

Rice Tea

- Julien McArdle -

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Cover Photo by Nintaro.

In memory of Steve Cisler.

Introduction

I would like to thank you for having purchased this book, though if you're anything like me, you've probably downloaded it for free as you contemplate whether it's worth your monetary support.

This book has come a long way from the six-page film concept that I originally concocted sometime in late 2006. Originally slated to be a realistic take on the 1995 film *Hackers*, this project evolved to become an entirely original story on its own.

If there is one thing that hasn't been affected by the metamorphosis from a screenplay to a novel, it is this work's adherence to reality. While the overarching story line may be fictitious, virtually all the events described in this novel are not. They mirror the true experiences of those talented few that populate the digital tubes.

To that end, I would like to acknowledge the following for their valuable contributions on the interwebs that helped shape this novel:

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ONE

Enter the Blackhat

In the windowless basement of a suburban home, in the wee hours of the morning, sat a twenty something man perched over the glare of his multiple computer monitors. In the one, he was playing some Hentai – at this point, the animated high school girl was giving off high-pitched squeals typical of the Japanese genre as she was being thrust into by her male compatriots.

However, at this point, the hacker wasn't paying any attention to the video. Rather, all his attention was focused on his other monitor. In it, he had a terminal window open in which he was issuing commands, the green text of his typed words set on a backdrop of black.

The desk on which his computer lay was pristine – his monitors and speakers were placed in perfect symmetry, the flat surface completely devoid of dust. This was an anomaly in this basement room, with the rest in utter disarray. Clothes were strewn all over, the posters were peeling down, and used cans of caffeine energy drinks peppered the floor. In this mess were also various technical books, usually opened to a certain page, on topics such as C programming and the TCP/IP protocol.

The hacker entered a few final commands in the terminal window, and sat back watching the screen spurt back copious amounts of text. The man smiled in relief. It was working, and on the first try. He had succeeded.

TWO

Just Another Morning

Seth lay in bed, his alarm buzzer still ringing by his side. His head turned to face the source of the annoyance, and with it, his arm came violently down to silence the contraption. The buzzer continued. He had missed. With a sigh, Seth took a better look at the alarm and navigated his fingers carefully around its buttons. With a small tap, the room turned quiet.

Seth was an average height, average build, 22 year old. His face featured brown hair and green eyes, the latter usually complimented by his stylized translucent glasses.

Slowly getting up, he turned his head to look out his window. His room on the upper floor provided a nice view of the greenery behind his townhouse, a rarity in the bleak asphalt and concrete landscape that surrounded him.

After a quick shower, Seth put on some clean clothes and worked his way down the stairs. He turned to go into the living area, or the “man center” as he sometimes called it. Against the wall stood a large second hand television, to which game consoles of all sorts were plugged in – between him and his two roommates, they owned all of the most recent gaming hardware. Beneath the television and the consoles lay a hefty rack-mount server, that would appear to be more at place in a data center than a residential home. To the side of this humming machine was a laser printer, with a single freshly printed out sheet.

Seth snatched the sheet, and brought it to the kitchen. Inside, he found his roommate cooking some eggs. Grabbing a lone magnet on the fridge, he posted up the piece of paper. The sheet was the product of Seth's boredom one afternoon, an automated script on the server that would run every morning at 6:30AM. It compiled weather information with the day's top tech headlines and some statistics about the server's current performance.

On this day, much like those before it, news of the Météo botnet were making the rounds. A new update had been released overnight, and more than 120,000 computers had thought to have been infected in the space of hours. While these newly enslaved machines might seem fine to their owners, they would in fact covertly be used to relay spam or assist in large-scale fraud operations. This was bad news for system administrators the world around.

Seth's focus was however not in these news, but rather the breakfast he would make himself. As soon as he had pinned up the sheet, he opened the fridge door to reveal its lackluster contents. He grabbed the loaf of expired bread, and put two slices in the toaster. Turning to his roommate, he asked:

"How was the LAN party last night? I didn't see you come in."

"Yea, we went for some karaoke after. We beat Carleton U's comp-sci team again." Always glad to hear when the other university in town had been beat, Seth replied "Good stuff."

Seth ate his toast, loaded up his MP3 player with some new songs, and prepared his bag for school. On his way out, he yelled back "I'll get the mail!"

THREE

University

It was perhaps early spring, but with the sun beaming down it felt almost like summer. The snow that had been so pervasive the month previous had entirely disappeared. People were no longer shackled by the heavy winter coats that were a necessity even the weeks before. Seth felt unusually liberated as he wore his light-jacket on his twenty minute walk to the nearby transit station.

The transit system in Ottawa was a hybrid of diesel buses and light rail. Every morning, Seth would walk to the nearby station where he would grab a train down to his university. Over the years since his move to this city, he grew fond of the transit network's efficiency.

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After a twenty-five minute ride, Seth's train stopped right on front of his campus, and he got off. A large sign, written in both English and French, welcomed him to "Canada's University." He had always found the University of Ottawa's bold assertion rather amusing.

Walking through the university center, Seth stopped to grab a coffee. French vanilla, as per usual. As he poured in a bit of milk, he looked up to a nearby mounted television screen at the news. The price for the barrel of oil had again increased, and three analysts were feverishly debating the source of this latest hike.

“Seth!” Seth, shaken out of his television-induced stupor, looked around. A young man was fast approaching him. He was built, his goatee well-trimmed – the man looked like a twenty year old version of a Hollywood top actor.

“Oh hey Jinks,” Seth replied unenthusiastically.

Jinks went on. “So I tried hacking that 127 dot whatever IP address you gave me yesterday. I used Sploitster and everything.”

“Find anything interesting?” Seth responded.

“Yeah! Check this out!” Jinks pulled out a newspaper from his side, practically shoving it into Seth's face. Jinks continued. “It was an ATM!” Seth was still readjusting his eyes to read the newspaper held up so close to his nose.

“Look!” Jinks exclaimed. “It spewed twenties randomly on the ground somewhere in hick-town Saskatchewan. That was me!”

The Internet Protocol address Seth had given to Jinks was a loopback – it was a specially assigned address that would connect Jinks to his own computer. Jinks couldn't of accessed any other computer using it, much less an ATM. That was the thing with scriptkiddies like Jinks: they knew how to use certain programs to cause damage, but they didn't know the most basic tenets of computing.

“Uh huh, nice. Look Jinks, I gotta go to the washroom. Classes start in three minutes. I thought you had some now as well?”

“Yeah, well just one – Polish cinema. I should go too. Later Seth.”

“See ya.”

Seth threw the remnants of his coffee in a nearby bin, and walked to the nearby door. Past the door were large concrete steps that brought students to the lower level of the university center.

Seth walked down the steps. At the bottom of the stairs, he could see the washroom doors in the distance to his left. Turning in the opposite direction, he headed down a long hall, an into an open doorway which greeted students halfway down. He had come into the dark, funky smelling, dungeon that was the university's arcade. Save for a lone light hung atop of an old pool table, the room was entirely lit by the hyperactive screens of its coin operated games. Seth figured that most of these machines had to be at least twenty years old, but these retro games were cheap to play and had really caught on with the campus' students.

Seth walked up to the *Street Fighter II* slot arcade machine, where two students were furiously shifting their joystick and mashing buttons trying to beat each other's virtual characters to a pulp. Seth, looking at the taller of the two players, subtly pronounced "Gab, we got class in less than five." The message received no reply, the player's attention entirely consumed by the machine. However, the pattern of prerecorded pained grunts emanating from the game's characters started to shift, and within seconds, Gabriel had dealt the finishing blows. He looked back at Seth.

"Okay, I'm done."

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The duo walked with utmost haste down the halls of the university's computer science and engineering building. It was amongst the newest structures on campus, with a design that proudly showed off its support beams and heating ducts to all its patrons. It was also home to numerous computer labs, rooms filled with networked computer stations.

Stopping by one of the doors, the two quietly entered. The professor in the midst of discussion paused for a brief second at

the interruption, glaring at the two late-comers. Seth mouthed his apology to the unimpressed teacher, who then continued on his lecture. The two found some empty seats near the back and listened to the professor, slowly getting their bags off their back as to not produce any further noise.

The professor went on. "This term project is worth 30% of your final mark ladies and gentlemen, so listen up." Seth logged into the computer on front of him, paying only half-attention to the words of his middle-aged lecturer. Looking off to the side of his computer monitor at his fellow classmates, Seth's eyes couldn't help but to fixate themselves at the girl sitting half-way down the room. Her name was Kerstin. She had a rounded face, shoulder-length black hair arranged in a ponytail, and a very cute European accent that came out whenever she asked questions. To top it off, she was an extremely competent programmer. Whereas others wrote limiting textbook answers to the problems given in class, she was one of the few that could think outside the box and develop intriguing efficient solutions.

The professor's unintelligible droning voice was punctuated by Gabriel's clear whisper.

"I think you're freaking her out."

Kerstin was staring back directly at Seth. Abruptly shaking out of his apparent daydream, Seth's eyes immediately returned to the idle screen on front of him.

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Not bad," said Gabriel. "You haven't even met her yet and she already thinks you're a freak. It only took you what – three months?"

"Yeah, thanks." Seth replied with a smirk.

The professor went on for some time on the minutia of memory management in operating systems. Finally, alerted by the communal ruckus of students packing their bags, the lecturer took a look at his watch.

“Oh look, we're all out of time. See you next time, and take a look at the assignment due next week!”

Stretching his arms, Gabriel looked to Seth. “Are we still on for the beers?”

“You know it.”

“See you there in what... ten minutes?” Gabriel continued.

“Sounds good to me,” replied Seth.

FOUR

The Digital Losers

Seth sat at a table at the local university pub, *1812*. It was rarely busy, and with its oversized tables, it was the ideal place to study while drinking a cold beer.