

Foreword and thanks.

It has been more than a year since I sat on a train, playing computer games on my Zaurus. Now, I am not saying that there is anything wrong with that, but I felt there must be something else I could do, that was more productive. So, I thought I would write a book.

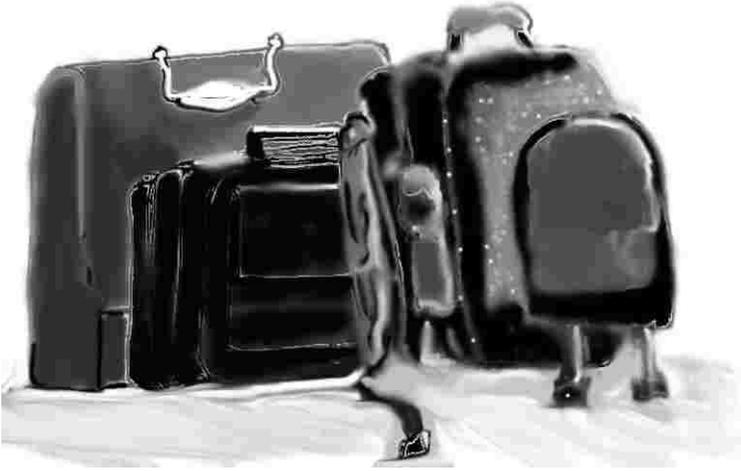
Well, over one year, and 67,000 words later, Z4CK is sitting before you. It is true what they say. We all have a book in us, and this is my one. I hope that you will get as much enjoyment out of reading Z4CK, as I had writing and illustrating it and the accompanying website.

Like many things in life, input, and help from others, is always invaluable. I would like to thank all the people who gave me feedback, good and bad. Therefore, thanks go to Drew Eden, Kevin Mackie, Michael Pacey, Neil Martin, John Hinchcliffe, and my wife Lynne.

A special thanks goes to my friend for the last 27 years, Moray Gilland, for completing the arduous task of proof reading Z4CK.

Finally, I would like to dedicate the book to my wife and best friend Lynne, as well as my children, Rachel and Rory. It just wouldn't be the same without you.

I'd like to give a final mention, and thanks, to my old fencing coach, Mr Torrie, who selflessly spent all those nights, and weekends teaching us to fence, and carting us around the country to competitions, without the slightest grumble. Much of my success with the foil is down to him.



Chapter 1 – Waiting to Leave

The drizzle began as the taxi drew up outside the airport's main entrance. The Scottish weather, at its usual February best, provided a cold, damp day, which was now growing dimmer by the minute. A smartly dressed, grey-haired man, in his 50s judging by his appearance got out of the taxi. Stepping clumsily onto the pavement he groaned slightly as he lifted the weight of his bags from the back of the car.

Hurriedly wrapping his long black woollen coat around him, he attempted to shield himself from the cold wind that blew a fine drizzle into his grimacing face. He finally managed to haul his bags on to the kerb. He looked up and studied his surroundings. The taxi pulled away, its tyres throwing up a watery spray from the road behind.

The man stretched as best he could. The pain from his uncomfortable taxi ride had taken a toll on his feeble frame. Old beyond its years, it had served him well, but continual punishment had now taken its toll. His muscles, not as strong

or flexible as they once had been, at least gained some relief from the change to a standing position.

Before him lay the concrete jungle of Edinburgh Airport. Behind him, the ongoing construction work; necessary since the bomb blast of August 2031. Billboards advertising the latest in computer technologies advised that the biggest companies always got the job done, or that Microsoft Linux was the best. This made him smile. He looked round, taking in more of his surroundings. It was now a natural instinct, something that he had nurtured over many years. The faint smile now faded from his gaunt features as he focused on the entrance: the way ahead, the start of something new.

A short pause- and then he took another deep breath, mustered just enough strength to heave his bags over his shoulders and made the short walk to the doors.

The blast of warm air comforted him somewhat as it hit his face. The public address system bellowed in the background. A confusing expanse of desks, check-ins, and queues spread out as far as his eyes could see.

Squinting in the artificial light he realised this was not far. Many years of staring at computer screens and scrolling text, with not enough focus on anything else, had made them tired and weak, like the rest of him.

He headed towards the British Airways check-in desk in front of him. He knew he was early, but hoped checking in now would at least allow him to off-load some of his luggage. The brightly attired check-in assistant smiled as he approached.

“Hello Sir, how may I help you?” She was dressed in a blue tartan uniform, her dazzling green eyes and smile belying the

boredom she must have truly felt inside.

“Ah, yes, err hello...I've got this E-Ticket,” the old man stuttered. “I'm due to fly out to Australia on this evening's flight.” The old man dropped his bags at his feet. He studied the woman before slowly continuing, “where do I check in?” She smiled politely, taking the piece of paper the old man held out, before replying.

“You're a bit early to check in for that flight. It's not due until 9pm. You can obtain your ticket from the machine. Now, just insert your ID card...if you've got any problems with the systems, you can ask someone at information desk 32 for some help.” She pointed to the check-in desk at the end of the foyer. “It's just over there.”

The old man smiled, “I should manage to answer a few questions and put my ID card in. Thank you. Thank you very much.” He smiled again, then coughed; clearing his throat as he prepared to pick his luggage up.

“Do you need a hand with that?” The assistant offered her help from across the desk.

“No, no I'll be fine.” came the reply. “Just not as young as I once was, ye know!”

“I can book in your luggage if you like. That shouldn't be a problem, Mr. Steele.”

Mr. Steele was glad to be able to hand over the bags. “Just put them there. Hold on one second whilst I log in to Sec-Net.” The Customer Services Representative put on a device resembling a pair of spectacles. A tiny antenna protruded from one of the rims. The mobile computer system booted up,

displaying its OpenZaurus start-up information on the lens.

Finally, it logged in, prompting her to ask the relevant questions.

Mr Steele set his bags down on the rails and answered the questions. Yes, he had packed them himself, no, he wasn't carrying anything for anyone else, and no, he wasn't carrying anything sharp...apart from his bar of Toblerone!"

The check-in assistant looked directly at Mr. Steele. "Could you look into my right eye please? I need to confirm your identity with a retina scan. Thanks." A small red beam shot across to Mr. Steele. "Thank you Mr. Steele. You will be travelling on one of our latest Airbus 423 Scramjets, and your journey time to Australia is 2 hours 34 minutes. Do enjoy your flight!"

Mr. Steele thanked the lady and headed off towards the ticket machine to obtain his boarding pass. He studied its user interface, and murmured to himself. "Easier than ever eh?" He paused, searching for the possibilities of gaining more access to the system. He did not mean to think about it, it was just something he always did. Thousands of Nmap, and Nessus security scans meant he now knew the output, before it had even arrived. He was like a mobile phone salesman checking out which type of phone everyone else was using, and figuring out where they got it.

It was then he heard a voice in the background, "Fucking old folk. Haven't a clue about technology. Come on Granddad its not mechanical you know!" Mr Steele completed his transaction quickly and turned round. A couple of young men in their twenties were behind him, both wearing baseball caps, and talking on their mobile life-units, laughing. Mr Steele

approached them. He looked at the one who had commented straight in the eye, and paused. He turned his gaze to the small titanium life-unit the young man carried.

The 'life-units' controlled everything from a person's identity and bank accounts, to their personal communication. They interfaced with the Sec-Net network, and allowed users to make secure transactions. They had become necessary for all transactions since the Tsunami Worm had destroyed the Internet, over a three-day period, in January 2018. A perceived need for more control saw Sec-Net rise swiftly. Its alternative, or what was left of the Internet, named Black-Net, was less secure. It had remained the domain of many underground 'black-hat' hacker groups. Although, true to form, most of the best technicians were weaned on it.

Most companies now paid for the security Sec-Net gave them since, it had never been cracked, although many had tried. Mr. Steele was especially proud of its security, as he had been its chief architect. You could not buy a coffee these days, without a life-unit connected to Sec-Net. The unit was secure, only responding to a specific owner's thumbprint when inserted into any reader. Like most other items, they came in various shapes and sizes, at a cost.

“Nice unit,” Mr. Steele noted out loud. He then drew out of his pocket a small device, not unlike a life-unit itself.

He pressed one of its buttons, but nothing seemed to happen. The young men laughed.

“Told you, doesn't even know how to use his own unit!” Mr. Steele smiled, “Yes, you're right, its definitely a young man's world!” and he ambled slowly away.

Several steps on he heard the young man swearing as he tried

to complete his transaction, “Fucks sake, this bloody machine won't accept my life-unit, what the fuck's happened?” His mate replied, “The lights gone out on mine too...bastard.” It was working fine a second ago...must be the fucking battery. Ten year life span my arse.

Steele smiled, “Electro-Magnetic Pulse; gets them every time!”

Now that he no longer bore the burden of his bags, Mr. Steele headed for the nearest comfortable spot to rest his tired legs, one of which he dragged along slightly as he walked. He reached the escalator, raising a hand to stop the sales person, who stood next to it, trying to sell him some new 'low interest' credit device. “Are you sure? It's fully Sec-Net compatible!” she said. Mr. Steele just shook his head.

He was not by nature a rude person, but on this day, he had had enough of people in general. The escalator brought him quickly to the next floor, where he stepped off gingerly, doing his best to concentrate on maintaining his balance.

He headed towards the coffee shop. It was busier than he would have liked, and he had to queue for his caffeine hit. There was no guarantee of even getting a seat, but then this was a captive audience with nowhere else to go. He read the sign hanging next to the counter. "Please place your order BEFORE sitting at a table." Mr. Steele finally arrived at the head of the queue.

A young lad was serving. He looked no older than 20 and was dressed in a white apron with a bright green polo shirt. He stood, cleaning the fake oak counter. Eventually, he turned to look at Mr. Steele, saying nothing, and waited. Mr. Steele looked at the board above. Would he have his usual, or would he be adventurous? The young man shifted impatiently.

“Can I take your order?” he finally asked.
“Yes, I'd like a semi Latte please.”

The young man turned his head, and gestured towards a young lady who stood to his right “One tall semi-Latte.” Without looking directly at Mr. Steele he pointed to the unit reader and stated the price, “That's 13 Euros.” Mr. Steele plugged the interface of his life-unit into the reader before heading to the next phase in the caffeine delivery.

He obtained his coffee and found a seat in the corner. The table had not been cleared. He moved an orange plastic tray and some coffee stained paper napkins to the other edge of the table before brushing the spilt sugar out of the way. Finally able to set his cup down, he leaned back and rested.

He pondered for a while, his breathing somewhat uncomfortable. Drawing a deeper breath, he took the life-unit from his pocket. He sat for a moment looking at it, brushing its amber LCD display with his thumb before finally plucking up enough courage to choose the communication option and make the call.

Putting the unit to his ear, he waited. The ringing seemed to last an eternity. Finally, the call was answered. “Hello, 491340?” came the voice from the other end. Mr. Steele began, “Err hello son, its me, your dad. Hows it going?”

“Dad?” came the surprised reply. “Is everything alright?”

“Aye fine, I'm at the airport.” came the stuttered reply. “I've got a few things I'd like to tell you before my flight.” Mr. Steele paused for breath. “Would there be any chance of you meeting me, just for a wee while?” There was a short pause, “it's a bit short notice...hold on.’

The sound of the telephone being put down was heard coming from the other end of the line. Then there was silence. Mr. Steele looked down at the table, stirring his coffee, whilst waiting patiently for the reply. Finally, his son came back to the phone.

“Okay, I can come down for a little while. Where are you going anyway, is it a holiday? Never mind I'll see when I get there.” A broad smile appeared across Mr. Steele's wrinkled face. “Excellent, I'll see you at the front door in twenty minutes.” With that, he pressed the button to disconnect the call.

Mr. Steele glanced at his watch, 5.50pm. He knew this was right as it was also synchronised with Sec-Net. He leaned back into the leather seat he occupied, and breathed a sigh of relief. He had done it. He had managed to pluck up the courage to make the call, one of the most important of his life. Soon he would be able to tell his son how he really felt.

Twenty five minutes had passed. Mr. Steele stood by the front of the airport main entrance. He was anxious, not having seen his son for over 6 months. He had been unsure how his sudden call would be greeted. He searched the dull concrete landscape that spread itself beyond the airport's main door for his son's car. The black BMW was distinctive. Its shiny alloys and tinted glass made it noticeable amongst the plethora of other cars passing by. Mr. Steele was not used to being noticed. To date, his world had consisted of work conducted behind the scenes, with no accolades, or notoriety to be won for it. By design, no one ever knew what he achieved.

More time passed, and no sign of the car, when suddenly his son walked up to him. Mr. Steele was taken aback by the sudden appearance.

“Hi Dad! Came as soon as I could. What are you doing here anyway?”

“Hello Son, Sorry, its been a while. How are you and the family?” came the old man's reply. His son hugged him. “It has been a while. Everyone's okay, but you still haven't said what this is all about. You've got me worried!”

The young man was taller than his ageing father, and slim, with short dark hair. He wore jeans and a blue lumberjack shirt, unbuttoned at the top. He adjusted his glasses as he waited for an answer from his father.

“Let's go inside son, I have three hours before I leave.” The old man put his arm round his son to coax him through the airports inner doors. Tom was now showing a marked concern as he and his father went up the escalator to grab a quiet seat, and a chat.

“They came to a large open-plan, self-service eating area. “Have you eaten yet?” Mr. Steele asked. “Err, no...I haven't yet,” came a slightly hesitant reply. “Let's grab a bite then. I'm starving!” With that, Mr. Steele headed under an archway to the self-service area before his son could protest.

The eating area consisted of the usual burger bars, pubs and coffee shops, all of which were happy to serve the discerning traveller a quick snack at an exorbitant rate. The large windows on the right hand side provided the light, what there was of it. The tables and chairs were over to their left. Food could be obtained and purchased at the left-hand side of the area. Trying to figure out what you wanted, where to get it, and how to pay for it, was not the easiest task in the world, especially if you were unused to airports.

Father and son obtained some pasta, and some coffee, before heading to the counter to pay. Mr. Steele held up his hand. "I'll get these Tom, it's the least I can do!" This comment produced a quizzical look from the younger man. However, he knew better than to protest.

They carried their trays carefully, with the food perched precariously on top, scanning the area for a quiet table.

The dull, grey weather outside seemed to dampen the spirits of the travellers they saw. People were sipping their coffees, quietly concentrating on doing their own thing. Some read books, some engaged in people watching. A suited businessman sat typing at his laptop, evidently tired. Others could be seen momentarily glancing at their watches, sitting patiently.

Finally, Mr. Steele and his son found a table suitable for their needs. Laying their trays down, they took their seats, Mr. Steele grimacing again as he eased himself painfully into a sitting position.

"Are you okay Dad?" Tom asked. Mr. Steele shook his head, "Not so good son, not so good!" He adjusted his coat, pulling it from underneath him. "That's what I need to talk to you about." He became very serious, a hint of sadness crossing his voice. "I'm afraid that...well, I've only a few months left. You see I've been diagnosed with cancer." He rushed the words out, as if afraid that something would stop him from saying them. "The consultant has said it's too far gone to do anything about. So I'm heading off to Australia...to warmer climes."

"Cancer, why didn't you say before this?" Tom gasped, visibly stunned.

Mr. Steele drew breath, "Well, I didn't want to bother you.

You've got your own family now, and I wasn't exactly there for you as much as I'd have liked.” Mr. Steele's voice tailed off as he watched his son's reaction.

Tom had placed his head in his hands. His eyes were reddening. Mr. Steele continued, “When your Mum and I split up you were angry with me.” Mr. Steele paused for a second. “I chose my work over her. Over you. It hurt me more than anything to lose you and her, but I had no choice.”

Tom reacted forcefully, “What do you mean, you had no choice?” He stood up as if to go. Mr. Steele put his hand out to him. “Please son, please don't go. I need to tell you this.” Tom hesitated, “Give me a good reason why I shouldn't walk out right now?” Mr. Steele responded, “please, just hear me out, I don't have long...I think its my last chance.” He continued slowly, “what I've felt, all these years...I was unable to show the love I've always had for you and your mum.’

He lowered his head, “I paid the price.”

Tom sat back down slowly with a sigh. “Okay, tell me...I've got a few questions myself anyway.”

Mr. Steele was noticeably relieved. “I've always wanted to tell you this! Now I'm free, I can.” Tom waited, saying nothing.

Mr. Steele began. “Well it was around 1992...Yes, it's a while ago, I know.”

Chapter 2: College Days

The two teenagers sat sniggering at the back of the class. The VAX mainframe was supposed to be secure, but repeatedly, they had hacked it. Mark turned to Duncan, "Check this out, I'm in again!" Duncan quietly wheeled his chair the few feet to Mark's terminal. The green text on the screen scrolled slowly as Mark tapped on the VT52's chunky black keys. Duncan seemed slightly panicked. "Look, don't you think we've given Techy enough bother, without locking him out again?" Mark didn't take his eyes off the screen. "If the fool is not going to secure the network, it's his own fault."

Duncan shook his head, "We'll get kicked out!" Mark turned round and smiled, "Aye right, nae chance, they need us here. We're money to them!" Duncan wheeled his chair back to his terminal, muttering to himself. "Okay, but I ain't getting into shit for this one."

The lecturer looked up from behind his screen at the front of the class. He squinted in the sunshine that projected hazily through the classroom windows. "Got a problem Steele?" Duncan replied instantly, "Nope, no problem, couldn't be better!" He raised his hand in acknowledgement.

Suddenly the door burst open. "Okay, that's it, Mark...Duncan, I've had enough!" Techy, as the lads sarcastically knew him, strode straight to the back of the room, to confront the two boys. Mark raised his arms in the air, "What, what now?" Duncan simply lowered his head, "Fucks sake, I told you you'd get caught, you numpty!"

The lecturer rose from his chair. The rest of the small class turned round to view the spectacle. They had seen it all before. "Can I just ask what's going on?" He started to walk to the

back of the class. Techy adjusted his shirt, and then pointed to the boys. “Yet again, these two have locked me out of the system!” The lecturer replied, “Have you any proof of this?”

“Yep, I've been logging their accounts for a while.” He grew more excited. “I noticed that all the users were having at least one login failure and....at the same time one of Mark's files, 'passwords.txt' would grow in size.” Mark leaned back in his chair, “Well done, you're improving, one day you might have a clue what you're doing!” The class laughed. “Quiet.” The lecturer held his hand up to halt the laughter.

Techy continued, “I checked the file, and there they were...everyone's passwords!”

Mark stood up and protested, “Aw, c'mon! I've hardly hidden the file. I mean, I even named it passwords.txt to give you a clue!”

“Fair enough, but it's still a security breach,” stated the lecturer. “Duncan, Mark, we'll have to decide a course of action, if you keep doing this!” “The sooner you're out the better!” Techy exclaimed, as he walked towards the door.

Sometime later, the two young men sat outside the principal's office. Mark winked at any eligible female that showed an interest, whilst Duncan sat quietly. The two had many things in common, but Duncan was more risk averse. Mark “Didn't give a shit!” as he would often say.

The principal, who was a well-educated man, slight in appearance, studied the boys for a second.

The men looked distinctly different. Mark had his favourite pair of faded blue jeans, and a crumpled white T-shirt. It had

probably not seen an iron in six months. His wavy, overgrown ginger hair covered half of his face, forcing him to blow it out of his eyes, from time to time. A scuffed pair of white trainers adorned his feet. He was laid back in nature, with not a care in the world.

The principal pointed to the plastic seats sat in front of his desk. Mark and Duncan sat down as instructed. Duncan's black tracksuit, and white squash shoes, were the most comfortable things he could find to wear. Comfort, before style, was always a priority when choosing his attire.

Duncan sat bolt upright in the chair. He ran his hands nervously through his thick head of dark brown hair, and wiped his brow. His face beamed red. A nervous rash he often got when worried, or nervous. Duncan knew that they had potentially gone too far this time. Locking the System administrator out of the network to prove a point about the lack of security, for the fourth time, was beginning to annoy the management.

The principle sat sternly behind the desk. He was smartly dressed, in his blue suit, white shirt, and grey tie. Light flooded in through the window, fragmented only by the blinds, on this crisp winter's afternoon, at Jeskdale College.

As it travelled across the room, it bounced off the glass-framed certificates that hung on the beige walls. The principle sat quietly, still saying nothing to the two young men as they took their respective seats. Neither of them was 20 years old yet. The principle began with a frustrated sigh, putting his pen down on the table in front of him. "You two, are the most talented people in your year, by all accounts." The two boys looked at each other, and then back at the principle.

He kept his eyes on them, watching for a reaction. "So why is it, that you, instead of getting on with your work, and getting good marks, insist on winding up the System administrator, by continually hacking our networks, and locking him out of the system?"

Mark began to smile. The principle, less amused, berated him, "You may find it funny, but I have a good mind to throw you off the course!" He continued, "You are doing no more, than wasting the college time and resources!"

Duncan spoke nervously. "We are only trying to prove that the network is insecure, and that anyone with any sense could break it!" The principle leaned across the table, "Okay, thanks for that. You have proven that on three prior occasions! All at the expense of Mr. Beatty, the Sys admin."

He got up from his chair, and walked to the window. "If you wish to break into computer systems, I suggest you build your own." He sat back down behind his desk.

"This is your last warning. If I see you in here again you'll be out." He picked up the pen again. "Misuse of computer resources is an offence under College rules." Now get out, and consider yourselves lucky."

The two teenagers got up. Saying nothing, they sidled out the door, knowing they had indeed been lucky this time.

They walked away from the office. Mark laughed, whilst Duncan breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll see you tonight, alright?" Duncan replied, "Yeah, thank god we got away with that. Is 8pm okay?"

"Sure. As usual for Friday night!" answered Mark. With that,

the pair headed off in opposite directions down the corridor.

Mark studied himself in the mirror. Combing his shock of ginger hair into a side parting, he stepped back and shook his head. Using his fingers, he brushed his hair back to the front. He smiled, nodding, "Yeah, lookin good!" Adjusting his black leather jacket, he stepped away from the mirror, and walked a couple of steps round his unmade bed, to the chair in the corner. He squeezed past a wooden desk, which had become scratched and faded with constant use. Metallica screamed and thrashed at the top of their voices on the stereo sitting in the corner. The sound vibrated through the table, shaking a glass of beer, which sat half empty. Next to the beer was a dirty ashtray, in which a cigarette sat smouldering.

Mark put his foot up on the chair, and began to tie the laces of his slightly dulled black shoes. A loud knock at the door distracted him. "Will you just come in, and stop mucking about?" he shouted. The door opened, and Duncan walked in. He also shouted above the incredible noise, "It was so quiet, I wasn't sure whether you were in!" Duncan took a step back from the noise, "Aren't you ready yet? Yer worse than a woman!"

Mark turned down the volume on the stereo system, and picked up the cigarette. He drew on it, eventually releasing the smoke into the air. "Got to the look good for the girls ye know!" They both chuckled. They were feeling good. Friday night was always a good night. They usually paid for it on Saturday morning, but none the less, tonight would be good. This time, they had things to celebrate. They had hacked the College system, and got away with it, again.

Duncan pointed at the glass. "Ye've had a drink. Thought you were driving tonight for a change!" Mark shook his head,

"What are you? My mum or something?"

"I'm just having one to get my courage up a wee bit. If I decide to have more, I'll leave the car in town." He patted Duncan cheekily on the face, as he walked past him, to the door.

On reaching the door, Mark stopped and looked over his shoulder at Duncan. "What's keeping you? We haven't got all night!" Duncan shook his head, and tutted, "Cheeky bastard!" Duncan switched off the stereo and left the room, slamming the door as he went. Mark was already half way down the corridor.

The college car park was dark. It's only illumination being a light from a solitary car park lamppost. It was enough to provide Mark and Duncan with some clue of where they were going. A brisk walk across the car park, and they had reached the old silver escort that Mark had bought for a few hundred quid. Sitting down, Duncan put his seat belt on, and looked at Mark.

"How the heck this heap of junk ever made it through an MOT beats me!" Mark started the car and laughed. "Would you like to walk up the road, you cheeky swine?"

Soon enough, they would be in town, stretching their student grants to the limit. Once more, they would join the cattle market that passed for nightlife in their chosen haunts.

The drive into town was uneventful. Mark would occasionally swear at a car he had deemed to have cut him up. Finally, they parked the car where they knew it would not be ticketed in the morning. This was always a contingency plan, as they never knew who would 'get lucky'. They never usually 'got lucky', but it was a plan, none the less.

The clock across the road, showing 9.15pm, lit up the dark

street with a bright white glow, which radiated from its face. Mark strode across the road, followed hastily by Duncan. Duncan had always found Mark a strange, but entertaining character. They had met on the first day of Technical college studying Information Technology, and had got on like the proverbial 'house on fire' ever since.

Nothing ever seemed to bother Mark. Any more laid back and he'd fall asleep. Duncan was not similar in this respect. He would stress about the slightest thing. Sometimes he wished he was more like Mark, but overall the pair kept each other sane. Both were excellent sportsman, and very competitive, but where Duncan trained hard, Mark never seemed to have to try.

Mark smoked like an Edinburgh chimney, and drank as if there was a water shortage. Duncan continually warned him of the damage it would do later, but these protests were often laughed at. The general response being, "You've got to die of something mate!" Mark believed in his indestructibility. "It would never happen to him." He was having a ball, and that was how it was going to stay for the foreseeable future. He was, after all, only eighteen.

Duncan shouted across the street to Mark, "Where are you going?" Mark replied, still keeping up the pace, "I've got to get some cash from the machine. C'mon." beckoning Duncan onward.

On reaching the machine, Mark inserted the card and entered his pin number, whilst Duncan stood back waiting. "I never seem to have much money in my account." stated Mark, exasperated. "No idea what the hell I spend it on?" Duncan laughed in disbelief, "It starts with B and ends in R you twat!"

Mark extracted the cash, which he promptly put in his pocket.

He laughed at Duncan's quip, and began to walk past him up the hill, to the club.

Just as the pair reached the club, having winked and nodded at several scantily clad members of the female persuasion, Mark stopped and turned to Duncan. "Why do we always go to the same club every week?" Duncan looked bemused by this sudden question, "Err, because we know it, and like it?" Mark replied, "Exactly! We know it, we know the people, and we have a good time." He paused for a second. "But what about girls? Do we ever meet any? No, do we heck!"

Mark lit another cigarette. "Let's go somewhere different, uptown...not a student club, just for a change!" Duncan looked up at the club entrance; the bouncers stood waiting to admit them. Finally, he sighed and nodded in agreement. "Why the fuck not. Come on, I'm dying for a drink."

The Zeffer was more up market than they were used to, despite its somewhat tacky flashing blue neon sign. It was well known for the latest music, and what was more, it was rich in talent. As they approached the door, a large bouncer dressed in a black woollen overcoat barred their way.

He stepped forward and held his hand up, ensuring the two men knew who was in control. "Where do you think you two are going?"

Duncan and Mark looked at each, and then back to the bouncer. "We were about to go into the club?" Mark's voice had a tinge of sarcasm that did not impress the bouncer. He quietly looked them up and down, shaking his head.

"You do realise that there's no jeans allowed?"

"Yeah we know, but we didn't think we were coming here." Duncan replied. "We thought we'd try it for a change!" The bouncer turned to a younger man behind him. He also wore a black coat. An earpiece and black leather gloves provided an added professionalism, and authority. "What do you think Dragon, will we let them in?" The younger man nodded in agreement, "They look harmless enough, it's early anyway." The large bouncer smiled, and stepped out of the way. "Okay, this time we'll let it go, but remember next time...no jeans!" The pair walked past, and into the club, Mark giving a salute on the way past. "Pompous git, give em a little bit of power, and they turn into little Hitlers!" Mark exclaimed as he moved out of earshot.

They progressed through the barely lit corridor, and entered the club. On the right hand side of the room, the client was presented with a substantial bar area, which was quiet for the moment. Bar staff loitered expectantly behind the bar, eager to serve any customer who had deemed it suitable to enter the club this early. Beyond it, lay a polished, and for the moment, clean wooden dance floor.

The DJ stood in his booth, lord and master of all he surveyed. It was obvious that he loved the sound of his own voice, as he had an annoying habit of raising and lowering the volume of the single he was currently playing, whilst he intermittently chatted to 'his audience'. This made it almost impossible to enjoy the music. The pair were quickly convinced that he was, indeed, a complete idiot. The music wasn't particularly to Duncan and Marks liking anyway, but it didn't matter. The guys were here for the view, not the music.

Most of the night consisted of Duncan and Mark standing next to the dance floor, eyes and mouth wide open, staring at the talent gyrating in front of them. They looked somewhat out of

place in their leather jackets, jeans, and black shoes. This worried Duncan slightly; he was never that keen on being different. Mark didn't care really.

The atmosphere seemed friendly enough. Mark nudged Duncan. "Check the babe in the corner, she's amazing!" He pointed to a petite, brown haired woman, dancing and laughing with a group of girls. She appeared to be slightly older than them. This was indeed appealing. Her tight black dress caressed every curve in her body. She was beautiful, too beautiful to approach, but you would be forgiven for admiring her, from afar. Many were.

As the time reached 11pm, the club's once empty dance floor, was now dark and full. The throng of people had created a natural heat that made the two men wish they had left their leather jackets in the cloakroom. The 50 pence it would have cost, was however, considered to be beer money, and they weren't about to throw it away on such a stupid thing as a coat hanger.

Lights from the dance floor flashed in time to the thumping beat. There was almost no space to breathe. Hundreds of people swarmed around the bar, like bees to honey. The dance floor was filled with an indistinguishable group of club-goers. Watching, dancing, or flirting. The odd single male could be seen staggering around inebriated, playing a version of what could only be described as "human pinball." He moved from one rejection to another, determined in his quest to find someone daft, or desperate, to accompany him home that evening.

Duncan's instincts were telling him to get a drink, but one look at the bar area made him think twice. People stood four deep, creating the impression of one mass entity of waving arms, and

bobbing heads.

Duncan decided to wait until it had calmed down, but Mark was less patient. "Has a man got to die of thirst, or what?" shouted Mark, leaning over towards Duncan. "I was just heading to the bar." Duncan replied. With that, Duncan headed off towards the mass.

Fifteen minutes had passed, by the time Duncan was finally leaning over the bar, shouting his orders. "A Red Stripe and a Miller. In fact, could you make it two of each?" The barman fulfilled his request, and shouted out the damage. "£7.60 mate." Cringing at the cost, Duncan picked up his drinks, and started the struggle back to Mark. In the distance, he spotted him, engaging in a heated exchange with a smartly dressed man in his early twenties. Each of the men gesticulated, and pointed aggressively at each other, before the smartly dressed man finally stormed off.

Duncan reached Mark, handing him his drinks. "Two drinks; ya beauty!" shouted Mark. "What the hell was that about?" queried Duncan. Mark leaned over and shouted in Duncan's ear. "Bloody weirdo, he asked me for a light, and then accused me of staring at his girlfriend, cheeky git." Duncan looked at Mark. "And were you?" Mark looked at Duncan, and shrugged his shoulders. "Now, would I do such a thing?" They both laughed. Mark continued, "I told him to sling his hook anyway, he's drunk, never mind him, he won't trouble us any more."

As the night continued, it became easier to get to the bar as more people left the club. In turn, it also became easier to drink. Both Mark and Duncan were now drunk. Their slurred speech ensured that not even the most desperate member of the opposite sex would show much interest. Duncan

eventually fell asleep on the banister, which surrounded an almost empty dance floor. Mark simply stood, can of beer in hand, smiling pathetically at anyone faintly attractive who passed.

Mark decided it was time to go. He shouted in Duncan's ear, and prodded him on the shoulder, finally waking Duncan from an almost comatose snooze. "Hey you lazy shite. Waken up, its time to go!" The lights in the club had been switched on, making the mess created that evening plain for all to see. Duncan peeled himself off the banister, half dazed. "What's the time?" Mark attempted to balance, and look at his watch simultaneously. A task he wasn't finding easy. "It's 2 o'clock, we can just catch the late night chippy if we hurry." Mark again swayed back and forth, as he rustled through his pockets for change. "Oh shit I've spent all my cash. What about you?" Duncan simply shook his head, to intimate he was in the same predicament. They made their way out of the nightclub, and into the cold of Saturday morning. Hardly able to feel the chill due to their drunken state, and with no money left, they decided to make the journey back home on foot. After all, as Mark pointed out "4 miles isn't that far, when you're drunk."

Mark stopped suddenly, "What about the car?" Duncan looked at him for a second, and pulled him up the road with the words, "Don't be a twat, ye couldn't drive a zimmer frame right now!"

The young men staggered round the corner at the top of the winding road, and on to the main street. A sudden shout from behind them attracted their attention.

Instinct forced them to pay attention. Turning on their heels, they saw the man who Mark had had the argument with, charging towards them. Two other men, of a similar age accompanied him. All three ran at a pace towards the pair.

Duncan and Mark looked at each other for a second. Even in their drunken demeanour, they knew it would be a bad idea to simply stand their ground. They turned, and ran as fast as they possibly could. Fear pumped adrenaline through their tired bodies, its rush bringing a wave of power to their weakened limbs. They hoped that their pursuers would tire first. Duncan, wheezing heavily, ran hard, avoiding obstacles, and the odd passer by, as he tore down the main street. All seemed to be a blur, including the screams and shouts of the following group.

In a last ditch attempt to lose the gang, Duncan took a sudden right turn, followed closely by Mark, into a darkened lane. A large skip sat at the end of it, in front the wall of an old building. It was a dead end. "Fuck." Duncan exclaimed, gasping for breath as the fear of the inevitable confrontation began to kick in. There was no choice now. The wall was too high to climb, and there were no other feasible escape routes. The young men could see their breath in the cold morning air. It was pitch black except for the street lighting at the end of the alley, as both prepared to fight their way out.

Mark turned to Duncan. "At least we're pissed! If we do get a tanking, we shouldn't feel it so bad, eh?" This, to Duncan, was of little comfort as the three men, fists clenched, drew aggressively closer. Duncan replied to Mark without taking his eyes off his assailants. "Trust you to look on the bright side...glass always half full eh?" Mark leaned towards Duncan. "Let's try and make a break for it." A nod from Duncan saw them charge headlong towards the threesome. Screaming, and throwing indiscriminate and inaccurate punches, they hurled themselves into the enemy.

The three men seemed taken aback. Knocked off their guard, one hurtled to the ground, allowing Duncan through the space

he had left. The others managed to regain control of their balance, grabbing Marks jacket. As he attempted to pass, they hauled him violently to the ground.

A flurry of kicks, and punches rained down on Mark from all three men. They seemed to have forgotten Duncan in their animalistic frenzy. The thud of boot and knuckle on bone could be plainly heard, as Marks hands and leather coat afforded him little protection. Mark could do no more than curl up on the ground, and hope the attack would end soon.

Screams of “Kill the bastard” emanated from the man who had earlier been arguing with Mark.

Duncan kept running, unaware that Mark was not behind him. Finally, he turned and stopped. Witnessing the beating of his best friend in horror, Duncan's anger and panic at the ferocity of the attack grew. Again, Mark's head flew back, as he received a vicious kick in the face. Blood splattered across a nearby wall, and began to pour from his now broken nose.

All thoughts of self-preservation vanished, and Duncan charged back to help his near unconscious friend. Crashing headlong into the attackers, he knocked one of the trio off balance, and into the wall. As he fell to the ground, Duncan followed through with fierce kicks, his fury growing by the second. Testosterone had taken over; harder and harder, he kicked, until satisfied this one was not getting up.

The man groaned and clenched himself, writhing painfully on the ground. With strength from nowhere, Duncan lifted a nearby dustbin. He brought it crashing down on the head of another attacker. The man fell to the ground, landing in a filthy puddle, one of many in the alley. Another vicious kick to the head, and the second man slumped to the ground. The chief

protagonist realised the situation, and having dealt Mark a savage beating, decided to run, leaving the others injured where they lay.

Duncan finally managed to grab Mark. Hauling him to his feet, they took off as fast as Mark's injuries would allow. Blood streaming from his nose and forehead, Mark struggled to steady himself. He staggered, before finally wiping the blood from his face, and moving slowly in the right direction. "C'mon we're nearly away," shouted Duncan, attempting to get Mark to move more quickly.

Finally, they had managed to put enough distance between themselves and their attackers, allowing them to get their breath back. Duncan knew that it had been a narrow escape for him. "You alright Mark?" Mark slurred sarcastically, holding his face, "Oh aye, never better!" Blood had soaked his leather jacket and jeans. He was a mess.

Duncan had never seen such injuries before, and hoped never to again. "Let's get you to Hospital as fast as we can." They stopped momentarily at the edge of the road, to look for a taxi. Whether one would stop for them, considering their drunken and beaten state was uncertain, but they decided to try, none the less.

Duncan drew a deep breath. He felt safe at last, and looked up at the sky. The glow from the streetlights had given it a somewhat reddish hue, the stars were bright and everything clear. Duncan regained his focus, as he became aware of a taxi travelling at speed towards them.

A sudden roar came from behind them. Duncan's feelings of safety suddenly passed. He turned to look in horror, as Mark was shoved forwards violently. Mark's head flew backwards,

as his body moved in the opposite direction, straight into the line of the on-coming taxi. The taxi's brakes locked, and tires squealed, in a hopeless attempt to stop tons of steel crashing full on into Mark's stumbling torso. The force of the impact threw his beleaguered body into a lamppost not yards from the side of the road, crushing his chest, and breaking his ribs. The impact wrapped him round the lamppost like a child's discarded rag doll. In an instant, Mark was gone. His final groan, and eerie exhale, would stay with Duncan forever.

Duncan screamed, and ran to where Mark lay. Blood trickled silently from his mouth. His eyes, once full of laughter, and fun, held an empty, hollow stare. The assailant, seeing the consequences, panicked and ran off down the street. Duncan did not give chase. Mark, even in death, was the most important priority.

Strangers milled round as the Taxi driver called the emergency services. It was too late. Mark's life had ended at the age of 18, in the middle of a road, and Duncan's grief, anger and guilt at the sudden loss of his best friend had begun.

As the emergency services came, Duncan seemed little more than a zombie. Unable to answer any questions, he sat in shock, his eyes glassy and red. The trail of dried tears clearly distinguishable, having left their mark on his dirty, bruised face.

For days, he could not comprehend what had happened. The suddenness of it all was incredible too, one minute laughing with his friend, the next thinking of his funeral, and the rest of college life without him. Nothing meant that much at that moment. Life's little traumas and hassles were, he realised, completely insignificant. Duncan had not come to college looking to make a good friend, but he had. Mark had not deserved to be taken so young, and Duncan never expected to

have to deal with such a thing. Dying was for the old, or at least, this is what he had thought. He was suddenly, shockingly, aware of his own mortality. The fragile balance between life and death.

The human body is the strangest organism, he thought to himself. It could take incredible trauma and recover, and yet, in certain circumstances the smallest thing would cause it to fail. Coping was tough. He felt he had not done enough to save Mark, and partly blamed himself, for the death of his best friend. Maybe if he hadn't looked up at the wrong time? It made him wonder how men coped in war, with their friends, and comrades killed every day. Do they really become hardened to this? The human mind was beyond his comprehension, its thought processes, and coping mechanisms more powerful and complex, than any computer he would see during his life. Little did he know it yet, but Marks death was to shape him, and return to haunt him, for many years to come.

Several months had passed. The trial, as far as Duncan was concerned would be a foregone conclusion. There had been many witnesses to the ruckus in the nightclub, and the murder of Mark.

The courtroom, with its grand old oak beams, and polished pews, seemed a noble place for a trial.

"We find the defendant not guilty on the charge of murder." The clerk of the court asked the foreman for his verdict. "On the charge of culpable homicide, we find the defendant, guilty." The spokesman did not flinch, and showed no real emotion, as he delivered the verdict. The court was hushed, except for the sobbing of the mother of the guilty man. The judge turned to the dark haired, well-dressed young man standing in the dock. "For the despicable crime of culpable homicide, I sentence you

to 9 years."

The defendant closed his eyes, and sat down, shaken by the reality of what was happening to him. "Take him down please," the judge continued. The guilty man's father was obviously upset by the verdict. He stood up, and shouted across to his son, "We'll always be there for you. We'll do our best to get you out, we believe you!" The defendant was taken away in handcuffs by two large prison warders. Following one last despairing look at his parents, he disappeared into the cells downstairs.

Marks father was a tall man. He looked very similar to Mark in many ways. He approached Duncan solemnly, and shook his hand. "This has been terrible for us all, we all miss Mark very much." Duncan stood upright, sadness and guilt crossing his face. The trial had brought many memories and feelings back that he had attempted to bottle up. "I wish...I wish I could have done more, I feel partly responsible." "It wasn't your fault...the world can be a terrible place." came the reply.

"People die. Sons, daughters, and spouses." Marks father concentrated intensely, emphasising the message he conveyed. "What was important is that you were here to ensure justice was done, and for that, I thank you." Marks father turned to his wife and hugged her. "It's over dear. Let's go." Marks mother simply smiled at Duncan, wiping a tear from her face with a handkerchief. A final painful smile came from Marks dad, before they walked away. Duncan was left contemplate the events of the past few days. Solitary thoughts echoed round his head like birds in an old church.

Suddenly, he returned from his daze, and became aware of a figure silently watching him. He turned to meet the glare from

a foreboding middle-aged man. Dressed in a long black wool coat, he stood, putting on a pair of black leather gloves. This was the defendant's father. The man did not look eyes for long, but Duncan saw hatred; and he felt afraid. The man looked away in an instant, and like the others, exited the courthouse, to carry on their lives as best they could. Duncan once more drew breath, as he had that fateful night, before being ushered out of the court. The next case was waiting to be heard.



Chapter 3 The Operation

"So it is then. We will initiate operation Z. The offer has been declined." The man behind the large Oak desk put the phone back on the hook, and sat relaxed, leaning back, smiling, confident in his position.

The bare, white walls and an absence of any windows provided a sterility only broken by the desk, and its rich wood stain.

He was in his mid 50s, and had witnessed a few things in his time. Some good, some not so. He stroked his greying beard whilst studying the two individuals, sat pensively before him, in their black Bauhaus chairs. The room was dark except for the desk lamp, which projected long shadows onto the white washed walls of the interview room.

The warmth of the room caused the nervous individuals to perspire slightly. The female took a handkerchief from her suit pocket, and dabbed her brow. Apart from this, it was quiet. Not a sound.

The man behind the desk began. "Well here you are, the two successful...how should I say?" He paused for thought, 'applicants'. Well done."

He paused again, flicking through some paperwork sat on the desk in front of him. He picked two folders up, and gestured at the man seated in front of him to come and get them. The man got up from his chair, and anxiously leaned across the table, taking the folders.

He handed one to the young woman seated by his side. As he sat down, he quietly uttered "Thanks." The bearded man resumed, his tone was one of authority. "It's all in there. Everything we know; everything you need to know, and everything we want you to find out!"

He continued, studying their faces intensely, looking for any reaction. His piercing blue eyes staring them both down, "You've come to know me, and these surroundings well. This is where your safety net stops." He looked straight at the woman. "Make contact as soon as you can. His favourite haunts are listed in the brief. Time is running out." He shifted his focus to the male. "We've managed to get you a position in the same company as the target." He paused. "You start a week on Monday."

He stopped talking for a second to sign some documentation. "Many people are counting on this to work. Do not let them or yourselves down. You have been provided with everything you need. Go to it. Oh, and of course, good luck. I don't expect you to need it." He looked back to the paperwork on the desk and gestured towards the door. A final "Thank you that will be all," signalled the end of the meeting.

The individuals left the room, sliding the door closed behind

them. They found themselves in the bright artificial light of the immaculate white corridor. They turned and looked at each other, knowing they would be in contact again, in the near future. For now, a simple handshake, and good luck on both sides was sufficient. They walked off, without any further exchange, to read their respective briefs. It had begun.

Another Friday morning. Another wait on the platform for a train that couldn't possibly accommodate all of the commuters. People milled anxiously in groups, trying to guess where the train would stop, and the doors would open, allowing them to have the best chance; any chance, of a seat. Duncan came down the steps to the platform. In his early thirties, his hair had a grey tinge to it.

He was smartly dressed, ready for another day, in the less than interesting world of on-line banking.

Duncan spotted Colin waiting by the platform. "Awright Col?"

Colin removed his personal stereo earphones, and responded with his usual "Aye...not bad, not bad." "Train packed again eh Col?" remarked Duncan. Colin replied "Yip, same as usual; no chance of a seat the day."

Eventually, some ten minutes late, the train pulled up next to the platform, and the squeeze to get through the doors began. Finally managing to get on, Duncan took his usual place, standing in the middle of the aisle. "Do you ever think to yersel, stuff this I've had enough?" asked Colin. He continued, "Of course, I mean, I'm lucky with the job I've got, but if somebody made me an offer...you know." Duncan replied laughing, "Aye right! As if that's likely to happen."

“So how’s your job then?” asked Colin. Duncan sighed. “Same as usual really. No big projects at the moment, pretty much supporting users.” “I thought Internet Security was supposed to be exciting...it is if ye watch the films, eh!” Duncan replied, “Maybe we’re on the wrong side, maybe I should be a hacker, there’s a bit of excitement there, and I’ve got the skills.”

Duncan looked around the train, his thought processes whirring for a moment. “Only one problem, I’m too honest, and I’d be shit scared of causing damage, and getting caught.” Colin queried Duncan. “Weren’t you offered that design job a wee while ago?” It was designing software to stop hackers wasn’t it?” Duncan sighed, “Yeah, but it was a new start-up and it wasn’t too secure. “At least the on-line bank is. Even if it’s not as exciting...nah, there’s more important things in life than poking around someone else’s network.” Duncan’s eyes widened. “However, if someone was to pay me to legally TEST their security...now that would be cool.”

“How’s yer wee company on the side going?” asked Colin, half scanning his paper. “Quiet, not much call for security testing unless yer a big company!” Duncan replied with a shrug.

“Tickets please!” The conductor struggled to get through the equivalent of a tin of sardines. Duncan’s face became stern. “It’s bloody ridiculous that we have a full fair to pay, when we don’t get a seat.” The conductor sighed. “How many time’s must I tell people? It is not the seat you are paying for, it is the journey. So, where you goin?” said the conductor.

Duncan realised that protesting was not going to get him anywhere. “Return to Edinburgh.” The conductor provided the tickets in return for the credit card. “Sign here.” he said. Duncan grudgingly signed the ticket and handed it back to the conductor. The almost automated response of ‘cheers’ came

from him. He squeezed by without any further delay. "Any more tickets?" he called.

At that moment, Duncan became aware of someone tapping him on the shoulder. A blonde woman with glasses, dressed in a formal suit, who had been standing behind him, handed him a business card. "I couldn't help hearing that you provide security services." The young woman continued, "We are looking to have a penetration test done on our systems, but most companies that undertake that work are a tad expensive." "Would you be interested in doing some tests for me...on the side...cash in hand, as it were?"

Duncan looked surprised. "Eh sure I'd be interested. How d'you know I am not too expensive like the rest of the companies?" Oh I don't think you'll be...its a hunch." she replied, smiling. "Besides you look like you could do with some entertainment. That's my number." An immaculate nail pointed to a telephone number as she handed over an elaborate business card. If you are interested, give me a call to arrange the details.

Duncan pondered for a second. He found the confidence of this woman intriguing. "Okay" he said. "I might just do that."

The train pulled in to the station, and without a look back, the smartly dressed woman joined the queue to exit. "Wehey" said Colin. "Ye've scored there. I'd like to practise my penetration testing on her." "How predictable Col. Could've guessed you'd say that." Duncan said, studying the card.

"Never heard of this company," he mumbled to himself. "But cash is cash. Mind you a bit strange they've got an Internet infrastructure, but she's got no email address on this card."

The train stopped, and the remainder of the passengers headed

off to their respective destinations.

“See you later Col.”

“Aye catch ye the night. The usual train is it?” Colin replied. “Yep, no overtime if its support.” “Right, see you then.” With that, Colin put on his headphones, and headed off up the grimy platform steps, joining the other commuters.

As Duncan walked down the hill to his work, a few things crossed his mind. When was the best time to phone the woman? What tools to use? How much he should charge? Most importantly, what to buy with the money he received. He of course also pondered whether he'd buy a croissant with his Latte this morning.

Having obtained his coffee and a chocolate croissant, he headed into work. As he clocked in, he nodded to the security guard at the main reception. The lift stood before him. Its shiny metal gave a polished glint, intimating the company's financial standing. Reflecting his image, he decided that he looked tired. “I need to get fit,” he said to himself.

Duncan stopped the lift at the third floor, and got out. As he walked, his shoes echoed on the gleaming oak of the reception area. Riona sat behind the reception desk.

“Morning Duncan. How's you?” Riona asked in her usual upbeat manner. “Not bad Ri, same as always. Anything going on today?”

“There's been a call from Ian Smith at Impax. He said he's...” She started reading from a note, straining to understand it as she read. “Trying to add a Firewall rule, but getting a general protection fault when he opens the Management software.”

She looked up from the note. "Does that make sense?"

Duncan sighed. "Aye, I'll give him a phone, I suppose."

Riona continued, "He sounded kinda annoyed!"

"When are they not?" replied Duncan, as he strolled off to his desk.

Morning Cam. Al in yet? "Yes, of course...why, there he is sitting in his chair. Can't you see him?" Duncan laughed. "Good morning to you. Happy as usual then?" Cam harrumphed, not taking his eyes off the laptop screen. "He was supposed to be in quarter an hour ago, oh and Ian Smith called. Yeah, general protection fault." Cam now swung round in his chair, leaning back casually. "Luckily for you, I sorted it out."

Cameron or Cam as he was known, tended to be the most cynical of a reasonably cynical bunch. He could often be heard sighing, and tutting in the corner. Quite often, his tall, thin frame would leave the chair, shaking his straggly blonde hair, whilst mumbling obscenities under his breath. The team were used to him. His propensity for arguing about anything was always a way to cheer up a boring day. Wind Cam up if you're bored; entertainment indeed!

Duncan lay his bag down under his desk and sat down in his chair. He sipped his Latte, and tore strips from his Croissant. Finally, he carefully switched his flat panel monitor on, and logged into the Debian Linux system. He waited patiently to be authorised, sipping his steaming hot coffee. His mail client automatically started. Nope, nothing ground breaking in store for today. A slew of the usual "For your information" messages, and dodgy jokes that often flew around the office.

Cam had just returned to his seat as Al rushed through the door. Cam looked up ready to make his usual smart quip, but was stopped in his tracks... "Don't..say..a..word!" Al's drawn out sentence and gestures stopped Cam's potential outburst. "As if I would say anything about you being late...AGAIN." said Cam. "Mornin Duncan." said Al. "Mornin Al, sleep in this morning? That's what happens when you leave your Uni stuff to the last minute. What you doing again?"

"Parapsychology."

Al answered the question with an 'I've told you all this before look' Cam swivelled in his seat. "So, seen any ghosties lately? Ho, ho, load of rubbish if you ask me!" Al turned to Duncan with a fake quizzical look. "Duncan, d'you remember me asking Cam his opinion, or even intimating I might?" Duncan scratched his head. "Don't really think so. Why would you want to ask Cam's opinion about that?" Duncan turned round to face the computer screen. "I mean, we don't ask his opinion about anything else!"

Cam got out of his chair, suitably chastised. "Anyone for coffee...ye pair o twats?" Duncan sat back in his chair and laughed. "When the going gets tough, the tough sulk." Cam pointed aggressively. "Do you want yer coffee in ye, or on ye?" This outburst caused more laughter. A resigned smile crossed Cam's face, as he walked off to the kitchen.

As Cam moved out of earshot Duncan spun across the room on his swivel chair, and stopped next to Al's desk.

Al had started the small business with Duncan. Duncan whispered. "We've got some potential work, look!" Duncan handed the business card to Al, who studied it. "I've never heard of this company. Have you?" "No." came the abrupt

reply. "But do we need to know every potential client prior to an engagement?" Duncan asked.

"S'pose not." answered Al. "Should we accept?" asked Duncan. Al became serious. "What's the scope, and how much is she offering?" "Not sure" replied Duncan. "I've to ring her to sort all of that out."

"Well just do it then, and we'll make a decision after that...but it sounds promising!"

As Al completed the sentence, Cam returned carrying three plastic cups. "What you pair of poof's gabbin about?"

"You wouldn't want to know Cam." Al said, accepting a coffee. "I'll phone her later on today then, and set the meeting up." Duncan added, continuing his conversation with Al. Al responded with a short nod of the head, "Aye, just do that." Cam butted in, "Definitely sounds a bit dodgy to me. Threesome is it? Duncan rolled his eyes, and returned to his computer screen. "Feast yer mind Cam, feast yer mind."

Time went by slowly. The usual dross of user support calls and monitoring of Firewalls, Intrusion Detection systems, and other security gubbins was undertaken as per every other weekday.

"Anyone for lunch?" asked Al, getting up from his chair, and stretching his legs.

The sun gleamed through the windows. Al's sudden movement disturbed random dust particles, floating through the air. "Where you going?" asked Cam. "I thought the Atrium might be nice." came the reply.

Cam swivelled in his chair. "I'd rather have my testicles

jammed in a hungry Lions mouth than go there." Duncan added, "that could be arranged...for goodness sake, how long is it before you come along. The foods good. Just because they didn't give you the part time bar job 2 years ago!" Cam responded, "It's a matter of principle." "Fair enough, we can't stand here all day. I'm off for some grub."

With that, Al headed towards the lift. "You coming Duncan?"

Duncan put on his coat and headed to the lift, where Al was holding the doors. Duncan finally stepped into the lift and the gleaming metal doors slid closed behind him. There was a momentary silence as the lift made its way to the ground floor.

Finally, the 'ping' of the bell sounded as it reached its destination. Al and Duncan clocked out for lunch. They nodded to the rather large security guard on their way through the swivel doors.

"So what do you think of the opportunity that's come up?" Duncan enquired. Al responded, "I thought about it this morning, and I don't see any problem with it. D'you?"

Duncan avoided a couple of people walking the opposite direction before answering. "We've got nothing to lose. I could do with the cash as well. I've been trying to save up for that laptop for a while." With that, Duncan and Al reached the front door of the Atrium. The Atrium was the closest eating establishment. It was frequented by most of the bank staff.

The Atrium was a large modern building. Cleanly defined lines and white walls were interwoven with modern metallic fittings. The centrepieces were two large glass and metal lifts that carried customers between the buildings floors. The night clubs bars and cafés of the Atrium's four floors were always

popular.

The seating on the ground floor was comfortable; the tables finished with a clean, wooden pine. The Atrium was quiet around mid day. Trying to get a seat for dinner was a different story. It was the place to be. One of the advantages of this was it attracted some of the city's *beautiful people*, especially during the summer months, when the layers of clothing were somewhat reduced.

Duncan and Al ambled across the Atrium's parquet flooring to the counter. Duncan raised his hand in a gesture reminiscent of a wave. "Hi Sadie." Sadie had been successful in getting the job that had caused Cam to boycott the place. It was easy to see why; she was friendly and attractive. "Hi Duncan." came the upbeat reply. "What do you fancy today?"

"What's on the go?" Duncan asked, whilst scouring the board.

"I can recommend the lasagne." Sadie answered. "Ok that sounds good to me. Can I have chips with that?"

Al cut in, "Don't serve him chips, he's on a diet." Duncan turned and looked round sighing, "Yeah of course, no chips." "You look fine to me," said Sadie. Al again butted in, "no he's chubby. You're just being nice. Oh, and I'll have lasagne and chips please."

A smile crossed Al's face, "and some of yer Strawberry cheesecake too!" he laughed. Duncan turned to Al. "You're not planning to make this easy for me are you?"

"Just go and sit down, and I'll get someone to bring the food over." Sadie pointed toward the seating area where Duncan and Al duly headed.

As Duncan sat down, he fumbled to find his wallet. I cannot believe Cam would want to work here, just because he'd have had a better chance of pulling!" "Yeah, a bit sad really, but there's nothing stranger than folk eh?" Al replied, shrugging his shoulders.

Duncan continued their original conversation. "Right, I'll give Miss Sharp a call and we can get the ball rolling on this one. I'll set up a meeting."

"When?" Al asked, scanning the area for any young ladies that may be around. "I'll phone after lunch."

Lunch arrived at their table. This was the main meal of the day for the two workers. Most people would usually have soup, but Duncan and Al had now changed their eating habits to having their largest meal at lunchtime. The quality and quantity of food provided at the Atrium was not however conducive to good productivity in the afternoon. Quite often Duncan would battle to stay awake.

The food went down well, as was usual. As Al started on his dessert, a smirk of satisfaction crossed his face as he took the first mouthful of strawberry cheesecake. Duncan did his best to ignore him.

"So" Al continued mouth half full, "What tools are you planning to use for this one?"

Duncan pondered for a second. "Well, I thought the usual. Do a little bit of digging; see what IP blocks they have. "Check out their DNS servers, perhaps a zone transfer if it lets us." He

paused, looking around the room, "Move to active scanning with Nmap of course. Nessus, to check for vulnerabilities or weaknesses, and take it from there."

"You're not going to use ZACK, or should I say Z4CK then?"

Al stopped eating and looked at Duncan, waiting for the answer. "Naa, don't think it's ready yet. I mean, I've tested it in the lab at home, and it seems to work fine." "WORK FINE!" gasped Al, "Its the best damn hacking tool I've ever seen. It's got everything, including the ability to change and learn. You could sell the code at a fortune!"

"Look." Duncan sounded exasperated, "As I've said before, if it got into the wrong hands it could be game over!" "I don't even have full control of the bloody thing myself. Once it starts, its got mind of its own, as you might recall!"

Duncan continued, "Okay, so it's got us all the info we were looking for and more, but it destroyed everything in the lab as well!" Al attempted to butt in, but was stopped with a swift hand signal. "And another thing, we couldn't disable it, so we had to scrap the machines. Now that was costly." Duncan's rant finally slowed, "once I can control it, then I'll use it!" Al seemed resigned, "Well it's your code." Al finished his mouthful of strawberry cheesecake. "Just thought it would be interesting."

"It would be interesting, but getting sued for loss of data and new servers wouldn't!"

Duncan had now completely calmed down, his voice taking on a serious tone. "I'd love to use the software in the wild as well. I'll have another look at the code tonight, and see if I can work on a safer control mechanism."

"I'll also see what the scope of this next job is, and MAYBE we'll use it in a data gathering capacity."

Al finished his dessert, and wiped a paper towel across his face. "Nice one!" With that, they both stood up, and headed to the unusually sunny weather outside, ready for the afternoon ahead.

The afternoon dragged on, interspersed with the occasional question, or smart remark from Cam.

At 3.05pm, Cam, who had been monitoring some of the Intrusion Detection Systems, swivelled excitedly in his chair. "Hey guys, I think we've got a live one here; check this out!"

Al, Duncan, and Cam gathered round the IDS monitor, which now showed a flashing alert. The screen filled with the sentence '*potential alert on system voyager*'.

"Some swine is having a poke around the secure web servers." expressed Cam, with an enthusiasm he did not usually demonstrate. Al asked, "What attack signature is being picked up?" "He seems to know what he's doing. It's a mix of tools, and he's probably spoofing some IP addresses." Cam scanned the Intrusion Detection System further, clicking frantically to bring up new graphs. "Looks like it's an Nmap scan, with multiple decoys, by the looks of things."

Duncan leaned excitedly over the monitor. "Can you trace him?" "Is there any way of knowing which IP he's coming from?" Al butted in. "Let's check to see if there have been any recent attempted zone transfers in the last five minutes or so!"

Duncan checked the logs on the DNS server. "We had an unsuccessful zone transfer attempt 7 minutes ago. Here's the address." He handed a piece of paper to Cam.

Cam flew across the floor on the chair. Reaching the keyboard of the firewall monitoring station, he quickly tapped several keys. Two mouse clicks followed in quick succession, and a smile lit up his face. He punched the air in triumph. "Yes, got him. I've traced him back to a provider in Warsaw. I'm checking the network based on this last Internet address."

"It's assigned to w95.libre.dyndns.org." Duncan shouted across to Cam. "Right let's shut him down then." Cam moved across to the Knoppix STD security station. Do unto others as you would unto yourself, or something like that!"

Cam stretched his arms above his head, and stretched his fingers, which gave out a cracking noise. "Less of the mucking about. If he's on a modem he could disappear at any second, and we don't want that." said Al, sounding slightly annoyed. Al took a more serious view of the whole security thing.

Cam brought up a system prompt. "I'll scan to see what he's left open on his computer." He began to type at the console.

```
NMAP -O -T5 -sS -P0 -v w95.libre.dyndns.org
```

The system instantly started scanning the offending computer. The flashing cursor tailed at the end of an ever-increasing stream of green dots, until finally, it provided the results they were waiting for.

"Woohoo." Cam shouted, punching the air again. "Looks like he's left several holes in his defences. Look, look." He exclaimed. "Can you believe it; Microsoft telnet!"

It was almost possible to see the adrenaline pulsing through Cam's veins as he loaded the rest of his attack tools. "Hydra

methinks, check what they've got in the way of password security?" Cam's fingers danced across the keyboard as he typed into the console at an increasing speed.

Again, a short wait, and the hack was complete. Hydra had cracked the telnet password, which had in fact, been rather too simple. "So what will I delete?" Cam said, a smug grin forming across his face. Al leaned over his shoulder. "I'm slightly bemused. Don't you think it is a bit strange that we're finding it this easy to get into this system? Besides look at this: we have a file here called weekly shopping list! Are you sure this is the right one you've got?"

"Course it is. OK, I'll just have a bit of fun."

Cam typed another command at the remote shell. *'del command.com'*

He smiled, "and now for the piece de resistance...ping of death."

The system at the other side's packet count fell to zero, as it was knocked off the Internet.

In the meantime, Duncan sat at the Firewall console. "I think that's worked, the connection has dropped off. What was that address again?"

Cam shouted the address across the room. "Err, that's not the one that was poking around! It's only just disconnected this second." Duncan replied.

"Oh bollocks, you've knocked one of our customers off." Duncan continued, sounding rather worried.

"Shit happens mate!" Cam seemed unconcerned. He shrugged his shoulders as he got up from his chair. "Now, that was a bit more like it...anyone for coffee?"

Cam certainly didn't bother about the odd case of friendly fire, especially when he considered the greater scheme of things. Duncan turned to Al. "I've seen those attack signatures before. I think we need to watch out for that one again, he'll definitely be back." Al concurred, "yeah, the ones that take their time, are the ones to watch."

Duncan pointed to his phone. "I better call Miss Sharp, and set up a meeting for tomorrow." With that, he ambled back to his desk, sat down and proceeded to pick up the phone.

Cam eventually returned with more coffee. "Just been talking to the help desk bod. He asked if we knew about an old biddy who'd just been blue screened, and was worried that she'd lost her bank details." He chuckled to himself. "What's worse, she doesn't seem to be able to boot up her PC again...woops!"

Duncan had dialled the number on the business card. Miss Sharp answered, "Hello Mobile Solutions, Miss Sharp speaking." Duncan thought for a second, and replied in the most *professional* voice he could muster.

"Hello, its Duncan Steele here, remember, we met earlier on the train, and you were looking for some security consultancy?"

"That's right, I remember. Have you thought about the offer? Would you like to meet to discuss?"

Duncan replied, "How about Monday lunchtime, about," he paused for a second checking his watch, whilst he thought about a suitable time. He continued, "how about 12:30 at your

offices?"

There was a short silence, before Miss Sharp replied quietly. "The offices aren't suitable at the moment...we can meet at Beroni's coffee shop, do you know it?"

Duncan responded, "Of course. I'll see you there at 12.30." Miss Sharp added, "Don't be late. It would be good if you could provide me with a scope of the tests, you would intend doing."

Duncan replied, "That's not a problem, and thanks again." He then put down the phone.

"Right, I've had enough excitement for one day. I'm off." Duncan stated, swivelling round in his chair. He then got up to leave. Clearing his desk, he made sure he had remembered all of things he needed for that evening. His Zaurus, a couple of blank CDs, and a few notes he had written that day. Moments later he had packed his bag, and flung his coat on. "See you all on Monday then." he called out as he left.

As Duncan reached the lift Cam shouted, "Remember, the new guy starts Monday, and you're mentoring him. Oh, and good luck at the fencing comp ye fat git..."

Duncan shook his head, and smiled, before raising his hand in a final parting gesture.

The office had been pleasantly warm, but once outside, the chilly dark night rapidly cooled him. He pulled his overcoat tightly round his shoulders. Shivering, he thought of a hot shower, and a Latte.

At last the rain had finally stopped. It had left a glistening trail of orange, puddle soaked pavements, now lit, courtesy of the

street lamps, towering above.

The arduous journey up the hill and on the train always seemed more difficult in the winter darkness. Almost an hour had passed when eventually he reached the front door to his block of flats.

He was relieved to have made it after the long walk down the hill, from the railway station. Duncan trundled up the final of three flights of stairs to his small flat and fumbled to find his key. A moment of panic set in as he felt he must have left it at the office. With relief, he finally found it in one of his zip pockets, where he had put it for 'safe keeping'.

He stuck the key in the heavy blue door. It creaked, the sound echoing across the concrete stairwell, as he struggled to push it open. "I Must remember to oil this bloody thing." Duncan muttered to himself. Once inside, he noticed the hall lights had been left on. They gave a comfortable glow, complimenting the beige carpet, and clean white walls, which made a welcome change from the cold cement, and darkness outside.

Although finally in his sanctuary, supposedly safe from prying eyes, he felt slightly uncomfortable, as if something was not quite right. He did not remember switching on the lights this morning, although it wouldn't have been unlike him. He quietly slid his rucksack off his back, and carefully laid it on the floor.

He crept cautiously down the corridor, until suddenly Duncan froze. His heartbeat became erratic. He began to sweat, and a sick feeling took his breath for a second. A tingling sensation ran up his legs, to his back.

He sensed that someone had been in the flat. He remembered closing the computer room door this morning. He continued slowly down the hall, his heart rate increasing. His palms began to sweat, and the cold he had felt outside was now gone.

"Hello? Who's in there?" came his stuttering, half whispered, call. Duncan began to push the computer room door open.

A sudden scream came from behind the door. The door swung violently closed as if kicked. Duncan was thrown into the wall. He crashed against it, before landing awkwardly on the floor. For a few milliseconds seconds he was dazed, and confused, before rage began to take over. He was, however in a vulnerable position, and toiling to get up.

Finally coming to his senses, he turned to look up. Standing over him was his girlfriend Lin. She was a small, well-toned woman, of Chinese American extraction. She stood directly above him, wearing her jogging bottoms and a T-shirt. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" shouted Duncan, angered and somewhat embarrassed.

Lin's hand covered her face. She looked apologetic and worried." Oh Duncan, I'm so sorry. I just meant to give you a surprise, not to knock you over!"

Duncan began to calm down. He'd had a fright, and being knocked over had hurt his pride. He was also, however, relieved to be okay. "It's alright, I know you didn't mean it. But what were you doing in the computer room honey?"

Lin looked at Duncan apologetically with her beautiful dark eyes. "I was only trying to clean up. I didn't hear you coming in; you gave me a fright. She pointed towards the room. " Its a mess in there!"

Duncan leaned against the wall for support as he struggled to get back on his feet. "Well, cleaning the room was a nice thought, but please don't kick the door again." He paused to take a breath. "You know how shaken I was after the flat was burgled. Suppose its what happens when you live in dodgy area." "As for tidying; I at least know where everything is, if its not touched." Lin helped Duncan up. "Of course." Duncan looked slightly perplexed. "Did you not hear the door opening? The noise is horrendous?"

Lin shook her head, and quickly changed the subject. "What do you fancy doing for dinner?"

"Err, I didn't have time to get any shopping in. It's been hectic over the last week or so." Duncan apologised.

Lin replied in her soft American accent. "Not a problem. How about a take-away, and afterwards, I thought we could have an early night?" She brought him closer for a hug. Duncan bent over to meet her, "I would love that, but I've got an audit scope to do, work on the control mechanism for my program, and surely you haven't forgotten about the competition tomorrow?"

Duncan was apologetic, "Sorry I didn't know you were coming over tonight." A momentary look of rejection crossed Lin's face. "You know," she looked down as she responded, "since we met 6 months ago at the club, we've not really had much spontaneity, have we? Have you gone off me?"

Duncan looked at her, and smiled. He brought her closer and kissed her softly on the forehead. "Of course I haven't gone off you, you're the best thing that ever happened to me. It's just bad timing that's all!" Lin looked up, and smiled. He continued, "that's better...now what do you fancy?"

Lin walked across the room to the kitchenette counter. "I picked up a menu from the new Italian restaurant down Southside Street. They look really good." Duncan followed her across the room, and peered over her shoulder at the menu. He scanned it for his favourites. "I had lasagne for lunch today; so spaghetti sounds good tonight. I'll give them a phone once I get my jacket off."

Duncan went through to the brightly lit bedroom, and dumped his coat on the bed. He looked over to the blue and white fencing bag that took up quite a large space on the bedroom floor. He stopped for a minute, thinking about the Scottish Championships he would be competing at the next day. He had been second three years running, and was desperate to capture one of the few titles that had eluded him. He had never been more ready, or this focussed before.

Fencing had brought him many things. Confidence in his ability. A sprinkling of fame and adulation, in the small world that surrounded the scene, and finally, it had brought him Lin. He had met her through fencing at the University club, only six months earlier.

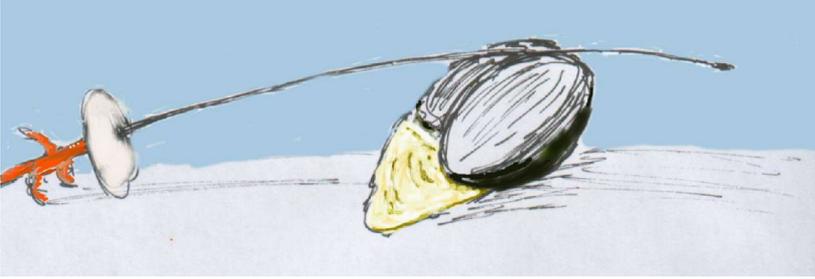
He snapped himself out of his daze, and remembered what he was doing, as a call of "Hurry up I am starving!" came from his girlfriend next door.

They finished their meal. "That was really nice." Duncan laid back comfortably on the leather suite, next to Lin.

She cuddled into him, "So what do you think of your chances tomorrow?" "Not sure. Richard will be there, he's always tough to beat." Duncan replied. "What time do we have to leave then?" Duncan thought for a second. "It's a 9am check-in, and

about an hour to Stirling, so...I would say its up at 7 and away by 8, at the latest."

The pair lay on the couch, dozing. It gave their bodies a chance to digest the food they had just eaten. They could have fallen asleep, where they lay.



Chapter 4 – The Tournament

Duncan suddenly jumped up from the couch. "Shit! I forgot I've got the scoping forms, and control mechanisms to do." Lin looked at him and groaned. "Oh...do you have to?" She paused for a second, getting up from her resting position, and rubbing her eyes. "You know, you do too much; and for what? You don't have to. You've got a good job!"

Duncan shrugged his shoulders apologetically, and wandered towards the computer room. "Sorry babe, I know. I'll be as quick as I can. I'll leave the scoping till Sunday, as I don't need it till Monday."

Duncan opened the computer room door. This converted second bedroom had become a lab for testing his creations. It was messy to say the least. Duncan could not remember what colour the carpet had been, and no one had seen it in a while. The room was a dumping ground for the old technologies he couldn't bear to throw away. He often thought he might use the Amiga 1200 which sat in the corner, for something one day.

He eased his way over the pile of old computer systems and other peripherals strewn across the floor. Only the light from the corridor lit the room. Finally managing to creep his way across it, he sat down at the ash black computer desk. He

repositioned, and switched on the angle-poise lamp; the only working light in the computer room, which sat on top of some stacked system units.

The desk's surface was untidy. Several computer units were stacked high to the left-hand side. A large flat screen monitor, positioned in the middle of the desk, afforded at least some space for the dusty keyboard, and mouse. To the right of the desk sat communications hardware, including a phone, and the necessary fast Internet modem. This balanced precariously on a huge pile of technical manuals. Cables strewn like spaghetti ran to the network points. Power adapters, required to keep these systems alive, were stacked dangerously into the power sockets. The desk, adorned with biscuit wrappers, discarded coffee cups, and sticky marks, had seen better days. The mess often annoyed Duncan, but not enough to do something about it. An old printer sat in the corner of the floor. Its extending cable snaked across the carpet, waiting to trip any adventurer who dared to get to it. Hence, it had been buried under uncollected printouts for some time. What did he need a printer for anyway? This was a paperless office!

As Duncan reached into the drawer to get the disk, the handle of the desk drawer promptly came away in his hand. "Fucking thing. Must remember to fix that!" He lobbed the handle to the floor, allowing it to join the other junk he had meant to use or fix, at some time or another.

Carefully opening what remained of the drawer, he rifled through a pile of CD's, and disks before eventually finding what he wanted. A blue disk, with a single black dot in the middle, distinguished this as the disk that held the source code for Z4CK.

Finally, he fixed his Zaurus palmtop to its makeshift tripod,

and switched the infrared receiver on. He brushed the dust from his main systems monitor. The room was conducive to the production of dust. The static from the monitor attracted it like a magnet in a scrap-yard.

He rubbed the dust from his hands, and switched the monitor on.

A black background fronted by bright green text and a login prompt appeared. He logged in quickly.

Inserting the disk into the drive, and mounting it, he promptly searched its contents, until he found the file Z4CK.source.

Anxiously looking round as he typed the password to unlock the source code, he opened the file.

For what seemed a reasonably short time, Duncan scanned the code in an almost trance-like state, making changes where he thought they were necessary. Although Z4CK, which was short for Zaurus-ACK, could do almost everything it had been designed for, he was still having problems with the control mechanism. The control mechanism was a special design feature, created to work like a steering wheel in a car.

Without it, even if someone had managed to compile, and start the software, it would still be uncontrollable. There was no way he could contemplate unleashing Z4CK onto a computer network, without full control. Despite this, he was keen to start putting his baby to good use.

Hours went by. Finally, Duncan's eyes were starting to strain. He hadn't focused them anywhere, except at the pixels displayed in front of him. He hadn't realised the time that had passed, until Lin leaned round the door.

"Are you coming to bed?" It was obvious by her tone that she was fed up waiting.

"Err, yeah, just ten more minutes. I'm nearly done." came the slightly detached reply.

Duncan didn't look away from the screen, as Lin carefully edged her way across the minefield of the computer room floor. She yawned, "How's it going anyway?"

Duncan slowly swivelled round in his chair, his body leading and head following, as he dragged his eyes away from the screen, to face her. "Not bad, I think. It works, that is for sure! I just need to do some final tweaks, and I can restart my testing."

"I'll need to port it to OpenZaurus from my main system for proper use." he continued.

"Can you use it to make money?" "Or will it simply rule the world?" Lin laughed sarcastically.

"Well, that's the idea; the money part anyway." replied Duncan, slightly annoyed by her sarcasm.

"Forgot to say, I've been offered our first security work." "I sort the details out on Monday. That's why I need to do the scoping form, and I'll probably do the actual audit next Saturday."

Lin sighed, "Does that mean you'll be away that day?"

"No, just for a short while. You just let this program run from here, and it should give us the info we need for the test."

Duncan turned slowly back to the screen. Saving his work, he

removed the disk from the system drive, and put it in what was left of the desk drawer.

Lin moved closer. "So, what exactly does this program of yours do?"

"Well," Duncan paused, looking for the easiest way to explain. "You launch this program, and it will scan a computer system, or range of computer systems, looking for weaknesses, or vulnerabilities, as I would term them. It can then, if you tell it to, exploit those weaknesses. It would be handy for testing the security of say, on-line banks, or other similar computer systems.

Lin thought for a second. "Sounds like something you wouldn't want to get into the wrong hands then?"

Duncan replied, "Nope, that you wouldn't. This software has several things that makes it different from other similar tools."

He started counting on his fingers.

"Number 1. It can disguise itself as it travels across a network, to a computer system. Making it indistinguishable from other network transmissions."

"Number 2. It has its own built in defence mechanism that stops anyone attacking it. Meaning, once its started, only the control mechanism can stop it. You know, it's like having its own immune system, fighting off other viruses."

"Number 3. It sends the information back to the control station. So we know where any of its worm components are at any given time."

Duncan paused for a second. "It will also attack the systems on any weakness learned, whilst finding its way out to any directly connected computer systems."

Duncan sighed, "Now, making that happen is reasonably easy...it's controlling, and tracking it, that's the problem!"

Lin took a step forward, and leaned over the screen. She whispered, "So apart from me, who else knows about this?" Duncan leaned closer to Lin. He spoke quietly, and slowly. "Only those I can trust...that would be you, and AI."

He leaned back in his chair. "I visited some security forums on which I posted questions last year, but that was under a pseudo-name. As far as I'm aware, no-one has associated it with me."

Lin kneeled on the floor, her hand resting gently on Duncan's leg. She looked slightly worried. "You're going to use this next week? It doesn't sound like a good idea to me? What if it goes wrong? You'll be in a whole lot of trouble."

Duncan looked around the room, pondering the question. "You know; I'm not bothered about material wealth, but I wouldn't mind a bit of recognition. Creating this tool would certainly do that, at least amongst certain communities."

"I'm sure it'll be OK...you've got to take risks sometimes, otherwise chances come and go, and you're...well, how can I say it, left at the station when the final train has gone? It'll be fine, once it's under complete control."

Lin stood up. "Anyway, it's all very well talking about fame and trains, and other interesting crap; but I'm tired, and you've got the competition tomorrow. So PLEASE, come to bed...surely that's an offer you can't refuse?"

Duncan smiled, and switched off the monitor. "Yeah, I'm gubbed. I'll probably have problems getting up tomorrow."

Again, they made their way carefully across the room. Lin headed straight to the bedroom, whilst Duncan wandered round the house, switching off the lights, and locking the doors.

Metallic take-away cartons lay strewn next to the sink. The dishes from the evening meal sat in the tomato-tinged water. The stench of Italian food filled the living room. Duncan thought for a split second that he might tidy them up, before the sudden need to sleep overwhelmed him.

No, he could do them tomorrow. He switched off the last of the lights, before stumbling wearily to the bedroom.

At last, as midnight came, Duncan had managed to get into the bed where Lin lay half-asleep. He leaned across her, and kissed her goodnight. Lin's smile was almost automated, but comforting, as she, in her dozing state, laid her arm across him. The bed was warm, the sheets crisp. He felt himself sink into the bed's luxurious mattress. Soon enough, the darkness of sleep brought another day to its peaceful, if somewhat busy conclusion.

Morning came too quickly. "Duncan, Duncan, get up you lazy git. It's past 7 o'clock." Lin shook Duncan, and gently slapped his face to try to wake him from his almost comatose sleep.

He finally came round. "Eh? What? What time is it?" Duncan struggled to open his eyes and focus. Lin had already got up, and switched on the main light in the bedroom. The light in the room was bright, too bright for this time of day, with no lampshade to dull it.

Duncan rubbed his face, and finally managed to swing his legs out of the bed. The bedrooms squeaky wooden floor felt cold as his feet touched it. Not the nicest feeling at this time in the morning. Gingerly pulling back the curtains, he could see that the world outside was dark, and yet again drizzly. Lin was busy dressing, "Hurry up, we'll end up late."

She walked towards the door. "What do you want for breakfast?" "Cereal, and a cup of tea would be magic." came the dazed reply.

Duncan stood up, and stretched. He began to slowly pick up his clothes, and promptly tripped over the fencing bag sat in the corner. The stumble finally woke him, as he went crashing into the pine wardrobe, clutching at its sides to stop his decent to the floor. He muttered a few expletives, and started hauling on his tracksuit. Finally heading to the bathroom, Duncan wet his hair, which, as usual, had looked like a birds nest.

Hair now suitably flattened, he ambled through to the living room, and sat down at the breakfast bar with Lin. Lin held her nose, and grimaced. "I wish you would do the dishes before you go to bed. It smells of tomato sauce in here. How many times have I asked you?"

Duncan replied apologetically, "Yeah I know, sorry about that, it was just so busy last night!"

They hurriedly finished their cereal, and collected their bags, which they had packed previously, managing to head out the door without any further mishaps.

Lin asked as they reached the car, "Now, have you got everything you need? All your equipment?" Duncan fastened

his seatbelt and replied, slightly annoyed with the patronising manner in which the question had been asked. "Yes, definitely!"

He linked his Zaurus to the car stereo. Switched on the ignition, and carefully maneuvered out of the confined parking space. "Christ, Edinburgh parking at its usual best!" He carefully avoided hitting the cars double-parked along the street, before eventually managing to exit.

Stirling was 45 minutes away. At 7.45am in the morning, it was a reasonably quick, uneventful journey. Lin dozed, allowing the stereo to provide the uninterrupted entertainment.

Duncan often worked out his problems on these occasions. Almost anything and everything that worried him was given mental airtime during these longer drives.

It was on occasions like these that his inspirations often came to him. Unfortunately, he would usually have forgotten most of them by the end of the day. At the forefront of his mind on this day, was the competition ahead. It had been several months since he had competed last. He worried he would not be fit enough to deal with the latter stages of the competition, if, as he hoped, he made it that far. Other ideas regarding the control mechanism, as well as new features for his software, also floated around his head. None of them were worthy of shouting 'Eureka'. His brain at this moment, was simply idling.

"Right, we're here." Duncan announced excitedly, shaking Lin's arm to wake her. It had been July since his last tournament, and he was keen to get back into the swing of things.

They got out of the car, and like a few others arriving at the same time, headed towards the tournament check-in.

"Duncan!" a shout came from some distance behind them.

A man in his mid 20s, of Arian appearance, ran from the car park to catch up.

Rich was one of Duncan's good friends, and former international team mate. He stopped next to the couple, and shook hands enthusiastically. "It's been months. Where have you been?"

"Oh busy, busy. You know how it is. You miss a couple of competitions, and suddenly it's been a while." was Duncan's reply. "This is Lin. I don't think you've met?" said Duncan, putting his arm round the young lady by his side. Lin smiled at Rich, "I've heard all about you!"

"Now that's worrying!" Rich replied, smiling politely. He glanced at his watch, "Anyway, let's get inside before we miss the check-in. I hear they are being strict on time today."

They stood in the queue, waiting to pay the entrance fee. They nodded, and shook hands with several other regulars on the circuit."

"So what's the latest then? Any new fencers I should worry about today?" "It all seems like the same old faces to me."

Rich looked around to pick out any new faces who may have appeared in the last short while. "Nobody really worth worrying about. There are about 120 entries today, but most of them are the usual cannon fodder. It'll get tough by the time you get to the top 16, probably. Rich produced the entry list from his pocket and took a closer look, scanning its contents for names. "However, there is Bauermann. I've heard he is pretty good. He's over here from Germany doing his final year in Medicine

at Glasgow. He used to be in the German B team...so I'm told."

After a short wait the men checked-in. The registration and weapons check was all in the one place. The registrar looked up from her desk, and spoke to Duncan, "Hello stranger, it has been a while hasn't? Almost a year!"

Duncan replied whilst delving into his wallet, "Yeah, I worked it out, and it's been almost a year since my last tournament. I've still kept practising though!"

The registrar replied, "Good to see you back again. That'll be £12 for entry please, and I need to see your license."

Duncan handed his license, and the required money over to the registrar." She stamped 'paid' against his name, and handed back his license. "That's fine Duncan, could you just hand your metallic jacket and foils over to the armourer, for testing please. Oh, and good luck today."

Duncan moved along to the next part of the check-in, hoping none of his electrical equipment would fail. He could ill afford to pay for new kit at this moment in time, and couldn't be bothered with the hassle of rewiring his weapons. He had been too busy to check his kit earlier, having thrown himself into the development of Z4CK.

The armourer checked each component of the equipment. The Metallic jacket, stainless steel mask, and finally Duncan's foils. "Yep, no problems here." He stamped the kit to give it the all clear. Finally, he handed the equipment back to Duncan, thanking him. Duncan replied, breathing a sigh of relief, "No! Thank *you*!" Duncan took the kit and put it back in his bag, relieved.

Rich's kit had also been checked, and as expected, was in good working order. He was more dedicated than Duncan. *His* kit was always in good working order. He didn't expect to fail such a thing as a weapons test.

"Better get changed, and warmed up. See you later eh?" Rich stated, bundling the last of his kit into his oversized fencing bag.

Duncan slapped Rich on the back, "In the final perhaps?"

Lin had been standing quietly in the background. "What time is it likely to finish?" Duncan stepped back looking slightly surprised, "about 7pm, if I manage to get to the later stages. Why? Are you bored already?"

Lin laid her hand on Duncan's arm to reassure him. "I was going to meet Angie at some stage tonight, that's all. I'll give her a call on the mobile." She sought to further reassure Duncan, "I'll see you in the hall, in a few minutes, OK?"

She began to head towards the front door.

Duncan replied reassured, "fair enough. See you in a minute eh?" Lin gave him a smile, and continued towards the sports centre doors whilst dialling her mobile. As she walked through them she turned, and gestured that she would only be 5 minutes."

Duncan entered the arena. It was magnificent, quite the largest setting he had fenced in. He sucked in the atmosphere noticing immediately the warmth. He felt this might cause problems later, if he wasn't careful. "Must make sure I drink enough, or I'll be for it later." he said to himself.

As he scanned the surroundings, his eyes feasted on the colours

that presented themselves to him. The pistes shone like polished silver. The fencers were engulfed in clean white Kevlar; this only broken by the gold lame jackets, covering their trunks. The black meshed masks that protected their heads gave them an almost android appearance.

They were all anonymous to the untrained eye, but Duncan knew, and recognised many of them from their stance, or the way they moved. Red and green lights flashed intermittently. Buzzers sounded as the electricity travelled down the sprung wires from the fencer's foils, through the ground-leads, to the scoring equipment, to indicate a hit.

Duncan peered around the hall for a suitable place to camp. He headed towards the stand, which was almost empty except for fencers changing, or limbering up. The fencing bags dumped on the benches marked the combatant's territory as Duncan clambered up to a suitable spot. He laid his bags down, and took another look around from his new vantage point. In front of him, a giant black curtain hung from the ceiling. It partitioned a quarter of the arena, ready for the final.

A raised fencing piste, 14 metres long, made of slotted Aluminium, sat in front of the curtain. Behind it, a quality lighting system, worthy of the showpiece the final would be.

Duncan donned his kit, and began the process of limbering up. The early stages were usually part of the warm up process for him, but today he was taking no chances; it had been a while, and he felt ring rusty. Lin finally joined him. "I saw a man with a microphone coming out to announce the first round. Let's see who you get." She seemed slightly more interested.

Duncan replied, pulling on his glove, and straightening his jacket one last time. "It should be OK. We'll see; it depends

what seeding I'm given. I've missed a couple of tournaments, and that could affect it a little bit."

Duncan's seeding was good. Not quite as good as it would've been a year or so ago, but he couldn't complain.

He was top seed in his pool, with most of the combatants in the first round reasonable club fencers. He wasn't usually affected by nerves, as some of his fellow club-mates were. However, he often found it difficult to get started. It could take a fight or two, but once these were under his belt, he usually settled in. From then on, there was no stopping him.

The tournament started strong, and grew harder as the day went on. The usual fencers carried themselves forward without many problems. Past the initial rounds, and early knockout stages.

Strength, speed, stamina, accuracy, and fast reactions were all necessary. Duncan felt he had taken up the perfect sport. A fencer could have all these attributes, and yet still not make it. There was more to it than just physical attributes. The timing of the attack, the distance you kept with your opponent, and the tactics of a chess master, produced the true champion. Duncan strived to be the best, but time, and again, he had fallen at the final fence. He was determined that this, would be his tournament.

Duncan paced himself in the early stages. Allowing his opponents to come to him, was an easy option, as most were keen to attack. Good timing in defence, and counter attack, allowed him to progress, whilst expending as little energy as possible. Again, and again he straightened his tempered steel blade back into shape, after someone had run onto its point.

Both Duncan and Rich were proving to be tough opponents for the majority. Soon, only the last 8 remained, themselves included. Duncan however, had found it tougher than usual.

It was almost 5pm, as Duncan managed to scrape his way through a tough final 16 bout. The fight, against a defensive fencer, who could not be tempted into attacking, had been a long, drawn out affair. Duncan's skills were tested to the limit. His opponent's strength was defence, making him risky to attack. Duncan had found out this, to his cost, early on in the fight. An anxiousness to get it over with had seen him lose several hits.

Duncan used all of his cunning to draw defensive and counter attacking actions from his opponent, before hitting him with his own cleverly time parries, and side steps. It had however, drained his precious energy, leaving him wishing he had done more training.

He slumped onto the bench, soaked in sweat, feet aching, bruised and blistered. He was physically, and mentally drained. Yet, in ten minutes, he would again pull on his fencing kit, to fight his toughest bout yet. He had drawn Bauermann, who had walked through the competition with little problem.

Duncan got to his feet, attempting to stretch the muscles in his back, which ached slightly. He was glad he would fight again soon, as there would be less chance of seizing up completely.

Sitting back down, he attempted to dry the sweat that poured from him, whilst tending the soles of his soft feet. They had been torn to shreds by the friction of the day's combat. He began to change his sodden T-shirt and socks.

Rich bounded up, and looked at Duncan's feet, shaking his

head. "That's what happens if you don't do enough training!" Duncan replied, "Cheers, I'll bear that in mind next time." Point bruising to Duncan's legs and chest were also noticeable. However, these were simply dismissed as the scars of the day.

At that moment, Lin returned from the drinks machine, where she had gone to fill Duncan's water bottle. "Here you go; drink this." Duncan drank greedily from the bottle. The water was cold, and well received.

"Cheers, you are an angel."

Duncan, Rich, and Lin chatted about the days fencing so far, and looked forward to the coming bouts. Rich, was second seed, behind Bauermann. He therefore had a better chance than Duncan of going through to the semi-finals.

Very soon, a man dressed in a black blazer and trousers, carrying a clipboard, approached. They recognised him as the tournament co-ordinator, and sat up expectantly.

"Duncan, Rich, we're about to begin the quarter finals now. If you could just be ready, and make sure you're weapons are tested, and working.

Duncan turned to Lin as he began the walk down to the piste.

"Wish me luck."

"Always!" replied Lin. With that, he headed towards the show piste.

The show piste made for a fantastic spectacle. It had been raised 6 inches from the ground, in front of the large black curtain, designed to contrast with the fencers white kit. It

gleamed in the bright lights of the arena.

Duncan walked to the right hand side of it, and plugged his electrical equipment into the system. He looked up at the stands, which had been empty that morning. The fencers' bags, and kit had been removed, and several hundred people now filled the arena seats. The noise levels began to increase as the first two finalists mounted the piste.

Duncan could hear nothing. Adrenaline had been the drug of choice for the day. It dulled the pain of the bruises and grazes suffered, but also focused the mind; making him sharp like the blade he wielded. Most things seemed to have happened in slow motion that day. The fight or flight response, was now in full flow.

Bauermann stepped confidently up onto the piste. He was a short stocky man, powerful in appearance. His fencing kit was immaculate. The blade of his foil slightly bent through efficient use, glinted in the light of the arena.

It had been used to good effect that day; his powerful frame delivering a hefty blow at lightning speed, if left unchecked. His black hair and thick eyebrows sat on top of his dark brown eyes. The eyes fixed on his opponent with a concentration never before seen by Duncan.

He had watched Bauermann destroy his opponents with embarrassing ease. Duncan was keen to avoid a similar embarrassment, in front of such an audience, at this stage.

They tested the conductivity of the electrical jackets and quickly saluted each other, and the president, as was the custom. Duncan gave a final glance towards Lin, who gave him the thumbs up, before he finally pulled his mask over his

face.

Both men were ready. All sound hushed as the president raised his arm, "On guard, ready, fence."

The combatants moved in and out of attacking distance, testing each other, making small feints and other varying movements. They beat each other's blades, to test reactions.

The combatants' concentration was intense, looking for openings, whilst careful to leave none. Duncan could hear, see, or think about nothing but the quick moving, efficient opponent before him.

Duncan knew his reactions were fast, hopefully fast enough to cope with this athletic German.

As they moved quickly up and down the piste, Bauermann's powerful legs suddenly propelled him like a springing cat towards Duncan, who had been in mid step. Caught off balance by the suddenness of the Germans blistering attack, Duncan reeled backwards, trying to regain some balance.

He was not quick enough. Bauermann's blade bent in an arc as the point punched into Duncan's left shoulder. In a split second Bauermann flew past him, even before Duncan's body had felt the full force of this hit, which knocked him to the ground. The red light flashed, and the buzzer sounded, as the audience cheered this incredible hit from nowhere.

The stand became a wall of sound as people cheered, clapped and stamped their feet in appreciation of the hit. Duncan pulled his mask up, and gasped for breath as Bauermann strode back to his line. One nil, with the first to reach 15 winning, meant a long hard fight was on the cards. Duncan knew he was going to have a tough time controlling the fight. He would

have to constantly change his tactics to out think this man. He knew he could not win on fitness, and strength; his guile would be his only saviour.

The gruelling fight continued. Tempered steel whipped through the air, clashing intermittently, as each combatant attempted to gain the advantage. Duncan's counter-attacks, ducks and side steps were foiling Bauermann's powerful, well-timed, attacks.

Duncan was using every trick he knew to throw off Bauermann's timing, speed and distance.

He would step into his attacks, feint attacks, or attack when least expected. He changed speed, starting an attack slowly, and ending it at an increasing pace. This constant change in tactics was taking its toll. It was becoming obvious that if Duncan were to win, he would need to finish it soon, before his energy ran out.

Finally, the 6-minute break was called, bringing a welcome rest for Duncan. Rich walked up to Duncan who sat by the piste drying the sweat from his hair and face. He was gasping the air to take in as much as possible. Duncan looked up, as Rich approached. Rich's advice was always welcome.

"Attack him more Duncan. His defence is weaker than his attack." Duncan grimaced, "Don't think I've got much left to do a lot of attacking. The last round really took it out of me; my legs feel like lead weights!" Duncan drank more water and exhaled. "Thanks anyway, I'll give it a bash!"

Rich smiled, "don't thank me, I'd rather fight you, than him, in the next round."

The bout was recalled. The score stood at 13-12 to

Bauermann, as both men mounted the piste for the final few hits. It had been a close and hard fight. Perhaps an all out attack was needed, Duncan thought.

The president called the fencers to their lines. "On guard, ready, fence!" Again, openings were looked for as the combatants moving stealthily in and out of attacking distance. Duncan finally saw his chance, and lunged with everything he had, towards the target.

Bauermann, taken aback, parried wildly, missing Duncan's blade. It glinted, as it whipped back through the air, and met full on with Duncan's elbow. Duncan's humerus took the force of the powerfully wielded blade.

Duncan shrieked with pain, as fire engulfed his forearm. Like a bolt of lightning, it seared every nerve on its journey to his fingertips. He ripped his mask off, throwing it to the floor, and immediately attempted to remove his sweat soaked glove. He grasped his arm as insane thoughts of amputation raced through his mind.

Duncan stumbled to the end of the piste, claspings his elbow, attempting to find his breath, as the crowd stood up and groaned. He was unable to concentrate on anything but the pain, and could do nothing but wait for the intense burning to subside.

It was clear that he would not be able to grasp his foil again that day, let alone use it effectively. He knew it was over. As his arm began to tingle and numb, he signalled his inability to continue.

Bauermann removed his mask, and apologetically tapped Duncan on the back with his blade. Duncan had scored the hit,

square in Bauermann's chest; but an inability to continue, meant that Bauermann would go through by default. Duncan felt sick. Even the huge rush of adrenaline, had not saved him from the pain. For him the day was over. As such, he had not been beaten, but he felt he had lost.

The crowd stood and applauded the combatants, appreciative of the fighting spirit, and skills shown on either side. It was little compensation to Duncan.

Duncan eventually gathered his things from the side of the piste, and walked over to where Lin sat. "Are you alright? How's the arm?" Duncan's arm hung limply at his side. "Tingling, but it'll be alright in a while. I'm going to grab a shower. Do you mind if we just head off after that?"

He paused for a second, "I don't think I could bear watching the final." Lin replied, "Its not a problem. I'll drive, you could do with a rest."

Lin continued, "As I mentioned earlier, I was going to meet Angie tonight, so I was just going to go to hers. If you could get back to your flat from there, that would be good."

Duncan slung a towel over his shoulder with his good arm. "Yip, no problem, see you in a minute." With that, Duncan walked off to the showers, a slight limp entering his walk, as his muscles began the process of stiffening, and the remainder of the adrenaline began to drain. This was the worst way to lose. He reached the showers, dejected.

The journey home was quiet, with little to be said. As they drew up to Angie's house, Lin turned to Duncan.

"I'll maybe pop over and see you later on in the week. I've got a

few things to do over the next couple of days, so I'll give you a phone. Ok?"

Duncan replied rather disappointed, "Alright. There's nothing wrong is there?" Lin smiled, "nothing at all, see you later." With that, she leaned over and kissed Duncan on the cheek.

She got out of the car and went through the entry door to Angie's flat, before giving a final wave. Duncan had never met Angie, but then, Lin had only been going out with Duncan for a few months. There was plenty time for all that meeting friends and family stuff later. He felt lucky to have met such a warm, caring woman, to share his life with.

Duncan took the wheel; his arm now fully recovered with the exception of some bruising. It was dark and cold outside, and the drive across town passed quickly.

Saturday evening was often quiet until later. Duncan thought about getting something to eat. As was usual with tournament days, he had hardly eaten.

He parked the car in the only space he could find at that time of night. Again, he hauled himself up the three flights of stairs to the flat; to find the door was open.

Duncan could not believe his eyes. He was sure he had locked it this morning. It did not look like it had been forced. Duncan, now extremely worried, cautiously entered the flat and laid down his bag.

He crept into the living room. Nothing seemed out of place. He looked in the other rooms; yet again, nothing seemed to be missing. He finally slammed the front door; annoyed with himself for being so stupid as to leave it open again.

He took his coat off and wandered across the living room to put the kettle on for a cup of coffee. He casually ventured into the computer room to boot up his systems, and check his mail.

Having switched on the light, he immediately realised that some of the computer systems were missing. His main PC was gone, as were a couple of the systems that had been lying on the floor. He grasped his head in his hands, "I can't believe I've been so fucking stupid," he shouted in despair.

After a short while, in which he kicked several pieces of computer junk lying on the floor, and wandered aimlessly around the house, he finally returned to the computer room, and sat down at the desk. He assessed the damage.

The monitor was still there, which he found strange. It was about the best, and most expensive piece of kit he had.

He then noticed that the desk drawer, and not only the handle were lying on the floor. The disks and CDs were gone! So was his software, the backups at least.

He carried the main source code to Z4CK, on his Zaurus's memory card. As long as he had the source code, and the password, he could always regenerate the software.

He began to feel slightly sick. Was this just an everyday burglary? Was it coincidence that he had been targeted again? What was going on? More questions flashed across his mind.

Had he left the door open that morning? He was sure he hadn't. He desperately attempted to remember the events of that morning. The more he thought about it, the more questions sprang to mind. Why hadn't this opportunist taken the telly or other stuff?

He would probably have problems with the insurance paying up as well, as there was no sign of forced entry.

Duncan was tired, and stressed. He picked up the phone in the computer room, and dialled Lin's mobile number. She answered immediately. "Hi babe, are you okay?" Duncan's mood was sombre, "It's me. I've been burgled again."

Lin sounded shocked, "Jesus not *again!* What did they take this time?"

Duncan sighed, "A couple of the computers, and some disks. Nothing else, as far as I can tell."

There was a short pause. "I told you to get out of that bloody area. It is no good there. How many times will you get burgled, before you see?" She continued, her tone becoming supportive. "I'm just about to go out, so I'll give you a call later on in the week as promised. Alright? And for god's sake, remember to lock your door!"

Duncan smiled; what else could he do?

Duncan put the phone down, and decided to get that coffee before making any further decisions. It gave him a chance to clear his mind.

He felt that someone must have seen, or heard, something. Around ten minutes later, he finished his coffee, and wandered over to the flat across the stairs, to knock on the door.

There was no answer. He tried again, but still no answer. As Duncan turned to head back to his flat, the door opened, and a man in his mid fifties stood staring at him in the doorway.

He was short in stature, wearing a red and white jumper, stained with food of some sort. His brown polyester trousers had seen better days. He was unshaven, and wore a pair of glasses, which seemed to perform a balancing act on the end of his nose. Duncan thought his neighbour's eyesight must be bad, as the glasses magnified the man's grey eyes, to a level that he couldn't ignore.

Although he had often seen the man across the landing, they had never communicated with anything more than an acknowledging nod. Duncan introduced himself.

"Hi, sorry to bother you, but did you happen to hear, or see anything unusual today?"

Duncan waited for a second; but got no immediate response.

"I've had a few things stolen from my flat?"

His neighbour's blank expression worried Duncan slightly.

"Sorry son? Ye'll huv tae speak up. The battery in ma hearin aids fucked, and am no due a new wan till Monday!"

"Ye ken the NHS these days - pure shite so it is." The neighbour moved closer to Duncan, to enable him to hear what Duncan was saying.

"Now whit were ye sayin?"

Duncan paused, slightly taken aback by his neighbour's manner. He decided that he'd probably get nowhere speaking to him, and so decided to cut his losses, and head back to his flat.

"Err, it's err, okay. Never mind. Cheers anyway!" and with that he turned to walk away. The man shouted as he turned, "Aye, see ye then. A hope ye catch the ugly bastard that wis in yer hoose nickin yer computer, or whitever as well."

He paused momentarily, "It wisnae *that* ye were comin tae talk to me aboot? Wis it?"

Duncan turned back in astonishment. He shouted, "Did you see someone here?"

The neighbour gestured that he had seen a large man. "Aye, big bastard. He hud a suit on. I'd say he'd been in the wars, by the looks oh him. Knackered nose like, but he definitely wisnae yer standard wee ned."

Duncan listened intently, starting to feel more concerned than before.

"The bass, hud the nerve tae staun on the stairs, lookin richt at me, and dial wan o they fancy mobile phone things. I couldnae hear whit he was saying though, what wi this hearin aid buggered in that."

He shook his head, "Honestly, I thought it was a fuckin cattle market up here the day, as no five minutes efter, I sees a couple mair weirdos hingin about outside."

Duncan raised his voice again, "What did they look like?"
"Sorry son, kind o blurry. They were doon the stair. A saw them oot o the windae, but my eyesight...its no sae good either, as ye can problay tell." Duncan sighed to himself.

The man continued, noticeably excited at remembering another detail. "One was wearing red though!"

Duncan thanked his neighbour, and made the short walk across the landing to his flat. He now, for the first time, had a real feeling of dread, as if he was being targeted for some reason.

He hadn't worried so much when he thought it was just another random break-in. He felt time was in some way running out, and next time they may visit whilst he was there.

He sat down anxiously on the chair, thinking to himself how bloody typical it was that his only witness was short sighted, and as deaf as a door post.

Duncan made a quick decision. He would finish his program here, tomorrow, and find somewhere else to stay for a short while. Lin would be out; whom else could he call?

He called Al. The answer machine at the other end kicked in. "I'm not here at the moment, please leave a message, and I'll get back to you...beep." Duncan spoke slowly into the phone; he always felt rather daft talking to machines.

"Al, I've been burgled again. I'm not sure if I'm just being paranoid, but I think someone is trying to get at the software, or me. Would it be possible to kip at yours for a few days?"

With that, he put down the phone, and went to get another cup of coffee. He sat down on the couch, and switched on the TV. The news spoke of terrorism, suicide, bombings and war. Thank god our country isn't always looking for a fight, he thought. There's got to be better ways to sort out the world's differences; a fencing match perhaps?

He switched the TV off and laid his head back. It had not been a good day at all, it had drained his energy, and now the warm,

comfortable couch was making him drowsy.

Soon he found himself dozing, relaxed, and ready for sleep. The day's events entered his restless slumber. They played out like a badly edited movie. Thankfully, morning would arrive soon.

Chapter 5 – Cracking the code

"Do we have it?" The grey bearded man leaned over the technician's shoulder, peering into a computer console, rather agitated.

"Its got to be on one of these disks Mr. Atkins. We've checked the PC we took from his flat, but found nothing on that." came a somewhat stuttered reply.

"Well keep trying, we've been working on this project too long. It should have been bloody easy."

"God, I'll end up having to do this myself!" An air of frustration had started creeping into the confident, almost arrogant voice.

Atkins stomped across the lab, leaving the two white-coated technicians sitting in front of a pile of unsorted disks, and other computer systems, stolen earlier that day, from Duncan's flat.

Both looked rather sheepish. It was obvious that the presence of Atkins was making them uncomfortable, to the point of being unable to concentrate on the task in hand.

"I expect you to stay until you find something. There is no such thing as a weekend here!" Atkins shouted, as he reached the door.

"Page me as soon as you have something."

With that, Atkins pulled an ID card from his pocket, and held it against the sensor. The glass door instantly slid open.

The technicians watched him as he walked past the window.

The sound proofed room allowed them to vent their frustration at their pushy, overbearing and totally unappreciative boss, once he was out of sight. As he disappeared down the corridor, the technicians cursed him. "Arse. Just because *he* doesn't have a life...what's the big deal with this one anyway? I've never seen him pursue anything with such vigour!"

The technicians sat high on their chrome and black leather lab stools. A grey bench spanned the length of the room in front of them. Computer equipment of all types sat scattered across the bench. The occasional beep and static buzz proving the systems were still functional. Behind them, quietly humming in the well-organised racks, were the powerful servers. Their coloured co-ordinated network cables, distributed neatly around the walls, lunged downwards towards a central hub in the floor.

Not the most inspirational, or comfortable conditions to work in. The only heat in this grey walled, functional room which, could've almost been mistaken for an operating theatre, was provided by the computer systems.

The room was secure. Sealed off from the rest of the building. Special access was required to work within its boundaries. Not that many people wanted to.

The hapless technicians sat side by side. One was much taller than the other. They had obviously worked together for some time, as they freely bantered and joked with each other. The shorter man picked up another disk.

"God, this is laborious. Remind me why I signed up to do this?"

"I mean, even if we find the file, we probably wont know what it does without further research, and it'll probably be password

protected!"

He stuffed the disk into the drive, "that's 4 solid hours now!"

The taller man stood up, and stretched. "I know, and that old git is not going to let it go until we find something; what a pain."

He limped across the blue linoleum floor of the lab to the primary bank of networking equipment.

Within the rack, the mass of neatly colour coded, well organised, cables ran upwards between the expensive, steel cased networking equipment, stacked securely there.

The systems were designed to work together. As much processing power as could be mustered was on call, as and when it was needed. Cracking codes had become tougher over the last year or so, and these systems, that at one time had taken seconds to perform their task, were now taking hours.

The technician powered some more systems up. They flickered to life, and started running their individual diagnostics routines. Green, red and amber LED's flashed intermittently, as the hard disks spun, and the networks connected. The technician stood wearily, tired at such a late hour.

"Well, if we do find this file, I guess we'll need a bit more power. Better get some of these systems set up to deal with the processing."

"It's going to be a long haul."

He wandered back to his seat, and sat down. "Are you listening to me?"

The shorter man turned excitedly to him. "Look at this! What does that look like to you?"

The taller man pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, and squinted at the screen. "Wehay, you may have hit the jackpot there Dave. Z4CK.source; that certainly looks like its got potential!"

"Open it up Dave."

Dave typed a few commands at the keyboard. "Shit, as we thought; it's password protected. We'll have to run a dictionary attack against it Andy."

Andy was leaning intently over the bench, his face almost up against the computer screen. "For Gods sake, that could take ages! I'll run the other systems in parallel, that should speed up the processing."

Dave rubbed his hands and strode across the floor, his limp now forgotten. He pulled a keyboard out from the rack, and typed furiously. Within seconds, endless pages of green text began scrolling across the flat panelled monitors.

Surely, it would only be a matter of time before the password was cracked, they thought.

Andy returned to his seat, and sat back on his stool. It was obvious from his expression, that he was relieved.

"Well at least we've made some progress...all we can do is sit and wait now."

"I'll give Atkins a call, he'll be pleased!" said Dave.

Dave reached for the black phone sat across the bench. Andy

stopped him in his tracks. "No, leave it just now. The last thing we need is flaming Atkins leaning over the top of us."

He straightened his white lab coat, as he sat back down. "If we crack the password, then we'll call him." He waited for a reaction.

Dave retracted his arm. "Fair enough, *after* we crack it."

Almost an hour went by with the password not yielding to the processing power being thrown at it. Andy paced the floor endlessly, whilst Dave sat quietly, reading a paper and sipping some coffee. "Andy, will you bloody well stop pacing backwards and forwards?"

"I'm trying to read the paper. Pacing about like a giraffe on turbo is not going to help!"

Andy replied, slightly annoyed, "I just want to get in there, and see what all the fuss is about, that's all."

He stopped pacing for a moment. "For God's sake; this guy must have used a bloody tough password!"

At that moment the primary system beeped. The scrolling text on the systems located along the walls stopped suddenly.

There it sat. The password. It seemed hard to believe that there it finally was, blinking at them, on the bottom of the console.

Dave punched the air in triumph. "Yes, take that you sucker, we..are...in." Andy rushed over to the screen, unable to hide his relief. "So, tell me, what was the password?"

"1ts,a_Zauru5," came the reply.

"Crafty devil. No wonder it took so long. Twelve characters, mixing alphanumeric, capitals, lower case and punctuation. Lucky we ever got it!" Dave typed the password carefully into the primary computer console.

The code, now unlocked, sat before them. Both technicians scratched their heads, as they attempted to fathom out its structure. "It's C code, but it's the strangest formatting I've ever seen!" said Dave.

Andy butted in, "He's either really good; or really crap, but the structure is definitely all over the place. Self taught I'd say!"

Andy had pulled his stool closer, as both technicians huddled round the monitor.

"Right, let's phone Atkins, he should be pleased!" stated Andy.

Dave turned round and looked at him with a look of cynicism, "First time for everything...you'd think!"

"Jeez, check the time!" A large round aluminium clock glinted in the artificial light, as it displayed the current time, 3:50am.

Dave picked up the phone, and dialled the number to page Atkins. Around 5 minutes passed before the phone rang. The technicians looked at each other, neither wanting to pick it up. "Well you paged him!" said Andy to Dave. Dave picked up the phone, "Hello Sir...it is good news, yes, we've cracked it, sorry.... I know its nearly 4 in the morning, but you did want to be kept informed!"

Dave turned and shook his head at Andy whilst pointing to the telephone handset. He rolled his eyes, whilst receiving a barrage of abuse from Atkins.

"Apologies for that. Okay, I'll see you when you get here Sir. No, we won't do anything else until you arrive."

Dave turned to Andy. "He'll be here in 20 minutes...oh joy!"

"Has he always been this bad?" asked Dave.

Andy replied, "Supposedly not. Hard to believe, but up to about ten years ago, he was an excellent boss, by all accounts. That's why he's as senior as he is."

"What happened there then?" asked Dave.

"Well," Andy began, "it seems his son went to jail, and that tore the family apart. I think there is a bit more to it than that. Atkins wife left him, he started drinking, and it got worse from there."

"Poor sod." exclaimed Dave.

"Yeah, shame. He was left with nothing; and word is he had a breakdown." Andy paused, "Was in *hospital* for a while...if you know what I mean."

Dave took another sip of his coffee, "And he's been a git ever since?" Andy laughed, "Yeah, you could say that, but don't let Atkins hear it!" Almost 20 minutes had passed, when the sliding doors opened and Atkins rushed in.

"Right, let me see it. What can you tell me about it?"

Dave, who sat in front of the computer screen, was slightly taken aback by the sudden appearance of Atkins. None the less he began, "Its written in C, but the format is a bit strange.

It'll take us a while to figure out exactly what it does from the code.”

Atkins butted in. "Have you tried compiling it?"

Dave hastily responded, "No Sir, we think that compilation, and execution of the code would be dangerous before further investigation.”

He looked at Andy for backup. “We wouldn't want to let this loose without having an idea of what it might do.”

Atkins looked at the pair of technicians with contempt.

"Bollocks. This is a test lab isn't it?" Andy stood up. Atkins had been leaning over him, making him feel uncomfortable. He started to explain, "It is, but this equipment...it's"

Atkins cut him short. "I've waited too long to get my hands on this, just compile the fucking thing." Andy looked at Dave and paused, uncertain of what to do next.

Dave shrugged his shoulders, and turned to the computer system, "I've got the compiler on this machine. I'll do it right away. It'll probably take around 5 minutes."

Dave typed several commands into the system, and the screen became a mass of scrolling text. Occasionally the system would pause, as if contemplating whether to take the next step or not.

After a good seven minutes, in which time Atkins stomped around impatiently, the compilation was complete. Or rather, it was incomplete.

Atkins looked blankly at the screen. "*What the fuck does that mean?*" he shouted, rather exasperated.

Dave stopped yawning, and answered the question. "The programmer has been pretty clever about this. Basically, it says the controller mechanism is separate."

Atkins rubbed his eyes. "You know, its past four in the bloody morning, and I can read...but maybe I don't comprehend, enlighten me!"

Dave continued, "It means that he has two separate programs, one is the...shall we say, *attack module*, and the other is the *command and control module*."

"We haven't found that bit." Andy butted in, "Without it, we can run the program, but we won't be able to control it."

Atkins stood back and folded his arms. They could see he was frustrated, almost bordering on angry. This was usual.

He sighed, and spoke slowly, his voice unusually calm and calculated. "Just run it." Andy and Dave spoke together, "We would recommend against that, without the controller mechanism."

Atkins stared at them. "Just...run...the...bloody...program, this is a test lab. That's what its here for!"

Dave turned back to the console, placed his hands on the keyboard, and began to type Z..4..C..K into the console. His finger hovered temporarily over the Enter key, before it finally fell, depressing it with a click.

The screen went blank. Silence. Atkins was vented his annoyance, "Blast, it doesn't even work."

Suddenly the hard drives began to screech as if being torn apart. Lights on the system locked green. The system seemed

to choke under the barrage of data thrown at it.

The blank screen hid the destruction that was unleashed upon the system's components.

The screen started to flash, on and off, on and off, until finally, with one last high-pitched beep, it stopped.

The technicians and Atkins looked at each other, stunned by what they had just seen. Another 'beep' and the system rebooted and started counting its memory, before it suddenly stopped.

Yet another high-pitched beeeeepppppp came from the speaker, making the technicians wince. The lights on the keyboard flashed continually. The system was now completely disabled.

Atkins watched the technicians desperately try to disconnect the squealing speaker. Finally, the sound died. Atkins was delighted by the destructive power of what he had just seen. "If we had control of that, we could cause a lot of damage. We must get it from him, before he uses it on anyone else."

As he finished his sentence, the screeching began again. The other monitors around the room went blank.

"Oh for fucks sake!" Andy cried.

Dave ran to the rack to switch the rest of the systems off.

He was too late. The combined screeching had now become unbearable, and it quickly dawned on them that they had just lost their entire lab; over 100 grands worth of hardware, in less than five minutes.

Atkins smiled. He knew he had to have the control module, and

in obtaining it, he would be able to finish what had been his agenda for some time.

He shook his head, and walked towards the door. He turned round one last time, to see the technicians running from system to system, like lab mice desperately searching for the smallest scrap of cheese.

The systems they had so lovingly built, now destroyed.

Atkins activated the sliding doors, and began to leave the room. He suddenly stopped. His smug grin disappearing, as a fact dawned on him.

He turned round quickly, rushing up to Dave. "Where's the disk for the attack module?" Dave pointed to the primary system, "In the floppy drive. It's probably a goner!"

Atkins was incredulous, "You never took it out before you started the program?" "You fucking idiots!"

Andy walked towards Atkins, "Now hold on a minute!" We warned you this might happen without the controller, but you insisted!"

Atkins seethed with rage, knowing very well the technicians were right. He stormed out, leaving the men in white coats desperately trying to salvage what they could of their systems.

Chapter 6 – Meeting

The day had more than dawned, waking Duncan with a start. For a change, the sun shone through the window, onto his face, causing him to shade his eyes. He rubbed them, trying desperately to wake himself up. He attempted to sit up, but the stiffness from the fencing competition the previous day made every muscle movement a painful journey in itself.

“Damn!” he said to himself. “I should've had a bath and slept in my bed. It might not have been this bad.”

Finally plucking up the courage to roll over towards the floor, Duncan swung his feet round until they eventually reached the carpet. Groaning as he used his stiff muscles to pull himself from the couch, he slowly headed for the kettle.

Duncan stretched as best he could as he waited for the kettle to boil. A few more yawns and a cup of tea later, he decided a hot bath was necessary before getting on with the rest of the day.

Duncan was, of course, unaware of the software testing that had taken place the night previous, albeit without the controller mechanism. Perhaps if he had this information, and an idea of the vigour with which Atkins was ready to pursue him, he would not have spent so much time pampering himself.

His bath, however, was indeed welcome. Slipping into its hot waters, he closed his eyes and meditated, pondering on the day that had gone before, and the day ahead. Al had not returned his call. Never mind, things did not seem so bad today. He would see Al at work tomorrow, and talk to him then.

Almost half an hour had passed before Duncan began to haul himself out of the bath. Feeling reasonably refreshed, he dried

his aching muscles as best he could, and limped off to get a change of clothes.

The bedroom was untidy. Duncan had not opened the curtains yesterday morning before he had left, so the room was still devoid of anything but the smallest amount of light. He found a crumpled pair of jeans and T-shirt that lay on the floor next to his bed, which he put on, before heading off to the computer room.

He sat down at his ash black desk. Shame they didn't bother clearing the rubbish on the desk, he thought to himself.

Duncan had carried his Zaurus with him to the tournament. He now produced it from his jacket pocket, and brushed its display with the palm of his hand. He carefully placed it in its cradle. At this moment, he would have generally linked to a wireless connection. His connection hardware had been taken, along with his other systems. He had no Internet, or network access.

His Zaurus started its OpenZaurus operating system. He had customised his PDA to allow him to undertake the security work, and increase reliability. The system prompted him for his previously configured four-digit password, which he entered. This innocent looking handheld computer was far more flexible than most people would have imagined. Duncan used it for everything from organising his life, to playing his music.

More importantly, it was the master controller. The mechanism by which Z4CK could attack, undertake reconnaissance, and override most computer system security.

Having entered the password, he quickly found the master control program. He also had a copy of the main program

saved in the systems memory. Duncan set to work linking the two programs back together, and removing the final bugs. Several hours later, he emerged from his extended concentration span. Mentally drained, he had finally finished the programming. It did what he wanted it to do: retrieve information, sit dormant in a host network reporting on the traffic passing by, and attack at any given time.

Duncan got up from his seat and scoured the floor for anything left that might serve as a test system, an expendable victim. He lifted two old systems from the dirty carpet. These had obviously been seen as junk, not worth taking. He set them up on the now plentiful desk space.

Having connected the power cables, the old systems whirred slowly into action. They wouldn't be of much use, but if he was going to damage them anyway, the older the better.

He began to compile the production code. Soon he would know if the software was all he reckoned, indeed, hoped it would be. The 10 minutes that it took dragged by; the hands of the clock seemed to stick on every move round its face.

“Compilation complete. No errors.” The words on the small screen in front of him confirmed success. Duncan was jubilant.

Finally, he would be able to test the finished article. It had taken almost two years of his spare time, and now it was ready. He stared at the screen wide eyed, savouring the moment, slightly afraid that it might not react as he expected.

Licking his lips he realised they were dry. "Here goes nothing," he whispered to himself, as he typed the first tentative command into the system. He was wise to be careful. The last time he had tested the control mechanism the target

systems had been destroyed. They were rendered completely unusable, and now, due to the theft, he was down to his last pitiful targets. They may have been old, but they were also important.

He finished typing the command *ZACK --info --target host1, host2* and pressed Enter. Immediately information about both systems began to flood the tiny computer screen.

Within a few minutes, the information gathering was complete. He had more data than any hacker would ever need to carry out an attack. This was state of the art reconnaissance. The software provided system services, the operating system type, as well user ids and simple passwords.

Duncan studied the information neatly laid out before him. He smiled and relaxed in his chair, happy with the results. He knew there was more testing to do, but for the moment, this had been a good, if careful start. He would need to reconfigure and harden the boxes to mimic truly secure production systems.

He was now sure that his software could break into any systems, given enough time.

Duncan decided to take a break, and have a bite to eat before carrying on. He ate a hastily prepared sandwich, and sipped a particularly strong, sweet coffee. The thought that maybe one day, people would know of, and respect his software launched his mind a million miles off into cyberspace.

A sudden, loud knock at the door snapped him out of his dream like state. Duncan stood up with a start and gingerly crept across to it. It was at times like these he wished he had invested in an entry phone.

There was yet another knock at the door. Duncan was now

within a foot of it. "Who is it?" he shouted nervously. A familiar voice replied, "Its me, let me in you idiot!" Al had arrived.

Duncan sighed with relief. He relaxed his shoulders, the tenseness leaving his body. He quickly opened the door, whereupon a concerned looking Al walked across the threshold. "I got yer message, so what's the damage?"

Without answering, Duncan headed back to the computer room, closely followed by his visitor. "They took my main PC, and a couple of other systems that I had used for testing. What's worse, they took my main set of disks which held the master copy of Z4CK."

Al studied the room for a moment. "Jesus, they didn't half make a fucking mess did they?" Duncan responded rather gingerly, "Err no, that's how it was before, in fact its tidier!"

Al raised an eyebrow, "How the hell did you find anything in this room?" He continued, "Anyway, I got yer message, as you can see. You can stay at mine if you want. It's not a problem; how long do you need?"

Duncan answered, "Just a couple of days, until this crap has settled down. I'm just feeling a bit nervous right now."

Al started to head towards the computer desk, "So what's happening then, have you managed to get any testing done before we meet this woman what's-her-name tomorrow?"

Duncan lifted a chair across the room for Al to sit down on, and sat himself down at the desk. "Her names Sharp, Miss Sharp, and yes, I think I've got all this lot working. Its a pity

those bastards nicked my stuff.

Duncan paused for a second. "It was lucky I had my PDA or that would've been that."

Al looked at the PDA. "Yeah, all that work would have been for nothing, what a bloody waste that would have been!" He crossed his legs and leaned back. "So, you going to show me yer software?"

Duncan smiled, "Of course. I'm just about to start the second test. This is the biggy. The information gathering one was a success, as you can see from this report. I'm going to do an all out attack, and try to get the software to spread between both of the test systems." Al looked at the report, "Seems to be a lot of information there, plenty for hacking purposes anyway!"

Al leaned over; resting his elbows on the desk, he strained to see the PDA's screen.

Duncan checked the cables and made a few final adjustments to the test systems. "Right, that's them hardened and imitating reasonably secure web-servers. All the unnecessary processes switched off, tougher passwords, and no real vulnerabilities. Let's see what this baby can do!"

Duncan's fingers flashed across the tiny keyboard typing *Z4CK --target * --spider --info --wait*. He looked at Al for the briefest of moments, and then pressed ENTER. One system started to whirr as it was interrogated. Its hard disk LED locked. Information scrolled down the PDA screen, far too quickly to see, as the software attempted to gain user and password data.

All of the system's components were tested, as the software bombarded the computer with hundreds of known access

breaches. Finally, the scrolling began to slow and become legible. The root user password had been cracked, and now the software had full control of all system processes. From here it began to launch its attacks against the second of the old test systems.

The hard disks on the second system began to whirr as information transmitted at an astounding rate to the PDA. Finally, the noise stopped on the second system. Access had been obtained much more quickly than on the first. The software had learned from its first attack, and used this to attack the second.

The software had gained control of both systems and was awaiting its next instruction from the master controller, as it had been configured to do by the --wait switch. Duncan scoured the information database that the software had provided him. He turned to AI who sat quietly, watching the proceedings with great interest. "The information in the database is absolutely right. Its done what I thought it would." said Duncan.

AI breathed in, thinking for a moment. "All that's fair enough, but what happens when there's a firewall in the way, and no openings?"

Duncan started excitedly, "That's the point, their is ALWAYS an opening of some sort, and in the same way their is always a back door out, unless the machine is switched off!" AI read the contents of the database. "I've got to say the information content is excellent. "Looks like this hits the spot!"

Duncan could not help feeling proud. His program had done its job, and a respected peer had complimented its quality. Duncan swivelled the chair back towards the PDA. He smiled.

"You ain't seen nothing yet. As you know the software now lies dormant in the first test system, as I used the --wait switch." He cleared his throat. "I can now use the system to do anything to any other system on the network. Not removing his fingers from the keyboard he turned his head towards Al. Check this out!" He typed a new command *Z4CK --target host1 --attack **.

His finger hovered over the ENTER key momentarily, like an executioner pondering the final moments of his victim. The finger landed on the key depressing it just enough to gain the result. Almost instantly the target systems hard disk light locked, its hard disk began to screech as if being torn by an horrendous monster.

Information scrolled erratically across its screen, completely indecipherable, whilst it squealed like an injured pig. Finally the systems speaker began a high pitched beeeeeep as the keyboards buffer began to overflow stopping all input to the system, and hence cutting off the ability to rescue it from its inevitable fate.

Al and Duncan covered their ears as the wailing became too much. Al lunged at the system and switched it off, breathing a sigh of relief. "Fucks sake, what a nightmare. Did it have to be so noisy?"

Duncan looked at him and pointed to the now silent system. "Switch it back on."

Al wasn't so keen. "I don't think I can stand any more of the noise." Duncan shook his head. "There won't be any noise." Al shrugged his shoulders, and switched the system back on. It counted its memory, and paused for a minute. The words SYSTEM FAILURE appeared on the screen, along with

“PLEASE ENTER YOUR PASSWORD FOR RESTORE.”

Duncan smiled. "There, don't say I'm not fair, guess the password and you can have your system back!" Al seemed mildly impressed by this. He thought for a second, "And the chances of guessing the password is?"

Duncan by this time had navigated his way to the door. "Don't know. The system decides; but I can retrieve it with the master controller. Could be handy eh?" Al stood looking at Duncan's PDA. "All that in one little box, scary shit man!"

Al glanced at his watch, shouting through to the living room, "Come on, let's go back to mine. I've got a couple of beers in the fridge and we could watch that new DVD I bought yesterday." Duncan replied, "Magic, that sounds like a good plan. I could do with getting out of here."

With that Duncan collected his work things and the two men were out the door. Glad to get a break from the flat, Duncan's nerves were almost in tatters. Thank God for friends, he thought to himself. They made it to Al's car safely and looked forward to a relaxing peaceful night ahead. Tomorrow was a big day. He'd need some decent sleep and hoped to get it tonight.

Duncan and Al drank the beer, and watched the DVD. It was the best Duncan had felt for a while. He was safe. Hopefully, he'd have no more unwanted visitors. He needed to get some rest. "I think I'll head off early, if you don't mind." Duncan said to Al, as the clock struck 11pm. "We've got the new guy coming in tomorrow." Al agreed, "Okay, I'll see you in the morning, there's a towel laid out for you in the spare room."

The following morning, Duncan sat at his workstation, staring

blankly into the screen. At 9.30am, his telephone rang. He reached across the paper-strewn desk, almost knocking over his morning coffee. "Internet Security, Duncan speaking."
"Reception here. There's a Brandon Harvey in reception for you." Duncan responded taking a deep breath, "Ok, I'll be down in a moment." Meeting new people was not one of Duncan's strongest points, but he understood it was something that needed to be done.

He decided to take some exercise, and walked down the stairwell, which echoed with his slow, deliberate footsteps. Brandon Harvey sat waiting in the reception area, looking around rather nervous, as one would expect on the first day of a new job.

He spotted Duncan, and instantly got up to greet his new work colleague with a smile. Of Afro-Caribbean decent, somewhere under 5 foot 6 inches tall, and slight of build, he was professional in appearance. His spectacles sat in such a way as to give him an intellectual appearance.

"Nice to meet you." Duncan said, shaking Brandon's hand.
"Let's get you up to the third floor, and settled in shall we?"

They got into the lift, quietly waiting for it to reach their floor, before walking to their area.

"Have you met the rest of this mob?" Duncan pointed to Cam and Al, who both sat in their seats. Al raised his hand and smiled to acknowledge his new colleague.

Cam swivelled round in his chair. "Welcome to the dump!"
"Hope yer enthusiastic, you'll need to be. Meeting everyone is the best part, its downhill from here!"

Duncan butted in. "So how are you today Cam?" Cam smiled, "Oh you know...same shit, different day." Duncan turned to Brandon, "As you can see, Cam's the cheery one, laugh a minute. Anyway let's get you set up."

Duncan set Brandon up with his access to the relevant systems, and showed him around during the morning. "If you've got any problems just give me a shout."

Brandon sat quietly at his desk, undertaking the task he had been given to ease him into the role. He seemed calculating, almost methodical in his approach, studying everything in intimate detail, before asking any questions he felt were relevant.

Indeed, he was not afraid to ask questions, and was obviously keen to learn. Although quiet, he seemed friendly enough. As lunch approached, Brandon walked over to Duncan. "What are you doing for lunch today? Would you like to go for a bite to eat?"

Duncan replied, "Sorry mate, I'd like to, but myself and Al are meeting someone up town." Brandon looked disappointed. "Okay, no problem. Err, do you know of any sandwich shops round here?" Al shouted across the room, "You could try Finn's, they're pretty good, and only just round the corner. Maybe tomorrow we could have a team lunch for a change?"

This seemed to cheer Brandon up slightly, "fine, sounds good. See you later then."

With that, he headed onwards towards the lift. Duncan went to get his coat, "c'mon let's go," he said to Al, "we're supposed to meet Miss Sharp at 12.30."

Cam swivelled round and opened his mouth to speak. Both Duncan and Al stopped him in his tracks. "Don't say a word!" Cam smiled and put his hands up, "Who me?" Say anything about you guys!"

Al and Duncan reached the restaurant on the stroke of 12.30pm. "Made it; nothing worse than being late for a business meeting. Managed to get the scope done this morning at work." said Duncan, breathing heavily.

"Good stuff, shame I didn't get a look at BEFORE the meeting!" replied Al. They walked inside and looked around. It was starting to get busy, and waiters in black waistcoats milled around the customers within the relaxed atmosphere of the restaurant; but there was no sign of Miss Sharp.

Sitting down at a vacant table, Duncan and Al studied the menu. A waiter approached the table carrying a napkin over his arm and a notepad in his hand.

"Can I get you something to drink?" The two men ordered their respective drinks: an orange juice for Duncan, and a Coke for Al. The waiter took the order and quickly strode off.

Once he had left, Duncan slid the scope of work across the polished table to Al. "Here, have a look at what I'm proposing."

Al took the paper from Duncan and scanned it for a second. "She's getting a lot for her money. Do you think you can deliver all of this?"

Duncan sounded upbeat, "yep absolutely sure, the software should have little bother getting the info back from their network now its finished." A short while later the drinks arrived, unlike Miss Sharp.

Duncan looked over towards the entrance. Standing up, he glanced through the lace curtained windows to see if Miss Sharp was anywhere in sight. She was not.

Duncan was becoming visibly agitated. "Maybe she's forgotten, or has changed her mind. What do you think?" Al tried to reassure Duncan, "She'll just be running late. You know how it is with these busy executive types."

"Have you got a number for her?" Duncan's eyes lit up. "Of course. I've taken her card with me. I'll call her mobile." He dialled the number, referring intermittently to the card. Finally putting the phone to his ear, he thumbed the card impatiently.

He muttered to himself, a little confused. "No, that can't be right." He looked at the card again, and carefully entered the number once more. He shook his head, "the number you have called has not been recognised?"

Duncan threw Al a puzzled look. "That doesn't make sense; this number worked on Friday, and I definitely haven't dialled incorrectly!" Showing Al the card, Duncan handed him the phone. The number no longer worked.

Al looked as confused, "Never seen that before. All we can do is wait over lunchtime. If she doesn't come, then she doesn't come!" Duncan was not happy at having wasted a perfectly good lunch hour. "I suppose we better order some food - here comes the waiter."

They ordered food, and waited. Lunch hour had come and gone and their day job required them back behind their desks before long. Miss Sharp had not appeared.

Leaving the restaurant, they hurried back to the office,

confused and annoyed at having seemingly been stood up, with no explanation.

As they had almost reached the office Al enquired, "so how's the new guy?" "Seems alright." replied Duncan.

Al seemed less sure. "I don't know. I just have this feeling about him. I think he's the type who could go snooping around a bit." Duncan laughed as they reached the front door, "and what exactly are you basing this on?"

Al shrugged his shoulders, "just a feeling I get, you know, it seems to me that if someone's trying this vigorously to get a hold of your software, someone inside would be the perfect opportunity."

Duncan slowed his walk for a second, "let's give the guy a chance eh? What on earth would he have to do with my software? You'll make me paranoid!"

Al replied, "just keep an eye on him, I think he's a bit strange, that's all."

Duncan thought about what Al was saying. He was usually a good judge of character.

They reached their workstations. Cam got up from his chair, "Would any of you ladies like a drink?" He paused, waiting for a reply. "Nope, no takers. Fine, a water for one it is then."

Brandon walked over and sat down next to Duncan. "I hope you don't mind me interrupting; but I was wondering if you could show me some the Intrusion Detection Systems we have in place." Duncan was happy to oblige and quickly demonstrated some of the procedures that were in place to deal

with intrusions.

“Any questions on that?” Duncan asked as he completed the training session. Brandon leaned forward in his chair, and spoke quietly. "You know, I've always fancied computer hacking. Just to see what its like breaking into other systems... it kind of sounds cool. Have you ever done any hacking? Do we do our own ethical hacking, to test our systems?"

Duncan glanced nervously towards Al, who raised an eyebrow in a *told you so* type manner. Duncan fixed his eyes on the screen. "Well, ethical hacking is part of this job, and I suppose it could be seen as more interesting than a lot of the other parts. But take it from me, if it's not legal, it's never worth it in the end."

Brandon nodded his head. "I suppose you are right, but would you be able to show me how you would undertake one of your ethical hacks, at some stage?"

Duncan replied, "Not a problem. However, we'll leave that for some other time, if you don't mind. There are still a few more fundamental things we have to get through first." Brandon seemed happy with the response. He thanked Duncan for his time, got up, and headed back to his chair.

Duncan began to ponder as to whether Al was right. Alternatively, was he just being over sensitive? After having been broken into a couple of times, it would be understandable. He felt the passage of time would unfold the truth, perhaps sooner rather than later.

The working day ended with Al and Cam left saying their respective goodbyes. Duncan sat in his chair, closing off an incident. Having just finished dealing with the lengthy support

call, he was slightly tired. The lack of sleep during the weekend certainly had not helped.

His thoughts were a million miles away from work, where had Miss Sharp gone? He had also called her office number that afternoon to find out that she hadn't been seen there since Friday, and had not called in sick. He consigned the potential work, and money from it, to the rubbish bin.

He suddenly felt a presence at his shoulder, and turned round to find Brandon standing next to him, about to speak. "Sorry to disturb you again. If its not too late, I was just going to ask you a few more questions...I mean if you don't mind."

Duncan pulled himself back to the real world. "Sure, no problem. Pull up a chair; how else are you going to find your way around here, if you don't ask relevant questions and get the answers?"

Brandon wheeled his chair from under his desk to where Duncan sat, and seated himself in a rather awkward and less relaxed manner than usual. He was nervous of his new surroundings, and was obviously keen to make a good impression with his peers.

"Following on from our earlier session, I was having a look at some of our security systems, including our firewalls. Do the firewalls have any intrusion detection systems built into them? How are they monitored? And how would we deal with the intrusions when they actually occur?"

He paused for a second, "And finally, how do we know it's a real attack?" Duncan thought for a second. "Several systems interact together to determine whether something really is an attack, or what we term as a 'false positive'. A false positive

simply wastes our time and is just a normal bit of network traffic that looks like it might be dodgy."

Duncan loaded a web browser, and connected to the intrusion detection system. "This is OSSIM. It stands for Open Source Security Information Manager, and it's the main console. This console allows us to do a few things, as I mentioned to you earlier today. We can obtain vulnerability reports, and it will perform event correlation. Most importantly, we can push different policies and rules, to different sensors. This hopefully reduces our false positives. As it has a web front-end it's reasonably easy to use...and its free. As you can see, it's pretty quiet just now."

Brandon nodded, showing that he understood. "Do we attack them back?" Duncan smiled, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Of course we don't, that wouldn't be ethical would it?"

Brandon smiled, "Of course it's not, but if you were to attack them back, what would you use?"

Duncan turned back to his screen. "A combination of things really. Nmap is probably our main tool. It maps out things like the operating system, which ports are open; even if there are no pings allowed through. Without it, we probably wouldn't get off first base. Duncan continued, "Once we find out where the openings are, we can then decide how to attack. We feed the Nmap results into another piece of software, called Nessus. Nessus checks for vulnerabilities in the target system's applications. From there its find, or create the exploits, and make a decision on where to go next."

Duncan laughed, "There's no magic bullet that just lets you in you know!"

Brandon was extremely enthusiastic. "Wouldn't it be amazing if someone wrote an all in one attack tool that could automate the whole process? "Now that would be something to get your hands on; don't you think."

At this point alarm bells began to ring in Duncan's head. "Yeah, shame nothing like that exists!"

Duncan glanced quickly at his watch. "God is that the time? Sorry, I've got to go. We can continue this tomorrow." He was starting to think that there was something funny about the new guy, and that he was asking too many awkward questions. He would have to be very careful how he dealt with him in future conversations.

Duncan headed out the main door, nodding to the security guard as he went. He had plenty of time to think, as he ambled up the road to the train station.

The journey home on the train was as cramped as usual. Passengers were desperately trying to gain as much personal space as possible, without invading anyone else's.

Duncan reached into his pocket for his Zaurus. "Fuck, its not here!" He murmured to himself. How could he have been so stupid as to leave it at work? What sort of an idiot would do that, in the present circumstances? He had become so flustered by Brandon's questions, that in his rush to get away, he had left it behind.

There was nothing he could do about it. He would have to hope for the best, and pick it up tomorrow.

A reasonably short, but uncomfortable twenty minutes later, the

train reached its destination. He made the walk home as quickly as he could, on another cold dark night. It was threatening to rain, and he was determined not to be caught in it.

Duncan finally reached the comfort and sanctuary of his flat. Even in his heightened state of paranoia, he was completely unaware that he had been followed, and was being watched.



Chapter 7 – A Tortuous time

Duncan slung his backpack down on the sofa. Grabbing a snack he turned on the television, and sat down to relax for a little while. Within seconds, he was sitting bolt upright, his heart in his throat.

The attractive news presenter sat sternly reading out the latest news. "The body of a young woman, was found this morning in an alley in the Leith area of Edinburgh. Miss Elizabeth Sharp, an executive for a small telecommunications company based in Edinburgh was found at 8:10am in Duke Street by a passing jogger."

The picture of the elusive Miss Sharp flashed on the screen.

The presenter continued, "The cause of death is not yet known, but police say the circumstances are suspicious. They are currently following several leads."

Duncan stood up, and strolled frantically across the room. Several leads, would they visit him? Surely not, he had only met her once. Duncan began to panic; he always thought the worst of any situation.

The phone rang, making Duncan jump. Regaining his composure, he took a sharp intake of breath and walked slowly across the room to where the phone sat.

He picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

"Hello?" It was Al. "Did you just see the news, is that THE Miss Sharp?"

Duncan replied. "It is; I can't believe it."

"Does she have anything of yours on her, you didn't hand her a business card or anything did you?"

"I did. Its kind of a standard thing in business ye know."

Al's tone became more serious. "I wonder what happened to her? Do you think it was something to do with the scan she was organising? Maybe some people had a lot more to hide than she knew?"

Duncan cut in, "and she had been getting too close."

He continued, "anything is possible. We've no idea what its all about. I'm sure we'll find out soon enough!" Duncan paused, "What should I do? Should I tell them what I know, or wait for them to come to me?"

As Duncan finished his sentence, there was a loud knock at the door. Duncan became silent for a moment. Al had heard the noise. "Was that the door?"

Duncan replied in almost robotic fashion. "Yes, it certainly was. Seems they've come to me first. Look, I'll speak to you later. Tell you how it all goes."

Al ended the conversation jokingly, "Now remember, you're allowed to make one phone call!" Duncan didn't find it particularly funny, "yeah, cheers mate!" He put down the receiver and headed to the door.

He stopped about a foot short and shouted. "Who's there?" A stern voice from behind the door replied, "this is the police, we would like to speak with you, if its not too much trouble."

Duncan cautiously opened the door, to be met by a plain-clothes policeman, and one in uniform. The plain-clothes policeman showed his him ID. He was in his mid thirties, with short cut, dark brown hair, which was greying slightly. His grey overcoat hid a red scarf wrapped into the jacket. A black leather glove held his ID card.

"I'm Detective Constable Bennet, and this is PC Willis."

He turned and pointed to the large uniformed policeman standing behind him. He looked Duncan up and down, studying for the first time, the man he was about to question. Duncan stood, holding the door open; not really taking in the fact that the police were now standing there. He had never had any dealings with them since Mark had been killed almost 10 years earlier.

DC Bennet enquired, "May we come in?"

Duncan gathered himself together. "Err, of course. What's this in connection with?" he asked, leading them into the living room. DC Bennet followed Duncan, coming to a halt in the middle of the living room. "We are investigating the murder of a Miss Elizabeth Sharp, in the Leith area of the Edinburgh. She was found this morning." He paused to gauge Duncan's reaction, and then continued.

"We have reason to believe that you were one of the last people to talk to her.

"We also found your business card amongst others on her person this morning."

Duncan replied, "I hardly knew her at all. I met her on the train. She overheard me telling one of my mates that I did ethical hacking and" DC Bennet held up his hand to stop Duncan in his tracks. "Ethical hacking, could you explain that please?"

Duncan stumbled on, feeling guilty for things he didn't need to. "Ethical hacking, is, well...its when we test a company's computer security for them...by trying to hack into it."

DC Bennet seemed interested. "May I?" He pointed at the chair, and sat down. The uniformed policeman had been busy scribbling notes, and now turned the page in his notebook.

Duncan also sat down, feeling slightly more comfortable now. He was however concerned as to where the questioning was going, and to how deeply involved the police felt he was.

DC Bennet continued, leaning forward in his chair. "So did you do any work for Miss Sharp?" "No, we had arranged to meet to discuss the work yesterday lunchtime, but obviously

she never turned up." "Do you have anyone who can verify this?" The police officer asked.

Duncan immediately replied, "Yes, my work colleague came along, we went to Beroni's, he can vouch for me." DC Bennet asked, "Can I have his name please?" Duncan replied, "Yes its Allen Munzer."

Duncan continued, "What happened to Miss Sharp?"

DC Bennet replied, "I'm afraid we can't divulge that information at the moment. The post mortem results haven't been confirmed yet."

Duncan decided it was best to tell the policemen what he knew. "I don't know if this is relevant but she specifically wanted me to do the work for HER, as she had her suspicions on the security of the computer systems of her company, at least, that's what she said."

Duncan waited for a response from the officers. The two men seemed to intimate that this information was of interest. Duncan continued, "She wanted to keep the fact that I was being hired a secret, and I got the impression that there was more to it than just the fundamental network security."

"She was keen for us to give her everything we could find on the systems, and that was basically the deal."

DC Bennet stood up and walked pensively across the room, finally stopping, to lean against the wall. "When you say you *got the impression*, what exactly do you mean?" Duncan stood up feeling a little less comfortable. "Well, she didn't seem to feel it was suitable to meet at her offices, and I just got the feeling from our conversation on the train that there was something going on within her company, that she wasn't

supposed to know about."

DC Bennet felt he had now found some valuable information. He strode across to Duncan. "You've been extremely helpful, thank you for your time." He began to leave, indicating to the police officer taking notes, to follow him. Just before reaching the door the Detective Constable turned, "oh, please don't leave the country in the next couple of weeks without informing us of where you are going. We'll probably need to talk to you again."

With an acknowledgement from the uniformed officer, they left the flat, closing the door behind them. Duncan stood in the middle of the living room, feeling rather relieved, as if a huge weight had been lifted from him. He expelled air from his lungs in a gasp, and then slumped onto the couch for a momentary rest.

Finally, after several minutes he got up and made a coffee, deciding that the best thing was an early night. The stress of the last few days was catching up with him.

After his first experience of business on his own, he was now wondering whether the whole thing was worth it. He had had almost no interaction with Miss Sharp, and now he found himself tangled up in something he could never have imagined. Things that only ever happened on TV and in the papers seemed to be happening to him. The semi-laborious Security administration position he had within the bank, seemed very safe, and attractive right now.

Duncan lay in bed pondering on the day's events. Was he a suspect? He knew he had witnesses who could verify almost all of his movements over the last few days.

He thought about Lin, and muttered to himself, "I'll give her a

wee call, its not too late." He was missing her calming demeanour. He leaned over to the phone sitting on the bedside cabinet, only just avoiding knocking over his glass of water. He dialled Lin's home number, with no answer.

Duncan thought it was slightly strange for Lin not to be at home at 10:30pm on a Sunday night. He called her mobile. Her voice-mail had been switched on, "This is Lin, I'm not available at the moment but leave a message and I'll call you soon...byeeeee!" Duncan left his message, "Hi Angel, its just your man giving you a call to see how your getting on, and tell you what's happened today. Give me a call back as soon as you can. Love you, bye."

Duncan was disappointed he had not spoken to her. She had been a very important part of his life over the last 6 months, and although their relationship had grown slowly, he hoped that they would still be together for the foreseeable future. He felt comfortable with her, he could chat to her and he could be himself, as far as he was concerned, she was perfect, a friend as well as a lover.

He switched the bedside lamp off, turned over and tried to relax again. It had been an unusual day, his brain buzzed with all the things that had happened and the possibilities that may ensue. Finally he began to relax, sleep was near.

The bright red digits on the clock radio turned to 3:01 am, the flashing colon providing the only light in the darkened bedroom. The occasional snores of Duncan broke the silence as he slept peacefully. This was sleep at its deepest.

Suddenly, several deafening thuds on Duncan's front door followed by a heavy crashing noise, were heard, as the door to the flat was broken from its hinges.

A group of men dressed in black, rushed through the bedroom door, making a large dent in its flimsy wood panelling.

The horrendous banging woke Duncan. With a start, he sat bolt upright, unable to catch his breath. Completely disorientated, he found himself being thrown violently off the bed, and onto the floor.

Two large men at the front of the group shouted and screamed at him as they pinned him to the floor. His face was pressed heavily against the floorboards. Duncan felt severe pain shoot up his joints as his arms were pulled and twisted viciously behind him. The men, Duncan guessed three altogether, began to tie his hands behind his back. They continued to scream and shout; warning him not to move or struggle.

Duncan's natural reactions were to curl up into a ball, or get up to attempt an escape. He was unable to do either, having been so instantly, and violently awoken from his deep slumber.

One of the men restraining him screamed in his ear, "Don't fucking move, or you're dead you little bastard." Duncan once more had his arms pulled tightly behind him as they were tied, the tape digging painfully into his wrists. The adrenaline coursing through his veins had now brought him to his senses. Panic setting in, Duncan began to shout, "Help, anyone, help!"

He was unable to lift his head to be heard properly. His mouth and the rest of his face still digging painfully into the wooden floor, held down by a large powerful hand. It was almost pitch black except for the hall light, which had been switched on.

Duncan tried to make out his attackers, but even straining his eyes, he found it impossible to make out anything more than

their bulky dark forms. It was obvious that this was a well planned, and timed attack, designed to create the maximum disorientation and fear in any victim. Duncan struggled, but found himself completely pinned to the floor by two of the men, the third keeping watch by the door. Duncan screamed and immediately found himself silenced by a punch in the mouth. The powerful hit made his face throb and sting. A warm wetness, he assumed was blood, began to seep from a cut to his lip.

He spat the blood out before he swallowed it. Everything seemed to be a blur now, running in slow motion. Duncan was unable to reach for his mouth after being hit, completely immobile, and pinned down by the heavy men kneeling on top of him.

The men lifted his head and wrapped electrical tape round his mouth. "Not so fucking tight, we don't want to choke him for fucks sake!" said the second man.

The man in the hall, was becoming nervous, "Hurry up, blindfold him, we haven't got all fucking night!" Within seconds, a hood was tied over Duncan's head.

A voice Duncan thought he recognized came from the darkness, "Come on, let's get him out of here, now!" In his confused state he couldn't place it. Suddenly he felt more afraid than ever before.

At that moment he was vigorously dragged across the floor, and out his door. He felt the cold landing stairs on the soles of his feet as they were trailed along, his heels thudded on each step as he was unceremoniously hauled backwards, towards the front door of the building. Outside was cold and wet. It had been raining. Duncan's toes, were dragged through a dirty

puddle, had become grazed and began to bleed.

Finally he was finally thrown headlong into a car.

"That's it, get him in. Now shut the fuckin door." He heard the door slam behind him. The car drove off at speed. The men talked amongst themselves, "He better fucking have the cash, else we'll just have to dump him in the middle of nowhere." The familiar voice seemed more muffled this time, "you'll have your fucking money, don't worry, we're nearly there. Now let's just keep it quiet alright!" What seemed like an age had passed, when suddenly the car veered to the left, and screeched to a sudden halt. Duncan was thrown from the back seat, full force into the back of the seat in front, before crashing to the floor. Blood, and tape prevented his attempts at gasping for breath. It was getting difficult to breathe, with no way of changing his predicament.

"We're here. That's him standing over there. Right get the fucker out of the car, NOW!!"

Duncan heard the door open, and found himself being hauled out of the car. His muscles tightened, a natural reflex. He was dumped headfirst on to the soaking wet ground; landing in what he believed must have been a petroleum filled puddle. As Duncan hit the ground, the tape wrapped round his face and mouth stopped him gasping for breath. An inability to protect his head had left his face badly bruised by the fall. Blood now seeped from a small cut above his right eye.

Duncan could just make out a different, slightly anxious male voice. "Get him up, quickly, take him inside before somebody sees what's going on for gods sake."

Duncan was pulled to his feet. Shattered from his ordeal, and

barely able to muster enough strength to stand, he found himself being hauled by the armpits up several flights of stairs, each step bruising his unprotected heels and ankles. He groaned with pain. The male voice shouted a command, "Open the door." A creaking sound followed, and Duncan found himself inside what he believed to be a doorway.

More light found its way through his hood, and Duncan's fear began to escalate as he made out the shape of a bright orb above him.

Behind him, a door was slammed, and locked.

He knew that no-one would see or hear his plight, and more importantly, come to his rescue. He was dumped unceremoniously into a chair.

The hood was pulled from his head, the bright light above blinding him for a moment. The tape gagging him was ripped off. Its removal stung, as hundreds of tiny hairs were pulled from his face and neck by the tapes sticky glue.

Duncan shouted out in pain, "Who are you? What the fuck do you want?" The male voice drew in from behind. "All in good time. I think you need a rest right now...goodnight!"

A technician stepped up and injected Duncan, who was still unable to get his eyes to focus properly. He felt the jab in his arm and began to shout, "don't do this, wait till I, I'll..." Duncan gave a final gasp as his head slumped off the chair, and on to the floor.

Atkins smiled. He now had Duncan and the software within reach. The technician turned to Atkins, "He'll be out for about 5 hours Sir." Atkins nodded. "Good, at last we seem to be getting somewhere. Wake me when he's ready...oh and ensure

everyone is here by 7am.” Atkins took a final look at his prisoner slumped, motionless on the floor. He then turned and left the room to ready himself for the morning ahead.

The bucket of freezing water, which had been filled from the tap just moments before, was thrown over Duncan, shocking his body into consciousness.

Still groggy from the drugs he'd been given several hours earlier, he gasped for breath as his head, face and torso attempted to cope with icy coldness in which he had been drenched. He shook his head and groaned, unable to wipe the water from his face.

He began to focus on a grey bearded man sitting smiling at him in a chair from across the room. Duncan had been hoisted back into the chair. He attempted to struggle but found his arms tied to the frame, his feet tied to the legs. He could not move. He was vulnerable.

Two white-coated technicians stood at either side of him. As his focus improved, he could make out the rooms grey dank walls. The peeling plaster was chipped and chalky, and mould had taken residence in the corners. Looking round the room Duncan noticed a simple steel framed bed, it looked dirty, its pillow stained yellow, from what, he did not know. Fixed to the wall at the opposite side of the room was a sink, it's encrusted taps dripping at a steady beat.

The wooden floorboards, like himself, were cold and wet. He noticed the dark red stains dotted here, and there across the floor, and on the walls. A simple light bulb shone directly above his head, it blinded him slightly, and it was close enough to ensure he could feel its, heat burning into his face. All this was designed to ensure maximum discomfort.

Atkins spoke, "Good morning, sleep well?" he grinned, pleased with himself. He already felt that he had won and was reaping the glory in the best way he knew.

Duncan replied, tired and in pain from his ordeal, "What do you want?"

Atkins got up "I think you already know, and if you don't, you must be more stupid than I thought!"

Atkins paced the room arrogantly, "What did you tell the police about Miss Sharp? I know they visited you."

Duncan took a breath, his head bowed, "Why don't you ask them, maybe you could help them with their enquiries?"

Atkins walked menacingly towards Duncan. "You know, if you're smart you'll be just a bit more co-operative. No one knows you're here, and nobody gives a shit!"

He walked back to the seat and sat down. "I'll ask you again. What did you tell the police?"

Duncan pondered for a minute, scared but angry. "Not much. Oh yes, I remember now. I told them men with grey beards were fuckwits!" Atkins face turned red with rage, he gestured to the technician to the right of Duncan. The technician swiftly kicked the legs from behind the chair, sending it and Duncan crashing backwards onto the splintered wooden floorboards. Duncan's arms took the full force of the chair as his weight hit the floor, causing pain in his elbows and wrists. His head followed, jolting into the floor behind him.

Duncan, winded, attempted to get out of the chair but his bindings held fast.

All he could see was the grey cracked ceiling. He turned, feeling dazed and in pain. Atkins walked across the room and stood over him. "I again warn you, don't fuck with me. You have no idea who or what you are dealing with here." Atkins ended the sentence with a kick Duncan's upper arm, giving him another jolt. Duncan's arm began to deaden.

Atkins walked away. "Haul him back up."

The chair and Duncan were hauled back up. Duncan's hands feeling numb after the weight that had laid on them, began to tingle. Atkins began his questioning again, "Now, as I asked you two minutes ago what did you tell the police? There really is no point in being stupid."

Duncan sighed, exasperated at the question, "What do you think I told them? I hardly knew Miss Sharp. I met her once and I didn't do any work for her." Duncan bowed his head. Atkins seemed happier, "Good, see that wasn't too difficult was it. Now I only have a couple more questions and this will all be over."

Where is the security tool you've developed? Our department would very much like to try it." Duncan raised his head, his breathing was more laboured than usual, "I wouldn't tell you if my life depended on it." Atkins walked across the room. "You really don't understand do you? Your life DOES depend on it." Again he gestured to the technicians. One walked up to Duncan and put the hood back over his head.

The room fell silent. Panic now gripped Duncan. His fingers and toes clenched white on the chairs arm, the blood draining from them as he prepared himself.

Suddenly from nowhere he felt a severe pain to his right cheek, it felt as if a blunt object had almost caved in one side of his face. Another blow almost burst his nose.

He screamed, completely unable to protect himself. Blinded, with no form of protection and deprived of some of his senses, he prepared for more of a beating; hoping numbness would quickly take over. More blows began to rain down on his head, arms and legs, to the point where he could no longer feel them.

Blood poured from his face, and nose, saturating the hood. His groans, met with laughter as his torturers enjoyed every second of their cruelty.

He began to slip into unconsciousness, only to be woken again, drenched by another bucket of freezing water. He gasped, his body reeled from the sudden shock, toiling to control the air intake as his head began to roll uncontrollably. His neck muscles were weakening, and he began to shiver violently. His face, bloody and bruised was almost numb.

Another severe blow to the stomach forced his body to expel all the blood he had swallowed. He finally vomited into the hood, before losing consciousness.

He came round some time later and found himself tied to the bed. It stank of urine, and faeces. The vomit he had expelled was stuck to his face. Some had dripped onto the pillow, although he was past caring about such things. His hood had been removed, and he was thankful for this small mercy.

Duncan could hardly see, his eyes were swollen from the beating he had taken, which made it difficult to focus. They weeped, and in turn the salty water stung the cuts on his face.

If they were willing to do this to him, what would happen if he gave them what they wanted? Should he try to hold on? Or hand over everything?

After a few minutes Duncan could just make out the figure of Atkins standing close to him. "Ready to talk yet, or would prefer some more of our delights?" Duncan was almost at breaking point. He wasn't a military man, and hadn't even had many fights at school.

"If I give you what you need, will you let me leave here?"

Atkins smiled. "Once we have access to the software we'll even give you a set of clothes. We can't have you walking about in blood stained, tattered pyjamas now can we?" Duncan had worked hard creating his software. He knew that if it got into the wrong hands it could cause major problems anywhere on the Internet.

Atkins leaned over Duncan, his voice was calm, sensing he was almost there. "Now where is the software?" Duncan turned his head away. "I can't help you there."

Atkins mood swung, he was incensed and not used to the stubbornness being shown by his current detainee. He turned and pointed at the door, "Bring in the girl. Now, we'll see who wont give us the information!"

Both of the white-coated men left the room. Atkins picked up the electric stun gun. "I love this little thing, it burns the skin slightly, but those are the breaks." Atkins smiled as he switched it on, and without hesitation ran it across the soles of Duncan's feet. "Let's see if this wont help you change your minds?" Tiny lightning bolts flew from the gun. Duncan screamed as his body jolted from the electrocution, the burning

pain immense.

“Painful, isn't it?”

Atkins mood became more aggressive; he began to seethe with anger, and hate. "You ruined my life. I've been watching and waiting for this moment for years, and now I've got you, you insignificant little bastard!"

Atkins continued in an uncontrollable rant, "you killed my son, you ruined my marriage, my career, everything. I hate you, I've always hated you."

Duncan, confused and frightened by the sudden outburst, strained to break free, the harsh ropes burning his wrists as he struggled. He felt he was dealing with a madman, and could not understand this man's hatred towards him. He had no recollection of ever meeting him."

Atkins walked away from the bed, breathing heavily from the strain of his outburst. He suddenly turned back and leaned closely to Duncan, again talking calmly into Duncan's ear. "Its okay for you. You simply lie in court and then get on with your life, whilst we all suffered. My son was good, you obviously provoked him."

Atkins mood swings were extreme, his unpredictability and rants instilling the most fear into Duncan. Atkins calmly ran the stun gun across Duncan's chest. Its tiny blue lightning bolt again shot forth, as Duncan screams turned to a high pitched shriek, before finally tailing off to no more than a deep breathing noise.

He was so close to unconsciousness, he whispered, stuttering - unable to raise his voice any further, "its not about the software

is it? It's about...me."

The door was flung open and Lin was hurled across the floor, finally coming to rest near the foot of the bed. She struggled to get up, her hands tied, her clothes torn and filthy. Her beautiful long dark hair was tangled, and she had been crying. Her left cheek was noticeably bruised.

Lin looked down at Duncan in dismay, "What's going on...what have they done to you?" Awkwardly she lifted her hands to touch Duncan's face, but withdrew them as he winced, his skin painful to the touch. She was appalled by the state he was in. Her sadness and concern were obvious to see.

Atkins walked across to Lin, who instinctively backed into a corner, cowering. He stood over her menacingly, looking at her, as if looking at an insect he would soon crush. "Very pretty isn't she? It would be a shame to make a mess of her, don't you think?"

He pulled her with great strength up and off the floor, and threw her backwards onto a dishevelled couch at the opposite corner of the room. Atkins smiled at Duncan. "So what's it to be then?"

Duncan knew the threat was real. He would never wish or allow Lin to be hurt. He loved her, and he needed to protect her, no matter what the consequences for him. Duncan stuttered, "As I have told you...I said nothing to the police." He continued slowly, his breathing heavy, "I know nothing about Miss Sharp; we did not do the security audit. The software, which is comprised of both an attack, and control module, is on my Zaurus handheld. I've left it at work on my desk, in its cradle...it holds all the encryption keys. The two files you need are ZACK.SOURCE and control.SOURCE. To

compile the code you must enter the password. The password is 'its,a-Zauru5!'" It's been over a year of work for me. I have no more I can tell you. You'll know what to do with the software when you finally compile it." Duncan strained to keep talking. He was dejected at having given in to this severe bullying, and felt afraid of what would happen next. "Now please...let Lin go." he mumbled.

Atkins smiled. At last after several attempts he had succeeded. He turned to one of the men in white coats, "get on to our man inside and tell him its on the desk. Tell him to get the PDA and bring it to the labs. We'll see what we can do with it. I'm sure it'll help us with our other operations."

Duncan, now barely able to stay conscious, felt nothing but rage towards the people who had done this to him. He had his suspicions he was being watched at work. Al had warned him there was something dodgy about the new bloke. Now he knew it was all true.

Lin, who was in the process of being untied, distracted Duncan's thoughts. She screamed at Atkins, "You said he wouldn't be harmed. When I took this assignment on it was supposed to be a simple case of getting some software and getting out. Now look what you've done, you're a fucking lunatic!"

Duncan was confused; he couldn't comprehend what he was hearing. "You know this man?" Duncan tried to lift his head from the sodden, stinking pillow.

Lin wiped away the make-up, which had created the fake bruising on her face. She also removed the blood from a deliberately bitten lip.

Atkins laughed, "You poor bastard, it just gets worse for you doesn't it? You don't actually think she's your girlfriend do you? Not at all, we needed someone to get to know you, give a psychological report on you, and watch your every move. What better than this beautiful young lady?" Atkins grinned, waiting for a reaction.

Lin simply stood there, head bowed, almost ashamed of how much she had hurt Duncan.

Atkins walked to where Duncan lay and patted him condescendingly on the head. "There, there, never mind!" Duncan spat a mouthful of blood at Atkins, who immediately retaliated with a heavy punch to the face. Lin shouted, "Stop it, for fucks sake, he's had enough!"

Duncan looked at Lin knowing all Atkins said was true. He felt completely empty, as though someone had torn his insides out before him and thrown them into the fire. Of all the tortures he had endured over the last short while; finding this out was the most the painful of all. Tears welled up in his swollen eyes. Almost unable to speak he looked straight at Lin, and in a barely audible whisper, "How could you, I love you. You slept with me? I thought we had something good together? How are you able to do this?"

Lin raised her head and spoke slowly, "It wasn't meant to be like this, and I have grown to care about you...I'm sorry."

Atkins was unable to stay quiet and listen to such rubbish. He interrupted, "How touching! I think you forget yourself agent Peel. Your job is complete, and it took you long enough as well! Not one to be proud of. Leave immediately, you'll be debriefed later."

"What will happen to him?" Lin asked. Atkins was obviously annoyed by this question, which he perceived to be insubordination. "What happens to Mr Steele is none of your concern, now get out immediately." Duncan watched Lin from his bed, gathering only just enough strength to raise his head. He couldn't believe what had happened and prayed that this was all a terrible nightmare, from which he would wake. Agent Peel reached the door, she looked at Duncan one last time, and quietly whispered shaking her head, "I am so sorry." She left quietly, closing the it behind her.

Duncan felt his best friend, and soul mate had just left the room and his life, taking part of him with her.

Atkins looked at Duncan and smirked, "aww, shame." Duncan's emotions ran between emptiness and rage. If he had got loose Atkins would not know what hit him.

Atkins mobile phone rang. He answered it, "You have it? Excellent, I will meet you at the labs in 20 minutes...don't be late."

He turned to Duncan. "Well this is where we part company...for the moment. You'll be secure here, but I fear not comfortable for the next while. We may need you to demonstrate the software at a later date. Until then, have a nice stay! Oh, and thank you so much for your time; its been very, how should I say...productive."

Atkins could still be heard laughing as he went down the corridor. The door was bolted from outside, and Duncan, although imprisoned, sighed with relief. It was over, at least for the moment. He was angry and still reeling from the events of the last few hours. He had no idea where he was or for how long he had been there. Complete disorientation had

been the idea and this is exactly what had been achieved.

If he got out of here these people were going to pay in one way or another, he thought to himself. He was extremely tired, and felt he could trust no one but himself. What Lin had done was the most hurtful of all. Duncan loved her and that had been destroyed in a few seconds. Who was the other agent? He had his suspicions but he'd have to make sure he was right before striking out. The most important thing now was to get out of here somehow, before they returned for him.

Not an easy task considering. In severe pain, tied to a urine soaked bed, and in a locked room, he assumed, in the middle of nowhere. Dazed and bleeding, he began to slip in and out of consciousness, his body trying to take the rest it so desperately needed. The light that had shone so brightly in his face just a few hours before had been switched off. The room, now eerily dark, was also becoming cold. The constant drip, drip, drip of a tap from the sink in the corner was slowly driving him mad.

He shouted out as loudly as his aching body would allow but it was of no use. The walls had been soundproofed in what he felt must be an old building. Duncan knew that these four walls had seen more pain than his. Finally, he could strain no more. His body needed rest and Duncan gave in to the darkness, his swollen eyes did not have far to close. A restless sleep was upon him.

Chapter 8 – The Fugitive

Duncan had no concept of the considerable time that had passed, when a rattling at the door suddenly woke him. He inhaled deeply and whispered to himself under his breath, "Please God no, not again, not so soon."

A familiar voice came from behind the door. "Duncan, are you in there, shout if you can hear me?" Duncan's heart pounded; it was Al. He lunged upwards as far as his tethers would let him, "Al I hear you, help me, please."

Duncan felt utter relief. Thoughts of dying turned to those of reprieve, if not miracle, in the form of his best friend. How had Al managed to find him? Al began the task of breaking the door down. He had come prepared. Soon the padlock locking the outside of the door was broken and Al rushed in.

As he rushed forward, he turned his head, covering his nose, taken aback by the stench of urine and vomit. He reeled in shock as he looked upon Duncan, lying beaten and tied to the bed. He began to untie him. "Jesus, what a fucking mess."

Duncan, finally untied, struggled to get up. "How did you find me?" Al stopped for a second and looked at Duncan, "I was right, the new guy, he answered his phone, and wrote down this address, pretty stupid huh? He then went into your drawer, and I saw him take your PDA."

"Then he left, not a word. Just before he got into his car I grabbed the Zaurus. He'll have probably warned them by now, so let's get the fuck out of here quick!"

Al paused for a second, straining to untie the bindings that held Duncan so tightly to the bed. "Oh, and by the way the boss

isn't too happy you didn't phone in. You better have a good excuse," laughed Al.

Duncan would have, if it had not been so painful to move his facial muscles. Al continued, "Come on, let's get out of here, in case they come back! I've got the car, let's go."

Duncan was furious, "Wait till I get my hands on the little bastard; it was so obvious, he asked far too many questions!" Al replied, "let's not stick around here too long, can you walk?" Duncan tried to stand up, "Jeez that's bloody sore."

He limped to the door aided by Al. Duncan's pain was immense. He ached all over. His face, torso and legs were all badly bruised from the beatings. A smell of burnt flesh, and hair came from his chest. "Where are we Al?"

Al stopped for a second, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you - just wait till we're outside." Duncan was astonished. He couldn't believe it. He was at Lin's supposed friends house. Duncan exclaimed, "Angie's, I might have fucking guessed!"

Duncan and Al got into the car. This was yet another blow to Duncan. He wondered if everything regarding Lin had been a sham, "Lin was in on all of this, can you believe that?" Al looked stunned, "What? Your Lin, surely not?"

The car fell silent as both men thought about what had happened and all the implications that surrounded it. Al finally broke the silence, "Well, at least you got a good shag, eh?"

Duncan scowled at his friend, "Thanks for that; really helpful!"

Duncan continued, "Wait a minute. Oh how stupid could I have been?" Al looked at Duncan. "What are you talking about?"

“Well I was burgled a couple of times, I thought it was pure coincidence...was it hell!” “Lin was on the phone a couple of times to Angela, she knew when I was out, and how long I was likely to be.”

It was all beginning to make sense to Duncan, as though someone had switched on a light. “She could've told anyone, and she probably did.” Duncan stared at the dashboard in front of him as if in a dream, and whispered to himself, “Love is blind right enough, what a fool. I should've known she was too good for me.”

Al turned to Duncan, “How the hell were you to know, anyway, it could've happened to anyone. Come on, let's get you back to mine...you should be okay there, for a little while at least.” Al was extremely vigilant as he drove back towards his flat, ensuring he took the lesser-known routes. “You'll need to get some clothes. You can't wander about in these blood stained pyjamas, and Christ do you stink of pish or what?”

Duncan raised half a smile. “Cheers, another great quote from the Al book of how to be tactful.” He laid his head back onto the headrest, trying to get as comfortable as possible. Al continued, “Your PDA is at mine, you can make sure it's alright when you get there. I don't know if the little git got away with the software.”

Duncan closed his eyes, “God my head is killing me, please tell me you've got paracetamol in the flat.” “Of course, how else would I get through those infamous mornings after?”

The car screeched to a halt at the kerb next to Al's flat. Duncan breathed a sigh of relief. “I can't believe we made it. Cheers mate, you're a life saver!” Al smiled, “hey what are friends for? Now come on, let's move it.”

Managing to safely get into the flat and close the door, Al handed Duncan the Zaurus.

"Is everything alright?" Duncan checked over the small computer. "Shit, the memory card is missing. I saved the software on there. All the encryption keys and certificates are in the memory, but they're no good without the rest of it." Al responded, now looking concerned, "So have they taken them?" Duncan looked at him, "Well I hope they haven't... they're in the spare leather holder, along with the new wireless card I bought last week!"

"They'll be in drawer at work, but surely that little bastard will have trawled through everything by now. They'll be long gone." Al butted in, "I didn't see him carrying a leather holder, and I was watching him closely. Maybe there's still a chance we can get a hold of the rest of the stuff. I'll go and get it for you, if you like. It might be a bit dodgy for you to go."

Duncan sat down in the chair, his legs aching. "You know, that would be great, but I really need to make sure its working, and no offence, but after the way I've been let down over the last wee while, I need to make sure I get the stuff myself."

Duncan strained to hoist his feet up, "Besides, its not fair on you. No, this is my problem and I'll deal with it!" Al looked pensive, "Well, I'm not convinced, but if that's the way you want it, that's fine. I'll come along with you in case you have any *unwanted problems*." Duncan replied, "I'm not likely to argue with you on that one mate."

Al began to tie his shoelaces, "Better go and get yourself a shower BEFORE you put any of my clothes on!" He continued, "Its cold out there. I better give you something to keep you a bit warmer, we cant have you freezing can we?"

He disappeared into his bedroom, before returning with a pair of blue tracksuit trousers and a red sweater. Duncan looked at him, "Oh great, perfect for covert operations!"

Al handed Duncan the clothes, "Stop moaning and go and get a shower quickly."

Duncan showered, the water stinging his tender skin, and muscles, and yet it felt good to get clean. There was, however, no time to savour it. Ideally he would have gone to bed and rested, but he knew this was not a possibility right now.

Duncan got out of the shower and carefully dried himself, ensuring he avoided the worst of the bruising. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. His battered face a multitude of dark colours, bruised and swollen, one eye almost closed.

How he ached.

Al had made him a cup of tea as darkness descended outside. It was almost time to leave for the office, to retrieve the rest of the memory. The two finished their drinks.

Al handed Duncan a pair of shoddy trainers and an old brown jacket from the coat hanger, "Eeugh, for fucks sake, when was the last time you wore these?" Al smiled, "Many years ago my friend...now let's get going."

The journey to the office was tense. Duncan's stomach churned, unsure of what he was about to face. The men chatted, feeling sure that they would be watched. Duncan sat in the car chewing his nails and looking nervously in all directions.

He couldn't believe they had not been picked up. Al drove at a

steady pace so as not to attract any untoward attention. "You're making me nervous with your bloody fidgeting. Will you please stop it?" Al said to Duncan, not taking his eyes off the street ahead.

Stopping just round the corner from the office, Al pulled on the hand break, and opened the door. "I'll walk round there and check it out."

"If its all clear, I'll wave you on. If I go straight into the building, you'll know I've seen something suspicious."

The car door closed and Duncan watched impatiently as Al calmly walked round the corner towards the building. After a short while Duncan's patience ended. He got out of the car and crept towards the corner where he leaned back against the wall momentarily, the last thing he wanted was to be picked up by Atkins and his mob of government thugs.

He quickly peeked round the corner to see Al beckoning him furiously. He was agitated, obviously keen to get into the office building as quickly as possible.

Duncan decided to make a run for it, although it was really no more than a brisk, painful hobble. They both reached the door with only security to get past now. Al walked ahead, "Hi Bob, how's it going? Just in to get some stuff I left behind." Bob looked up from his book, disinterested. "Yeah, no probs." Bob glanced at Duncan, "What on earth happened to you?"

Duncan replied, "Err, slight argument with a brick wall...I lost." Bob raised an eyebrow, then shrugged his shoulders, "God, must make sure I never pick a fight with a wall, judging by the kicking the fucker gave you!" Duncan smiled as he walked past, and entered the lift.

The lift accelerated upwards to the third floor. "Right we're here. Let's get the stuff, and get the fuck out." said Al taking off at top speed. They reached Duncan's desk, just as Brandon came out of the toilet.

He looked surprised to see them, "Duncan, what happened to you?" Duncan's was enraged, screaming at Brandon, "You little bastard, I know your game." He charged toward him, knocking the new start backwards over a desk.

Brandon was completely unprepared for the ferocity of the attack and landed heavily on his back, shrieking, confused and scared.

"What's wrong, what have I done?" Duncan attempted to land a punch on the grounded victim narrowly missing. "You fucking tried to steal my software, I know you are working for them, admit it, you little fuck!"

Duncan held Brandon on the ground. He grabbed his collar and was now grappling with the smaller man." Duncan was unable to control himself, the rage taking over. He hauled and shook Brandon hitting his head repeatedly on the thinly carpeted floor. Brandon tried in vain to protect himself, lifting his hands to protect his face, attempting to curl into a ball. He desperately tried to calm Duncan down.

He gasped, as he fought to get the words from his mouth. "Duncan, I've no idea what you're talking about!"

Duncan landed a punch square on Brandon's mouth, "ahhh, for gods sake listen to me." cried Brandon.

"Al took your Zaurus. He said you had phoned and asked him to bring it to you!" Duncan, still sitting on top of Brandon,

loosened his grip for a second, "You're lying. You took the Zaurus. You were planted here to get the software!"

Brandon continued, holding his head in pain, breathing heavily, "He went into your drawer took it, and left." Duncan shouted in Brandon face. "No, your lying, you took it and Al took it from you!"

He landed a halfhearted punch on Brandon's cheek, which caused his head to reel backwards. A look of disbelief crossed Brandon's face at hearing Duncan's last sentence.

It was beginning to dawn on Duncan that perhaps Brandon was telling the truth; nothing would surprise him any more. Duncan got off Brandon, who managed to stagger to his feet.

Brandon wiped his bloody nose and looked at Al in disgust, pointing accusingly. "He's the liar, what have you to hide?" Duncan turned to Al, confused. The pain from Duncan's injuries to his face and legs returned with a vengeance.

Duncan limped over to Al, "Well, is that how it happened?" "Don't be fucking stupid! Just ask him where he put the rest of the stuff."

Brandon responded, gesturing aggressively, "Cam gave me the rest of the stuff, YOU left behind."

Al flew into a rage, "You little shit. You'll have to do more than lie your ass off to get out of this one." Al launched a fearsome kick at Brandon, which knocked him back to the ground. He stood over him pointing, "fucking shut up, you've caused enough trouble; this is none of your business."

"Duncan, you hold him there, and I'll get the stuff." said Al, as

he headed towards Brandon's desk.

Duncan held Al back firmly, "What do you mean, its none of his business. What business?"

Al replied, "never mind, let's get out of here, before he starts asking too many questions about your software!"

Delving into Brandon's drawer, Duncan scrambled about, unable to find the black leather case. Al stood menacingly over Brandon, ensuring he couldn't stop them, although this didn't seem to be on his list of things he intended to do.

Duncan shouted triumphantly to Al, Got it! Now let's get out of here." Al held Brandon on the floor, "don't even think about coming after us or you won't know what's fucking hit you!" He gave Brandon another kick to the ribs.

Al and Duncan headed towards the lift, Al moving ahead, "Quick, we'd be faster taking the stairs." Duncan agreed and both men charged through the door to the third floor landing.

Al passed through the door first, suddenly turning and slamming it in Duncan's face, as he followed. Duncan was thrown backwards to the floor, sliding across its polished wooden surface.

The black leather case containing the memory fell from his grip as he landed. Al rushed back through the door, and kicked a bemused, and struggling Duncan back to the ground. He then calmly walked over to the wallet and picked it up.

Duncan held his stomach, gasping for breath, badly winded. He tried desperately to get air into his lungs. Al crouched down next to him, extremely pleased with himself, "You know

nothing is ever what it seems eh?"

"Your girlfriend, your mates...what next?" Al laughed, standing up, he aimed another kick at Duncan. The blow, aimed at his face, glanced off his arm, doing little damage.

Al taunted Duncan, "You're useless. Honestly, as if your software was ever going to get you anywhere. You should have known that once we realised its potential, it wasn't going to be yours any more...you didn't have a clue. Al shook his head. "It's hard to believe that someone as naive as you has made it this far in life!" He ended his sentence and began to walk out through the door to the stairs.

Duncan's anger brought him some strength; he could see the hazy shadow of Al descending the stairs behind the swinging door.

Hatred for the betrayal and ridicule that had been meted out began to well up inside of him. Duncan slowly clambered to his feet, "No bastard is going to treat me like that and get away with it!" his voice taking on a new found determination.

Duncan rushed through the door, and caught up with Al one flight down. Al stood his ground smiling, "Come on then you stupid half-wit. Let's see what you're going to do?"

Duncan launched a ferocious punch, which completely missed its target. He stumbled forward, rapidly losing his balance. Al ducked into his oncoming attacker, punching Duncan again in the face. Pain shot through Duncan's jaw, with only rage keeping him conscious.

They wrestled perilously on the landing, getting ever closer to the black metal railings that lined the stairwell. Suddenly,

Duncan gained his balance, pushing Al back towards them. A look of terror crossed Al's face as he realised what was happening.

Losing his balance, he desperately grabbed at the red sweater he had given Duncan, and pulled him headlong over the railings. Both men hurtled the thirty foot towards the marble below. Duncan closed his eyes, his body's natural reflexes protecting bracing itself, ready for impact. The fall seemed to happen in slow motion. As the grey marble floor drew ever closer, a sudden violent jolt, and crack slowed, and finally broke their decent.

Duncan slipped the remaining five feet to the ground. He was, for the moment, unable to get up. By some miracle he had survived. He heard a single groan, followed by a sharp intake of breath three feet above him. As he mustered some strength together, he attempted to crawl to his feet. It became apparent to Duncan that he had landed directly on Al, cushioning him from what would have surely been severe injury. He attempted to move again, with only minimal success.

Breathe, breathe, he thought to himself. He inhaled several times before he opened his eyes fully, and sat up on the marble floor, dazed, and confused.

As he became more aware of his surroundings, he noticed a constant dripping. He squinted his eyes, and moved his right hand, to support his weight. It slipped on a wet patch next to him, straining his already painful shoulder.

He looked at his hand. It was covered in blood.

Hanging above him, draped over the railings, was the limp, lifeless body of his former friend. For a second, Duncan

panicked, "oh shit, oh fuck, oh no! Al! He slapped Al's face to try to arouse him, but there was nothing. Al's gruesomely contorted death mask captured his final second of life. His eyes, wide open, looked downward in the direction of the steadily growing pool of blood, that streamed toward the floor.

Duncan staggered to his feet and clumsily grasped at Al's neck, feeling for a pulse. He knew it was pointless, there was none. Al was dead, his chest and lungs had been crushed in the fall.

Blood trickled from his nose and mouth; his hands shook intermittently, as the last kinetic energy left his body. Apart from this it was silent, eerily silent, but it would not be like this for long. Duncan would have to make a run for it now, and explain later.

The leather pouch sat on the stairs next to Al's lifeless body. Duncan picked it up, and reached into Al's pocket to retrieve his Zaurus.

A voice came from above. "Duncan, you alright?" It was Brandon shouting from the top floor. Duncan paused for a moment, but decided to say nothing. It was past time to make an exit. Duncan glanced up momentarily, before limping off down the short corridor.

Once through the doors he entered the reception area where the security guard queried, "Where's your mate?" Duncan replied continuing onwards to the front door, "he decided to hang around for a while."

Duncan had made it. His heart pounded as he hobbled as fast as his battered body would allow him, to the nearest corner. He had no idea what he would do now. Life for him had just got a whole lot more complicated, and he was going to have

disappear for a while.

One thing was certain; the police would be looking for him, as would Atkins. He pondered as to why Al would have freed him, and then attempt to steal his software. Maybe they needed him to get them the missing piece? He sat in the alleyway, taking as much rest as was possible, considering the circumstances. His rest was suddenly shattered by the sound of sirens. He got up and peered round the corner. A police car and ambulance had pulled up outside the office. Soon the place would be crawling with them. Duncan headed down the alley and into the darkness as quickly as possible. He now had a fair idea where he was going. It would be dangerous, but in comparison to the last few days it was worth any risk he might have to take, to get there.

The docks had just been renovated, and some businesses had moved down there. It certainly wasn't ideal, but it would be the safest place, allowing him to mingle with some of the homeless he knew dwelt there.

Chapter 9 – Information gathering

Duncan knew that he would have to act quickly. He had no money or food, and the police would be hunting him, as would Atkin's agency.

On reaching the end of the alley, he stepped out from its darkness and turned left, beginning the arduous walk down to the docks. It was cold and dark and had begun to drizzle slightly. Pulling the old jacket tightly around him, he increased his pace as best he could, keeping his head down as he went. He was in fact glad of the cold weather, as at least it meant less people were out.

Most of the curtains on the Georgian town houses he passed were closed. Duncan had more than one reason for heading for the docks area. He knew that a new industrial estate meant network connectivity, including hopefully some wireless access points to which he could silently connect.

Security on these was often poor or non-existent and he would probably be able to gain access to the Internet and other services through them. If he were going to clear himself he would have to find out more about Atkins, Miss Sharp and the surrounding organisation. He was still puzzled as to where he had seen Atkins before, and what on earth he meant when he blamed him for the death of his son. Perhaps this was all simply a case of mistaken identity.

Many things didn't make sense to him. The sadness and emptiness he felt inside at finding out that the relationships with his best friend and girlfriend were nothing more than shams, using him to get information, with a final goal of stealing his work, were paralleled by the anger and a need for vengeance towards Atkins and his organisation. He was afraid

– how had it come to this? A week ago, he had a girlfriend, a good job, and had been happy. Now, he had been beaten, was homeless and on the run.

Duncan did not know whether to vent his rage, or sit in the street and just wait to be caught. He was certainly demoralised and any belief in the power of friendship he had once had was now gone. Had Al or Lin cared anything for him? He would probably never know. This was another thought that for the moment depressed him terribly.

Duncan began to tire. The downhill walk had now become an uphill struggle. He had forgotten how far away the docks actually were, and his current state was not conducive to such exercise, especially in the cold wet conditions of an Edinburgh winter.

Whilst he walked his mind wandered onto the few things he had to investigate further. What did Miss Sharp know? He had a phone number and company name. Duncan felt that by finding out what Miss Sharp knew he would surely find the answers to several other questions he still had. He was sure it was linked somehow. The main question still unanswered was who exactly was Atkins and which organisation did he work for? If he knew this, he knew he could harass Atkins in more ways than most people would think possible. Luckily, in his pocket he had the tool to do it.

He finally managed to limp his way to the docklands area. A labyrinth of new businesses, darkened doorways and side alleys provided cover for many cardboard box dwellers. Blending in with them would give him a chance of avoiding detection just long enough to get the information he needed. He stopped at a junction and scanned the area. To his left were the docks, and several industrial units, closed for the evening.

Pubs lined the right hand side providing some dubious entertainment and liquid refreshment to any brave enough to enter the white washed graffiti stained blocks that passed as buildings. Their flat roofs protected with barbed wire, and windows barred against the rowdy revellers, some of whom would have been barely able to stagger into the darkness of the night, provided a bleak foreboding picture.

Duncan decided to enter the industrial estate to his left, continually checking the landscape as he walked, searching for any hidden CCTV cameras. The wind whistled through the quiet streets, blowing the odd tin can along the ground, startling the already nervous young man.

He headed towards the furthest doorway he could find having reached the far end of the industrial estate. He hoped and prayed that tonight it would be empty and he would be allowed a small amount of undisturbed rest. He had to recover, freezing or not. The last thing he needed now was to be spotted and reported. He was sure the police would soon be looking for him. For the first time in his life, he felt completely alone with nowhere to run and no one to turn to. He would be forced to watch his every interaction now, trusting no one.

He finally reached the far end of the industrial estate. For once his luck had held, having not tripped any security lighting. He flitted like a ghost from warehouse doorway to doorway until he found a place devoid of all human habitation.

It was dark, quiet and, most importantly, sheltered from the wind and rain that had now started. He sat down, exhausted. Duncan pulled his legs up and huddled into his jacket, closing his eyes and resting. He knew he could not sleep, as he would have to be gone before morning, but for now this was home.

Duncan rested as best he could. For how long he did not know, as, although it was cold, his extreme tiredness made him drift repeatedly into sleep. He knew he would have to find a wireless network point if he was to start solving the questions that had left him in his terrible predicament.

His restless sleep was suddenly broken by a booming voice, "Hey, what the fuck do you think you're doing in ma space?" Duncan looked up to see a large man leaning over the top of him. Duncan leaned backwards to take back his air space. "Sorry?" he said. He felt vulnerable, but knew that if it was required he could get up quickly and make good an escape. The figure spoke again, "Yer in ma space! Where will I sleep if you're sitting there?" Duncan no longer felt so threatened as the stranger's tone was more inquisitive than dangerous.

Duncan answered, "Would it help if I moved over a bit?" The figure stood up straight, "Err, aye, ah suppose so!" The stranger sat down next to Duncan. He began to lay out his sleeping bag in ritual fashion; it was obvious he had been homeless for a while. The figure sat where Duncan had, Duncan moving to the other side of the doorway.

They looked at each other uncomfortably. "So, I haven't seen you here before, running from something?" Duncan answered, "You could say that, hopefully this is just temporary." The man's clothes were old and worn out; he had evidently obtained any clothes that he deemed wearable. His long dark trench coat was filthy, his trousers held by a piece of cord where the belt should have been. The coat was not exactly complemented by brown nylon trousers, and an old pair of army boots. His hair, grey and unkempt, straggled in the wind sometimes covering his unshaven, red, wrinkled face. He had been drinking, and his breath stank of the cheapest vodka. However, Duncan no longer considered that this man was a threat, and indeed felt

strangely comfortable in his presence.

"The name's Jimmy – James, if ye like Sunday names. Whit's yours?" enquired the man.

"Its Bill, William on Sunday," replied Duncan. Jimmy squinted, his head shaking uncontrollably as he peered into Duncan's face. "Jesus, what happened to you, did you get a doin'?" Duncan replied, "You could say that." Jimmy pointed, "yer on the run eh, a gang, police, who?" Duncan was less than keen to answer the questions of the inquisitive tramp. Luckily, Jimmy launched into his life story before he was forced to – not for the first time Duncan thought.

"I wasn't always like this you know! Once I was successful, I had it all, wife, kids, and a good job. I used to work as a consultant aero-engineer. I was consultant for Aero-pol. I don't suppose you've ever heard of them, eh?" Duncan replied, "Aye, I went for an interview with them once on the IT side. Didn't get the job though."

Jimmy looked surprised that someone had actually heard of the company for whom he had worked. "Aye, one of their top consultants. Now look at me. I'm so dependent on the sauce, I can hardly hammer a fuckin nail!" He continued, "ye know, a few years ago there wasn't a thing I couldn't fix or a problem I couldn't solve. Times change, eh?"

Duncan was intrigued by the older man. "What happened?" he asked. Jimmy coughed before finally replying. "Well, it was the work that I actually blame, although the wife blamed me." He paused for a second, "What was I talking about again?"

Duncan realised that the drink had taken its toll. He couldn't tell how old Jimmy was, but he was probably a lot younger

than he looked. Duncan reminded Jimmy of what he had been talking about, "you were saying there wasn't a thing you couldn't fix, but it changed." Jimmy's train of thought returned to him, "oh aye, I loved ma work, but the demands of the job, you know, they're so hard."

"I couldn't stay awake for long enough to do the stuff I needed to do, so first I started taking caffeine tablets, then it went on from there." Eventually I couldn't sleep at nights so I began to take sleeping tablets at night, then cannabis." Jimmy shook his head, "as you can imagine it kind of got out of hand, the work wasn't happy about the drugs. I lost my job. I loved that job. I got depressed and starting drinking, then the wife left with the kiddies."

He stopped talking and was silent, wandering off into another untimely daze.

Duncan felt he should say something. He could not help but feel sorry for someone who was, in his day, obviously a talented and hard worker. Jimmy looked up, "I loved ma wife and kids, ye know. Family, ye cannae beat it!" His eyes began to glisten and a single tear rolled down his dirty red cheek. He had returned to his trance-like state, looking back at better times.

Duncan interrupted quietly, "are you all right?" Jimmy managed to pull himself together, "yeah, yeah, anyway that was a while ago, but you never stop missing them, eh?" Jimmy ended his story, "ye know I couldn't handle it and I thought drink was the answer, the little savings I had meant nothing, I felt completely empty." Duncan asked, "so how long ago was that?" Jimmy looked up at the sky, the wind had died down and quiet seemed to prevail, as if to add to the solemnity of the moment. Jimmy responded with a slight annoyance in his

voice, "Well, it would be... eh, three or four years now." He continued "I just can't get back on my feet, everyone takes you on first impressions, and do you know how difficult it is to get a job, or social security, when you've not got a home?" Jimmy calmed himself down, "Sorry, I just get annoyed at the system. I'm only 40 and already life seems to be done for me." He again paused, inhaled deeply and then shook himself. He looked at Duncan, "anyway, so what the hell's your story?"

Duncan wasn't very sure about providing this man with the full truth. If he didn't believe him, he could turn him in to the authorities. He might turn him in anyway! Duncan tried to avoid the subject, "Oh you don't want to hear about my story, it's not really that interesting." Jimmy leaned towards Duncan, "no, actually I really do, what you don't think you can trust me?" He leaned back against the wall, "believe me I'm no friend of the authorities, the amount of hassle they've given me, a decent citizen."

Duncan replied, "well, I work with computers. Computer security." Jimmy's eyes lit up; "You're into computer security? That's brilliant! So, you do the firewalls... or a bit of hacking? Jimmy perked up, "sorry carry on, didn't mean to interrupt." Duncan continued, "well yeah, unfortunately my job is just looking after one of the bank's firewalls and Intrusion Detection Systems. It all sounds rather comfortable doesn't it?"

"Anyway, outside work, I've written a program that so far has been able to gather information from every system I've tried, including passwords." Jimmy looked astounded, "Wow, that's some bit of software! You wouldn't want that getting into the wrong hands, eh?"

Duncan's sitting position was becoming uncomfortable; he shifted to ensure he did not become too numb. "The problem is

some government agency of some sort found out about it and wants it, and as you can see... they'll go to any means to get it."

Jimmy took another look at Duncan's face, "you're saying some government agency did that to you? No bloody way man!" Duncan responded, "I know, anyway they are definitely still looking for me."

Jimmy smiled, leaned over and touched Duncan's arm, "Lucky you found me then, eh? Stick wi' me and ye'll be just fine." Duncan smiled, his face still hurting. "I have to find out more about a man called Atkins. If I can find out more about him, I might be able to get myself out of this mess."

Jimmy became more serious, "how do you plan to do that?" Duncan produced the PDA from his pocket, "with this!"

Jimmy moved to take a closer look at the PDA. "I've seen these things in the shops, but I've never had a proper look at them. I though they were most useful as calendars." Duncan held the PDA closer to Jimmy so he could get a better look. "No, this type is much better, with this Zaurus SL-5500 I can login to servers, configure computer systems, the works, just as good as a laptop, and even better with this wireless network card and few bits of choice software."

Jimmy liked what he saw. "God, it's amazing how fast technology moves on, eh? Well don't just sit there, power it up!" Duncan switched it on and the OpenZaurus operating system quickly started. Launching the network scanning software, he scanned the surrounding area for wireless networks. He studied the output whilst explaining to Jimmy, "you see, this software will scan for a network, then I can launch my software and see if we can break in."

The Zaurus beeped, highlighting the fact that a network had been found. It had also provided an Internet address. Duncan smiled, "Okay dokey, part one complete. Let's see what we can get back from this." He opened a new window and typed in 'Z4CK --info' and pressed the enter key. He looked at a wide-eyed Jimmy, "Now all we can do is wait!"

The pair viewed the tiny screen intently as information scrolled by, most of it too quickly for much to be picked out. Almost 5 minutes had passed when finally the PDA beeped. The cursor flashed at the bottom of the screen for the answer to the question: view report - Yes/No. Duncan typed yes and pressed enter again.

The system compiled the report and provided the information they had both been hoping to see.

Address allowed 00:80:cc:64:ba:f8.

Gateway 192.168.1.1

Password Gu35t

IP deployed by Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol.

Duncan and Jimmy whooped, their fists punching the air simultaneously. Soon they would be accessing the Internet and hopefully able to get the information they needed. They entered the required settings and loaded the browser. The default Internet home page appeared and was now available. They had struck lucky – the Internet access was fast, more than they needed to do substantial damage or gather more information.

Duncan said to Jimmy, "better check the news, see what's going on. Remember, whatever you see, understand that I'm innocent. Jimmy looked sternly at Duncan and moved nervously away, "eh, what do you mean?"

Duncan replied, "Well, the main reason I'm on the run is this." Duncan told Jimmy the rest of the story. How Al had fallen, and how he felt that Atkins had a vendetta against him. Finally, he explained that the police would definitely be searching for him. Jimmy sat and took it all in, paused and then spoke, "I believe you. Strange, I hardly know you, yet I know you're not lying!" He continued, "I can understand why you didn't even want to divulge yer real name. I'll help as much as I can." Duncan was relieved. Yet again, he had done what he said he wouldn't and had taken a big gamble. Duncan typed the website address. His fears were realised – what he saw was not nice, but he now also had some more information... Atkin's first name.

The news website was up to date. The front page had a picture of Atkins and a short story on the body having been found. It also mentioned Duncan was a suspect, and that he was extremely dangerous. Atkins stated that the public should not approach him.

Jimmy said, "that looks pretty serious to me, here download this bit." He poked a dirty finger towards a news trailer. Duncan clicked on the trailer and it began to stream to his PDA. It was a news report on the same incident showing Al's body being removed from the building, and Atkins, Gerald Atkins, being interviewed by the police as the lead in the investigation. Duncan turned to Jimmy; "If there's one man you don't want to be in charge of an investigation, it's your worst enemy."

At that moment, it dawned on Duncan. He had been pondering for ages as to where he had seen Atkins before. He was the father of the man who murdered his friend Mark. He told Jimmy, again giving him more of the picture. Jimmy was visibly concerned, "you know, considering the torture this guy

was willing to inflict on you, I have a bad feeling that he may not be wanting to capture you alive now." Duncan agreed, "I know, I'd already thought of that."

Duncan continued to talk whilst his thumbs flitted over the keyboard, typing as if possessed. He knew he was starting to get somewhere and that the answers could be found.

"Let's have a look for the court case that I was involved in, maybe it's archived somewhere. I'll search for the man who killed my friend." A short while of hunting through the various search engines seemed to draw a blank until one the searches brought up a link that seemed to match. Duncan pointed at the screen, his excitement was hard to contain. "I think I've found it. My God, look at this Jimmy!" The headline read, "Fourth suicide of the year at McQuarkenvale prison."

They read on. The article stated that Andrew Atkins had been found hanging in his cell, after having served just two years of a nine year sentence, for culpable homicide. It was believed at the time of the report, that prison bullying was to blame, and that the culture of bullying within the prison had become uncontrollable.

Duncan leaned his head back against the wall and looked up at the sky, "Atkins blames me, that's why he said I murdered his son. Oh my God...he's lost it."

Jimmy warned Duncan, "C'mon it's getting light, let's get away from here. I think we better start looking for a better hiding place than a doorway in an industrial estate!"

As they began to walk away they spotted a security guard. He shouted over to the men, beckoning to come towards him. Duncan began to panic; this was the last thing he needed. He

took a deep breath, and carried on. The guard again called them over. Jimmy spoke to the guard, whom he seemed to know. "Hi Graham, how's it goin'?" The security guard replied "Jimmy, you know you can't hang about here, if I catch you here again I'll have to report you. Who's yer pal?" Jimmy stuttered, as Duncan butted in, "the name's Ken. Excuse the face, had a bit of a rough time over the last couple of days, you know what it's like!" The guard seemed to take Duncan's word. "Luckily, I don't know what it's like mate. Anyway you better be gone before the bosses arrive, and Jimmy...please sleep somewhere else for God's sake!" Jimmy smiled, "of course, as always." Duncan and Jimmy quickly walked away, leaving the guard to continue his patrol.

On moving out of earshot, Duncan expressed his relief, "Jesus, am I going to end up nearly having a heart attack every time someone talks to me?" Jimmy replied, "let's get goin', next thing is to get some sort of breakfast. I did a couple of shops a wee favour, so I'll see what I can do."

They reached a small café at the side of the docks, staying vigilant as they went. They entered the shabby green door, which badly needed repainting. Jimmy walked up to the counter and spoke to the large, middle-aged woman standing behind it with her arms folded. At first, she shook her head, holding her hands up, obviously arguing a point with Jimmy. Eventually she seemed to become resigned, and nodded her head in agreement, before pointing them to a table in the corner.

It was early morning and although the pair looked rough, they were unlikely to scare the guests who frequented this establishment.

"What did you say to her?" Jimmy replied, "I just reminded her

of the time I stopped some drunken idiot from nicking her till...now that was scary!" Jimmy continued, "Oh and I promised that you would wash the dishes." Duncan twigged to what Jimmy had just said, "what? Dishes? Oh for God's sake." Jimmy laughed, "ye've got nae chance, you're far too gullible for your own good!"

Breakfast, when it eventually arrived, consisted mostly of overcooked fatty bacon and sausage. A runny egg and beans also slid around the plate, swimming in grease. It would all be soaked up with a slice of thickly buttered white bread. They were hungry and it did not seem to matter. Beside this, the hot, sweet tea was most welcome on this cold morning.

Almost half an hour after the two sat down, more people entered the café. The men soaked the last of the bread with the grease from the plates. Duncan could not help but feel uncomfortable, as though everyone was looking at him. It was hardly surprising considering the bruises on his face.

Jimmy got up from the table. "Right, let's get going before it gets too busy around here." He waited for Duncan to join him before exiting the establishment, nodding as a sign of appreciation to the woman who had provided the food.

"So where are we going?" Duncan asked.

Jimmy kept walking as he answered. "Well, let's just say there's a new property I've just inherited. I don't stay there all the time, so as not to arouse suspicion and get booted out but it's not bad from time to time. It's close to a good area see... and the residents are a bit touchy."

Jimmy led Duncan to a rather large house with a good-sized garden. It must have been built around the 1920s and it would

have made a plush home for a middle class family at some stage. Now its exterior of tired stone walls was crumbling, half the roof slates were missing and its windows were boarded against looters. The garden wall looked like it would collapse in a breeze, and its once beautiful garden had become a rubbish tip.

The men opened the front door. Its hinges, which required oiling, screeched, making Duncan shiver. They moved past a pile of dusty wood lying on the floor and into the dark, foreboding hallway. It was cold, and as they moved through the hallway, they decided that it might not be a good idea to venture upstairs, the rotten wooden floorboards making it too hazardous to negotiate.

They headed to what once would have been an ample living room. Jimmy raised his hand in a welcoming gesture. "Welcome to chez moi! It's not much, but it's safe."

Indeed no one seemed to bother Jimmy here, and for the moment, Duncan felt safe. The living room's only light source was the small streams of sunlight forcing their way through gaps in the planks used to board up the windows. The floor was covered in a dusty threadbare rug. Persian, Duncan thought. Newspapers covered in the fat from fish suppers and vodka bottles littered the rest of the available space. Here was damning evidence of Jimmy's poor eating and drinking habits. A tattered sleeping bag lay on a woodworm infested bed-frame in the corner. The room's stale musty stench would take a bit of getting used to.

Jimmy was upbeat. "It would be uninhabitable, ye know, if it wisnae for this fire. I can cook tins of beans, and make cups of tea here, as well as get a bit more light!"

Duncan enquired, "so what do you use to light the fire?"

Jimmy replied, pointing upstairs, "oh, any wood I can get my hands on really, doors and old furniture, most of which breaks really easily...on account of the woodworm."

"How long have you been here?" asked Duncan. Jimmy replied, "Not sure. I think 6 months." Duncan looked confused, "so why did you stay in the doorway last night?" Jimmy wandered over to the fireplace, "sometimes after a few drinks I can't be arsed walking all this way home. It's my home from home there anyway!"

Duncan shrugged his shoulders, not really understanding the psychology, but simply accepting it for what it was.

They lit the fire and put a battered, tarnished, old kettle on it. The fire's warm glow provided an amber light to the room that sent shadows dancing across the walls as the men sat and chatted about their personal experiences. Jimmy was a fascinating character with many stories to tell. He talked about his work and his mentoring, his doubts in his abilities, and his loss of identity and self-esteem. "I remember asking my old mentor once, how can I be a good engineer when I don't and can't know everything. He gave me some good advice. He said 'the mark of a good engineer is not someone who knows all the answers, but someone who knows WHERE to find the answers they don't know.'" Jimmy paused for a minute, "I really miss that old man." Duncan butted in, "speaking of old men I'll need to start looking into Atkins. I've got a few things so far but it's difficult to glue it all together." Jimmy agreed, "Right. Let's sort out what we have."

They had the name Gerald Atkins, whose son, Andrew Atkins had died in prison. Duncan was aware of Atkins' hatred towards him. They also knew he wanted the software Duncan

had written. Was this purely a business interest, or was there anything for him to gain out of it? Duncan had Miss Sharp's business card and company address. Why had she been murdered? Was there a connection? Duncan felt there was. She had known something was up, and had to be silenced. Atkins was quick to question him as to the statement he had given the police. This, to Duncan, pointed to a strong connection, but how was he to prove it?

Jimmy and Duncan decided that the next step was to pay Miss Sharp's company a visit that night. Duncan also made the decision that Atkins' life was going to get a bit more difficult from here on in. For now though, a bit of rest was required. Jimmy had already fallen asleep on the bed, with the fire's heat providing a certain comfort level.

Duncan curled into the foetal position on the floor and grabbed some newspapers. These provided the closest thing to a pillow; he carefully laid them under his head, and had soon drifted off.

Waking with a start, Duncan checked his watch: 8.32pm! He woke Jimmy who stirred, then stretched. "C'mon Jimmy, it's time to go." exclaimed Duncan, a sense of urgency entering his voice. Jimmy nodded in agreement, and soon both men were on their way to the offices of the late Miss Sharp.

"So what's your plan once we get there?" Jimmy asked. Duncan replied, "well, believe it or not the best thing to do is raid the bins, you never know what passwords, phone numbers and names you can get hold of that way. Once we've done that, we need to find out more info on Atkins. All whilst avoiding the police and anyone else we come across...easy, eh?" Jimmy murmured to himself, "so we're going dumpster diving eh...risky!"

Atkins shouted across the table, "Where the hell are they? You're supposed to be out there looking for him, but you're telling me he's simply disappeared? Well that's just not good enough!" Three agents including Miss Peel stood quietly, awkwardly waiting for Atkins' rant to cease. No one ever dared to interrupt him during one of his rants. Atkins finished his rant and fell silent. The agents looked at each other uneasily, Agent Peel finally stepping forward, "The statement has gone out with his description, I'm sure it's only a matter of time before we catch up with him."

Atkins leaned menacingly over his desk, his knuckles white from supporting his weight. He was obviously agitated. "Do you know how quickly computer information travels? He has the software, he could be breaking into systems as we speak, and you think that 'a matter of time' is good enough?"

He sighed and shook his head, "I'm going to have to do this myself, you useless bunch of idiots." The tallest of the agents attempted to object, but was silenced. "Don't even bother making excuses, just go and find him...God help us if we don't!" The agents shuffled quietly out the door closing it behind them. Atkins slumped back into his black leather chair and muttered to himself, "useless bastards...if you want a job doing..."

Duncan and Jimmy scouted the area surrounding Mobile Solutions, the company Miss Sharp had worked for. As a medium sized enterprise, security was not as tight as if it had been a bank; at least that was as far as security on the outside was concerned. Its computer network security may well be a different matter. Duncan knew that they had an Internet presence of some sort, as Miss Sharp had been going to give him the Internet addresses for vulnerability testing purposes.

The pair crouched quietly behind some bushes not more than a hundred yards away from the building. In front of them lay the car park, currently bereft of all but a single car, probably belonging to the security guard. A solitary lamp lit the sign above the front door, although Duncan thought he could just make out another security light, which he felt would activate if someone got too close. He wasn't keen to attract attention by just ambling up to the front door. The building itself was a typical industrial unit. Its bunker-like harled exterior didn't complement the tall glass windows, which reflected the light from a nearby lamppost. Its double-glazed front door looked directly onto the street. It would be difficult to break into without being noticed.

The men couldn't see any bins or even a skip, and decided to try their luck round the back of the building. A road ran down the hill to the left and they decided to quickly walk down in that direction. As they walked towards the back of the industrial unit, they noticed that a six-foot fence enclosed the yard. Jimmy turned to Duncan and whispered, "Looks like we're going to have to climb the fence, what do you think?" Duncan agreed, "Let's do it, and be careful, we don't want to get caught here, you never know, they may be more vigilant if anything dodgy was going on with Miss Sharp and they think anyone is on to them." Jimmy had made his decision to go, and had stood up just to be pulled back down to the grass by a frantic Duncan. "Stop, there's a car coming!" Both men fell to the ground, the lights of the vehicle passing directly over them.

The car did not stop, moving past and on into the estate. It was nothing, but Duncan, unused to doing this sort of thing could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He began to sweat, his breathing becoming momentarily erratic. He tried to compose himself, exhaling several times.

The coast was now clear. "Jimmy, you stay here and look out for me, whistle if you see anything." Before Jimmy could reply, Duncan was on his way towards the fence. He ran at it, ignoring the pain in his legs and arms, and after a bit of heaving and pulling was over and into the yard, landing heavily on the other side. It was dark. They had picked a moonless night, not the best idea, but the choice was not theirs to make. Duncan tried to move forward quietly, crashing into bins, and accidentally kicking tin cans lying on the ground. "For fuck's sake!" Duncan whispered as he kicked yet another piece of debris on the ground. Covert operations were not his strong point. He reached the bins and began to rustle through them. He was specifically looking for printer paper but as he had been his usual disorganised self he had not taken a torch, therefore on finding any paperwork he knew it would be hit or miss as to how relevant it would be.

A good ten minutes passed before he had collected what he felt was enough of what he could see in the darkness as computer paper, bills and letterheads. He decided to take a final look in the skip that sat next to the back wall of the building, to see if anything else happened to have been thrown out. Amongst the wood, cardboard and other debris, Duncan struck gold, coming upon an old laptop. He shook his head, "what a bloody waste, why the hell they chuck perfectly good stuff out just because it's more than three years old, I'll never understand." He retrieved it and stuffed it into his sweatshirt. "Better get the hell out of here!"

As he headed towards the fence, he was stopped in his tracks by the banging of the yard gate. Duncan froze; he needed to get to cover as quickly as possible, but was temporarily unable to move. Breaking his fear, he forced his legs to propel him back behind the skip, which he nervously peeked out from.

A large man standing at the gate could just be made out shining his torch around the yard. "Who's there, come out now?" Duncan held his breath as the light shone around his feet. He hadn't been spotted so far but the yard wasn't that big, and he felt it would only be a matter of time. The dust from the rubbish and the gravel on the ground made Duncan want to sneeze. This could not have happened at a worse time. He held his breath, his eyes beginning to water, willing the feeling to go away.

The watchman had, by now, decided to enter the yard. His steps brought him ever closer to Duncan's position. He wondered why Jimmy hadn't warned him; surely he had spotted the man? Duncan searched anxiously for alternative escape exits, his eyes becoming slightly more accustomed to the gloom. He knew he was going to have to try to run past the ominous figure standing in the yard. Suddenly the noise of a stone rattling one of the bins resounded from behind the man, drawing his attention away. "Who the fuck's there?" he shouted swinging his torch round wildly before sprinting off in the opposite direction.

Duncan saw his chance; he crept stealthily round the back of the skip and got close to the gate, the watchman's torchlight danced around as he chased someone off into the distance. Duncan was clear to go, so he did.

Duncan fled out through the gate and headed toward the relative safety of the bushes before any further time could elapse. He found his way to where Jimmy should have been, but there was no sign of him. Breathing heavily, and shattered from the stress of the situation, Duncan looked around, straining in the darkness to see his new companion. He did not dare call for him now as the watchman had given up the chase and could be seen heading back to the yard. Duncan was

thankful for whatever or whoever had distracted the watchman, yet there was no sign of Jimmy. "Should've known he'd clear off."

The watchman disappeared into the yard for almost five minutes, obviously having a good look around, before finally closing the gate behind him and leaving. Duncan sighed with relief; he felt lucky this time and did not cherish getting into that position again. However, he knew that if he was to obtain relevant information on Atkins he might have to. Duncan was just beginning to relax when from nowhere a hand gripped his shoulder, making him jump. He quickly turned on his assailant, raising a fist ready to lash out.

"Stop!" Jimmy cried, holding his hands up to protect himself. He was visibly startled by Duncan's sudden aggression.

Duncan was furious. "Where the hell were you? Why didn't you warn me about the guy with the torch?"

Jimmy fell onto his back, hands in the air, "I couldn't, you were gone before I could tell you...I can't whistle, you stupid arse!"

Duncan smiled. "For God's sake, couldn't you have thought of some other way to warn me then?" Jimmy replied, "I couldn't. I just kind of panicked, so I decided to distract him. God, I'm gubbed! He didn't give up that easy, I can tell you. I've not run that far since I was a kid!"

Duncan relented, thanking Jimmy for helping him. Jimmy looked at the plastic bag Duncan carried. "See you got some paperwork then."

"Yeah, hopefully it'll be useful, couldn't see a bloody thing in there. I also got an old Laptop, might be handy for some stuff,

ye never know, eh?"

Jimmy seemed impressed. "Well, it'll be useful if it works."

Duncan took a final look around. "I've had enough excitement for one night. Let's get back to the squat. We'll see what we can get from this and leave any other digging for another night. Who knows, there might be enough here to save us having to do Atkins' house!"

They returned to the squat and immediately began the task of sifting through the bag of paperwork Duncan had managed to retrieve. Several torn invoices and letterheads came under close scrutiny. After a short while Jimmy put the invoice he had been looking at down. "Not much here!" Duncan kept sifting, "Oh I don't know, what we're really looking for here is a way in. A person's name for some social engineering, some telephone numbers that might give us an entry point, or some computer names and network addresses. If we can get any of those then it hasn't been a *complete* waste of time. They kept looking and before long, they had some of the information they required.

"We can check the net, we may get an administrator's name from that," Duncan explained. Jimmy picked up the laptop, brushing some dust off the grey dusty lid. "Not bad at all. These were top of the range the last time I was working. What a bloody waste!" Duncan put down the invoices, "power it on, let's see if it works."

Jimmy pushed the 'on' button and the laptop began to slowly come alive. The two men couldn't believe their luck; they just hoped there was enough battery charge to allow them to look around. The glow from the laptop screen lit up Jimmy's and Duncan's faces as they stared wide-eyed into their Pandora's

box. A simple Windows 95 password was bypassed using the escape key. They had a quick look around the file system to see if they could find any files that might provide them with information. Nothing of interest, apart from sales letters, existed. Duncan spoke whilst moving the cursor efficiently around the scree. "People are so fucking stupid, who knows what info could be on here, and its not even wiped!" Let's have a look in the trash, shall we?" Several undeleted files sat in the trashcan. "These spreadsheets may be interesting."

The spreadsheets seemed to provide basic information on the cost of different birds, as well as their location. This seemed bizarre, as the company was telecommunications based. Duncan frowned, "hmmm, a bit strange, maybe this guy sold exotic birds as a hobby!" Next, they checked the email client on the system, scrolling through what seemed like endless amounts of messages. Jimmy exclaimed, "Christ, we're definitely getting nowhere here, this is a waste of bloody time!" Duncan held his hand up as if to quieten Jimmy's complaint. "Wait! Look at this!" his eyes widened. "I think this one is the answer."

Jimmy looked back at the screen, "Oh, not the bloody birds thing again!" Duncan interrupted him, "No look...I think its codes of some sort. The birds are just codes for virus types, and their locations! This guy is trading viruses by the look of things." Jimmy seemed sceptical, "how do you figure that one out?" Duncan pointed at the screen flicking between the spreadsheet and an email he had found. "It says here `Trojan equals Budgie, and location is Zambia.` Now Zambia seems here to relate to Vistore... which I think may be an internal server. Another example here says Virus equals Parrot, and also gives the location Zambia."

"We've got to get in here Jimmy. I reckon a little social

engineering may be called for. We'll phone reception tomorrow, we've nothing to lose.”

Jimmy replied, clearly becoming bored and agitated, “Aye, all right. God, I need a drink!”

That night in the squat was cold, as a desperate Duncan sat by the embers of a half dead fire. Jimmy shuffled about the room picking up bottles, and emptying what dregs he could into a cup. Jimmy hadn't drunk for over 36 hours now and he was beginning to sober up. The migraines he used to know were coming back and he needed to save himself from the pain. He emptied his tin cup of the final drops of alcohol, and curled up hoping to fall asleep before it all began. The laptop's battery had long died, and much as it was useful Duncan knew it would probably be flogged for a few pints as soon as Jimmy got his hands on it. In the meantime, he covered himself with some newspapers, leaned back against a damp wall, and tried to get some rest. He felt time was quickly running out.

Chapter 10 – A little social engineering

Duncan and Jimmy woke, shivering. The air was cold, their breath being plain to see in the chill of the room. The embers of last night's fire smouldered in the hearth. Duncan felt hungry, and tired. He hadn't slept well last night, and he was beginning to miss his comforts. He wondered how Jimmy had coped with it all this time, and then remembered the drink. He had forgotten Jimmy's predicament over the last day or so as Jimmy had barely touched a drop. A lack of funds and other interesting things to occupy him had perhaps made the difference. Duncan did not really understand his addiction; he did not think that he had ever been addicted to anything himself, apart from his morning coffee. He checked his watch;

it was already 9:15am, and time to call in. Earlier the previous evening, he had checked the relevant Internet domain and found the webmaster's name, and associated telephone number from the domain's registration information.

Duncan assumed that this name was that of the head of IT, a common mistake for companies to make, and an excellent opportunity for hackers to undertake some social engineering. Duncan had also extracted the name of the salesman whose laptop had been thrown in the skip. Armed with this information, he headed out to find some money for the phone call.

He knew he could not head too far into town, as the police would be looking for him there. He asked several passers-by for some change before finally, someone was kind enough to offer him 50 pence. This was perfect, just enough to make the calls he needed and hopefully find the information that would allow him a way into the network. Duncan made his way to the nearest phone box, and dialled the number listed on the letterhead. The receptionist answered. "Good Morning, Mobile Solutions, how may I help you?" Duncan put on his most professional accent. "Hello there, it's Ken Fraser, from sales. The company provided me with a new laptop a wee while ago and I am trying to dial in to get my e-mail. Can I speak to someone in IT?" The receptionist replied, "The IT technician is off this week, but I can direct you to his temporary replacement, would that be of any use?" Duncan replied, "That would be fine, as long as he can help. It's pretty urgent. Thank you very much."

A short pause was followed by the voice of a slightly nervous young man. "Hello, err, Mobile Solutions IT, how can I help you?" Duncan began, "Hi, its Ken Fraser here. I've been trying to dial in but it doesn't seem to be working. My son was

playing with my laptop yesterday and may have deleted a setting. Can you confirm the telephone number?" The temporary IT administrator replied, "Are you still using the old dial-in? We've also got a remote access server available from the Internet. Have you tried that?"

Duncan was cool on the phone. "No, it's typical. I'm always the last to know, what with being out on the road all the time. I haven't used it before, can you give me the address?" The person on the other end of the phone paused for a moment, "Sure, just let me look it up." The administrator provided the address, which Duncan wrote down on the back of his hand. Duncan pondered; would he get away with asking for the password? He began, "Sorry, to bother you again, but have I been set up for that? I certainly don't know my password if I have. Could you reset it?" The administrator hesitated for a second, "Okay just this once. Hold on." Again there was a short pause. Duncan could hear the administrator's keyboard rattling in the background. He was becoming concerned his money would run out. The administrator returned to the call, "Hold on a second, you don't have a user id on this system!" Duncan thought that he had been rumbled. The administrator continued, "I'll just create one for you. Right, that's it done. Your user id is capital Kfraser, and the password is p4ssw0rd. Please change it as soon as you can, we wouldn't want anyone getting in, you know!" Duncan tried to contain his delight, "Thanks so much, you're a lifesaver, bye." With that, Duncan put down the phone and ran back to the flat. There was no time to lose. He had to get into the system before the intrusion was noticed.

Duncan burst through the door to the squat to find Jimmy sitting up in the living room warming his hands next to the fire. He turned round, surprised to see Duncan come rushing in at such a pace. "What's up with you? Where have ye been?"

Duncan couldn't contain his excitement. "C'mon, we've got to go. I've managed to get a login to their system." The men took off out of the squat and down the street. Duncan fired up his Zaurus and using the ``Z4CK --scan --info`` command searched for more wireless access points. Soon enough the Zaurus beeped, confirming that it had detected a system. The men sat down next to a wall. Jimmy put a small coffee cup out in front of him, and proceeded to beg. He felt he might as well try to get something from just sitting around. It also made a good cover for Duncan.

Duncan typed into the Zaurus console ``Z4CK --connect``. He waited and watched for a moment. "Damn! This link is encrypted. That makes a change." He stopped his software and changed the command switch. He typed again, ``Z4CK --decrypt --connect``, and watched. Time passed slowly, people walking by, staring at them in the street, annoyed and slightly bemused by a couple begging in their area of town. Fifteen minutes had passed and Jimmy was getting anxious. "Are you not in yet?" Duncan replied, "It's an encrypted link. It takes a while to capture enough information to crack the encryption algorithm. A few more minutes, have patience!" Jimmy replied, "Patience I have, time we don't." A couple more minutes passed. "That's it! We've got the key, and the addresses we can use." Duncan typed the shared key in, along with valid network addresses. He fired up his remote access software. Jimmy was now more interested in what Duncan was doing, but was also becoming more anxious. "Duncan I'm a bit concerned that someone will call the police in this area. They don't put up with people like us for very long here."

Duncan typed in the remote access systems address, not paying attention to what Jimmy was saying. "It's a Citrix Secure Gateway. I'll have access in a minute!" Duncan entered the user ID and password provided by the Administrator and

waited. "Shit, it's not working," Duncan exclaimed. Jimmy leaned over. "Type it again." Duncan retyped the user id and password. This time he was presented with a full desktop. "Whew!" he exclaimed. "Just mistyped the password!"

Duncan scouted around the system looking in the user's home directories. Access to certain parts of the system was fine, but administrator access was required if he was really going to get anywhere. He copied Z4CK on to the remote system and ran it. He typed yet another switch – this time ``Z4CK --crack --SAM``. Within minutes, Duncan had the admin password. "Christ, that's not a very secure password?" exclaimed Jimmy. Duncan ran several searches looking for Atkins' name as well as any other files that may have connections to viruses, birds or hacker tools. He quickly downloaded several files that he felt were relevant.

Jimmy nudged Duncan, "Duncan, we've been rumbled mate. Let's get the hell out of here!" Looking out from a window, across the road a man was talking into a mobile phone watching the two men, and pointing in their direction. It was probably his Internet connection they had been using. Duncan kept downloading furiously. "C'mon Duncan, he's fucking coming down the stairs." Duncan replied while continuing to type furiously, "Okay, Okay! Just two more seconds." The man had come out of the building and was heading across the road. He shouted, "Hey you, come here!" Jimmy hauled Duncan to his feet and they ran down the road as fast as they could. The man had no interest in giving chase. Instead, he stopped and continued talking into his mobile phone.

Shattered by the sudden need to get up and sprint, the two men finally reached the squat. It was yet another narrow escape. Soon after, they peered out through a crack in the boarded windows to see a police car drive slowly by. They breathed a

joint sigh of relief and slumped to the floor. Jimmy turned to Duncan, "Yer killing me, stuff this for a game of soldiers. I need a drink! Look, I collected a couple of quid when we were beggin'!"

Duncan had returned to his research, ploughing through the files he had taken. It was not long before his suspicions were confirmed. Mobile Solutions was involved in the storage and distribution of advanced viruses and hacking tools. According to some of the correspondence, Atkins had, through his government position, been able to obtain a great deal of these tools for them. Duncan knew however that technicalities in UK law would make it difficult to prove and prosecute, and besides, how could he say he obtained such information?

He was up against the cyber- weaponry equivalent of an arms dealer, and obviously, it was big business, with many aggressive nations eager to buy. He could not help but wonder how much his software would fetch in these markets. It seemed that Miss Sharp had simply been unfortunate enough to stumble upon these dealings. Atkins or someone within the company had her killed before Duncan could audit the network, and perhaps find too much. Duncan realised that this of course was another reason why every means possible had been used to stop the audit going ahead.

Jimmy had been listening to Duncan's theories. "But surely someone else has either figured this out or is investigating it?" "You cannae be telling me that with all the electronic surveillance and vetting that someone else doesn't have the slightest inkling of what's going on?"

Duncan had no answer to this. "It does seem strange," he said in an almost subdued voice.

Jimmy perked up. "Anyway, fancy a wee drink? I'm off to get me some cheap Cider, most I can afford with this cash."

Duncan replied, "No, there's not really enough time. I've got to find some answers here." Jimmy shrugged his shoulders, "Fair enough, now you look after yerself, and I'll see you later."

Duncan was slightly disappointed, but felt it was not his place to play a parental role. Jimmy headed out the door like an excited child going to the sweet shop. Duncan wondered when or if he would see him again.

The door to Atkin's office swung open. Atkins, annoyed by the sudden disturbance, shouted at the shadowy figure holding the door. "Can't you bloody knock?"

"Sorry Sir, but we've had reports on a couple of things that might interest you." The agent paused to gain breath.

"Well spit it out for God's sake! I haven't got all day!" shouted Atkins. Atkins had little patience at the best of times. The agent, taken aback by this outburst, responded quickly.

"Someone has reported two people begging in the Trinity area of town."

Atkins frowned. "Whoopy-fucking-do. What has that got to do with me?"

The agent ignored the sarcasm. "It was reported that one of them used a small computer to hack into a local broadband connection. We're sure it's our man, Sir." Atkins stood up and stroked his beard, whilst moving from behind the table and towards the agent. Atkins challenged him. "What makes you think it is him?" The agent took a step back. "Well," he

faltered, "The description matches Duncan Steele, and people don't usually beg in that area."

Atkins eyes widened. "Right, that's enough info. Get a couple of guys round there and see if you can get some of the uniformed lot to join you." The agent nodded, and quickly left the room. Atkins sat down on his desk, and smiled, "I knew I'd get you back sooner or later. Looks like it's going to be sooner."

The phone at the left hand side of Atkins' desk rang. Its volume was turned down low so as not to cause its owner offence. Atkins leaned over and picked up the phone, carefully placing it to his ear. "Yes, I'll take it." he answered.

As he listened, the expression and colour drained from his face, "I see, that's not good, was any information obtained?" "Yes, that is quite a breach of security. I would be most obliged if you could get rid of the fool at once!" Atkins put the phone back down. For a second he sat quietly before suddenly clenching his fist and banging it hard on the table. The resounding thud knocked a glass of water from the table, smashing it on the floor. In an instant he calmed down again, the anger and frustration gone.

He immediately picked up the phone again. "Yes, you were going to get a few people to look for Steele. I have just had some news. You will need to get more men, and I will be coming along as well. Be ready in ten minutes." He looked down at the broken glass lying on the floor. "Very soon, Mr. Steele, I'm going to smash you too!"

Around 10 minutes later, Atkins got into a waiting car. "Do you know which area he's in?" The agent also got into the back of the car. "Judging by the reports, it's the Trinity area of

town, quite a good area, definitely not known for beggars.” Atkins was extremely calm, as though going on a shopping trip. Without looking directly at the agent, he asked another question. "Any idea where he may be sleeping? Rough, or under cover?"

The agent replied as best he could, "We don't have specifics on his location, however, intelligence relating to the area indicates there are a few abandoned houses near to Anderson Road in Trinity and we believe they are occasionally used as squats. The residents have complained about them for years. We thought that that would be a good place to start." Atkins put his seatbelt on as the car drew away. "Excellent! Let's see how far he can get now."

The journey took only 20 minutes, but as the time went by Atkins seemed to become more impatient and excitable. It had been a while since he had been out from behind his desk. In front of the car was a white unmarked van. Manpower had been found quickly on the authority of Atkins. The traffic leading out from the centre of town was reasonable for this time of day, certainly enough for the black car and white van not to be noticed as they headed towards their goal. The vehicles would of course be more noticeable once down in the quiet Trinity area.

Jimmy had managed to spend the small amount of cash he had obtained, and had already all but emptied the two litre bottle of Cider. He walked as he drank, passers-by glancing aside or crossing the road. Jimmy had not travelled far for his drink, and was close to reaching the squat, when a white van and black car passed him by. He would not have noticed them, but for the screech of the brakes. Jimmy began to panic, and stopped in his tracks for a second. He decided to continue as if oblivious. An agent stepped out of the car, beckoning him

over. "Hey you! I'd like to talk to you." Jimmy stopped and raised his eyes from the pavement. "You want me, mate?" he asked. The man walked over, "Bit early for a drink isn't it?"

Jimmy replied, "No, no. I've been up for hours, hair of the dog. Last night was a heavy one. Ye know – wild parties! After all, us students are only young once." The agent continued, ignoring the last quip, "Have you seen this man?" Jimmy squinted at the photo. "Is it you on a good day?" The agent was unimpressed by Jimmy's smart antics. Atkins got out of the car, "C'mon don't waste your time on this fool, get a move on! We haven't all fucking day." The agent gave Jimmy one final look, before walking back to the car. Jimmy exhaled, but knew that he would have to make a hasty return to the squat in the hope of warning Duncan about the danger coming his way. He began to walk more quickly, knowing deep down he would not get there in time.

Duncan looked out from behind the cracks in the boarded-up windows of the squat, if only to get a bit of light and see if Jimmy was likely to appear back. As he drew away from the window, a large white van caught his attention. He stopped and studied it for a second. A black car followed it closely. Duncan found this strange. His palms began to sweat, and his mouth became dry. He headed upstairs, careful of the rotten floorboards, to get a better view from the rooms above. He peered intently through a crack in the wood of the upstairs window. Several uniformed men got out of the van. Another man who seemed to be in control exited from the black car behind. At first, Duncan did not recognise him. He concentrated his focus. It was Atkins, his worst enemy. The hairs on Duncan's neck stood on end. Immediately he looked around the room for the best escape route. He knew his time was up.

He began to calculate the odds. Was this all the men, or were there more waiting elsewhere, ready for him running? Duncan rushed downstairs to the back door, but it was jammed. What now? He began to panic as the thoughts of jail, or worse, crossed his mind. Then he remembered the toilet had an unblocked window! He headed to it. The only natural sunlight in the house lit this dank little room. The once elegant sink lay cracked and broken on the floor, next to a brown stained toilet bowl. There was a smell of uric acid, powerful enough to turn the strongest stomach.

The lock still worked on the door and he decided that this might give him some more time, a delaying tactic. He bolted it shut, and climbed onto the toilet bowl, balancing precariously whilst trying desperately to open the window. It held fast for what seemed an age, but eventually he managed to open enough of a gap for his slender frame to get through. As he hauled himself through the window, Duncan became aware that the front door to the squat had been opened. The shouts of policemen could be heard down the corridor.

Duncan's haste intensified causing him to lose his footing. He clung onto the window frame, desperately trying to pull himself through to the other side. He fell onto the debris-covered grass below, just missing several boulders as he landed. Duncan looked toward the window above; he had no time to lose if he was to make good his escape. He could hear a commotion coming from behind the toilet door, as someone tried to force it. Cracking timber and a scream from upstairs caught his attention, as a hapless individual fell through the rotten floorboards.

Duncan was up and over the wall faster than he believed was possible. At the back of the wall was an alleyway, which opened out onto streets at both sides. A row of garages lay

directly ahead. Duncan hammered his way down the lane and was soon out of range. He knew the people hunting him would not give up easily. To have any real chance of escape he would have to make a few good decisions on which directions to take. He had little time to make these choices. He now knew how close the police were to catching him. Lying lower than a rabbit in a burrow would be the order of the day, but for the moment, he needed to find that burrow. Nowhere seemed safe.

Chapter 11 – Help from nowhere.

Duncan kept running, for how long he wasn't sure. Suitable hiding places on these suburban streets seemed impossible to find. He couldn't head into town as too many people may recognize him, but staying out in the suburbs had two problems. He was not local, and the locals were wary of outsiders, especially ones they saw as undesirable. Someone limping around with black eyes was noticeable, and undesirable. Apart from this, there was a real lack of network access, and he desperately needed to get access to any network connection if he was to put the rest of his plans into operation.

Duncan was beginning to tire; a lack of food and water combined with almost no sleep had sapped his energy over the past few days. He wandered around in a dream like daze as his energy levels began to deplete. This may have explained why he didn't immediately notice the car pulling up next to him, and taxiing for a short while.

It sounded its horn. The sudden noise made Duncan jump, his natural instincts making him run without as much as a glance behind him. As he ran, the car kept pace with him. After a short while, Duncan became aware of the cars electric window opening and he braced himself for the worst. To his surprise, there was no gun blast, instead a recognisable voice shouted from the car.

"Get in you stupid arse!"

Duncan turned to find Cam beckoning him. Duncan was hesitant, but realised that he had no real choice if he was to stay free for much longer. "What the hell are you doing here?" Duncan asked as he got into the car. "Well there's all this crap on the news about you killing Al, and some other woman."

He stopped talking for a moment to concentrate on his driving, "Now you can be a bit of a boring twat, but a murderer you're not. Besides...it all looked a bit more exciting than doing a pish days work at the bank!"

Cam checked his wing mirror for any signs of someone tailing them, "Oh, and it's pretty busy by the way, seeing as you and Al are not there just now. The new guy has also gone missing, which I blame you for, since you tried to give him a doing! So I thought, fuck it, I'm not doing all this myself!"

For the first time Duncan was genuinely pleased to see Cam. "How did you find me?" Cam replied calmly, "Oh I have my means. However, that's not important right now. We've got to get you safe." A smile crossed his face, "and by the way, the face is an improvement, but the body odour isn't!" Duncan replied, "cheers."

It was clear as to one of the reasons that it had not been too difficult for Cam to find him. He lived in the Trinity area. They passed through a large houses black steel gates and up a gravelled driveway, stopping directly outside a beautiful Victorian house. The manicured garden was surrounded by an old wall, which must have been over 6 foot in height. An Oak tree was a prominent feature in the centre of the grounds. "I didn't know you were a gardener," said Duncan, a little taken aback by the houses splendour. Cam laughed, "Gardener, me? Am I fuck. But luckily our gardener is a gardener."

The house had been a manse once. According to the stonework above the door, it had been built in 1903. They passed through the double doors into the largest hallway Duncan had ever seen. The halls parquet flooring, meticulously laid, was a tribute to the workman of a bygone age. There were heavy doors to the right and left, and straight

ahead, a wide stairway.

"How many rooms do you have here?" asked Duncan. "Oh 30 odd." It was becoming apparent to Duncan as to why Cam didn't give a toss at work; he didn't need to. Cam pointed at the stairs, "My parents occupy the top floor. I'm in here." He turned to the door on the left and opened it carefully. "We converted it to a flat, it has got ample space. You'll be alright for a while." They entered Cam's flat; it was large with high ceilings and plain cream walls complimenting the polished beech wooden flooring throughout.

They turned right, walking down a long narrow corridor, which Duncan could see, ended at the kitchen. Cam pointed at the kitchen; it was bright and airy with several windows looking out from the side of the house onto three double garages and the back garden. The garden was a positive suntrap in summer. Cam pointed to the cupboards and fridge, "food in there, and plenty of it, even for a fat boy like you! You just need to help yourself." He turned back towards the hall. "Up here is where you'll be for a short while."

Cam opened a sliding door and led Duncan up an ornate steel spiral staircase. The top of the stairs opened out onto what could only be described as the most fantastic computer room Duncan had ever seen. A token single bed sat in the corner so the excuse of a spare room could be given. At the far end of the room was a large arched window. The room's left hand wall slanted as if part of the roof. Duncan noticed some bells on the left hand wall. "What are they?" Cam smiled, "This used to be the servants quarters when it was first built. I liked the idea of servants so I left them there, pretty cool eh?"

Two red leather chairs sat in the middle of the Hessian carpeted floor, whilst up against the right hand wall was an incredible

array of laptops, computer systems and games machines. Duncan stood in awe; the whole house was the stuff of dreams. "Right, you're up here out of the way, nobody will find you, for a while at least. Get some rest and I'll get you some nosh. Then you need to tell me what the fuck has been going on." Duncan was thankful for this unexpected help, and accepted it gratefully.

As Cam reached the computer room door to go downstairs he turned back, "oh, I nearly forgot...through that door at the far end on the left you'll find a shower...*please* use it before you get into the bed, your body odour is offensive!" He laughed and continued downstairs, leaving Duncan to get a well-needed shower.

Duncan, although tired, had trouble sleeping. He was afraid of being caught, and had little time to concentrate on hassling Atkins. Duncan's software was fully tested, and he was keen to let Atkins feel its full force.

Cam had taken his clothes and washed them, saying it was more for his health than Duncan's. He now returned with these and some food. "C'mon, you'll have to get up, you're not in the luxurious position of getting much time to sleep mate." Cam laid a plate and cup on a small table by the bed. "Scrambled eggs and coffee. Only thing I'm much good at making, but hey, I didn't think you'd complain." Duncan ate hungrily. As he drank the coffee, its caffeine and sugar content rushed to his head causing him to feel slightly high.

"Right," Cam began, "What the hell is going on here? You'll have to tell me from the start if I'm to help you any more." Duncan told the story in reasonable detail. "How can you help me?" Cam replied, "Well you're here for a start aren't you? I have some contacts that may help you get out of this bloody

mess."

Duncan produced his Zaurus, "do you mind if I hook this up to your network? I see you have a wireless access point here."

Cam replied as if expecting the request, "of course, what are you going to do? I would suggest that you start digging for information if you're to get out of this?" Duncan simply smiled.

The two men sat side by side, as they logged into their respective computer systems. "We don't get to do much hacking at work, which was the main reason I joined. Thought it would be quite cool part time. Instead I just get pissed off with the continual admin, and Mrs J Doe not getting access to some poxy website; I mean, who the fuck cares?" stated Cam. Duncan agreed, "Yeah I know, but hey, it brings in the cash." Cam looked around the room and smiled, "yeah but some folk don't need it!"

Duncan entered the password and loaded the controller code that would allow him to use Z4CK again. Cam stopped him, "Wait, just before you do this I hope you are going to use another system as a decoy? I don't want anyone tracing us and banging down these doors based on your incompetence." Duncan replied, "of course, I'm not stupid am I?" Cam seemed reassured and returned to his console.

Duncan began to look for any information he could gain on Atkins. He had the information from the laptop, and the findings from his Internet searches. Cam wheeled his chair over to Duncan and peered over his shoulder at the PDA, "yeah information is quite sparse on this Atkins bloke eh?"

"However, I've got hold of the email server he uses for personal web mail if that's any help." Duncan was surprised. "How and when did you get that?"

"As I said, contacts!"

This help delighted Duncan. "Right let's start there...what's the address? With that, the two men began.

Scanning the mail server, the software quickly found vulnerabilities in the system. Cam was incredulous, "I can't understand why these folks never patch their mail systems, it's just an open invitation, they deserve what they get you know!" Duncan typed another command at the console ``Z4CK --overflow --root --brute mailserver --port 25``. He sat back, "This will attempt to brute force the super user account via the mail port once it's used my special overflow attack. It may take a while!" The PDA's screen went blank. A cursor flashed like a heartbeat letting the hackers know the attempt was still in progress. Eventually text began scrolling up the screen until it ended abruptly. At the bottom sat the text ``phase complete: overflow success, Attempting brute force...`` Again, the cursor sat blinking. The two men waited eagerly, poised over the top of the system. Suddenly everything stopped, and a ``root@mailserver:`` prompt appeared. They were in!

Cam was astonished, "Christ, we were aware that this was good, but that's bloody impressive...I can't believe your in just like that!" Duncan was already hunting around the file system looking for the relevant mail files that may help him. Duncan checked for user account AtkinsG. He found it, along with the relevant mail directories. "I'll install Z4CK on here, and set it to copy any new mail from Atkins account to us. Time to get out, don't you think?"

Duncan seemed happy with the progress they had made so far. Cam was already downloading the mail from Atkins mailbox. The room's atmosphere buzzed with a feeling of excitement at the prospect of finally defeating Duncan's nemesis.

They searched through the mail. It soon became apparent that

Atkins was less careful here than he should have been. A goldmine of information and evidence sat before them. Cam sifted through some of it, "Fucks sake, there's everything here we need to stitch him up. Confirmation of purchases, work files, virus patterns, the lot!"

Cam rubbed his hands, "Right what now?" Duncan concentrated on the screen in front of him. "Well, let's head to the sites that will have his credit card details stored. I think a little look in their credit card databases is called for. The two hackers broke into and downloaded credit card details from several database servers. Atkins credit and debit cards, as well as purchases were there for them to view, including his address and buying history. "Excellent! That's that done. Once we have all the information we need, we'll have some fun with this. We don't want to do things piecemeal, he'll suspect something before we can get everything we need."

Duncan paused for a second and turned to Cam, "Have you found his work email address?" Cam replied, "Yeah its here AtkinsG@MIAgency.dnsalias.org" Duncan looked back at his PDA, "right let's see what we have on MIAgency.dnsalias.org."

This was the big one; if they could break into this system, they could find out more information than they would ever need. They were sure the systems would be heavily guarded with hardened computers, firewalls, and a myriad of intrusion detection systems. Avoiding detection would be difficult, and being caught in these systems would bring the full force of the government security services down on them. At best, it would mean jail, at worst, who knew? Duncan did not feel that at this stage he had much more to lose.

It was decided that in order to increase the chances of avoiding detection, they would hold off until that night. Less staff

usually meant less vigilance, and those who were there would more than likely have to call specialist support staff. This, Duncan and Cam hoped, would give them more time to get the info they needed and get back out. They ate tea, and sat chatting, time passing slowly. The hands of the clock at times seemed glued in position. Eventually, the old Grandfather clock struck 11 o'clock. Its chime ringing down the hall, reverberating up to the rooms above.

Duncan and Cam looked at each other. The room was now dark with the only illumination provided by the soft light from the lamp in the corner, and the glow of white text from the computer screens. The atmosphere was tense. Duncan wiped his brow, the goal closer than ever. The attack tools were at hand, an array better than Duncan had seen before. He and Cam had no doubt that they could achieve their goal, but could they do it without detection? Both sat upright in their chairs, anxious but also nervous with excitement.

Cam turned to Duncan, "Well...here goes nothing. Hope this software of yours can get through. Companies and home networks are one thing, but government security agencies...are we mad?" Duncan simply smiled, passing a piece of paper to Cam, "this is the plan, think you can do that? I'll do the rest." Cam smiled, "hey, have laptop will hack!" They readied themselves at their keyboards. With a nod from Duncan, the attack began.

The console room within the Military Intelligence Agency was in the middle of a shift change, with a hand-over process currently in progress. The room was secure, soundproof and unremarkable. Banks of flat panelled screens sat in racks across the back of the room. The occasional flashing i.e.d brought the only noticeable colour to the stark environment. Everything from the intrusion detection systems to the nightly

backups was part of a job that could be at the best of times laborious. A television in the corner and take away food broke the monotony of the monitoring process. The civilian operators sat round a table in the middle of the room, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. They ticked their checklists and scribbled notes for the evenings-scheduled changes. The operator performing the handover paced the grey carpet, stopping and leaning over the desk occasionally to emphasize a point.

It was quiet as usual save for the odd backup failure alert. On these occasions, the operators would page the appropriate technician to ensure a fix before core business hours. Soon enough the men were settled into their shift. They typed the odd email, ran a batch job when required, laughed at the comedy channel, or poked fun at each other. It was just a usual Tuesday night.

Derek chewed on his chicken chow mein, when he noticed that one of the intrusion detection probes had tripped. "Hey Kevin, what do you think this is?" Kevin scrutinised the monitor that had produced the alert, "hmm not sure, where's it coming from?" Derek seemed confused, "According to this it's from one of our own systems!" Kevin shook his head. "That's daft, the damn things playing up again. I thought they would have optimised the probes by now...too many false alarms. We better not call the guys out yet. You know how pissed off they get when it's a false alarm." Derek shrugged his shoulders, "fair enough, I'll keep an eye on it, maybe it's one of those script kiddies again. How many times do we get probed every night?" Kevin replied, "too many!"

A few more minutes passed and Derek began to worry, "Kevin, another one has tripped, it's the mail system, but again...it thinks it's someone inside!" A sudden flurry of red alerts began to flash at various places on the console, indicating that

attacks were taking place all over the network. Kevin ran to the console, beginning to panic. He typed furiously at the keyboard, let's see if we can trace this suckers Internet address." He stepped back from the console wide eyed, "Derek...call the security team out, I think we're being hacked, the address is," he hesitated. "Its...your console...no its my console...the firewall itself!"

Soon hundreds of different attack signatures from different locations were flooding the Intrusion Detection Systems. The operations team began to panic. No one had ever penetrated the firewalls. The intrusion detection systems seemed to be reporting attacks on a massive scale. Derek picked up the phone, "Hi is this network security? We've got a real problem!" Almost 20 minutes passed with relentless streams of alerts appearing everywhere. So many attacks now that it was impossible to tell what was real and what was a decoy. A technician from the network security team swiped his card and entered the Operations Bridge to find the operators in a state of confusion.

Phones were ringing constantly, and the incident had been escalated to senior management. Attacks were coming from inside, and outside. Hundreds of different attack patterns seemed to pour through the defences. The network security technician studied the console in disbelief. He waited only a few seconds before making a snap decision.

He shouted above the babbling of operations staff, ringing telephones, and the constant alerts coming from the detection systems. "Disconnect the Internet connection now!" The operator ran to the back of a communications rack and pulled the cable from the hardware. The alerts halted, and within a few short minutes all became silent. The people in the room stood breathless. The staff stood quietly, waiting for any further

signs of attack. No further attacks came. Derek finally spoke. "We'll have to reconnect the link at some stage, when do you think would be a good time?" The security technician pondered for a second. "Probably half an hour, I'll stay here for a while; I'll have to check the systems and assess the damage anyway." They all knew that would take time.

Duncan hammered at his keyboard; the attack launched by Cam had distracted the operators and security technicians. So many different intrusion signatures from so many obscure sources had hidden the true attack. Having found an alternative dial-up connection, he had been given enough time to compromise it, whilst the operators panicked at the ensuing front line assault. Duncan knew that he had little time left now Cam's connection had been cut to do the things he wanted, indeed needed to do. With a final flurry at the keyboard, he ended his attack.

He sat back in the chair, breathed deeply and brushed his fingers through his hair in relief. Atkins would soon find life getting that little bit more difficult. Cam jumped out of the chair and whooped, "That was just the best. I cannot believe it worked. I wish I could to see Atkins face over the next couple of days, this is going to be so fucking cool." Duncan relaxed in his chair, shattered from the pressure. He had more information, but he also knew time was running out.

He wondered where Brandon had gone, was worried about Jimmy, and despite everything that had happened missed Lin. If he had had the option, he would have rather just gone home and started again. Unfortunately, that option did not exist. It was different for Cam, it was just one big game to him.

Duncan lifted himself out of his chair and walked across to the bed. He lay down on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

"Are you Okay?" asked Cam. "Just tired," Duncan replied. Cam swivelled round in the chair and faced Duncan, switching on a standard lamp sitting next to one of the systems. Its dim light gave the room a comfortable warm feel. The lamps light cast long shadows across the beige walls. "I have a confession to make." The sentence brought a feeling of dread which hit the pit of Duncan's stomach like a sucker punch. He had no idea what was coming next and his body and mind had come to expect the worst after his experiences over the last few days.

Duncan did not take his eyes off the ceiling. "Go on" he said in as calm a voice as he could muster. Cam spoke quietly and deliberately, "I've been watching your progress...a few of us have, and the software you've created is excellent. I know at work I tend to do rather stupid things and pretend not to know too much. However, I have a bit more of a clue than any old firewall monkey. My on-line name is Hades." Duncan slowly sat up "aye right, you mean the Hades? The hacker who is always breaking into those supposedly impregnable systems, and posting the vulnerabilities to bugtraq?" Cam smiled, "well I do give them a chance to fix it first, before I post the vulnerabilities, and at least now they don't ignore me; not like in the beginning."

Duncan pointed at Cam; "You were one of the people who replied to me and helped push me in the right direction when I began writing Z4CK last year. I've been working beside you all this time and you've never let on?" Cam sat for a moment, "Well, you were so matey with Al, and you know I never did trust him. I just had this feeling something wasn't quite right."

Duncan bowed his head, he had not really had any time to think about Al's fate properly, but now it was starting to sink in. He had felt angry and betrayed, but his sentimental side would

always remember some of the laughs they had. He couldn't help wondering how false it had all been. He felt empty, and yet the circumstances he now found himself in were changing him; he was becoming stronger. After this, he was sure nothing would be insurmountable.

Chapter 12 – Last train to Waverley

Atkins drove his Range Rover up to the security checkpoint. As he always did, he stopped the car and rolled down the window, before holding his card against the card reader. The light flashed red and beeped 3 times, denying him access. He hadn't noticed, and averted his gaze back to the steering wheel, preparing to drive through. Nothing happened. He swiped several times more before becoming irritated and deciding to call security on the intercom. "Atkins here, this bloody gate won't let me through, what the hells wrong with it?" The security guard was unaware of any problems and promptly opened the gate to the car park. Atkins drove through at a pace, revving his engine as was customary when he was annoyed.

He had almost calmed down by the time he had reached his parking space, and clambering out of the vehicle headed to the doors.

Door after door denied him access slowing his way to the office. He headed to the security station. "This bloody thing won't give me access, check it please." His tone won him no favours with the security guard, who ran it through the computer system. "It seems you don't have access to most of the building Sir." He handed the card back to Atkins. "Atkins looked at the guard in astonishment, "Well, give the fucking monkey a prize...I know that! So can you fix it? Or will I have to stand here all day?"

"You'll have to fill in a form; its procedure." Atkins flew into a rage, "fuck your procedures, do you know who I am?" The security guard smiled, "Yes Sir, according to this your Gerald Atkins!" Atkins shouted at the guard, "Fix the card or I'll have you thrown out...get me the head of security." The security

guard sat behind the glass pausing for a moment before swivelling round in his chair and picking up the phone. "Hello Sir, I've got a Gerald Atkins here, he says he should have more access than he has at the moment. I see, okay I'll sort that out right away Sir." The guard put the phone down, and inserted the card into the card reader. "Just reprogramming it now Sir." Atkins stood impatiently tapping his fingers on the counter, and staring at the guard. "Come on I haven't got all bloody day!" A few seconds later the guard removed the card from the reader and handed it to Atkins. "There you are Sir." A wry smile crossed his face as Atkins snatched the card from him and stormed off. The guard mumbled under his breath, "have a nice day, you old fool!"

Everything Atkins tried within the building, with the exception of the doors, denied him access. The coffee machine rejected his card, and his security login token was incorrect, denying him access to his PC or the computer network.

He called in one of the technicians, "what the hell is wrong with the computer systems today?" The technician looked surprised, "nothing reported, everyone else seems to be getting logged in Okay." Atkins was bemused. "Has anything changed lately?" The technician replied, "There was an attempted hack last night, but nothing serious. They didn't get in!" Atkins was noticeably annoyed. "How do you know they didn't get in?" Atkins aggressive questioning unnerved the technician. "Err, I think they checked the logs. The attack only lasted about 15 minutes, before they pulled the plug." He waited for a response from Atkins, but got none.

He added, "There's been no more attacks since!" Atkins password was changed and he finally gained access to the system. "You may go now," he said ushering the technician out of his presence. Atkins stared in disbelief at the screen as he

checked his mail. He got out of his chair and ran to the corridor to get the technician, "Get back in here quickly, look all my mail has gone!" The technician walked quickly back into the room and peered over Atkins shoulder. Atkins was starting to feel uncomfortable. His email was important. He knew that he had been targeted, meaning only one thing; Steele had broken in. "I'll get this sorted right away," stated the technician, slightly panicked that the system had been compromised to such a level. Atkins had become angry, "heads will roll for this, I promise you...get the head of security ASAP. I need a word."

Atkins paced the room pensively, desperately trying to remember what had been in his mail. He was sure most of it was safely tucked away in his secure mailbox. He quickly sat down and typed his user ID and password into his Internet mail account. '*Incorrect Password.*' His access had been removed. The colour drained from his face. He bit his lip, which reddened producing a tiny trickle of blood. He had no choice. He would have to remove Steele personally, before too much was known of his own underhanded dealings.

He got up from his desk, and was halfway out the door when the security manager appeared. "What exactly is the problem?" Atkins had no time for the man, and rushed past him. "Your technician knows, he'll fill you in. Just get it sorted and get my mail back you incompetent fool." He was halfway down the brightly lit corridor by the time he had ended his instruction.

Atkins pulled out of the car park at speed and drove a short distance round the corner to a garage. He pulled up next to the pump and sat for a short while. He was sweating, and out of breath. His mind was racing, attempting to determine what had happened, and what information, if any, could be gleaned from his email accounts. Eventually he exited the car and put his

usual £10 of petrol in the tank. Walking steadily towards the garage he stopped only to pick up a paper. His disgust was obvious as he read its headline, *'Double murder suspect disappears'*.

Atkins felt he was being mocked, as though Duncan Steele was laughing at him. He had convinced himself that he was surrounded by fools who cared little about this menace to society. Atkins hatred of Duncan Steele was strong and growing daily. In his mind he had caused the death of his son, was a dangerous hacker unwilling to give up his software and now...now he was publicly mocking him and his ability to solve crime. Atkins decided immediately that he would waste no more time, waiting for idle incompetents to find his prize. He would take it himself.

Atkins entered a daze, staring blankly at the paper. "Here, you gonnae buy that?" asked the garage attendant. Atkins came back from his deep thought. "NO" came the curt reply, and he promptly dropped the paper back into the stand. His rudeness was renowned, even here. Walking up to the counter, he simply stated his petrol pump number and waited to be asked for his card, which he promptly and unceremoniously handed over. From behind the glass the assistant took the card without looking up. She swiped it and waited. After a brief pause, she looked at Atkins. "This has been rejected," Atkins was bemused. "How can that be rejected? I have the funds, try it again." Again, the card was swiped with the same result, "Sorry its still rejecting it." A queue had begun to form, making the assistant impatient. "Excuse me, but people are waiting, do you have another way of paying?"

Atkins fumbled with his wallet eventually producing ten pounds. He handed this over, slightly embarrassed and quickly left the garage. He got into his car and pulled away at speed,

almost crashing into a passing vehicle which promptly came to a halt. The furious driver waved his fist and sounded his horn.

Atkins reached home and stopped in front of his white garage door. His house was an average sized bungalow, red brick in appearance. The window frames were worn, and required attention, as did the wooden front door. Atkins had not been motivated to do these sorts of things since his wife had left. Likewise, the interior required some cleaning and maintenance. Old carpets that had once radiated colour were now dulled and worn. Every shelf was covered in a fine layer of dust, with cobwebs inhabiting every corner. It was clear that once this had been a happy family home. Now it was no more than an empty shell inhabited by a bitter, unhappy man.

Atkins walked through his lounge to the kitchen, its worktops filthy with coffee stains, unwashed plates and take away cartons. The black and white checked linoleum on the floor was showing signs of wear and tear, and some water lay next to the washing machine where it had leaked only the day before. The back window gave a view onto a once beautiful but now overgrown garden. This house and his work were all Atkins now had. The grief at the loss of his son had spiralled out of control, and through it, he had lost almost everything, including his remaining family members. People would have pitied him, if they had liked him.

This year had been especially hard for Atkins. His son would have obtained his freedom. Nine long years had passed since his first meeting with Duncan. In that time, the hatred and grief had taken root, tearing his life apart. He stared out of the window at the overgrown back garden, thinking of happy summer days, the smell of fresh grass, and the sound of children playing. He sighed, and turned away.

Atkins reached into the cupboard for an empty glass. He found a clean one and walked to sink. Running the tap until the water ran cold, he carefully filled it, before returning to the lounge to call the bank. The phone sat on the mantle-piece, not used as often as it once was. Laying his glass down he dialled the number and waited for a short while in the standard call centre queue. Atkins muttered to himself, "bloody call centres, these people don't give a damn."

Some minutes later, the customer care representative took his call. "Hello, I-bank. Can I have your name and account number please?" Atkins dutifully provided the information required along with his address, which was accepted by the representative. "How may I help you Mr Atkins, she said in that all too familiar '*happy to help*' tone. Atkins was less happy. "I've had my card rejected a couple of times today and I'd like to know why. Would it be possible for someone in your useless organisation to shed some light on this?" "Certainly Sir, just give me two seconds to check your account details." There was a short pause. "It seems you have become overdrawn, and have insufficient funds at the moment. Also, according to our information, you cancelled your credit card with us via our website. This cancellation was accepted as you had no outstanding debts on it."

Atkins was dumbfounded. "This can't be true. There must be some mistake. I certainly did not cancel my credit card yesterday!" The representative paused again, "Sorry sir, the database shows that yesterday evening at 11.49pm you cancelled you credit card, and stated the reason as being '*dissatisfaction with the security of our on-line banking systems.*'" Atkins was furious, "I did not do this. My account must have been hacked. What about my other account, what transactions have been made over the day?"

The representative was becoming flustered, realising that there may have been a security breach. "The largest transaction here is a payment for eight thousand pounds to the Happy Valley Sunshine Charity, if I may say so a very generous gift!" Atkins rage grew, he screamed down the phone, "You stupid girl. I didn't give any money to charity. My account has been hacked. Your lawyers will be hearing from me, and I'll ensure that all the papers know that your security is poor." Atkins smashed the handset down shaking the mantle-piece. He screamed at the top of his voice, "Steele you'll fucking pay for this!"

Atkins was unable to contain his rage as he picked up a lamp and wrenched it from the wall socket, swinging it wildly around, knocking over or hitting almost everything in the room. Finally his tantrum ended and he sat down, exhausted. Mentally and physically drained, he slumped onto his couch in a heap. He took off his tie and threw it to the floor. Atkins no longer cared about consequences, Steele would die. He was looking forward to it.

The police hunt for Duncan Steele was not going well. On the ground the investigation was being handled by Detective Inspector Reese, and Sgt. John Wilson. They sat in the incident room staring at a white board hanging on the wall next to a map of Edinburgh. The window blinds were closed to provide a clearer view against the glare of an unusually bright day. Red circles marked on the map indicated previous sightings of Steele. Scrawls of notes written in red, green and black pen where key points were highlighted had been pinned to the wall during a previous brain storming session. Reese walked round the desk which sat in the middle of the floor, bypassing the solitary computer system to the coffee machine, which sat next to the office door. DI Reese was a tall man, not afraid to say what he meant. His large, cumbersome frame gave him a frightening presence. "Do you want a coffee John?"

John Wilson was in his mid thirties. Smartly dressed in an immaculately ironed shirt, which complimented his professional manner. He scrutinised the white board, trying to make sense of the information it contained. He stood up and brushed some dust from his suit jacket. "Can I have a water please?" Reese leaned over to the water container sitting next to the coffee machine. "Don't blame ye, the coffee's crap," he said, in a thick Geordie accent.

He handed Wilson the drink before sitting down on one of the vacant chairs at the table. "Right let's go through this again; we've talked to the Brandon guy from the office, who saw almost all of the incident take place, and he is sticking to his story that the murder of the agent was actually an accident.

Wilson picked up his notes and began to read them, "Yes, that's correct; he says that both men were extremely violent towards him, before Alistair Munzer threatened Steele and attempted to obtain the Zaurus. Which is seemingly what Steele had returned to the office for." Reese agreed and added to the conversation, "That would make sense. As we know Munzer was working for MIA, so he may well have been under the orders of Gerald Atkins." Wilson continued, "Brandon Harvey then states, *'That a struggle ensued as they headed towards the stairs, and that having crashed through the door, there was some shouting, before everything went quiet.'*" Reese sat forward in his chair, leaning heavily on the paperwork covered table. "How did he put the last part of his statement?" He said he *'rushed through to the stairway to find Steele on the ground three floors below, and Munzer hanging over the rails at the same floor.'*

He thought for a moment. "Ye know, if I'd been planning to murder someone, or throw them over the balcony, I sure as hell wouldn't be joining them, if you catch my drift!" Wilson

agreed, "yeah there's no real evidence to pin anything on Steele here, beyond culpable homicide. The procurator fiscal would throw this out before it got to court, as self defence. The story is corroborated by what Steele told the homeless bloke James Gillard when he was with him in the squat. Gillard was quite helpful when we picked him up, seems honest enough to me."

DI Reese was obviously concerned, "I think this thing runs deeper than it looks. Do we have any other evidence, except circumstantial, for the Sharp murder?" Wilson was apologetic, "Again, we've only got the circumstantial evidence, and even that's poor! Checking her incoming calls we know he called her." Wilson put a pencil he had been playing with down, "Other than that nothing, again we don't have a motive for Steele to have done it, and he wasn't spotted in the area at the time the crime is believed to have taken place." DI Reese got up from the desk, "Go through the information you have again. Let's see if we can find any other angles here. I don't think that Steele is guilty of anything more than hacking, and self defence. Of that there's no doubt...but someone else killed Miss Sharp. We can't convict someone on Atkins say so." Reese got up to leave the room, but turned as he opened the door, "give me a shout the first decent lead you get, this is doing my head in. Oh, and check Atkins out as well!" With that, he closed the door and walked to his office.

Several hours passed, by which time Reese was preparing to go home, just as Wilson charged through the door. "Don't you knock?" Reese asked, taken aback by Wilson's sudden appearance. Wilson was flustered and excited. "We've had a pile of new information you may be interested in. Have you got time to come and have a look?" Reese's mood changed. He put down his bag, "Of course, show me what you have!"

The meeting lasted over an hour, and Reese was pleased with

the new information. "This is good stuff, no matter how it was obtained. Fine - right, set up a sting and we'll haul him in. I'm assuming our lead can set something up?" Wilson replied eagerly, "I haven't asked him, but the possibility is there." Reese was upbeat, his gruff tones and body language more animated than usual.

"Okay, let's tell Atkins the news, he'll be pleased." Wilson got up to leave the room and prepare the ground. As he opened the door Reese called to him, "Wilson, whatever you do, be careful with this. We could clear this whole damn mess up in one go if we play our cards right. If it goes wrong, we're going to have a whole load of shit on our hands." Wilson smiled, "don't worry we won't foul up!" Reese grabbed himself a coffee from his percolator, and thought about the possibilities that lay ahead.

After a few sips, he remembered how bad it actually tasted, "Bloody crap!" He threw the rest in the bin and grabbed his bag to leave the office, switching off the lights as he went.

Cam and Duncan were jubilant at the information they had managed to gather on Atkins. They hungrily ate a take-away in the kitchen. The glare of the strip lighting making a stark change from the soft light they had been used to in the computer room upstairs. Cam finished a mouthful of chow-mein, "Ye know, computers are fascinating, and we spend most of our time in front of them, but sometimes you've just got to get away from the fuckin things, otherwise you'd lose it!" Duncan nodded in agreement, chewing his lemon chicken. He felt safe for the first time in a while, and was thoroughly enjoying the little bit of security that he currently felt. He took a sip from a bottle of beer. "I can't believe we've managed to pull that one off, hopefully this will help clear me. Duncan

stopped eating for a moment, and threw his head back into the air, laughing. Cam grunted, "What is it?" Duncan replied, "Oh, just wishing I could've seen Atkins face when he found out what we did with his bank accounts, and the rest of it!"

Cams mobile rang, "Yello, Cam here! Hi, how's it going man? What am I doing now? Eating a Chinese take-away." Cam paused for a second to listen to the caller at the other end, and then he responded. "Yeah, it might be possible to do that. I have someone staying with me just now, but he might be up for it. Yip, he's a sound guy. Ugly as sin though!" Cam looked for a reaction to his last comment. "Do you think it would be possible for him to come along? Hold on I'll ask and give you a call back, cheers...catch ye later dude!"

Cam put the phone back in his pocket. "I've got a couple of mates going out for a few drinks tomorrow, the place is usually jumping, nice totty as well. Do you fancy coming along? It'd be totally understandable if you didn't, but I think it would do you good."

Duncan pushed his empty plate towards the middle of the table. "I'd love to go, but obviously the face is a bit of a problem, I don't want to draw attention." Cam laughed, "Never stopped you before!" Duncan smiled, "I better not, its a bit dodgy, don't you think?" replied Duncan. Cam seemed disappointed, "Yeah, you're right, shame though, I'd better not go either it wouldn't be right to leave you here on your own."

Cam pulled out the mobile to call his friends when Duncan had a change of heart. "Oh fuck it, you only live once, why not take the risk!" Cam was obviously pleased. "Nice one, some good food, a few beers and home for two in the morning!" He called his friends and made the necessary arrangements. He closed the phone with a flick and sat back in his chair, putting

his feet up on the table. "Great. Tomorrow will be cool. They're a good bunch. We'll see them there for 10pm!" He raised his beer to Duncan, before taking another swig."

Atkins was sitting quietly on his couch; the television in the corner was showing yet another comedy repeat, which barely raised a smile. He lifted his drink from the table, and finished the water in one gulp. "Load of crap, don't know why I bother subscribing to this shit." he muttered to himself. He reached over to the table and picked up the remote control. Switching the TV off, he threw the remote onto the couch, and sat in darkness for a while, drifting in and out of sleep, when he was suddenly woken with a start by the phone ringing. Atkins was unaccustomed to that sound at home. It left him slightly confused for a second, before he managed to pull himself together, and realise what was happening "If this is a fucking double glazing company I'll scream."

He picked up the phone and answered it in an aggressive tone, "Hello, Gerald Atkins speaking?" In a second his tone had changed, "Yes, that's correct. I see...you plan to pick him up tomorrow? That is excellent news. Yes, I will be contactable at home tomorrow evening. Do you have a specific time?" Atkins listened for a second, "So, you'll pick him up around 10pm? Finally, you're getting somewhere." Atkins paused for a second, "May I ask where? No, of course not, that's operational information. Thank you for informing me, goodbye."

Atkins put down the receiver for a brief moment, before picking it up again and dialling. He waited patiently. Finally, the call was answered, "Hello, its Atkins here. The plods are conducting a sting operation tomorrow. The target is Duncan

Steele. I need the location.” He listened intently for a second, “I don't care that it may be classified, just fucking get it!”

Atkins put down the phone and clenched his fist in triumph, "Tomorrow Steele, you will pay. Jail is not justice enough for scum like you; even if I don' get my hands on the software, its going to be one of the best days of my life."

That night Duncan slept well for the first time in a long time. Atkins slept less well, unable to contain his excitement at being a single day away from achieving a goal that had alluded for almost a decade. He tossed and turned in his bed, never a good sleeper at the best of times. Perhaps this would bring closure, and allow him to get on with what was left of his life?

Duncan switched on the lamp. The light forcing him to shield his eyes momentarily, whilst his pupils contracted. He slowly got out of bed and walked unsteadily down the corridor and in to the kitchen. Grabbing a drink, he stood, gulping it down for a couple of seconds before placing the glass in the sink. His drinking earlier in the evening had taken its toll, and his head thumped like a drum. He shook it, trying to pull himself together before finally shuffling back to bed.

The morning of December 16th broke, cold and dark. DI Reese and Sgt. Wilson had made it in to work early. The temperature outside combined with the wind, made for an unpleasant walk to work, which had left all with at least cold hands. They grabbed some disgusting coffee from the drinks machine, its dual purpose of waking them, and heating them up, did the trick on both accounts. They had got used to the taste, it just wasn't wise to drink too many in a day.

Reese sat at his desk, still slightly tired, but looking forward to what he felt would be a productive day. He sat directly across

from Wilson who cupped his coffee in his hands, blowing into the mug before taking a sip. Its steamy hot contents warming him as he drank. The strip lighting was stark but functional, and contrasted with the darkness outside, visible through the fifth floor office windows on this early winters morning. DI Reese looked up and coughed, attempting to clear his throat before venturing any sort of communication.

A slight cold and sore throat was normal for a smoker like Reese at this time of year. He was almost completely hoarse. He croaked, "Today's the day then. A chance to clean this up; did you get the papers?" Sgt Wilson put down his cup and lifted a pile of papers, waving them in the air and smiling. He searched for a moment and produced the relevant ones. "Here they are. I'll put them in my coat pocket for safe keeping." Reese nodded in approval, and then turned to the computer sitting on his desk. He switched it on and waited for the login prompt to appear. "Computers eh? Can't see the attraction of sitting in front of these things all day. I would rather be outside. A game of football, or spending some time in the pub. Some of these people are just 'Billy no mates' with too much time on their hands, and more fat on there backside than you'd care to mention!" Wilson replied, "I can see the attraction of going somewhere you shouldn't be. Surely you wandered onto building sites when you were young? Ran away from the watchman perhaps? I did. I didn't cause any damage though, and that's where it becomes a real pain. Reese nodded in agreement.

Wilson began to look through the papers, "What time are we due to go tonight? 10pm isn't it?" DI Reese replied without looking up, "Yep, around your bedtime isn't it? Hopefully you can stay awake!" Wilson laughed. "Anyway, I've got to go through the rest of the case files and prepare for the briefing later. There's going to be a few of us there, and we don't want

to muck this one up, otherwise the press will have a field day!"

At 5pm Cam and Duncan sat down to eat a Pizza. "Fancy a beer?" asked Cam. "You're starting early!" replied Duncan. "Early? No such thing as starting early when it comes to drinking! Now do you want one or not?" "Yeah cheers, that will go nicely with the Pizza." Cam opened the fridge. "Good man, glad to see you are not one of these poofs who can't handle his drink!" Duncan replied, "Oh I didn't say I could handle my drink. I'm a cheap night. A few quid and that's me drunk; yeah slightly different from college, now that was one continual drinking binge.

The two drank and ate, both beginning to relish the chance of going out and tasting the Edinburgh night-life for the first time in a while.

Atkins was far less subdued than usual. He had cancelled his bankcards, and was sure his threats against the bank would bear fruit. He had finally, after a lot of shouting and jumping up and down, had his access at work reinstated. Tonight was the night that he would finally watch Steele being caught and read his rights.

He walked down the brightly polished corridor to his office, and swiping his card at the door, opened it. The lights were off, he did not like too much light. Switching on the desk-lamp, he sat down in his comfortable leather chair and took the paperwork from his briefcase. Atkins was unable to contain himself. Thoughts of Steele preoccupied him more than ever. Leaning forward and pressing the button on the speaker phone,

he called his secretary. A tinny voice replied through the device. "Good morning Mr Atkins, how may I help you this morning?" Atkins upbeat reply surprised his secretary. "Hello Agnes, would it be possible to have the files relating to the Eastern block cyber crime reports?" He paused for a second. "And could you possibly bring me a coffee, that would be extremely kind of you?" Agnes replied, "of course Mr Atkins, I'll be up in five minutes."

Atkins switched off the speaker phone and began scanning through the documents he had taken from his bag. Within 10 minutes Agnes had arrived with the files and a tray with coffee and biscuits. She laid it down on a clear corner of the desk, her mid 50s frame straining carefully to ensure she did not drop it. Atkins looked up and smiled, "Have I ever thanked you for the great job you do for me?" Agnes was slightly taken aback at this question.

She wondered to herself as to the current mental state of her boss, so unusual was it for him to be pleasant. "Err, no...to be honest. I don't think you have!" Atkins smiled apologetically, "Well thanks for being so organized all this time, and for putting up with my moods." Agnes blushed. "Well, its all part of the job. Can I get you anything else?" Atkins replied, "No that's everything, thanks again." Agnes left. Feeling good made a change from the feelings of dread that she often took from her dealings with Atkins.

At 9pm, Nightshades, one of the trendiest nightclubs in Edinburgh opened its doors. It was generally quiet at this time, with revellers usually hitting the pubs first before going on to spend the latter part of the night and early morning drinking, socializing and generally attempting to attract a mate. Duncan

and Cam walked up to the door; both dressed in the correct dress code. Jacket, smart dark trousers and polished shoes, all of which Duncan had borrowed from Cams substantial wardrobe, although some of it didn't fit particularly well. Duncan was understandably nervous as he approached the door. "What if they recognize me?" Cam turned to him, "Just act calmly and don't flap. It'll be just fine, now come on."

The bouncers main concern was how Duncan had received his injured face. A large bouncer in a black coat wearing an earpiece inquired, "Not a trouble maker I hope, I want to see no problems in here tonight and I'll be watching you closely." Duncan held his hands up. "You'll get no problems from me, that's guaranteed." The bouncers gestured for them to move on into the club.

The club was dark, its old stone walls covered in weaving patterns of gold line. The carpets were tough wearing, designed for the thousands of club goers that would traverse them. The two men joined a few other people climbing the staircase to the club. Having reached a landing at the top of the stairs, the two were confronted by a booth in which a pretty money collector sat. She looked expectantly at the two men. "Two please." said Cam. The young lady handed the tickets over. Cam beckoned Duncan onward, past the booth. Duncan smiled politely as he walked past.

They had reached the club, which was almost empty. The odd couple stood at the bar, and a few groups sat at tables by the side of the dance floor. Comfortable seating and tables bolted to the floor had been positioned around the outskirts of the room, next to the walls. A substantial dance area sat in the middle of the room. Its polished wooden floor was bordered by a dark carpet. Large bar areas were positioned at each side of the room. Several bar staff quietly stood around, eager to

serve anyone looking for a drink. They would be extremely busy later as the throngs of drunken revellers shouted their orders, and fought to reach the front. A set of stairs to the right led to the VIP lounge, somewhere Duncan had never been. Its plush interior could be seen through a large glass panelled wall. It made for a perfect viewing area and place to get away from the thumping wall of sound.

With the exception of the bar areas, and sparse lighting scattered along the walls, the room was dark. This suited Duncan; less light, less chance of being recognized. Cam and Duncan sat down at one of the tables near the back of the room. "This looks good. I'll just get the drinks in. The usual?" Cam asked.

Duncan nodded and took his seat whilst Cam headed off to the near empty bar area.

After a short while, Cam returned carrying four bottles of beer precariously balanced between his fingers. He laid them down carefully on the table, which was currently free from alcohol spillage. "Right, get that down you. I got two as I couldn't be arsed going back to the bar more than is necessary." Cam sat down and looked around. "Totty free zone just now eh?" Duncan agreed, although he was just glad to be out for a change. This was decidedly different from what his life had been like over the past couple of weeks. "Cheers for the drinks, when are your mates due?" asked Duncan, sipping from the bottle. "Oh, knowing them they'll probably come along steaming at about 10pm. They never arrive when they say they will; bit of an effing nightmare when you're actually going somewhere."

Cam scanned the area. "Well at least I've got a prime position for totty watching, not like yourself, facing the wall. What

were you thinking?" Duncan had not really considered the view and had accordingly sat down facing Cam, and the back wall. "I'm not bothered, as long as the music gets better than this!" The music, although not too loud was not to either of the men's liking. An incessant thumping beat with not much else. Cam put his drink down. "It does get better later on, and they play quite a good mix. I couldn't listen to this shite all night either!"

As time passed, the club and the music grew noisier. Cam's friends were indeed late, and by 10.30pm the dance floor, and bar areas had become packed. The two men were glad they had gone to the club when they had, as there were now no seats available. Cam had just bought another round, and the table, which was clean only an hour and a half before, was littered with empty crisp packets and beer bottles. Spilled alcohol had also left the table wet. Other people had found a space on the table to put their empty glasses. The environment was all together warmer and smokier; not exactly ideal for healthy living, but then none of the punters were here for that purpose. Not too many people seemed to be the worse for drink yet, but then again, the night was still young. Duncan did however feel slightly light headed and knew that he was beginning to slur his words.

Cam laughed, "You are crap at drinking, how much have you had?" Duncan thought for a second, "Four pints anyway!" Cam replied, "Aye bollocks. Try three bottles! Just a slight difference. Anyway I'll be back in a second, I'm off to see if I can find my mates, oh and I've just spotted a couple of nice lookers just asking for the Cameron charm!"

Cam got up and headed towards the crowd, leaving Duncan staring at his half empty bottle of beer. Duncan suddenly felt the need to empty his bladder, and so gingerly got to his feet.

He navigated round the table, trying his best to walk with at least a hint of stability to the toilets.

The nightshades toilets were not the most pleasant place to be. Duncan used them as little and as quickly as possible. A drunk walked up as he washed his hands, and swayed in front of him, trying to keep his balance. "How's it goin?" said the man, extending his hand to shake Duncan's." Some mess of a face you've got there, what happened?" Duncan did not get the chance to answer. The man shook Duncan's hand and began to stagger off muttering to himself, "some doing you must have got, ye poor bastard." Duncan stood still for a second as the man opened the door and left the toilet. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, "drink...I ask you!" He got back to washing his hands.

Sgt Wilson and DI Reese had now arrived at the club, and were met by Cam. "Is he here?" shouted Reese, trying to make himself heard above the thumping beat of the music. Cam replied, "Yep, I'm not really happy about this, but yeah, I've got him here." The men conversed as best they could. Wilson indicated to Reese that he had an urgent phone call to take. He disappeared to a quieter spot.

A short while later, Wilson tapped Reese on the shoulder, and shouted in his ear. "Atkins has done a runner!" DI Reese stepped back. "What the fuck do you mean? Didn't they pick him up at the house?" Wilson shouted again, "It seems he wasn't there!" DI Reese threw his arms in the air, and shook his head to indicate his disgust. "Get them to start looking for him right away!"

Duncan stared in the mirror. His face, although better, was still showing the bruises suffered during his beating. The swelling had receded at least, little compensation. After a short while

Duncan prised himself away from the mirror, walked over to the hand dryer, and switched it on, the noise drowning out the muffled thumping from the club next door. It was not, however, loud enough for him to notice the sound of the toilet door opening again. It made him realise just how sound proofed the toilets actually were. He finished drying his hands, flicking the excess water from them, before turning round, and heading towards the door. His head was bowed, looking down at the floor when suddenly he was stopped in his tracks. His heart rate increased, and he began to feel sick. His immediate instinct to run, came to nothing, as his feet refused to move, gripping him to the floor like a powerful magnet.

A large man with glasses, and a smaller grey haired man, stood before him. They were backed up by two other smartly dressed men, one of which stood at the toilet door. The other was Cam. The tall man took an ID card from his suit pocket, and held it up for Duncan to see. "I am Detective Inspector Reese," he stated. He then pointed to Wilson, "and this is Sgt Wilson." Duncan stepped back, and leaned back against the wall, his heart rate slowly beginning to decrease. There was no escape from here. No chance to run; he was caught. He looked at Cam who was unable to look back at his colleague.

Duncan was resigned to being taken in, "I can't believe you've done this to me," directing his comments at Cam. Cam replied, "Sorry mate, but you can't run forever, can you?" He continued apologetically, "They made me an offer I couldn't refuse. These law enforcement people have their means too."

At that moment, Atkins burst through the door, knocking the policeman to one side. "What a fucking noise out there!" He paused, looking gleefully at Duncan. "At last! We've caught the little bastard." He walked past DI Reese and up to Duncan. "Didn't think you'd get away, did you Steele, you murderer!"

Sgt Wilson looked directly at Reese. Neither man had any real idea how to deal with the situation. Atkins should not have been at the nightclub, and his appearance had seriously complicated matters. A low-key nod from Reese indicated to Sgt Wilson to carry on with the matter in hand.

DI Reese shoved Atkins out of the way. "That's enough, you'll get your say!" Atkins was less than impressed, but decided to let it go, for the moment. Sgt Wilson stepped forward brandishing a pair of handcuffs. "Duncan Steele, I arrest you on the following charges pertaining to the computer misuse act. Several counts of the unlawful misuse of a computer system, and the theft and retransmission, of confidential data. The assault and grievous bodily harm of one Brandon Harvey. Breaking and entering and unlawfully obtaining confidential documents belonging to Mobile Solutions Ltd.

Finally, I also arrest you on suspicion of the culpable homicide of Alistair Munzer, on the 8th of December of this year. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you choose not to. Anything you say may be taken down and given in evidence in a court of law. If you do not have a lawyer, one will appointed to you. Do you understand?

Atkins interjected furiously. "Wait a minute, is that all he is being charged with? He murdered Elizabeth Sharp. Why is he not being arrested on that charge?" Sgt Wilson held his hand up to quieten Atkins. "You'll get your say in a minute."

DI Reese asked again, "Mr Steele, do you understand the charges?"

A single "I do." came from Duncan.

Reese nodded to Sgt Wilson, who turned to Atkins. One

policeman ensured the door was barred, and the other moved towards Atkins. Atkins stepped back noticeably bemused by these sudden movements. DI Reese began, "Gerald Atkins, I arrest you on the suspicion of the following crimes. That you unlawfully obtained and sold to third parties, computer viruses, and computer software which may have, in turn, been used against her majesties government and her allies."

Atkins protested, "What the fuck are you on about, you idiot?" DI Reese, completely unshaken, continued, "and, that you murdered, or had murdered, Miss Elizabeth Sharp. I also arrest you for attempting to pervert the course of justice in the above instances." As Reese completed his sentence Atkins lunged backwards, putting his hand into his pocket. Before any of the police officers had time to act, he produced a small hand gun, and was screaming at the men in front of him, "you bastards, your all on his side, the law is fucked up!"

Atkins paused for a second, as the policemen backed away, "Steele, I came here to execute you! It's what you deserve; and it'll be an honour to carry it out!" As Atkins took aim, a police constable lunged forward to grab the gun. The weapon discharged erratically. The bullet passed only inches to the left of Steele's face. It ricocheted wildly off the bathroom tiles, before finally embedding itself, with a dull thud, in Sgt Wilson's upper arm. He dropped to the floor instantly, grasping his arm in a vain attempt to stop blood pouring from the wound.

Atkins took his chance. Opening the door, he ran headlong onto the dance floor, knocking several clubbers, with their drinks to the floor. The police officers were left behind, dazed by the suddenness of the attack, and took a moment to regroup. DI Reese got up from the floor, and took control, shouting at the top of his voice, "You stay with Wilson and

Steele; and call for backup. Oh, and don't forget a fucking ambulance." He pointed to the other police officer. "You, come with me!" Both men rushed out of the door. Atkins had managed to ram his way out through an opening nightclub door, knocking over yet more people, queuing to enter the club.

A young man standing in the queue, who had seen his girlfriend knocked over, confronted Atkins. "You stupid bastard, watch what yer fucking doing, or I'll have ye!" Atkins waved the gun in the man's face, causing him to back away. Atkins took aim, and without any further thought, shot the man in the knee.

Blood sprayed from the wound, as the surrounding kneecap shattered, sending splintered bone flying in all directions. The man fell to the ground, screaming, and holding his shattered leg. Atkins calmly stood over the man, "You picked the wrong day to shout at me you little fuck!" The queue dispersed with onlookers ducking, running, and screaming. Atkins swivelled on his heels and ran up the hill, turning to the left at the top, and disappearing from sight. DI Reese finally managed to get out of the club in just enough time to spot Atkins turning the corner. He stopped and radioed for help, "I need backup. We have one suspect in custody, but another is on the run. He is armed, and dangerous. I repeat, armed, and dangerous." He gasped for breath before continuing. "He's heading up towards North Bridge. A middle-aged man, with greying hair and a beard. Under no circumstances, approach him directly. Get the armed response unit down here, and for gods sake hurry with the ambulance. Wilson has been hit in the arm, and a bystander has been shot in the leg." Reese was visibly anxious. The policeman standing next to him was bent over, breathing heavily. He looked up, "What now sir?" Reese did not hesitate to answer. "Let's follow the bastard, before he does any more damage. He's lost it big time!"

Atkins tore up the street towards the bridges overlooking Waverley station. He ensured no one got in his way by waving his gun at anyone coming within several feet of him. Very soon, he had reached the bridge. Out of breath, and with his muscles burning from the build up of Lactic acid, he halted. He knew he was wasting his time, and the rage he had felt only a moment ago, had again receded. It was time to bring it all to a conclusion.

He stopped a passer by as she walked down the hill. She had not seen the gun, and smiled at Atkins as she passed the middle-aged man, who stood, staring at her. Having drunk too much, she was more than slightly intoxicated, and not in any fit state to struggle with Atkins, or even properly comprehend the seriousness of the situation as he grabbed her arm, and pulled her towards him. Atkins spotted Reese and another plain clothed policeman coming up the hill to his left side. The sirens of a police car approaching from the right could be heard in the distance. Atkins pulled the girl closer to him, knocking her off balance temporarily. He screamed at her to get up, pulling her back to her feet, and almost off the ground. She had become his shield. Her life was now in the hands of a mad man.

Within a few moments Reese had made it to where Atkins stood, and was within shouting distance. "Leave the girl Atkins, she's got nothing to do with this. Just give it up now, and come quietly!" The girl, now understanding the seriousness of her situation, sobbed and whimpered, terrified that she may only have a few seconds left. Atkins snarled, "Shut up...stop you're blasted whimpering!"

Atkins held the gun tightly to her head, pressing it on her temple as he shouted in her ear. The dark night was now lit up by flashing police lights. People milled round in disbelief at

what was unfolding before them. Police surrounded Atkins on the left and right. He was backed up against the bridge wall, with nowhere to go. DI Reese tried again. "Come on Gerald, give it up. You need to talk to someone about all of this." Atkins relaxed his grip on the girl, suddenly realizing that what he was doing was futile. He began shouting at Reese. "Why didn't you charge him with murder? He murdered my son! All I wanted justice...where is the justice?"

The police officer stepped out from behind the police car, his arm outstretched. "Why don't you give me the gun? Let the girl go, there is no need to involve her; she has done nothing wrong! Come on, we can help you."

Atkins screamed irrationally. His eyes widened, trying to take in all of his surroundings. He was afraid, as if he had come out of a trance, he had known for years. "Oh Christ, what has happened? There is no point any more. You've turned against me now. Why can't you see I'm one of you, and yet...this is how you treat me?" He pushed the gun tightly against the girl's head.

Atkins stood tall, as if about to make a great statement, the finale to his tragic play. He inhaled. "Well, I've had enough of taking crap from everyone. I'll show you, you will regret it!" He paused, as if to give dramatic effect. "Have a nice life!" The surrounding police, and onlookers, braced themselves for the worst.

With his final statement, Atkins pushed the girl to the ground, and grabbed the wall behind him. The sound of an oncoming train below drowned out Atkins screams as he jumped. In a split second, he was gone. He was over the wall with the energy of a man half his age, and fell onto the track 40 foot below, shattering his heels. His ankles twisted and cracked as

he landed. He winced with the pain, attempting to stand up, as the on-coming train hit him at full speed, smashing his body a 100 yards through the air, and down the track.

Reese ran to look over the wall, followed closely by the remaining officers. All they could see was the back end of the thundering machine, screeching to a halt. Reese laid his head on the wall in despair, and sighed. No one spoke. There was nothing to say. They knew that in a short while they would be looking at the shattered remains, of a once decent man, driven insane by his bitterness and hate for another. A policeman helped the young girl to her feet. She burst into tears, shaking uncontrollably, the shock of what had just taken place, too much for her.

Reese eventually pulled himself away from the wall and shouted out to the gathered crowd, "Nothing to see here, be on your way." An ambulance had arrived to take the traumatised girl for a check up, accompanied by a female Police Constable.

Reese stepped wearily into the squad car, with the remaining police officers, and drove the short distance to the train station below. A feeling of dread filled them as they walked to where Atkins lay. His body was shattered; no more than a contorted, mangled piece of wreckage. His misshapen torso, was now completely broken. Shards of rib and shin protruded through Atkins clothes, his face was unrecognisable, having been crushed, and almost torn in two by the force of hundreds of tons of steel. Blood lay in pools around, and near the body. Its spray marked the trajectory Atkins had taken on his final voyage. An accompanying police officer looked away, trying not to vomit, with little success. An ambulance crew arrived at the scene, running towards Reese.

He stuck his hand in the air. "No need to rush, he won't be

going anywhere in a hurry." With that, Reese left it to the others to deal with the remains. There would an inquiry; that he knew, but for the moment, he needed to get away from here, and talk to Steele.

Chapter 13 – A New beginning

Duncan stood at the desk in the police station. He had sobered up since leaving the club. The shock of a bullets near miss had pulled him out of his drunken state. The light was brighter than he would have liked, and he was having some trouble hearing the questions he was being asked, due to the damage done at nightclub. Two police officers had accompanied Duncan to the station, and they now stood at either side of him. The last thing on the mind of Duncan Steele was escape. In fact, he had grown tired of running. He was glad that it was finally over. But what lay ahead now?

He knew the maximum term in prison for crimes against the computer misuse act were around 2 years, but what about the GBH? Surely no one would convict him over the death of AI? It had been an accident, self defence at the most? Duncan had been lucky to survive on that occasion.

The policeman behind the desk stood up to address Steele. He was a tall man dressed in the standard police uniform, well polished, and clean-shaven. "Please empty your pockets Mr Steele, and place all of your belongings on the table in front of you." Duncan did as instructed. His wallet, a handkerchief, some keys to his flat, and finally some spare change he had been given, after buying some drinks. It then dawned on him; his Zaurus was at Cam's! "Damn." he muttered to himself. The policeman frowned, "something the matter?" Duncan replied quickly but quietly, "No...no problem." After all his attempts to keep his Zaurus and its software safe, it had finally fallen into the hands of the man who had set him up.

Duncan went through the routine of picture taking and finger printing. The handling police officer then stated, "You are allowed one phone call, you can make it at the phone on the

wall." He pointed to an old fashioned phone hanging on the wall. Duncan looked back at the officer, realising that he really had no one to call. Al, who he thought was his best friend, now lay dead after the incident on the stairs. Lin had been working for Atkins, and Cam had shopped him. He would have like to have called Jimmy, but he had no idea where he was, or for that matter, what state he was in! His parents were old and lived far away. He did not want to worry them.

Duncan responded in a subdued manner. "I don't think I need a phone call, it's alright." The policeman followed up his statement with a question, "Do you have a lawyer?" Duncan replied, "Not as such. I have an old fencing buddy I knew from College. Rachel McGlaffen, she works at Mcfadden and Bruce, I believe." The policeman wrote this down. "Fine. I'll arrange for her to visit tomorrow, seeing as it's now past midnight."

Duncan was escorted to the cell where he would spend the night. The white washed concrete room had no windows. A sink with soap and a less than clean toilet were located on the left hand side of the cell. The immobile steel-framed bed on the right hand side was covered in a grey woollen sheet, and white pillow. It was neatly made. That was it, stark, bare and eerie. The dripping from the leaky tap would be a constant annoyance Duncan thought to himself.

Duncan stepped inside and the heavy green steel door was closed securely behind him. The room echoed with the heavy clang as it closed. Duncan sat down on the bed and put his head in his hands. Although he was lucky to be alive, he felt anything but. He now faced serious charges. How had it come to this? He had never intended to use his software in anger, or get caught up in any violence. As far as he was concerned, it was all to defend himself in some way. He felt desperate and

unsure of his future.

He eventually lay down on the bed. There was nothing else for him to do right now anyway. Looking up at the stark light in the middle of the ceiling, he could only think the worst of the situation. It was like some books he had read, or television he had watched. He had scoffed at these. Those things could never happen in real life, and yet, here he was. He hoped he would waken up to find it had all been nothing more than some sort of horrible dream. At that moment the light to his cell was switched off. "I guess its bed time then?" Duncan muttered. He harrumphed and turned over, hoping sleep would come quickly.

The next day could not come soon enough. Perhaps some things would be sorted out today, at least that is what Duncan hoped. He would at least have a better idea of what exactly was going to happen; he had never been in trouble with the police before. He had been nothing more than a witness at the trial of Andrew Atkins. Duncan's lawyer was due to arrive at 9am. Duncan breakfasted on Corn Flakes, toast and tea. He also drank water in an attempt to rid himself of an awful hangover obtained through the few drinks he had had the previous evening. His clothes stank of cigarette smoke, not making him feel his best. Understandably, he had not slept well. Duncan wondered how prisoners coped with being locked up for years. In this short while he began to understand how people could become institutionalized. A habitual regime could never prepare you for the variety of the outside world. Being locked up for years was a fate he was keen to avoid at all costs, and he hoped and prayed that he would get a lucky break.

His old fencing friend, Rachel, who was now a lawyer, was presented to him. She sat down in an elegant manner across the table from him in the interview room. "It has been a while.

Never thought I'd see you in a mess like this! How are you, all things considered?" she said, putting her brief case down on the table. Rachel had been a live wire at university, but had now calmed down, moving seamlessly into a life of law. Her smart black pin striped suit complimented her dark shoulder-length hair, and fashionable wire framed spectacles. "Not as well as yourself." came Duncan's reply. "Did you hear what happened last night? Do you have any information on Gerald Atkins?"

She paused for a moment, as if to prepare herself for even contemplating the thought of what had happened. "He committed suicide, at least, that's what its thought to be. It would have been a futile attempt to escape. He jumped over the North Bridge and into an oncoming train; died instantly." Duncan felt relieved but slightly saddened at the same time. He knew his nemesis would no longer haunt or indeed hunt him down; but a horrific death like that? He didn't wish it on anyone. Rachel eventually raised a faint smile, "Anyway, let's get on shall we? From the start, tell me what happened, and don't miss any details out, even the technical stuff." She paused for breath, and removed her glasses to clean them. "I'll need to know everything if this goes to court; don't want the prosecution coming up with any gotchas!"

She put her glasses back on and produced a notepad. Leaning forward, she looked directly at Duncan, waiting for him to begin. "You can tell me about the bruising for a start!" Duncan told his story with the odd interruption from Rachel, ensuring she had, and indeed understood, the whole picture. Finally, when it was done, Rachel sat back in disbelief, "Well, some adventure you've been having, we'll have to see what we can come up with. Off the top of my head, the hacking well...there are reasons why you did what you did, call it research, investigation, and the law is quite vague in this area.

The assault and the culpable homicide charges." She paused, thinking for a moment. "The culpable homicide charge, I think we'd have a good case for self defence, but we need to talk to the witness, the one you attacked!" Duncan leaned over and put his hands on the table, "It was a case of mistaken identity. I thought, and was conned into thinking, that he was spying on me...trying to get my Zaurus and its software...that he was working for Atkins. I was wrong."

The door opened and DI Reese entered the room accompanied by Cam, and a young female Duncan had never seen before. Duncan got up from his chair, staring intensely at Cam. "What the fuck are you doing here, ye traitorous bastard?" Cam seemed relaxed. "Cool your jets man, and listen to what we have to say. Oh, and sorry about last night." "You will be!" came the reply. The men pulled up chairs, whilst the young lady stood in the background. Reese looked at Duncan for a second, studying his bruised features. He then produced a tape from his pocket. Instead of putting it in the machine, he laid it carefully on the table. "Well, here we are." he paused, drawing breath. "Up until now, we felt that there was a possibility you were involved in the death of Miss Sharp. However, new evidence has come to light, obtained from various sources, including Cam here, that points to your innocence in a couple of the matters you are charged with."

He coughed, clearing his throat in order to present the rest of the information. "It was clear that Gerald Atkins had a grudge against you; his son took his own life, and he blamed you for it. It was clear from his mental state that eventually he would try to take revenge. His position, and excuse that your software would breach national security, was the perfect opportunity for him. There is also strong evidence that he illegally supplied computer hacking tools, Trojans and viruses to the Middle East, and various other hostile countries. If he had managed to

get his hands on the software you have developed, which by all accounts is exceptional, well...who knows what would've happened?"

As you know, we attempted to arrest him yesterday on suspicion of the murder of Miss Sharp, who had commissioned you to audit the network. It seems Atkins panicked, thinking your software might have found the tools he transferred and stored illegally on the company systems. As Miss Sharp was suspicious about the dealings of Mobile-Solutions, we think he had her murdered. Unfortunately, he seems to have had the power to do it. It is clear to us that he attempted to avert the blame to you. Duncan butted in, "Does this mean I'm free?" Reese paused for a moment, annoyed at being interrupted. "Not quite, the assault you carried out was serious. Luckily for you, Mr Harvey does not wish to press charges in this instance. He was also a witness to the scuffle between yourself and Alistair Munzer. If we charge you with culpable homicide, it may hold up in a court of law, as it was stated by Brandon Harvey that you, quote *'Pursued Al Munzer down the stairs.'* You therefore became the aggressor!" Duncan sank back into his chair, dejected at this news.

DI Reese turned to the young lady standing behind him. "As for the computer hacking, it's not exactly my field, so I'll leave Agent Shaw to explain." Agent Shaw took a step forward. "Duncan, we know that you hacked into several networks, illegally viewing and altering private data, as well as stealing credit card details, and transferring Gerald Atkins funds." The reason I am here is to inform you that we have been watching Gerald Atkins and some of his associates within the M-I-A for a while.

CyberSecure, which works as an independent high tech crime unit contracted to the British Government was suspicious of

Atkins dealings with some Middle Eastern countries. "His sale of what we term 'Cyber Arms' was highly illegal, and gave these countries more power than they would have naturally had." Agent Shaw continued, "Although he did not lead a lavish life-style, it seems he was being well paid for this weaponry. If he had got your software, which he was desperate to do, even to the point of offering you a position within the Military Intelligence Agency, heaven knows what information these people would have been able to get hold of!"

Agent Shaw pulled a chair across to the table, and sat down in an informal manner. "As I've just mentioned, at CyberSecure we do work for the British Government. Its important stuff to be honest, but it is in the background. As you may have guessed we are bound by the Official Secrets Act."

She pointed to Cam. "It's quite a new team, and we're always looking for talent. We have offered Cameron a position, provided he helped us with our inquiries, regarding yourself and Atkins. To be honest, like yourself we gave him a few choices. He chose the best for him...if you know what I mean!"

Cam stared at the table, not lifting his head.

He mumbled, "Its better than the stupid bank. Thank god, I don't have to go back there. They have the power to fast track my application, and get me into Australia." DI Reese interjected, "We're not here to talk about your personal circumstances Cam."

Cam was slightly taken aback by someone being so abrupt with him. "The pay is reasonable too, and I personally think you'd enjoy it. Better than the shit we do at the bank anyway!"

Agent Shaw interrupted, "So here is the offer. Join us, do a

year of training, which will include psychology, self-defence, and several other disciplines. Take your experience, knowledge and Zaurus, with the Z4CK software, which I have in my pocket to us, and we will drop all of the charges. We will wipe the slate clean. Alternatively, we certainly could charge you with several of the things we mentioned earlier."

DI Reese looked in anticipation at Duncan. "Well, you do realise there would be no charges remaining against you? If you do not choose this option, then we will have no choice but to charge you under at least the computer misuse act. That, as you'll probably know, carries a maximum sentence of two years; however as you also illegally shifted funds this is also theft, and goodness only knows what other crimes we'll uncover!" Duncan pondered for a moment. The choice seemed obvious. "Where do I sign?" Cam leaned across the table and shook Duncan's hand. "Sorry for handing you in mate. I had no choice you know; you are a damn good hacker. Let's put it to the proper use shall we?"

Duncan relaxed. "I only have one request!" The other people round the table threw each other a worried glance. "You have sway with the bank? Now Al is gone, I'm leaving and so is Cam, they'll need new staff, right?" Agent Shaw responded, "We have some sway with the bank, why?"

Duncan replied, "Would it be possible to give an old friend of mine a break? Jimmy Gillard is a good guy, eager to learn. He could really do with a chance. I'm sure something to work toward would get him off the sauce." DI Reese laughed. "That old drunk? We took him into the station just after you were picked up by Cam. We let him go. Therefore, if we can find him, I think we can sort that one out. He might need some retraining, but that's one we can swing!" Duncan was happy that his request had been accepted. He wasn't exactly in the

strongest position to be asking for anything.

DI Reese issued a final warning. "Please understand that we are making this arrangement in good faith, and that if, at any stage you cause us problems, the charges will stand. We will throw the book at you. Do you understand?" Duncan understood very well, and was glad to be making a new start. "I have a couple more questions if you don't mind. "What will happen to Lin?" Agent Shaw replied, " If you mean agent Peel, that is classified information. She was acting under orders for a superior officer. However, beyond that we cannot provide any information. I don't think you will be seeing her again in the near future."

DI Reese began to get up from his seat. "Well, if this meeting is over I'd like." Duncan raised his hand and interrupted again, "just one last question. Can I have my Zaurus back?" Agent Shaw reached into her pocket and produced the battered Zaurus, which she slid across the table. "There it is, safe and sound." Duncan switched it on, and checked it over, nodding in approval. "Nice one. I assume that taking my software is part of the deal."

Cam stood up. "The choice is yours. For some of the tasks you are going to be asked to do you can take it with you, or you can do it the hard way! Now what do *you* think?" Duncan didn't hesitate. "You know, I get the feeling that I'm going to be glad I wrote Z4CK after all!"

Around 6 months later in Moscow, a cold, darkened room hummed to sound of computer fans, and the frantic clicking of computer keys. The rooms only light emanated from the laptops and computer monitors stuck in the corner. Log files

scrolled up the screens as the men ran their Nmap and Nessus scans, reporting their targets findings to their masters. A red neon sign from a bar across the road flashed intermittently through the misted window, adding to the atmosphere within the room. The wooden floorboards, strewn with coffee cups, beer bottles and cigarette butts, creaked as the men traversed them, pacing up and down, anxiously waiting. Against one wall, a haze of smoke from cheap cigarettes hung over the two young men who sat down at their laptops. Their concentration was intense. Their goal, almost within reach.

The door, bolted from the inside ensured they would not be disturbed. The two men were scruffy in appearance. One in his late teens, the other in his early twenties, typed in bursts at their keyboards. They would stop occasionally to scratch their scraggy beards, or light another cigarette. They spoke to each other in Russian, their native tongue. Their excitement began to grow as they drew closer to the crucial information their Mafia bosses sought. They would be paid well for this work. The older of the two men drew on a cigarette, and made a joke, which made the younger snigger, as he swigged from his bottle of beer.

The laughter and jokes ended abruptly as a high-pitched screeching noise filled the room. A look of disbelief crossed the face of the younger man, as the screeching spread to the other systems. The older of the two men shot up from his seat and lunged across the room. All the systems were already dying. The scrolling stopped as the main system froze.

They quickly pulled the plug, breathless and sweating. Finally, after a short while, they switched the systems on again. The systems booted. The men sighed with relief, and patted each other on the back. Suddenly the systems stopped again, leaving a simple prompt at the bottom of the screens, *'Hacked*

by Z4CK – Please enter the recovery code: \. There was no chance of guessing it in time. The younger of the men banged his fist on the table in front of him, whilst the older man, more aware of the consequences of failure, ran around from keyboard to keyboard in a state of panic. Their systems were dead. He glanced at his watch. They must escape, and hide quickly, before their masters arrived for their next visit. He grabbed the younger man out of his seat, and pulled him towards the door. He was unbolted and opened it, only to find two large men standing before them. It was too late.

The two hackers backed into the room, obviously fearful. The two larger men looked at each other, before following them in. The door was closed, and bolted, to *ensure* no unwanted interruptions.

Duncan Steele shut Z4CK down and closed his laptop. Getting up from his desk, he went to the coat-stand, and put his jacket on. For him, it was simply another day, at a very busy office.

Tom sat back in his chair, “Well, that's some story, but you weren't tied to CyberSecure for all this time? Why didn't you leave after your time was up?” Mr Steele replied. “Well, I was in my 40's in 2014, when I was able to leave, but as I was bound by the official secrets act, I couldn't exactly put that on my CV. No-one at that time was going to take someone of my age on in a good security role without a strong reason, and no history. This might not have been a problem if something could have been fabricated, but CyberSecure don't exactly hand out references. Therefore, it was easy to stay. I had grown used to it. The whole thing was like a drug to me. I was addicted, which meant I was hardly ever there for you, or your

mother.” Mr Steele paused for a second, “How is your mother?” Tom replied sighing, “She’s happy with Bill dad, it’s best forgotten about. She loved you with all her heart, but there was only so much she could take, ye know. The decision to split was tough at the time, and she doesn’t want to think about it any more.”

Tom stirred his spoon around an empty coffee cup. “So why have you stopped now, is it the cancer?” Mr Steele replied, “I was ready to quit around 2018, but then the Tsunami Worm destroyed the Internet.

Duncan leaned forward, his voice lowered, “You see, it was a derivative of Z4CK, so I felt responsible. Someone, we still don't know who, obtained the advanced code and tweaked it for their own purposes. There was no way of stopping it, and, well...the rest is history. I felt compelled to carry on, and shortly after I was asked to design Sec-Net.”

Duncan continued, “That was the last straw for your mum. I've regretted that decision ever since.” “You see, like the police, or military, CyberSecure wasn't just a computer job. Our projects brought us into contact with criminals on a regular basis. These people would not think twice about furnishing you with a pair of concrete boots, and throwing you in the nearest lake!”

Tom leaned forward. “I can understand why mum wasn't able to cope. That's what years of stress do to a person, she told me that.” Tom held his hand out to his father, “Mum will never forgive you. I will never forget. Some of those times were lonely, and a lot of the time all I wanted was to see my dad; but I suppose it wasn't uncommon in those days.” Tom sighed, “I hated you for a while after the divorce. Listening to mum crying herself to sleep each night...it’s just been awkward

since, but I always wanted to get back in touch. I only wished you had done this before. I'd be happy to start again, I have missed you Dad.”

A tear ran down Duncan's cheek, traversing his wrinkled face before dripping on to his shirt collar. It was the first time he had cried in a long time. Over the years he had been conditioned to show no emotion; it was part of the job. However, the joy and relief he felt right now overtook him. Both men reached across the table, and embraced each other. They chatted for a while until Duncan checked his watch, “God, is that the time? I'll need to board soon!” Tom put his hand on his fathers. “Don't go, come and stay with us. I'm sure it would be okay!” Duncan placed his other hand on his sons. “No son. I couldn't impose myself on you, not like that. Besides, I've had this trip planned for years. I'm looking forward to it.” Tom got up from the table. “Well, it looks like our times up! I'm so glad you called me. Australia is only a couple of hours away. We'll visit you soon. I've got some holidays in the next couple of months, so I'll arrange something.” Duncan smiled, “I can't wait, I'd love to see the Grandkids again.”

Duncan and Tom walked the short distance to the boarding gate. “Have you got someone meeting you at the other side Dad?” Duncan replied with a wry smile, “Oh yes, someone I haven't seen for almost 30 years, can't wait!” Tom and Duncan shook hands. “Good luck, I promise I'll come out and see you soon.” Duncan replied, “I'll look forward to it, the doctors say I've got 6 months, but we'll have to see about that!”

Finally, with a last wave to his son, Duncan boarded the plane to Australia. Soon he would be on the other side of the planet, to start the final phase of an eventful life.

Within a couple of hours, BA1314 had touched down at Sydney Airport. Duncan noted how warm the weather was, as he carried his long coat, and small bag painfully through customs. Passing through the usual checks, he reached arrivals and scanned the area. His eyes met those of another gentleman in his 60's. The tall, thin man smiled cheekily as he spotted Duncan coming through the arrivals gate. He raised his hand to welcome him. "Over here, ye old git!"

Cam looked considerably older, but his manner was still unmistakable. Duncan limped over to him. Cam stretched out a hand and shook Duncan's enthusiastically. "So how long has it been?" Duncan answered, "Nearly thirty years my friend!" Cam replied, "and 6 months to go you say? Well, no time to lose then. We better start the party now, eh?" Duncan smiled, "Yeah, I've been too serious for too long. Time to take a leaf out of your book...show me the beers...you old git!"

www.z4ck.org

Website Links

www.insecure.org Creator of the Nmap port scanner
www.nessus.org The Nessus vulnerability scanner
www.openzaurus.org Excellent alternative to the Sharp ROM
www.irongeek.com A good site for Zaurus security tools.
www.ossim.net Home of a great IDS Manager.
www.knoppix.org Linux on a bootable CD
www.knoppix-std.org The security tools distro
www.debian.org My favourite Linux operating system.
www.allstar-fencing.co.uk Distributors of top quality fencing kit
www.smoothwall.org Creators of Smoothwall security system.
www.openoffice.org Used to create this Novel.
www.gimp.org I did the illustrations with this software.
www.apache.org My favourite web-server.
www.open-solutions.co.uk Open Solutions Consultancy
<http://sydb.dyndns.org> Michael Pacey's website.
<http://sec-net.dyndns.org> The futuristic security net portal.
<http://black-net.dyndns.org> Black-net the alternative to sec-net.

About the author

Kevin Milne has over 15 years of experience in Information Technology, a third of this in the Information Security arena. He holds a wide range of qualifications including Cisco Security Specialist, Checkpoint CCSE, and Infosec Professional, as well as passing the ISS Ethical Hacking exam.

Kevin currently works as a web services specialist for Europe's largest assurance company, where his remit covers the provision and security of Internet access services. Kevin is also a director of Open-Solutions Consultancy Ltd, where he provides open source and security services to customers in Scotland.

Kevin has been involved in fencing for over 20 years, having won Scottish titles at various levels, as well as finishing second at the Scottish championship in 1995,96 and 97. He also represented Scotland at foil in 1991, and 93.