

M. SEAN
COLEMAN

net wars

THE CODE

1-6

COMPILATION ONE

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

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What happens after Strider's vow for revenge?

netwars - The Code Compilation

netwars: The Code. Welcome to the Deep Web. Those parts of the internet no search engine explores. The place where you can buy anything. Drugs, children, weapons. Anyone can do it. And get away free

Anthony Prince, head of high-tech security firm PrinceSec, dies in a plane crash at the hands of a hacker named Strider. By day, Strider is Scott Mitchell, an analyst at the National Cyber Crime Unit (NCCU). On the night of Anthony Prince's death, PrinceSec suffers a cyber-attack. Passwords, secrets, security measures to high profile targets are stolen. When the NCCU is called to assess the damage, they find a link between Prince and a criminal hacker group called Black Flag. The race is on for Mitchell to protect his hacker identity as Strider and to stop Black Flag before the next attack.

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.



The Code – Compilation

M. Sean Coleman

Complete First Series

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

Digital original edition

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The Code

You will never know me, but I will be the death of you.

I saw what you did — I see everything you do.

I heard what you said — I know your secrets.

I know where you went — I follow you everywhere.

You are not above scrutiny — I scrutinise everything.

You are not above the law — I am the law.

Don't ask for forgiveness, nor pardon, nor grace.

Just understand this:

If you cannot live by the Code, you must die by the Code.

Strider



The Code 1
M. Sean Coleman
Crash

RULE #1: Always Introduce Yourself

Targets should know that they have been attacked and understand why. Ultimately, they must know that their secret is out.

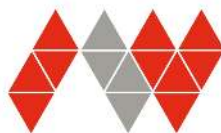
He hated Paris in the springtime. It was all such a cliché — couples walking hand-in-hand along the Champs-Élysées, and kissing for posed photographs beneath the Eiffel Tower, or buying overpriced, single-stem roses from street hawkers at pavement cafes simply because every other couple there had just done exactly the same thing. Of course, he understood that they were all just fulfilling a romantic stereotype, it was what they had come here for, but it was the sheer unoriginality of it all that annoyed him — countless couples going through the motions of being in love to such an extent that Romance Tourism was now a major business in Paris.

Strider, as he was known online, sat in his elegant apartment, just off the Rue de Sévigné listening to the evening bustle of the 3rd Arrondissement, and wondered again what had happened to make him so cynical? Why should he care if people downloaded their love lives wholesale from the movies. At least it gave them a framework within which to conduct the relationship. If it made them happy, why should it bother him so much how they went about it? Perhaps it was his own lack of interest in having a relationship that upset him more. It seemed that the very thing every other human sought out had always left him cold. It wasn't that he had anything against women, in fact he found them fascinating, and he had an appropriate understanding of men, but when it came to

relationships, even friendships, the whole concept just seemed so illogical. Why would you allow another person to get that close to you? Or get to know you that well? How could you let someone look into your soul and see you for who you really are? He simply couldn't understand the appeal. He had never let anybody know him to that extent. Not even those who would call themselves friends knew what Strider did or who he was. He would always be alone, ultimately, and there was something about being in Paris that hammered that fact home.

Still, in a matter of hours this would all be over, and he would be on a high-speed train bound for the relative normality of London and far away from the capital of romance. These last hours had passed pleasingly slowly. During the final moments of any assignment, time seemed to slip and slide at different paces — ponderously slowly for hours and then, when the moment of truth finally arrived, he was always afraid it would pass too quickly and he would miss it altogether. He could feel the quickening in the pit of his stomach. A feeling of nervous excitement, but with something else in it — something almost spiritual. This was his calling.

His apartment — one of several safe havens he had dotted around Europe — was both his laboratory and his office. It had been modified to filter out much of the rough noise of the city below, and today he had appreciated the silence more than ever as he had spent the afternoon checking and rechecking his work, making sure everything was perfect. After months of preparation, it all came down to this one brief moment of absolute concentration. He needed to focus now; a man's death depended on it.



Anthony Prince strode out onto the tarmac at Paris-Le Bourget airport and headed directly to his small private jet — a Cessna Citation Mustang. His pride and joy. Prince had often joked that if it were a toss-up between saving his wife and saving the Cessna, the plane would always win. In truth, it already had. One of the reasons he was going back to London tonight was to explain to his wife why he had to leave her — to tell her his side of the story. There was no point continuing to live a lie, but he felt he owed her a version of the truth she could live with. Besides, there were things he needed to do in London before he vanished for good.

He pulled the collar of his designer coat up around his ears and bent his head against the cold rain. He had hoped to be in the air before this weather front had come in, but he had been caught in yet another series of calls from his business partner in London. The company was in the middle of rolling out upgrades to its flagship security software, Cryptos, and the process needed Prince on hand. As CEO of PrinceSec — a specialist security software company which supplied governments and private corporations with state-of-the-art cyber security systems around Europe — Anthony Prince had built an enormously successful company on the back of a single piece of code, and he had done it all by hard work and a healthy disrespect for fair play. He was in the pocket of a number of major players in the UK and, thanks to this new software roll-out, he was expanding his trade to the EU.

Prince loved being in control and he loved exerting his power. Right now, however, he felt completely out of control. He needed to get back to the UK. He needed to get rid of the evidence, and he needed to get the hell out of there again, before the morning news broke, bringing all of his skeletons crashing out of the closet with it.

He climbed into the empty plane alone. Prince insisted on flying himself whenever he could, despite the company's

protests. It was a control thing, but it was one of very few moments when he could concentrate fully on something other than running the company. Just him, the plane and the elements. No calls, no meetings, nothing else to think about but keeping the bird in the air and putting her down safely. He was a good pilot.

He smiled grimly as he settled himself into the small cockpit and began the preflight sequence. He liked it here. Paris-Le Bourget was a small airport with a rich aviation history, the most seminal and famous event in its illustrious past being the arrival on 21 May 1927 of Charles Lindbergh — the first man to make a solo crossing of the Atlantic in his famous single engine monoplane, the Spirit of St Louis. Despite the relative comfort of his own small Cessna, in these moments before take-off Prince usually liked to imagine himself as one of those great heroes of aviation history, strapped into an old plane, unsure if this flight would be his last. Today felt different. Today he didn't feel at all heroic. He felt like he was fleeing the battlefield.

He slipped his laptop into the small strongbox beside the co-pilot's seat. Even though he was alone on this flight, he liked to have the machine under lock and key — there were secrets there he needed to keep close. Of course, even if someone got hold of his laptop, the heavy encryption on his files and his almost impenetrable password system would make it very difficult for all but the most serious hackers to find anything incriminating, but even so, he felt comforted to know it was locked up. Especially right now. He needed to get back to the UK and download the data onto his secure server and wipe the drive. It was the same procedure after every one of these little extra-curricular trips of his, but all the more important now that his secret was out. He needed to destroy any evidence linking him to his contacts. He might be able to escape the UK authorities if he was careful, but if any of his new associates were implicated, they would

find him and they would kill him without question. There must be no trace.

'Good evening Tower, Citation Charlie Juliet Four, holding short runway two right,' he said to the control tower. He felt his voice wavering and cleared his throat.

'Citation Charlie Juliet Four, winds 200 at 7, runway two right, cleared for takeoff,' came the reply in a heavy French accent.

Prince leaned lightly on the throttle and felt the engines respond to his touch. He pushed the plane through the streaming rain towards the end of runway two, wipers pumping across the windscreen. Despite hundreds of hours of amassed flight time, he still felt nervous going up at night and in the rain. He had no choice today though, he didn't have much time.

'If you ever have any doubts, don't fly,' his flying instructor had drilled into him. He wasn't sure that the advice stretched to fear of being arrested on landing.

'Come on Tony! With both balls!' he hollered to himself above the strain of the engine. The strangely encouraging phrase was a family tradition that had come from his Spanish father's playful abuse of his son whenever Anthony Prince was being feeble. 'Vamos Antonio! Con dos cojones!' he would bellow joyously, and Anthony would laugh and redouble his efforts. 'Crude, but effective,' thought Prince fondly. As he pushed the throttle forward, the small plane bumped and jostled along the runway, gathering speed. The rain pounded against the windshield and the headlights barely penetrated the gloom.

'Paris in the spring time, my arse,' muttered Prince as the plane nosed up into the air with a small wobble.

It was a flight he made frequently, crossing the channel and heading across southern England up to the small airport in Surrey where Roger, his driver, would be waiting to pick him up. Even in this weather, it was a pretty

straightforward run. He eased the plane out of its ascent, wishing he could see further into the gloom.

Have faith in your instruments, he thought. Seconds after the thought crossed his mind, a beep from the console indicated he had reached his desired altitude.

'Easy money,' he said out loud. It was one of his favourite phrases.

Once he had signed off with the tower and double checked all of his readouts, he put the plane into autopilot. Now she could do all the hard work. He sat quite still, staring into the driving rain, mesmerised by the rapid back-and-forth sweep of the wipers. He reflected on his week and on the transaction he had just completed. It was despicable act, really, for a man in his position. As CEO he should care more about what this scandal would do to PrinceSec's reputation and, more importantly, to his staff, but Anthony Prince only cared about one person and he was going to be just fine. He hoped.

'I should have just stayed out of it,' he thought ruefully.

This past year had been the most stressful and the most exciting of Anthony Prince's life. He had always worked hard, always earned well. Yes he had stepped on some people on his way up the ladder, but how else were you supposed to get to the top? He had always been above board, though. Of course, he had dirty little secrets, like his penchant for young girls, and his secret stash of filthy images bought from shady operators under a cloak of anonymity. He had always struggled to see why society felt it was so wrong. He was just looking. In his search for images, he had come across a network of like-minded individuals who called themselves the Teddybear's Picnic Network. Through them, he had found a place to explore his feelings and share his desires, and it was all completely anonymous. It was still his little secret, and nobody else would ever know who he was. A year ago, that all changed.

He had been working in his office late one night when a call had come in on his direct line. The caller had identified himself by the ominous sounding handle Nightshade, and had directed Prince to a secure server, where they had engaged in an hour-long conversation via an instant messaging client. By the end of the conversation, Prince knew nothing would ever be the same. The caller knew everything about him, everything about his family, his bank account, his whole life. That didn't worry Prince too much, it was all pretty easily accessible data, he had nothing to hide on that front. But the caller had gone on to detail every one of Prince's illicit transactions. Child pornography. When Nightshade had typed the words, Prince's heart stopped. He knew. But how could he have known? The Teddybear's Picnic Network guaranteed anonymity.

Nightshade had made Prince an offer that night — his silence in return for data and access. Reluctantly, Prince had agreed. It went against everything he had ever stood for, but Nightshade had him over a barrel. He couldn't face the idea of his secret getting out.

This was no ordinary blackmail though. Nightshade had been offering a rather lucrative partnership. A way out of the life that Prince had been living, a way to explore his wildest desires and a way to make more money than he could even dream of. And why shouldn't he? Wasn't he sick of struggling against the bureaucrats in government? Wasn't he tired of putting PrinceSec's bottom line at risk simply because politicians or multi-million dollar corporations were too tight to upgrade their security? They all knew the risks, but they would rather wait until somebody actually proved how vulnerable they were.

Nightshade had told Prince that he represented an underground organisation who called themselves Black Flag. Prince had come across Black Flag before — an elite group of hackers who worked in the criminal market on the Deep Web. They were exactly the kind of hackers Cryptos

had been designed to stop. Nightshade laid out their proposal and, by the end of the conversation, Prince's recruitment into the Black Flag ranks had begun. It made perfect sense, the way Nightshade explained it. All this time Prince had been protecting the government and big corporations from potential cyber attacks — and to what end? Who were they to say what was right and wrong, when they were guilty of far worse crimes against their own people. Prince slowly came to understand that he had been protecting the wrong people. What Black Flag did was real, it was here and now, it forced change in a way that made governments uncomfortable, and Prince could be part of that. Not to mention the fact that he could earn a lot more money, and thereby pursue his own fantasies.

The first part of the plan had been to ensure that PrinceSec's Cryptos software was installed in as many manufacturing plants, power grids, water treatment plants and other national infrastructure processes as possible. They needed to encourage rapid and widespread take up. Nightshade claimed to have contacts in military and municipal installations that would benefit from a sizeable back-hander for speeding the process through, but most of the drive needed to appear to be a legitimate business offer. PrinceSec had been supplying industry-leading security software for years and with a substantial number of the major control systems operating in Europe already using PrinceSec's software, they were in a unique position of trust. It didn't take long, at discounted prices, to get substantial buy-ins across the board. Part one of the plan had gone incredibly well. A cheap and robust software solution to a substantial security risk — who would turn it down? Over fifty per cent of the major infrastructure and manufacturing processes in the UK were now running Cryptos, and the take-up in Europe had been strong too. That represented some eleven million devices inside schools, hospitals, production and manufacturing plants,

refineries and transport networks. But that was all gravy — they had only really needed to get into one particular control system, and that had been achieved last month. Their operation could move on to the next level, and Prince's work for Black Flag was as good as done. It was time for him to make his exit.

Prince knew how close he was to getting away with it all. He only had to get through the next day and his part in the whole sordid contract would be over. He would have more money than he knew what to do with, and he could take himself away, outside of the UK. To paradise. PrinceSec would be destroyed, but he didn't care anymore. Over the past year, he had found a way to fulfil all of his fantasies without ever having to worry about being caught. The Deep Web, with all of its secretive, anonymous boards. Oh, the things he had seen. The depths he had plumbed. It seemed money could buy you happiness, after all. He had already spent a large fortune setting up a luxury house in Thailand, and with the help of a few new documents and his friends in the Teddybear's Picnic Network, he had already made plans to have a little welcoming party when he got there. He was finally going to realise his fantasies. He had built a palace, and now he would find a little Princess to live there. Nightshade and his employers could have the rest. He knew he should feel some kind of guilt, but he was way beyond that now. There was no stopping them, and if he was honest, Prince had begun to enjoy being part of something illegal. It suited him.

Another ping sounded from the console, breaking his daydream.

'Bloody thing,' he muttered, looking down. It was the altitude indicator. It had been acting up on the flight over, coming on as a warning when there was nothing wrong. He had asked for the plane to be serviced while he was in Paris, and the mechanic on the ground had assured him that everything was in perfect condition. He tapped the

light. It stayed on, staring back at him like a malevolent eye. He wouldn't have time to get it looked at again tonight. It had been that very same mechanic who had handed Prince the envelope which had contained proof of Prince's impending downfall.

'This was left for you,' the softly spoken man had said. It had struck Prince as odd at the time that someone would have left his private mail with a mechanic, but he had been on the phone and hadn't paid too much attention. He had thanked the man, taken the envelope and the service log book, and carried on with his call. As he had walked away, he had heard the mechanic wish him a safe flight. It was only after he opened the envelope, while sitting in the business lounge, that Prince realised the trouble he was in.

The envelope had contained a single slip of paper with a series of digits written on it. Four sets of numbers, separated by three dots. Prince recognised them immediately as a numerical website address. Sitting in the lounge at the airport, he had opened a secure browser on his laptop and keyed in the numbers. He often received information this way from his contacts, and he hadn't thought twice about entering the digits.

The address took him to a directory with several links in it. The first link said 'Read Me'. As Prince clicked on the link, it refreshed the screen with a cryptic note, which read:

You will never know me, but I will be the death of you.
I saw what you did — I see everything you do.
I heard what you said — I know your secrets.
I know where you went — I follow you everywhere.
You are not above scrutiny — I scrutinise everything.
You are not above the law — I am the law.
Don't ask for forgiveness, nor pardon, nor grace.
Just understand this:

If you cannot live by the Code, you must die by the Code.

Strider

Prince had never heard of Strider, but he found this note very threatening. As he tried to close the window, it triggered a series of new windows to pop open. Each of the new windows revealed another part of Prince's online life: evidence of all of his purchases and interactions with the Teddybear's Picnic Network, every minute he had spent browsing the dark recesses of the Internet, copies of the images he had shared, even a picture of the house he had just bought in Thailand. There had been no demands and no ultimatum.

Prince had called Nightshade immediately, and read him the message. Nightshade had been spooked, Prince could hear it in the hacker's voice, but he had assured him that he would take care of it. It was one of the benefits Prince enjoyed from his work with Black Flag, and he felt confident that Nightshade would be able to remove any threat to their plans from this new source, but he still didn't like the idea that there was somebody else out there who knew his secret. He wondered how much else Strider knew.

Sitting in that small plane now, Prince felt that rising wave of panic again. He needed to get back, and burn his drives at work. He had been foolhardy. What if this Strider character had already informed the authorities — they could be waiting for him at the airport. It'd all be over for him, certainly, but that didn't worry him as much as the threat of reprisals from Black Flag. If their plan was compromised now, the whole organisation could be unmasked, and it would all be Prince's fault. He had let his guard down. He had been greedy. If his stupidity caused any of the members of Black Flag to be exposed, Prince

knew he would end up paying the ultimate price for that failure.

Ping. He was starting to hate that ominous little light. He disengaged the autopilot and tried to right the plane. The controls felt like they were fighting against him. His stomach lurched as he felt the plane go into a roll. What the hell was happening? The controls not only wouldn't respond, but they seemed to do the opposite of everything he asked. As if from nothing, the small jet started to spin out of control, spiralling straight downward.

'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!' he called over the radio. 'Charlie Juliet Four. I'm out of control. I'm going down! Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!' Nothing but static came as a response. He had been in a roll like this before; the Cessna was a touchy jet. He needed to act quickly. Trying to compose himself, Prince released the stick, eased forward on it again and felt the plane lift out of the roll and come back to level. He was a good pilot. He tried to calm down again, breathed out, and felt the plane come fully back into his control. He couldn't see anything in the gloom outside, but he checked his console which confirmed that he'd lost height, so he cautiously eased the stick forward to lift the nose.

'Control? This is Citation Charlie Juliet four. I'm okay. I'm okay. Levelling up,' he said.

'Goodnight, sweet Prince,' came the reply.

Prince looked up from the console just in time to see the looming white face of the cliffs of Dover right in front of him. His altitude indicator was way off — he had pulled up level just above the surface of the sea. There was not even time to scream before his small jet crashed into the white cliff face and exploded with the force.



‘Goodnight, sweet Prince,’ Strider repeated, smiling darkly at his own joke.

The radar on his desk showed that the small plane had hit the ground just at the edge of the British coast. Anthony Prince hadn’t quite made it back onto home soil. Strider gave himself a moment to savour the feeling, breathing deeply. He always enjoyed the sensation of power and control he got from these moments. It was genuinely arousing — unlike any other moment in his life. Ordinarily, he would allow himself time to revel in it, but tonight he didn’t indulge the feeling for long. It had been a busy week, and there was still a lot of work to be done before he could call this job complete. Loose ends to be tied up.

Quickly, efficiently, he began to strip the machines from his desk; carefully disconnecting cables and coiling them precisely. Equipment was precious. For this particular job, he had established an exact working replica of the Flight Control System used by both French and British Air Traffic Control. It was much easier than people might think. Some of their equipment hadn’t been updated since the seventies and spares, parts, manuals and protocols were all often available online. Hell, some of the parts had even come straight from eBay. It was all about preparation in this job. Prepare, execute, disappear. Each stage of the mission as important as the next.

In the end, the actual attack was usually the easiest part. Getting close to your target was the difficult bit. Getting deep enough under their skin to know how to stop them and how to hurt them most, but at the same time to minimise the damage their accidental death inflicted on others. Tonight’s attack had been no different.

He had been secretly following Anthony Prince for over three months, and in that time he had got to know a lot about the CEO of the most respected security software company in Europe. He knew what he was afraid of, allergic to, and good at. He even knew what Prince had bought his wife for her last birthday. In fact, he had suggested it — subliminally, of course. He liked the notion that he had been inside the man's system so long he had become entirely invisible.

Most importantly, he knew Prince's darkest secret. Strider had seen some darkness in the world, and very little of it kept him awake at night, but he kept a special place for child molesters and paedophiles. The Teddybear's Picnic Network, or TPN as they were known in their chatrooms, were an exclusive bunch, who took member privacy very seriously indeed. Strider had seen the way they protected their own. He had, in fact, only begun to pursue Prince after the man had managed to evade exposure in a sting targeting the TPN. He always liked to give justice a chance — but he had watched as the group closed in to protect its members when the authorities swooped in, destroying evidence and burning servers. He had seen Prince walk away without suspicion and pick up right where he left off. So, when he had discovered Prince's plans to take his passion to the next level, Strider had felt compelled to step in. Child trafficking was unforgivable in Strider's eyes. Prince had definitely broken the Code.

So, Prince had become his next target and he made it his job to find out everything about the man. It had been easy to learn, for example, that Prince preferred to fly himself. He also knew exactly when Prince was due to fly out of Paris-Le Bourget that evening, what his flight plan was going to be, and how long he was due to stay in London. Prince's stop in the UK was scheduled to be very short, and a falsified flight plan for his departure was already logged. Strider knew that tonight was the night.

When he had seen Prince's request for a mechanical service while his plane was on the ground, Strider had been delighted — this would be even easier than he'd hoped.

Social engineering, as it is known, was a key weapon in Strider's arsenal. He could adopt any disguise with confidence, and take on any persona with ease. People assumed hackers were social misfits; pale-skinned introverts who sat alone in darkened rooms, incapable of engaging with the real world. Strider was exactly the opposite — young, charming but forgettable, handsome but not strikingly so, average height, average build, neutral voice. He blended right in. He prided himself on being able to get close to even the most carefully protected people in the world. For some reason, no matter how paranoid in every other aspect of their lives, people somehow forgot to look over their digital shoulder quite as carefully. Nobody had really figured out the digital equivalent of bodyguards yet. Strider usually spent every moment of his spare time preparing background on anyone in a position of power, just in case the call came in. He watched them all, the whole strange circus, noting down the smallest details. It was always in the smallest details that the most important clues were hidden. Be prepared. Sometimes his targets were politicians, sometimes law-makers, sometimes CEOs of major corporations. The one thing that linked them all was their arrogance in thinking that they were above the law. Well, perhaps they were above the law, but they were not beyond the reach of the Code.

Considering who Prince was — the head of a global cyber security firm — the end game with him had been a little disappointing. Posing as a specialist Cessna mechanic had proved remarkably simple. Getting through airport security had required nothing more than a company logo and a laminated staff card, which he had run off in his own apartment. Of course, he always used highly sophisticated

equipment to make sure everything looked authentic, but it was hardly necessary — very few people checked too closely. After all, what kind of criminal would bother posing as a mechanic for private jets? It hadn't taken long to load his bug into the GPS control system which fed the jet's autopilot. He had even personally handed the documents back to Prince, looked the man in the eye and wished him a safe flight. Then, once Prince was in the air, it was simply a matter of waiting until he signed off with French Air Traffic control and engaged the autopilot. Once activated, he could take control of most of the Cessna's onboard functionality, including Prince's ability to turn the now malfunctioning autopilot off. By the time he reached British airspace, it would have been too late for Prince to save himself anyway, even if he had realised his controls had been over-ridden. He had been warned and now he was dead.

Strider never felt guilt. Why should he? He was performing a service after all. Policing the ones the police couldn't catch, governing the ungovernable. Yes, he acknowledged the irony — at the end of the day he was still taking a life, and to do so was the ultimate disengagement with the human condition. It left you on the outside, looking in, unable to find a way back to a normal existence. But then Strider had been an outsider for so long, he couldn't remember a time when he felt part of something. Everything about him was a facade.

He was quick and efficient in his clean up, carefully transporting each piece of his temporary lab to the lead-lined storeroom he had installed behind a false wall in the lounge. An untrained eye would barely notice that the lounge here was smaller than any of those in the other apartments in the building. Besides, Strider never had visitors, and any curious neighbours had long since given up trying to engage the handsome but shy young man in conversation. Even the girl from the floor below had now stopped popping by on false pretences. It had taken a few

months but she had finally got the message, he was not relationship material.

He thought about Anthony Prince and about the man's poor, long-suffering wife. She was an innocent party in all this. He knew that by this time tomorrow she would have been alone anyway. At least this way, she would never have to find out what her husband really liked. To her, and the rest of the world, Anthony Prince's death would be a tragic accident, and no one would ever know his secret. It was the cleanest, safest way to dispose of a body. Let technology do the killing for you.

Earlier that evening, to ensure that all of those loose ends had been tied up, Strider had accessed Prince's desktop computer in the PrinceSec London offices and had deleted an encrypted folder of images which he knew Prince kept in his document folders, making sure to overwrite the space with a folder of similar sized documents — family photos he had lifted from Prince's laptop. Once people learned of Anthony Prince's unfortunate accident, there would inevitably be an inquiry into his death, and when they probed his last actions, Strider didn't want any evidence pointing to the notion that someone may have had a reason to kill Prince. He needed Prince to go quietly if his plan to shut down the Teddybear's Picnic Network was going to work.

Stepping out of his apartment into the driving rain and popping up an umbrella, Strider felt satisfied with his work. Perhaps Paris wasn't so bad after all.



It hadn't been confirmed yet, but Nightshade knew. Prince had promised to check in with him as soon as he landed. It was now four in the morning, and he had still heard

nothing. As soon as Nightshade had seen the coastguard report of a small aircraft crash, he had known. Anthony Prince was gone. Which was a real shame, and terrible timing. He would have a lot of cleaning up to do to make sure that Prince didn't lead anyone back to him or his team. He couldn't worry about that now, he had a much bigger problem. With Prince gone, their source of information and access was gone. He was going to have to go in and take as much as he could before anybody realised the CEO was dead. Nightshade had used Prince's login details many times in the past, but with Prince dead, he wouldn't be able to do that again after tonight. He needed to know everything Prince knew. The whole plan rested on it.

'Think, think, think,' he muttered, drumming the sides of his forehead repeatedly with the fingers of both hands — as though keying directly onto his brain. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, his bare feet tucked under his knees and laptop balanced precariously on his lap. His fingers left his head and prodded carefully at the keyboard. He hit return. A beep came back.

'Dammit!'

He cursed as the password was rejected, yet again, by the remote server. He stared at the login screen of Prince's remote desktop. How could the password have changed? He knew Prince hadn't changed it, it wasn't part of the plan. Nightshade was the kind of person who made contingencies for his contingencies. Even though he had been convinced that Prince would play his part in the plan exactly as directed, Nightshade couldn't leave anything to chance. Right at the beginning of their relationship, he had installed a key logger — a small program that monitors each keystroke a user types on a keyboard — on all of Prince's devices. He was sure Prince was aware of that fact — the CEO was highly security conscious after all — but it had never stopped him from allowing Nightshade access. Somehow, now, Prince's password was not matching the

one he had input last. Which meant that the password could only have been changed from a device that Nightshade wasn't monitoring.

'Think,' he urged himself to clear his mind. Had Prince cut him out, right at the last minute? Nightshade found himself wondering whether Prince was even dead. Perhaps he had just disappeared. Perhaps he had got cold feet, knowing that this Strider character was about to expose him. Perhaps he thought the risks were too high and just did a runner. No. That didn't make sense. Prince would know that there was no way he could back out now. Nightshade couldn't allow paranoia to creep in.

"Think, think, think," this time he drummed the sides of his laptop. Then it struck him. Contingencies for the contingencies. He didn't need to go in through Prince's machine at all. With a little luck, he could access the server directly. Only three people in the company had full system administrator rights to the company server and Prince was one of them. Even if someone else had changed Prince's desktop login, the chances were they hadn't gone to the trouble of changing his server admin password. Nightshade would have to go in the hard way.

Feeling a nervous thrill of excitement, he accessed the server via a secure shell, and pausing only to check his file log for the right admin password, he keyed it in. A reassuring ping told him it had worked. He was in.

Nightshade wasted no time getting what he needed: PrinceSec's entire database of Cryptos clients, complete with firewall details, administrator user IDs, IP addresses, security weaknesses and current software versions, all of which were worth millions to the right buyer. But Nightshade wasn't selling. This database was the key to stage two of their master plan and that was worth a hell of a lot more.

He turned his attention to removing any further evidence of his relationship with Prince. They had been

very cautious — never using real names or locations — but Nightshade wanted to make double-sure. Being careful to cover his tracks, he checked the server for any sign of his connection. He was sure that Prince had never used his company desktop to contact him, but it was worth checking. Having convinced himself that every trace of their contact was destroyed, Nightshade logged out. He felt a wave of relief wash over him as he stretched his arms up above his head. It had been a long night, but it had been strangely entertaining.

Since Prince had called to tell him about the threat, Nightshade had spent a large part of the evening looking for evidence of the hacker who called himself Strider. As he trawled through the Deep Web, he began to piece together an image of what Strider was capable of. Secretive, mysterious and obviously dangerous, Strider may prove to be a worthy adversary. He began to feel a grudging respect for the hacker's abilities. Strider was very good, and although Nightshade was angry that he had got in the way tonight, he wished they could have worked together somehow. It was so rare to find such talent attached to an obviously murderous mind. It would never happen now, he knew that he couldn't leave a hacker like Strider out there in the world. Especially after he had come so close to ruining Nightshade's plans. No one kills a member of Black Flag and gets away with it. They would have to get rid of him.

'But not quite yet,' he thought.

Nightshade smiled. It was a smile of pure, twisted malice. There was still some fun to be had. There was something intriguingly familiar about the hacker's work, and Nightshade wanted to know more. Besides, there was no point getting rid of an adversary without letting them know they'd been beaten — where was the fun in that?

'So, Strider,' he mused. 'Are you coming out to play?'

RULE #2: It's Nothing Personal

Your job is to make sure that nobody is above the law. You are not in the business of vendettas.

The Internet. Wonder of the modern age. Liberator of free speech and creative expression. Over the past twenty years, thanks to the almost global adoption of connected devices, human interaction has undergone an enormous transformation. The world is a much smaller place, and the World Wide Web is to blame. It's a place of social networking, Google searching, music streaming, desktop protesting, self-publishing, information in nanoseconds, sharing, spreading, community, productivity. There's something for everyone: if you can think of it, the Internet will have something dedicated to it. That's how the majority of the connected population see it, anyway. Very few of us stop to think about just how many of our daily activities are now 'connected'. Yes, we are aware of identity theft, spamming, phishing, viruses and worms, but few of us will look at a device which has been built to make our lives easier and see it as a possible weapon.

Potentially, anything with an electronic component could be hacked to cause huge damage. An automated drip in a health clinic, for example, could be reprogrammed to deliver a fatal dose, and reset again before staff were any the wiser. A simple security update to the control room computers in a power plant could grant hackers access to the entire grid. Using your smartphone on your work Wi-Fi network could open up all of your corporate secrets to your competitors. Your phone, your house, your pacemaker, even