ironclad

Brief - Follow a laptop from the heart of a government agency, to the wringing hands of a mafia-linked assassin. Wince as he gives it to his senior colleague Edik Niemeyer, a virtual terrorist with the ability to decode its hard drive. Then cross your fingers and hope for the best.

It all started when Nile Greenbaum signed the Official Secrets Act in 2004. Working for MI6 he was told about a threat to the World Wide Web that would render it useless for fifty years. In fact, he was told to write it! This new weapon would be called the Ironclad virus. It was up to Nile to ensure that if and when it was deployed, it completely switched off the Internet.

Three years later, Nile has finished his masterpiece. Now, he's told to dismantle it and distribute it amongst Britain's most trusted sleepers. Hopefully, they'll never be asked to return its component parts to GCHQ. If they are, it can mean only one thing. The Internet has become a threat in its own right.

Vic Mudrick began as a developer on Nile's team. Like all the others, he was given his own work's laptop on which to cut new and intelligent code. But Vic made a mistake that put the security of the Ironclad project at risk. He was dismissed, told the payroll department would consider his CV, and put under close surveillance. His ego was badly bruised and revenge became his only ambition.

A few loose bricks in the Home Office firewall gave him just the opportunity he needed to hit back. He sucked information from their mainframe onto his MacBook, then put that information up for auction on eBay. Sold to the highest bidder, his computer briefly became the property of a small, Central American state. But the regime behind that small state was teetering on the brink of collapse. Their London ambassador got himself shot making his way to the airport. And the secrets of the Ironclad virus tucked away on Vic's humble laptop, fell into the hands of his murderer.

Ray Daveen, a simple assassin, had no idea what to do with this encrypted data. But he had a close colleague who regularly boasted he could hack into the Pentagon if the Koreans would only back off for five minutes. Edik Niemeyer wrote malicious code for the mafia. He took the blood-soaked laptop from his friend and broke it open. A PowerPoint presentation played out. The story of the Ironclad virus was disclosed. And Edik became its latest, greatest fan.

A few days later, two black bin-bags are slung in a skip parked on a tatty street corner in Walthemstow. They don't stay there long. In this part of town, scavengers rifle through every take-out box and ready-meal tray they can find to earn a buck. The laptop is recovered, tidied up and placed in the window of a local pawnbroker's shop.

Joshua Burn spots it there shortly afterwards. Joshua's adventure into the sinister alleyways and backstreets of the global village has begun.

Chapter 1 - In one of MI6's premier conference suites in London, England, a voice that commanded respect was addressing a handful of fresh-faced young agents. He spoke as if the fate of the free world hung on his every word.

'Total destruction,' he said. He could have been recording a trailer for the next Hollywood blockbuster. 'Nothing less will do. We want something that will reduce the World Wide Web to rubble inside twenty-four hours. Is that clear?'

Heads nodded slowly, their owners obviously shell-shocked by his no-nonsense attitude.

'Security surrounding this operation will be tight,' he warned. 'In fact, it will be so tight you won't be able to breath for surveillance equipment and high-tech snooping devices. Under no circumstances will you be allowed off the complex, here at Benhall, until your task is completed. Understood?'

The same heads nodded again. They were honoured just to be in the same room as Colonel Nile Greenbaum. 'You won't be allowed to discuss your progress with anyone, not even your closest colleagues, the people sitting beside you now, in this very room,' the briefing continued. Colonel Greenbaum snatched an A4 pad off the desk closest to him and flung it in the wastepaper bin beneath the room's only shuttered and bolted window. 'And you won't be writing anything down,' he sniffed. 'Everything must be recorded in here,' someone had his stubby forefinger jabbed into their unsuspecting temple. 'No notes, no data flow diagrams, no evidence you ever worked on this project. Is that clear?'

Someone's pager bleeped, disturbing the moment. Everyone looked fearfully about. What was the penalty for allowing your pager to interrupt this guy? A sound flogging before dawn? Instant transportation to Australia? Colonel Greenbaum's thick moustache bristled but his movie-tone voice never wavered. 'That reminds me,' he said. 'You'll surrender all forms of communication with the outside world to me. Immediately. They'll be returned when the job is done.'

He strode casually between the rows of desks towards the smooth, panelled door in the far wall. Leaning out, he summoned two security guards from the silent corridor. They entered, drawing their guns as they did so.

'It's alright,' he said, putting them at ease. 'No need to panic.' The guards relaxed but for some reason, did not immediately put their weapons away.

'Soldier!' Colonel Greenbaum barked in the left ear of the first. 'Holster that sidearm!'

Like a robot, the man did as he was told. His colleague followed suit, swiftly tucking his gun into the folds of his smart, army-issue, grey jacket.

'I told you I'd call you in after a few minutes,' Colonel Greenbaum's voice was as soft as silk suddenly. 'Remember? You know what to do.' The men frisked everyone, individually. Two minutes later, they left with a small cash of mobile phones, blue-tooth headsets and palm PCs in a wire basket. It looked as though they'd been shopping for a couple of spoiled teenage kids.