

M. SEAN
COLEMAN

net wars 2

DOWN TIME
1-0

COMPILATION TWO

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

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About the Book

netwars 2 – Down Time Compilation Two

Mutual funds. Savings accounts. The stock exchange. It takes just one cyber attack to crash it all.

Down Time sees the return of vigilante hacker Scott Mitchell, whose victory against hacker group Black Flag was just a minor setback for the cyber criminals. With a new recruit under his wing, The Salesman is ready to launch another attack in this high-tech serial thriller set in the anonymity of the Dark Web.

The National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU) in London have joined forces with the FBI to battle a new piece of malicious code threatening to bring the world financial market to its knees.

Meanwhile, several elite traders have been found dead in strange circumstances — from heart attacks to kinky sex acts. Could their deaths be connected? This compilation features all six episodes of the gripping cyber thriller.

About the Author

M. Sean Coleman launched his career as one of the original writers on Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy Online. He has since written and produced original, award-winning shows for MSN, O2, Sony Pictures, Fox, the BBC, and Channel 4. He continues to write novels, graphic novels and tv scripts from his home in London.



Down Time
M. Sean Coleman
Compilation Two

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

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Digital original edition

Bastei Entertainment is an imprint of Bastei Lübbe AG

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Germany, and filmtank GmbH, Hamburg

Written by M. Sean Coleman

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Cover design: Guter Punkt, Munich

E-book production: Urban [SatzKonzept](#), Düsseldorf

ISBN 978-3-7325-0914-0

www.bastei-entertainment.com



Down Time
M. Sean Coleman
Episode One - ROGUE

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1

An arrogant man was always far easier to kill, he found. Not because he had anything against self-importance, necessarily, but because it was always so much easier to get closer to the arrogant ones without being noticed. They made more noise, and left a bigger trail. They were so accustomed to being the centre of attention, that they never noticed him until it was far too late. Even if they saw him watching them, it would never occur to them that he would want to kill them. Somehow their arrogance made killing them all the sweeter. It was their sudden realisation that they would never achieve their lofty ambitions, and that, ultimately, they would only ever be remembered as a victim, and not as the great success they had always assumed they were.

Shylock sat quietly at the end of the crowded bar, watching his next victim with a bubbling sense of loathing building in him. Nat Marley was a popular young man, and was surrounded, as usual, by a braying group of colleagues. They were here every Thursday, with unstinting regularity, necking expensive shots, with champagne chasers and making sure that everyone in the bar knew exactly how important they were. It would have been easy for him to hate these finance boys — everything about them oozed corruption, pomposity and a blatant disregard for anything except higher profit and more glory. Who was he to judge them though? He had been one of them once, and what was he now? A hired killer has no moral high ground, after all. If he was really honest, their behaviour didn't actually bother him that much — this was far more personal. Besides, he had spent a long time following Nat Marley,

and he knew that this young man was by no means the worst of the bunch. He was arrogant and driven, for sure, but then, so was Shylock. The problem was that Nat Marley had just become a serious threat, so it was time for Shylock to get rid of him. If only the young man had been easier to corrupt or more inclined to cheat, perhaps he would have lived to see the morning. Shylock knew that he was moving quickly, and without his partner's knowledge. But he also understood that, to his current partner, everyone had a finite time in which they could be useful and when that time expired, it became far too dangerous to let them hang around. The trick was to stay useful. Nat Marley had not managed to do that, and now his time was up.

Shylock had learned the hard way not to make this part of his job more personal than it had to be. Of course, many would argue that taking someone's life was as personal as it got, but he didn't see it that way. Not in this case. He hadn't started this fight, but he would certainly finish it. In the beginning, he hadn't intended to come this far, but he had no regrets about what he had become. There was no point trying to sugar-coat murder. It was far better to simply shut off any feelings he would have once had about it and focus on the job in hand. Revenge *was* just a job to him now, like baking bread, or packing meat — functional and repetitive. Yes, particular care needed to be taken to do it right and to follow the rules but, otherwise, it was just a job. He checked his watch. Eight-thirty exactly.

If he'd done his homework properly — which of course he had — Nat Marley would be about to make his excuses and leave his colleagues in the bar, to slip off to an important meeting that he couldn't tell anyone about: a hot date with one of his company's strongest competitors who appeared to be offering him a significant step up the career ladder. Nat Marley would be feeling pretty good right now, Shylock thought, as he watched him throw his head back and laugh raucously at one of his colleague's comments. He

could have made some lofty assertion about Marley's meeting tonight being a date with destiny, but the truth was that Nat Marley was going to die. Not because it was his destiny, but because he had become a serious risk Shylock's bigger plan.

Sure enough, within moments, Shylock saw the young man glance at his watch, quickly down the rest of his drink and stand up. There was the usual chorus of taunts from his colleagues — leaving the party early was a sign of weakness in this pack. Nat Marley brushed off their insults with ease. Collegiate ribbing was water off a duck's back to him.

“Why would I want to waste a perfectly good evening with you bunch of losers,” was his parting comment, as he slung a ridiculously expensive jacket over his shoulder, downed a final shot from the tray on the table, and strode off, middle finger extended to his colleagues over his shoulder, and most eyes in the bar tracking him out. He made it too easy.

Shylock watched his victim leave, and smiled. Despite reminding himself that it was just a job, he had to admit enjoying this part more than any other. The last moments of the hunt were certainly the most tantalising. Last time, he hadn't really enjoyed the actual killing, and a lot of the preparation had bored him, but these last seconds of the chase — they were sublime. It was the understanding that he knew something literally life changing about his victims that even they didn't know yet; that's what was thrilling. He left a twenty-pound note under his empty glass and eased off his chair. He could hear the bugle calls in his head — the hunt was almost at an end, the hounds were closing in. He smiled a broad and sinister smile as he followed Nat Marley out of the bar and into the cool night air.

The city was dark and cold, under a thick drizzle. His breath fogged in front of him and he zipped his leather

jacket up. As predicted, Nat Marley hailed a cab, directly outside the bar. He pulled his smartphone out as he watched his target give the address, and used one of his own custom-built apps to log the taxi's GPS tracker as it pulled away. Of course, he knew where Nat Marley was headed, but this way he would be able to follow his progress in real time.

He slipped his helmet on, climbed onto his motorbike, and gunned the engine. He took one last look at Nat Marley as he pulled alongside the cab at the lights, and then he sped off. There was still a lot of work to do.



Nat Marley didn't bother tipping the taxi driver and he certainly wasn't going to thank him — it just wasn't his style. The guy was doing his job, he didn't need thanking for that, and he only tipped if they did something exceptional for him, or he was trying to impress some pretty little thing he'd picked up. Other people often accused him of being cheap, waiting for his change when he had enough in the bank to support a small country, but it was the principle of the thing for him. Give nothing away for free.

He slammed the door and stood in front of the tall glass building. It was a building he knew well enough, he had walked past it every day for the last five years. Eisenberg, Katz & Frey were the company he had set his heart on getting into ever since graduating, and it looked like he was finally going to get his chance. He'd heard of the top companies poaching the elite from their competitors before, and there was often a good sweetener to help you jump ship. Not that he needed any kind of sweetener, just getting a foot in the door was exciting enough. This was

where he would make his real fortune, he was sure of it, and he could put the stress of the last year behind him.

Almost a year ago, he had stupidly involved himself in some extra-curricular activities that had seemed like a good deal at first — he had been approached by a group of likeminded individuals to pool their resources to build a program that would tackle the security vulnerabilities in their part of the financial sector and make them all richer than they could imagine. They had called themselves The Water Boys, and they fancied themselves as the best of the best. He had been paid well for his time, but had gradually begun to realise that they were working on something much bigger than he thought, and he didn't like the risk of it. He knew that their industry was more complacent about security than it should be, but he wasn't prepared to become an activist to prove it. When he realised that the people he had joined forces with were actually looking to bring down the stock markets, he tried to pull out. That was when the threats had begun. He had given them one last piece of code, but it had deliberately included a backdoor, in case they ever used it. He had assumed that his involvement was now over, and he had then set about building the antidote. If they did attack the market, it would be Nat Marley who stopped them. He would become a legend. Tonight's meeting would be the beginning of that journey.

Nat Marley might be young, but he was widely recognised as one of the most gifted employees in his firm right now, and he knew it. He had graduated top of his class, which was already an elite group of mathematical geniuses, and after a brief stint on Wall Street, he had been snapped up and shipped back to London by Flintlock and Staines, one of a handful of high-frequency trading firms which effectively ruled the London Stock Exchange.

People have an image of the stock market which usually involves testosterone-fuelled men in expensive suits and

colour-coordinated shirts, barking orders into multiple telephones, while watching fluctuating market prices appear and disappear on a scrolling ticker-tape beneath large banks of screens. That image is as outdated as the movies that created it, but the alternative is too complex for most people to comprehend, so we cling to the old image because it makes sense. It puts people behind the success and failure of our stock market, and somehow that makes it okay. The truth is that those traders are no longer there, at least not in the same way, and the majority of trades are now made inside black boxes, located in heavily-guarded buildings, with little or no human understanding of what happens.

Following the market collapse of October 19, 1987, which became known as Black Monday, the global financial industry began to change irrevocably. The process began slowly at first, but intensified over the years that followed as, gradually, all of the people — those loud, confident guys in expensive suits — were replaced by computers. These days we live in a world where machines make the trades, and where those same machines read our news stories and even our Twitter feeds, and react to what they see there in milliseconds, or even nanoseconds, faster than any human trader could even blink. A hoax tweet from a hacked Associated Press Twitter account, suggesting that President Barack Obama had been injured in an explosion at the White House, sent the stock market into almost instantaneous free fall, erasing some two hundred billion dollars from the market's value. As soon as the tweet had been confirmed fake, the markets bounced back up again, just as quickly as they had gone down. The computers had made the costly mistake of believing Twitter and reacted as quickly as they had been programmed to do. These so-called Flash Crashes have become part and parcel of the modern stock market.

In his first month on the job, Nat had experienced the full, shocking enormity of a Flash Crash, and it had excited him like nothing he'd ever experienced before. May 6, 2010, had started out fairly normally for him, with the one difference that it was the day of the General Election in the UK, and that always made the European and US markets a little jittery. He had been looking forward to seeing how those nerves affected the market, but he hadn't been prepared for what he experienced that day. Adding to the global tension on that day was the fact that, while the UK electorate had been casting their votes for a new government, the Greeks had taken to the streets to protest against the austerity measures being imposed by their own government. The mood on the market was already darkening by the time Nat had arrived at work, and every time Athens appeared on a news bulletin, another few points drifted away from the Dow Jones Industrial Average like wisps of smoke from a bonfire.

Suddenly, and without warning, what had started as a flutter in a reliable market became a shudder, and then a jolt as it spread to other stock markets and exchanges, immediately causing indices to plummet. Within seconds the Dow had lost one hundred points, and before finance workers could even begin to react, it had lost another hundred. And another. Brokers desperately tried to pull their stocks, cancelling orders in an urgent bid to limit the damage. Terrified, they huddled in communal spaces and watched the prices descend with unstoppable force. Seconds later, at six hundred down, the Dow had lost more than it had on the day that Lehman Brothers collapsed. Around him, traders were looking nauseous — it was like staring into the abyss. Even 9/11 hadn't caused this much of a reaction, which suggested that something enormous had happened. But what? There was nothing on the news, nothing online. Why wasn't someone stepping in and doing something to stop this madness? It was at that moment Nat

realised there was no one who could stop this. It was already 2:47 p.m. in the US, and the circuit breakers designed to halt trading following unusual price swings only worked until 2:30 p.m. They were on their own. The Dow was racing to a one-thousand-point drop, representing losses of around one trillion dollars, and it was sucking everything down in its path.

Then, out of nowhere, the market turned again and began to rise, almost as quickly as it had just fallen. Back to a mere six hundred down, then three hundred. Traders around the world let out a collective breath. The whole crash, the most dramatic in stock market history, had happened within ten minutes, and it was the most terrifying and exhilarating ten minutes of Nat Marley's life. He had just witnessed the power of high-frequency trading and the algorithms which back the practice up, and he knew it was where he needed to be. He had seen into a trading world few outsiders could imagine: a global matrix of complex algorithms, running on interconnected computer nerve centres literally the size of houses, which fed seemingly omnipotent, supersonic trading robots governed by the very latest artificial intelligence. He was hooked.

Five years on, Nat had come close to achieving his dream of becoming one of the alpha males in this new world, and he had the respect of both his peers and his bosses to prove it. He was a data wizard, so skilled in spotting and predicting patterns in the market that he had risen to the top of his firm, and had even been moved inside their highly secretive quantitative derivatives operation. So, he was a quant — a mathematician who used quantitative techniques to predict markets — but he was better than most. Something about his attention to detail, or his ability to spot changes in the minutiae, made him sharper, faster, and far better than his peers. The piece of software he had built, that he had considered sharing with his current firm, was going to take him to the next level. He

was almost certain his contacts would attack at some point, and he would be ready for them when they did. If his firm was running his program, they would be protected. That made him the most valuable asset on the market. And now here he was, outside the London headquarters of his dream firm, about to head up to a secret meeting with the man who could seal his place at the top of the tree. He felt totally pumped.

Nat fished in his pocket and pulled out the employee swipe card he had been sent in the mail, along with the invite to be here tonight. He had stuck to the orders contained in the message, and not even hinted to any of his friends and colleagues that he was being headhunted. He was quite looking forward to seeing their faces when he told them he was going to Eisenberg, Katz & Frey.

Not for the first time since getting the invitation, he wondered how he had come to their attention. Had somebody vouched for him? He couldn't think who would have. He was exceptionally good at his job, he knew that, but it wasn't the kind of industry where people supported talent anonymously. However it had happened, it was his turn now, and he wasn't going to be shy about showing off his talents during this meeting.

Nat walked down the wide alleyway, around the west of the building to the side entrance, exactly as he had been told to do, and pressed the card against the reader. The light on the reader flicked from red to green, and he pushed the door open with his foot. Inside, the lights detected his movement and flickered on. It all felt very cloak and dagger, creeping into a competitor's building late at night, to have a clandestine meeting about switching sides. He felt like a spy, and he realised that he liked the feeling. The door closed behind him with a heavy clunk and he followed the stairs up to the second floor, where he pushed out into the corridor, still following the instructions which had accompanied the invitation and the blank staff

pass. He was moving slowly, taking his time. He had left the pub deliberately early to give himself that luxury. His father had always taught him that the greatest courtesy you could pay was to arrive on time, and as an adult he had made it a policy to always arrive exactly at the time agreed. Not before, and not after. He still had five full minutes to get to the twentieth floor before he was due to be there.

He slipped into the gents toilets on the second floor, just near the elevator he would be using. He wanted to make sure he looked his best. He leaned over the basins and stared at himself in the mirror. He was a good-looking guy, he knew that, and he was looking particularly good at the moment. He'd bulked up a little in the last year, spending more time in the gym and less time in the bar, and he was in a crisp white shirt that clung to his chest and biceps. He ran his hands under the tap and damped his hair a little in order to tame it back into its neat shape. He slid his jacket on and brushed both shoulders a couple of times. He looked good. He was the man. He was going to do this. This was his time.

He smiled at his reflection as he ran his hands under the dryer. Somebody had left a motorcycle helmet beside the basins. It struck him as odd that you would leave something like that behind. His invitation had implied that the building would be virtually empty. The financial software industry was a small one, and he really didn't want to bump into anyone he knew before he was ready to break the big news. There was no sign of anyone in any of the cubicles though, so he shrugged and left the bathroom before the owner came back.

In the elevator on the way up to the twentieth floor, he ran through possible responses to the questions they may ask him. He didn't know how these things played out — was it an interview or a formality? Either way, he would nail it. He was ready. He thought of his parents, and how proud they would be when he told them. They had no

concept of what he did, apart from that he was very good at it, and had already made lots of money from doing it. He had bought them a lovely big house out in the country, and he'd given each of them a new car and an account stuffed with spending money. It seemed to make them happy, though happiness was not an emotion that came naturally to either of his parents. He'd bought his older sister a flat in the middle of the city, for which she had still to thank him. She had no idea how lucky she was to have him as a brother.

Once he was partner here, they would never want for anything again, any of them. His family was the only thing, apart from himself, that he cared about. He didn't get to see them often, but he made sure they had everything they could possibly want.

A ping from the elevator doors told him he was on the twentieth floor. He set his shoulders as the doors opened. The entire floor was in darkness, with just the light from the elevator spilling out into the open-plan space. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but he found it quite eerie that there seemed to be no one up here. He peered out, feeling a rising sense of trepidation. Had he got the wrong time? The wrong floor? Had he messed it up? Only as he stepped out into the darkness did he notice a solitary light coming from one of the corner offices. He breathed a sigh of relief and began walking towards it. Detecting his movement, the overhead lights flickered on up here too, and he blinked as soft fluorescent light flooded the room.

The twentieth floor was as spectacular as he'd always heard it was — a huge space, stylishly decorated and open-plan all the way round, with clusters of reassuringly over-priced desks concealed by designer screens. Metal, wood, glass — the modern style screamed sophisticated professionalism. The floor-to-ceiling windows gave a view out over most of London. The neon glow of the city bounced back up at him, flaring in multi-coloured starbursts in the

rain on the huge expanse of glass. He smiled as he strode towards the corner office, he loved this place already.

When he got there, the office was empty. A laptop sat open and alone on the desk, lit by a neat desk lamp. A single chair had been pushed out from the desk in front of the laptop, as though the user had just stepped away briefly. The name plate on the door confirmed he was in the right place: Colm Monroe had sent him the invitation to be here tonight. The CEO of Eisenberg, Katz & Frey was renowned throughout the industry for hand-selecting each of their new recruits above a certain level.

Nat had been only slightly surprised to receive the invitation for a meeting, but he hadn't been at all surprised by the clandestine nature of the arrangement. People in Nat's position held a lot of information about their companies, and being seen even talking to a competitor was considered a betrayal of company policy. Nat was keen to find out what Monroe would put on the table, but he wasn't about to throw his career away for a first meeting. After all, he had more to offer them right now, than they had to offer him.

Nat stepped in to the office and looked around. It was the kind of corner office you see in the movies: neat and ordered, with no over-flowing in-trays, empty coffee mugs or dying pot plants. A single photo frame on the desk showed just enough deference to a private life, but otherwise it was pure, cold professionalism. He liked it, it was the kind of thing he could see himself having one day. He stood in the doorway to the office, hesitating. Should he go in, uninvited? Or would he be better to slip away and come back in a moment, when Monroe was back at his desk?

No, he thought, this must be a test. He had arrived exactly on time and the guy wasn't there, so this must be a little mind game, to see how he would react. He would go on in, he decided, and wait as though it was perfectly

normal. But, before he could step inside, he heard a movement behind him.

“So you made it then?”

Nat turned around to find a short, broad-shouldered man standing very close behind him. He was smiling, but it wasn't the warmest smile Nat had ever seen. In fact, it made him look quite sinister. He didn't look at all like Nat had been expecting the great Colm Monroe to look. He had the same close-shaved head and dark eyebrows that Nat had seen when he'd looked the man up, but he had definitely been expecting him to be taller. His fearsome reputation seemed to demand a taller man.

“Was there ever any doubt?” Nat tried to make the question sound affable and relaxed, like he was one of the grown-ups. His heart was pounding in his chest. Monroe held his ground for a moment too long, not moving around Nat, and forcing him into an awkward side step as if to welcome the man into his own office. Monroe reached out his hand and shook Nat's firmly, reaching his index finger up Nat's wrist. It was an old trick which stopped the other person being able to exert any force in their own grip. Nat squeezed nonetheless — a limp handshake would be the kiss of death with a guy like Monroe. He felt the man's nail scratch his wrist as he broke the grip and stepped past him, still smiling under lowered brows.

“So,” Monroe said, as he sat down behind his desk. “You think you stand a chance at Eisenberg, Katz & Frey, do you?”

He noticed an American lilt to Monroe's accent. Was he putting it on for effect, or was Nat confusing his famous Scottish brogue for a Yankee drawl? Nat sat down calmly opposite Monroe before answering. He was determined to play this thing right.

“I'm guessing you must be thinking something similar, or we wouldn't be here right now,” he replied. Was that too

cocky for an opening line? Tough. He couldn't take it back now.

"Fair point," said Monroe.

His voice was more nasal than Nat had been expecting, too. He had listened to recordings of some of Monroe's more legendary presentations, and the man hadn't sounded so whiny.

"So," Monroe continued. "Tell me about Flintlock and Staines."

"What do you want to know?"

"They're one of the best firms in London. Their turnover is in the billions. They only hire in the top five percent, and you're sitting here with their biggest rivals. So why are you so keen to leave?"

Nat had prepared himself for this line of questioning. Loyalty to the firm was a prerequisite in this industry.

"It's a fantastic firm, and I have been very happy there. But I've outgrown them, and let's face it, it's not Eisenberg, Katz & Frey," Nat said. "Besides, I'm in the top two percent. Which is where you hire from. This is where I belong."

Monroe raised an eyebrow. Nat was trying to read the expression. He had done his research — he knew that Monroe liked confidence and assuredness. He was legendary for finding the smallest hint of vulnerability and using it to rip young pretenders apart. If he liked you, you were in, but if he turned you down, the door was closed, and there was no way you would ever open it again.

"Relax kid," said Monroe. "You're not here to pitch. You're here for your last chance." Monroe pulled a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and began easing them onto his hands. It seemed a strange thing to do, but Nat had heard of people who were extremely anxious about touching surfaces — perhaps this was another one of Monroe's legendary idiosyncrasies. With the gloves on, Monroe turned the laptop around to face Nat.

“Here,” he said.

Nat peered at the screen in front of him, and frowned. It was blank. A console screen. A cursor blinked, awaiting instructions.

“You remember how to access your own server, right?” Monroe leered over the top of the laptop screen.

“Of course, but what—?”

He had been expecting a tough interview, but he had no idea what was happening here. Monroe sighed and looked at him, waiting for a realisation that obviously wasn't going to come.

“For a genius, you're not very bright, are you?” he said, coldly. “This is your last chance, son. Hand over the code.”

Nat felt sweat beading up on his face. What was happening? Why was Monroe behaving like this? Was he part of The Water Boys? Was he Shylock? Surely he couldn't be involved with a group like that.

“I'm afraid you've got yourself into a very unpleasant situation, Nathaniel,” said Monroe. “I imagine you're not feeling very well, right now.”

He was right, Nat was breathing heavily. He felt nervous, uncomfortable, jittery.

“What's going on?” he asked, somewhat pathetically.

Nat could feel his heart fluttering. What was happening to him?

“You have been injected with an extremely fast-acting poison,” said Monroe. “I have an antidote, but you're going to have to play ball.”

“I won't do it,” Nat said, firmly.

Monroe just smiled.

“No skin off my nose,” he said. “Think how it will look when they find you here, in the competitors' office, server compromised, covered in your own piss. How's that for a legacy?” Monroe was absently wiping a clean handkerchief over the table's surface, cleaning it while he spoke.

“You can’t do this,” Nat gurgled. He was struggling now. His lips weren’t responding to his brain, and he was finding it hard to swallow. He tried to keep the desperation from his voice, but he could feel his throat tightening. His skin was hot and clammy. He was beginning to panic.

“It’s already done, mate,” Monroe said. “It’s up to you now. You want it to stop?”

Nat leaned forward. His head was swimming. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. It didn’t work. He didn’t feel in control of his body any more.

“All you have to do is hand over the code, and I’ll make it stop,” said Monroe.

“Okay,” Nat said, with a thick tongue, not forming the word properly. He forced himself to lean closer to the computer, but his body felt heavy and outside of his control. Monroe pushed the machine closer to him and Nat tried to navigate to his own remote server. His fingers wouldn’t respond to his brain. Finally he managed to key the numbers in and hit return. The root of his private server popped up, requesting a username and password.

Nat looked at Monroe. The man looked cold, dispassionate, and stupid. He knew that Colm Monroe was not a stupid man, but the guy in front of him right now looked pretty dumb. He was leering at Nat, waiting for the code. Nat’s body may have felt like an alien vessel that no longer belonged to him, but his brain had just begun working with alarming clarity. This man was not Colm Monroe. He had been tricked. He had been stupid. He had fucked up. Defiantly, he decided that he would rather die than give them his code. It took all of his strength to push the laptop away. It was meant to be a big gesture, but in reality it moved less than an inch.

“No,” he said. It sounded more like “Nnn”. His tongue was fat and heavy in his mouth. His heart was thumping; he was feeling worse by the moment. He was short of breath, and his skin was clammy. He ran his finger around the

inside of his collar, trying to loosen it, but it didn't help. The world was closing in around him. He could feel his shirt sticking to his skin under his jacket and he felt like it was strangling him. He needed to get out, to get away from here. He stood up, shakily, feeling his legs wobble beneath his weight.

Monroe didn't move to stop him, and as Nat tried to walk away, he saw why. He wasn't going to make it. Nat managed to get within a yard of the door before his legs gave way. He turned back and tried to reach one of the sofas behind him, but he sank to his knees before he could get there. He was gasping for air now, and pulled at his tie to loosen it.

The man who wasn't Colm Monroe made no move to help him, but just looked up over the laptop screen with a small frown.

"Oh God," said Nat, gasping desperately for breath, but none would come. He lay down, hoping for some relief. He was choking, asphyxiating, dying. The reality hit Nat like a sledgehammer: he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it. His mind was working overtime, but his body had given up. The pain burning through him as his body shut down was unlike anything he had ever felt before, but he couldn't get his strangled throat to make a sound. He was terrified, and he couldn't force a single muscle to fight back. Nothing would help him. The last thing Nat saw was the man pretending to be Colm Monroe stand up from the laptop and turn away to face the window, as though he didn't want to watch. Nat gave in to the darkness.



In the end, killing Nat Marley had been a lot easier than he had expected, and certainly much easier than the last guy. Shylock was disappointed that he hadn't been able to get the kid to unlock his server — it had been something he had wanted to be able to hand his partner as a sweetener for being about to remove so many of their key players in such a short space of time. He needed to wind up The Water Boys group, and he couldn't afford for there to be any loose ends remaining to tell tales. His partner would understand, but it would have been easier if Shylock could have shown him exactly why Nat Marley had needed to be removed.

At least he'd managed to get the IP address of the server. He knew he'd be able to do something with that when he finally had a little time to himself. He noted down the digits and closed the browser; he wouldn't be needing it anymore.

He could feel his skin prickling with sweat under the thin layer of latex he had used to disguise himself as Colm Monroe. He had needed to get Nat Marley into the office, and have him be comfortable enough to get close to. Now that the killing was over, he needed to arrange the scene to look just right and then he could go home and clean himself up.

He was going to leave the laptop in the office to complete the illusion that Marley had been getting into bed with the opposition. Even though he had needed Marley silenced, he had spent time and effort planning this death. Luring Marley here had tied in nicely with his larger plan to discredit the young man. He wanted Marley's reputation to be the focus of any investigation, and if he'd done his job right, there would be no trace of anything else for them to look in to — even his cause of death would be a mystery. It was always helpful to have the authorities looking the wrong way while the next move was being planned, and finding the competition's golden boy dead in your office,

with a laptop full of your sensitive data was a good way to create a distraction. In the long run, it would make his partner happy, too. He was thinking ahead.

He carried the laptop over to Colm Monroe's desk, and cabled the machine directly to Monroe's desktop computer. He pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket and laid it on the desk. It was a full sheet of handwritten instructions — his crib sheet. He fired up Monroe's computer and entered the login details he had been supplied by his support team. Once the screen opened up, he navigated to the folders he'd been looking for. He kept referring to his crib sheet, making sure he did everything just right. He knew that he had one chance to get everything he needed, and he couldn't afford to forget anything. Lists made him happy; they gave him a certain reassurance. He made his way through his checklist, copying files and folders across to the laptop. He didn't bother to open them or read them now — there would be time for that later too.

While the machines were talking to each other, he busied himself with the physical clean-up job. He was less comfortable with this side of his work, but he would be quick and efficient, as always. He walked over to Nat Marley's still warm corpse and bent down beside him, making his assessment. Marley was a tall man, but at least he was slim. Shylock figured he could lift him clear off the ground in two stages. He certainly didn't want to be dragging him; that would leave traces.

He scooped his forearms under Nat's shoulders and lifted him into a sitting position. Nat flopped forward grotesquely, and he has careful not to let him stretch too far forward, he didn't want too much post-mortem damage on the guy. He hauled Nat's body up onto the sofa, before walking around to assess the scene.

Nat looked awkwardly placed, so he pulled him about gently until he had him arranged in a more recumbent position. Now he looked like he had leaned back to watch

the game on television and just fallen asleep. Much better. He crossed back to the desk to check on the computers. They too had done their work. Good. He could leave the laptop behind now to complete his scene. Using his handkerchief, he wiped the back and sides of the machine again, leaving just the keys untouched. He had only used gloved hands to type, so he was confident that it would be clean. He then wiped down everything on the desk. He even wiped things he hadn't touched. He prided himself on being very careful about forensic detection — his work now relied on him being able to get in and out of any place without being noticed.

He stood back and looked around him, savouring the scene. He was in no rush. He was actually enjoying the unspoiled peace of this moment, after the death but before the discovery. This was the perfect time. He realised that he had enjoyed this death more than the last. Perhaps because Marley had deserved it more. Or maybe he was just getting better at it. He picked up a water glass and pressed the rim to Nat's bottom lip. Then he formed Nat's hand around it, ensuring an even spread of prints, before placing it on a coaster on the low coffee table in front of him. He wanted this scene to look just right when they found it. It had to look natural. He knew that the poison he had used would leave no trace in Nat's system, and the plan was that the police would just chalk it up to natural causes and not look any further. Nonetheless, Shylock would make sure there was no trace of his own presence here. Nothing could tie him to Marley's death.

He slipped a USB drive out of his pocket and plugged it into the slot on Colm Monroe's desktop computer. He clicked the icon and installed the only program contained on the drive. It was a small, simple piece of software that would give the digital clean-up team access to the network, allowing them to erase any evidence of his being here. He trusted them; they had never let him down. CCTV, access

codes, logs of doors being opened or sensors activated could all be reset remotely by his team. As long as there was no physical evidence here, he would be as untraceable as the poison that had killed Nat Marley.

He checked his watch. He still had ten minutes. Good. He dug into his briefcase and pulled out a small digital camera. He took photographs of the glass, of the computer, of Nat's body, and finally of the whole scene from the door of the office. Putting the camera away, he snapped the briefcase shut and placed it outside the door. He then went back in and wiped everything again. Finally, he straightened Nat's tie a little and smiled. His work here was done, and it was time to move on to the next one.

2

Scott Mitchell was still getting used to his new alter-ego. He had chosen the name Phoenix to symbolise his rise from the ashes of his past persona, Strider, but if he was honest, he wasn't sure it fitted. It felt too ethereal, too delicate to match his view of himself. Besides, Strider had been his alter-ego for so long that he was sure he was actually mourning his demise. Strider had been powerful, dangerous even — the exact image of his namesake from *The Lord of the Rings* in both nobility of cause and strength of purpose. Strider had been the perfect persona for the kind of work Scott Mitchell did under cover of the Dark Web. In many ways, he had felt more comfortable as Strider than he ever would as plain old Scott Mitchell. But Strider had needed to die in order to save Mitchell, and Mitchell would just have to get used to living without him.

With Strider in his life, he'd felt safe and complete. He'd had his little routines. By day, he had been Scott Mitchell — an unassuming code wizard and former criminal hacker turned to the good side — a man who worked as a consultant for the NCCU, the Cyber Crime Unit of the National Crime Agency in London. It had been the perfect cover for his extra-curricular pursuits as Strider, and it had given him a lot of the access and all the motive he needed. As Strider, he had invented and perfected The Code — a set of rules and guidelines by which he lived and operated, and by which he expected others to live. If he discovered, through his work at the NCCU, that someone who had broken The Code was about to get away with their crimes, he would let Strider take over and dish out his own type of justice.