The Cipher Files: Cracking the Code

Noah Anderson had always been good with computers. He was one of the top students in Mr. Kendell's Creative Coding class, where he learned Python programming and how to troubleshoot code. While other students just followed assignments, Noah went further. He rewrote scripts to make them better, figured out how different loops and conditionals worked together, and often helped fix his classmates' broken code. When something didn't work, he had to know why.

Noah also had a thing for nicknames. He loved coming up with names for his friends, especially ones that sounded cool or tech-related. He and his group started calling Mr. Kendell "Master K," and before long, the whole school used it. But Noah himself didn't have a nickname, and even though he wanted one, nothing ever stuck. He figured he'd earn one eventually—something that truly fit.

Across the school, Damian Dalton was working on something different. While Noah spent his time fixing code, Damian was busy breaking it. He liked finding weaknesses in the school's systems. At first, it was just a game—messing with the bell schedule, causing random login errors, or making small vending machine malfunctions. But the more he experimented, the more he realized how much control he could take.

Damian didn't just want to cause problems—he wanted to prove something. He believed that technology ruled everything, and if he could control the system, he could control the school. What he didn't know was that every time he messed with something, Noah was the one fixing it. While Damian thought of Noah as a rival, Noah didn't even know he was in a battle.

Noah didn't see himself as a hacker. He loved solving problems, not creating them. When a program had an error, he fixed it. When a computer froze, he figured out why. It never crossed his mind that someone could be causing these problems on purpose. So when the library's self-checkout system started failing, Noah just assumed it was a software bug. Books weren't scanning, student accounts weren't updating, and the librarian was frustrated. Noah took a look, found the issue, and patched it. He never thought to ask how the error got there in the first place.

Meanwhile, Damian was watching and learning. He knew someone was fixing the things he was breaking, but he didn't know who—yet. Every time he caused a glitch, it disappeared within a day or two. That meant someone was cleaning up after him. At first, it annoyed him. But then, he saw it as a challenge. If someone was going to erase his work, he would make sure it wasn't so easy next time.

The Cipher Files: Introduction

The next few "glitches" became more subtle. The school's vending machines started rejecting student ID payments, random error messages popped up on login screens, and some classroom projectors refused to connect to teacher laptops. None of these were major problems, but they were annoying enough to cause distractions. Students complained, teachers grumbled, and Noah—thinking it was just another day of school tech issues—kept stepping in to fix them.

But as the tech issues piled up, Noah started to notice something strange. These weren't random malfunctions—they were too specific, too deliberate. The vending machines worked fine after school, but not during lunch rush. The login errors happened right before major assignments were due. The projectors failed only when teachers needed them most. It was almost like... someone was doing this on purpose.

Noah wasn't supposed to have access to the school's systems, but being an office aide came with perks. The principal knew he was tech-savvy, and whenever there was a computer issue too big for the teachers to handle, Noah was often the one called in to help. Sometimes, the principal even pulled him out of class to fix urgent problems—anything from locked accounts to network crashes. Because of this, Noah was given temporary admin access at times, allowing him to see how the school's systems worked on a deeper level.

Damian, however, had no such permission—but that didn't stop him. He wasn't fixing things; he was breaking them on purpose. Unlike Noah, who learned through official coding lessons, Damian had taught himself through trial and error. He had discovered security flaws in the school's outdated network, finding ways to bypass certain restrictions. While most students were locked out of protected files, Damian had figured out how to slip through unnoticed. Every system had a weakness, and Damian was determined to find them all.

The first time Noah noticed something was off, he was fixing a problem with the library's checkout system. It should have been a simple bug—just a missing line of code. But when he checked the system logs, he found extra commands that shouldn't have been there. It was like someone had intentionally messed with the code. The problem wasn't just an error—someone had changed it on purpose.

Meanwhile, Damian was getting bolder. He had started with small glitches, but now he wanted to see how much control he really had. He tested his limits by turning off certain Wi-Fi access points, resetting passwords, and making school printers spit out pages of gibberish. Nobody suspected a student could be behind it—except Noah, who was starting to put the pieces together.

At first, Noah didn't think much of the strange code changes he had found. The school's tech wasn't perfect, and bugs happened all the time. But as he kept working on different

school systems, he started to notice a pattern. The errors weren't random—they were deliberate. Each time he fixed a problem, it was as if someone had intentionally altered the code, then left it to see what would happen. It didn't feel like a mistake. It felt like a test.

Damian, meanwhile, had moved past small tricks. He wasn't just causing glitches—he was watching how people reacted. Each time Noah unknowingly fixed his work, Damian studied the logs and learned how the school reset its systems. This gave him even more ideas for future exploits. He started messing with classroom projectors, making them flicker or refuse to connect. He edited digital announcements, inserting tiny errors that made messages unreadable. These weren't just pranks—they were experiments.

Noah's suspicions grew when the same types of errors kept appearing. The coding issues weren't scattered—they were targeted. It was always something noticeable enough to cause frustration but not serious enough to raise alarms. It was as if someone wanted to see how far they could push before getting caught. The realization made him uneasy. Someone wasn't just messing with the school's tech—they were learning how to control it.

But who? No students should have had access to these systems. The only other people with the right permissions were teachers and IT staff. Noah couldn't imagine a teacher wasting time on this. That left only one possibility—someone had found a way in without permission. And whoever they were, they were getting better.