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Eclipse Protocol

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Introduction

Riley Grant never believed the world would end with a scream or a bang. In her line of work, apocalypse crept in as quietly as a line of corrupted code undetected at the heart of a network. Night after night, she watched a war most people would never see—one waged not with bullets, but with algorithms. The glow from her monitors was her only sunlight these days, the digital frontier providing both her sanctuary and her prison.

She'd once been the rising star of Criterion Technologies, a cybersecurity firm revered for its iron-walled defenses and government contracts. Under the guidance of Dr. Marcus Leland, Riley grew from a determined but green recruit into one of the sharpest minds in digital security. Marcus was more than a mentor; he was her greatest advocate and the closest thing to family she'd had since college. Their work was important—protecting systems that powered entire cities, hospitals, and nations. But lately, Riley couldn't ignore the mounting pressure or the sense that somewhere, buried deep inside all the data, something was fundamentally broken.

It started as ripples—reports of coordinated data breaches targeting infrastructure in London, Tokyo, São Paulo. Each attack more sophisticated than the last, each leaving no trace. Within Criterion's warren of glass and steel, the atmosphere shifted from focused tension to raw panic. Riley poured herself into the investigation, sleeping in her office, chasing patterns across endless screens, haunted by the feeling that the breaches were just the opening notes of a much larger symphony.

Then Marcus was killed. A break-in, the police said. Wrong place, wrong time. But the timing was all wrong, the clues too clean, the files on his laptop mysteriously wiped. Staring at the empty screen he used to call home, Riley uncovered a hidden subdirectory—one file, out of place but obviously meant for her. Its name: Eclipse. The contents were incomplete. Just enough to terrify her. Projects, protocols, and references to something that could obliterate not just digital walls, but entire economies.

Now, with her world violently upended, Riley faces suspicion from every side—a traitor to some, a scapegoat to others. She's forced to look at her past, her talents, and her loyalties with new eyes. And as a shadowy organization known only as The Zeroes emerges from the digital ether, issuing impossible ultimatums to governments worldwide, Riley realizes she's at the heart of a crisis that could topple everything she's ever known.

With danger closing in and the rules of engagement shifting by the second, Riley must

decide who she can trust and how far she's willing to go to stop an attack no firewall can withstand. The world may not end with a bang, but in the age of the Eclipse Protocol, it might not need to.

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CHAPTER ONE: Digital Ghosts

The city of London, usually a symphony of bustling activity, felt eerily still beneath the digital onslaught. Riley Grant, hunched over her workstation in Criterion's sterile, glass-walled London office, watched the real-time threat map glow like a diseased organ. Red nodes flared across the virtual representation of the Tube network, then the financial district, then the power grid. It wasn't just a breach; it was a cascade, an orchestrated demolition of London's digital infrastructure. Each flicker of light on the screen was a company losing vital data, a hospital system faltering, a traffic light gridlocking entire intersections.

"Severity at Level Five," her colleague, Kenji, mumbled, his voice tight with strain. He was a good man, steady, meticulous, but even his usual composure was fraying. "We're seeing distributed denial-of-service attacks layered with polymorphic malware. This isn't a state actor, Riley. It's... cleaner."

Riley nodded, her fingers dancing across the keyboard, pulling up diagnostic logs and tracing IP addresses that vanished as quickly as they appeared. "Cleaner, smarter, and leaving no signature. It's like they're digital ghosts." Her eyes narrowed, focusing on a peculiar anomaly: a phantom data packet, a mere wisp of code, that seemed to *redirect* rather than simply disrupt. It was less about destruction and more about misdirection. A calculated sleight of hand.

She ignored the clamor of voices behind her, the frantic calls from clients, the sharp orders from Criterion's higher-ups who demanded answers no one had. Her world shrunk to the glowing rectangle of her monitor, the rhythmic click of her mouse, and the hum of the servers. Marcus Leland had always taught her to look for the invisible, the logical impossibilities that hinted at deeper truths. "The most dangerous threats," he'd often say, "aren't the ones that scream for attention, but the ones that whisper."

And this attack was a whisper. A cold, insidious whisper that spoke of unprecedented sophistication. It wasn't about stealing data or extorting money; it felt like a test, a demonstration of power. A flexing of digital muscles. The sheer scale and coordination of the London attack indicated resources far beyond any known cybercrime syndicate. This was something else entirely.

A sudden, sharp vibration from her desk broke her concentration. It was her private line, encrypted, reserved only for Marcus. Her heart gave a peculiar lurch. He was supposed to be at a conference in Geneva, a high-level summit on global cybersecurity threats. Why would he call her now, directly? She picked up, her voice a little breathy. "Marcus? What's going on?"

Silence on the other end, then a series of distorted clicks, like a bad connection. "Riley... it's worse than you think," his voice, usually so steady and reassuring, was strained, laced with an urgency she'd never heard before. "The London attacks... they're just the beginning. They're using a... a new type of vector. Something I've only ever seen theorized."

"Theorized where, Marcus?" she pressed, her gaze still fixed on the scrolling lines of code, trying to correlate his words with the digital chaos unfolding on her screen. "What are we dealing with?"

"Project Eclipse," he whispered, his voice barely audible over what sounded like distant sirens. "They've weaponized it. They're going to use it to... to collapse the entire framework. Riley, listen to me. They're after something more than just data. This isn't about profit. It's about control. Absolute digital control."

A chill snaked down Riley's spine, colder than any server room. Project Eclipse. The name sounded familiar, a phantom memory from a classified briefing she'd attended years ago, a theoretical concept that had been dismissed as too dangerous, too complex, too impossible to ever develop. A cyber-weapon so potent it could unravel the very fabric of the internet, plunging entire nations into digital darkness. The thought sent a shiver through her. Was that what was happening now?

"Marcus, where are you?" she demanded, a knot tightening in her stomach. "Are you safe? What can I do?"

A sharp, metallic clang echoed through the phone line, followed by a muffled grunt. Then, a voice, cold and synthesized, cut through the static. "Your mentor is no longer available, Ms. Grant." The words were devoid of inflection, like a text-to-speech program. "You will find a... *gift*... waiting for you. A token of our appreciation for your keen insights."

The line went dead. Riley stared at her phone, her hand trembling. Her mind raced, discarding frantic questions, pushing aside the rising tide of fear. Marcus. *No longer available*. The chilling certainty in that synthesized voice. This wasn't a prank. This wasn't a hacker trying to mess with her head. This was real. And it was happening right now.

She slammed the phone down, her gaze sweeping across her screens. A new window had popped open, seemingly from nowhere, on her primary monitor. It displayed a single, stark image: Marcus Leland's Geneva hotel room, ransacked, a figure lying motionless on the floor. It was blurry, distorted, but unmistakably him. A cold, hard lump formed in her throat. Her mentor. Her friend. Murdered.

Her eyes darted to the corner of the image, where a small, almost imperceptible symbol flickered - a stylized zero, surrounded by a jagged, incomplete circle. The Zeroes. The shadowy group Marcus had mentioned, now making their presence terrifyingly clear. They weren't just hackers; they were assassins. And they were playing a game far deadlier than she could have ever imagined.

A siren wailed in the distance, a mournful cry that seemed to echo the sudden emptiness in Riley's chest. The London attacks, the phone call, the image on her screen - it all coalesced into a horrifying truth. Marcus wasn't just a victim of a random break-in. He was targeted. And somehow, she was now implicated, a pawn in a game she didn't understand.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, pulling up her private, encrypted communication logs, specifically the ones she shared only with Marcus. They were all there, every conversation, every shared vulnerability. But then she saw it—a timestamp, five minutes before Marcus's call, indicating an outgoing data burst from *her* workstation to an unknown IP address. An IP address that now resolved to the server hosting the image of Marcus's hotel room.

It was a setup. A blatant, brutal frame-up. They wanted her to look guilty. They wanted her to be blamed for what had happened to Marcus. Her blood ran cold. The synthesized voice had mentioned a "gift." This was it. The gift of being the prime suspect in her mentor's murder.

"Riley, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost." Kenji's voice cut through her spiraling thoughts. He was standing beside her, a concerned frown etched on his face.

She looked up, her expression a mask of controlled panic. "I think... I think I just did," she whispered. The red nodes on the threat map still pulsed, a terrifying heartbeat of a city under siege. But now, another, more personal threat loomed. They weren't just attacking London. They were attacking her. And she knew, with chilling certainty, that her life had just been irrevocably changed.

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