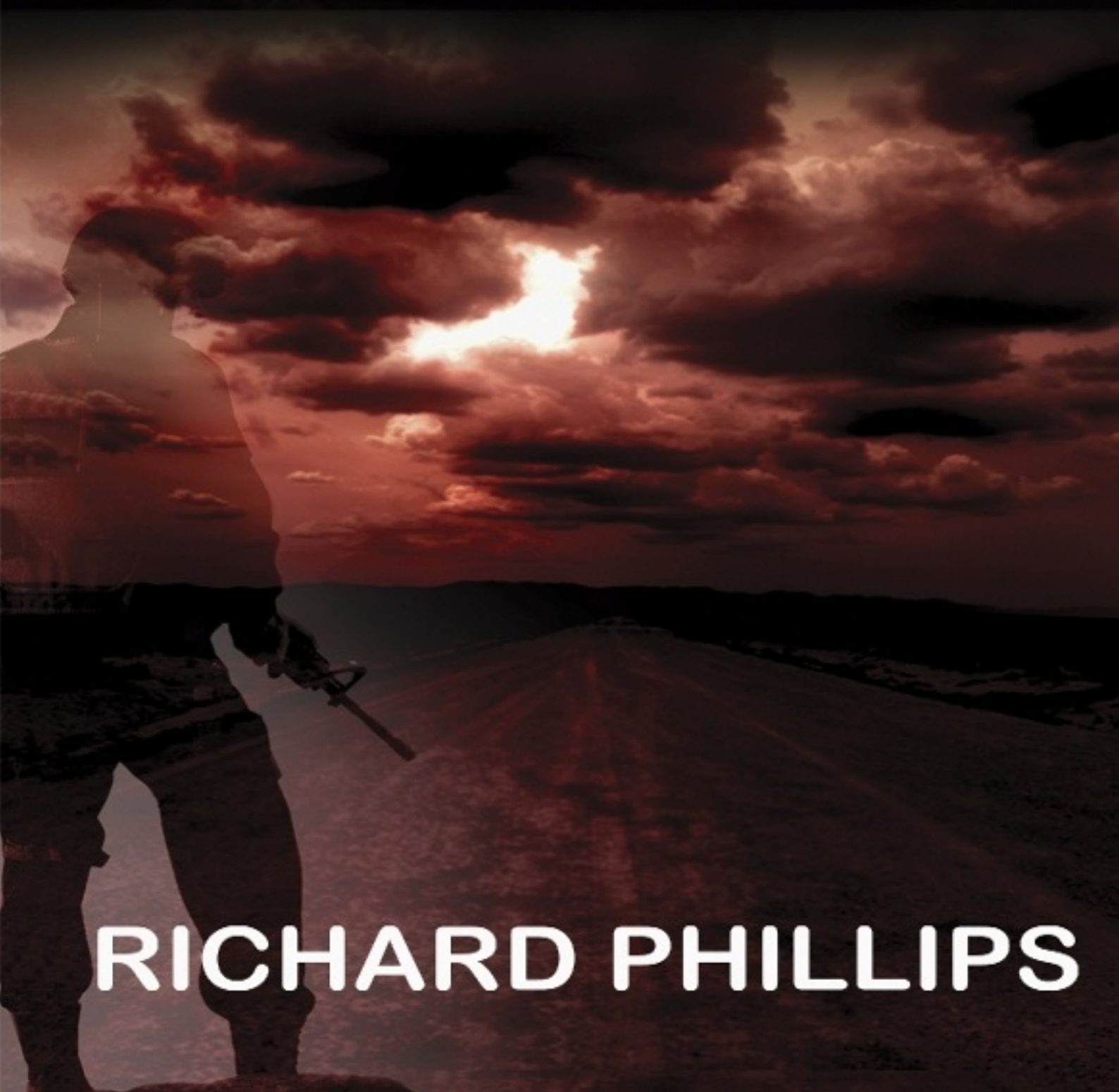


Book Two of The Rho Agenda

IMMUNE



RICHARD PHILLIPS

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By

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The naked teenage boy lay flat, suspended in the air as if he rested upon an invisible examination table.

If he could have blinked his eyes, he would have. But that was not possible. The stasis field that held him suspended four feet above the floor permitted no such movement. Instead, his eyes stared upward, unable to close, unable to blink, his movements now subject to a will other than his own.

Gray light from the conduits that snaked overhead illuminated the jumble of machinery crowding the room. The teen's ears thrummed with the low, throbbing pulse of the machinery that surrounded him. He wasn't sure how long he had lain there. Except for the thrumming, his only full-time companion was pain. He dared not think about his other visitor.

A subtle current in the air wafted around his body, a passing coolness that gently brushed the hairs on his arms and alerted him to the visitor's arrival before the other man passed into his peripheral vision. The arrival confirmed only one thing: God had abandoned him. A lifetime of belief had been stripped away; the awful truth lay bare. No loving God would allow his child to endure this. Not this.

The face of Dr. Donald Stephenson, deputy director of Los Alamos National Laboratory, swam into the boy's view. The scientist's eyes swept him as clinically as a medical examiner studying a corpse. An apparatus the size of a small screwdriver dangled from Stephenson's fingertips. From one end, a bundle of hair-thin wires extended for an inch and a half; the other end terminated in an odd-shaped lens that swiveled about on a pivot. Leaning in close, Dr. Stephenson held the device to the teen's face, reaching out with his left hand to touch the skin that covered the orbital socket of the boy's right eye. Satisfied, the deputy director set the device to one side and pulled on a pair of latex gloves.

Stephenson's hawkish face leaned in once more.

"Good morning, Raul. Shall we begin?"

Clamped within the grasp of the invisible lines of force that draped his body, Raul's mouth could not even twitch to release a scream as the scalpel removed his right eyelid, then scooped deeply into the socket. A single spurt of blood splattered Raul's face before his nanite-infested bloodstream could stem the flow. Moving faster than Raul's healing process, Dr. Stephenson thrust the end of the lens device into the empty socket, sending the hair-like wires squirming into Raul's head, burrowing deep into the exposed optic nerve.

Having abandoned his prayers for death, Raul hurled his mental curses at the God who had abandoned his son to an altogether more horrifying crucifixion.

School had been out less than a week. Heather should have started feeling that wonderful sense of relaxation that comes from getting used to the idea that there isn't any homework due. Instead, a growing sense of foreboding plagued her.

She had been dreaming again. Those strange dreams, which she couldn't quite remember when she awoke at odd hours of the night, left her skin damp with sweat. Neither Mark nor Jennifer had mentioned nightmares, leaving Heather the only one of the three who wasn't sleeping peacefully and looking rested.

That she couldn't remember the dreams was strange in itself. After all, she remembered everything. All three of them could play back anything they saw, the images as clear on the theater screens of the minds as if they were seeing it anew. But not these dreams. She actually dreaded going to sleep for fear of what the dreams contained, although that made even less sense. What sleep she had been getting came toward morning, marring her pattern of being an early morning riser.

This morning, a bright sliver of sunlight made its way through the branches of the tree outside her window and into her room. As the branches swayed in the gentle morning breeze, the annoying sunbeam repeatedly stabbed at her eyes, like the glint from a cavalry trooper's signaling mirror in an old western movie.

"Okay. Okay. I'm getting up!"

In addition to not feeling rested, this morning her head hurt. Griping at sunbeams wouldn't help, but somehow it made her feel just a little bit better to vent her annoyance to the universe.

Heather debated just throwing on her robe and going downstairs for a cup of hot tea. But a hot shower called to her. She breathed in the steam as she stood beneath the pulsing jet from the massage nozzle, the temperature set just cool enough to avoid raising blisters on her skin. She gave thanks for old houses built before flow restrictors reduced the available water pressure to an impotent trickle. It was one of the many things about her house that she loved.

By the time she dressed and made her way downstairs to the kitchen, Heather felt almost human. The television news blared from the living room indicating the location of her parents, but she bypassed it, blocking out the breathless voices of reporters in Breaking Story mode as she homed in on the bin with the tea bags.

"Good morning, Mom, Dad," she called out over her shoulder as she slid the cup into the microwave to heat the water.

The lack of response to her greeting struck her as curious. Perhaps her parents had gone outside without bothering to turn off the TV. She'd switch it off and join them as soon as her tea was ready.

Thinking of the TV focused her attention in that direction, finally allowing the words of the news report to filter into her consciousness.

"...at his home just outside of Ft. Meade, Maryland, this morning. In what police are calling a tragic case of murder-suicide, the FBI discovered the bodies of NSA director Jonathan Riles and Senior NS computer scientist Dr. David Kurtz at the Riles residence this morning.

"Although the investigation is ongoing, high-level sources inside the administration tell CNN that

FBI agents were in the process of executing a search of the Riles home, pursuant to a search warrant, when they discovered the two bodies in Admiral Riles' private office.

"We have also received word that Admiral Riles may have been despondent over an FBI investigation into illegal activities being conducted by the NSA, activities that Riles had authorized without the knowledge or approval of the president.

"...Hold on. We are just getting word that the vice president, a longtime friend and college roommate of Admiral Riles at the Naval Academy, is about to issue a short statement. We go now to the vice president..."

Heather didn't remember leaving the kitchen and making her way into the living room, but she now found herself standing behind the couch where her mom and dad sat riveted to the television screen. Vice President Gordon stared somberly into the television camera from behind his desk at the White House.

"My fellow Americans. It is with the deepest sadness that I address you this morning. I have taken this unusual step because I cannot bear the thought of how my good friend may be portrayed in coming days. With that in mind, I think it is important to let you, the American people, know a little of what I know about the man and the situation that led to this tragic outcome.

"I have known Jonathan Riles since we were roommates together at Annapolis. I played alongside him on the Navy football team. I studied at a desk across the room from him as he qualified for selection as a Rhodes Scholar. And I served with and under him as he rose to the rank of vice admiral in the United States Navy.

"Never have I met a braver man or one who cared more about his country than Jonny Riles. He was a man's man, a man from a different age. He cut his teeth in the historic struggle of the cold war. That struggle against the Soviet Empire molded his belief set and, in the end, I believe that it was that belief set that destroyed him.

"All of you are aware of the tremendous implications of the president's public announcement of the existence of the Rho Ship, along with his plan for a phased release into the public domain of the beneficial technologies your government has been able to unravel to this point.

"You are also, no doubt, aware that there has been a tremendous ongoing debate, both inside and outside the administration, about the wisdom of making that information public. Our president took the courageous and, I believe, correct step in putting the good of our planet ahead of selfish national interest by releasing that information.

"Unfortunately, despite all of his years of exceptional service to our country, my oldest friend could not bring himself to accept that decision. In recent days, it has come to our attention that Admiral Riles was misusing his position at the National Security Agency in an attempt to discredit the ongoing work being done by the fine scientists on the Rho Project. In doing so, he hoped to prevent the release of technologies that Admiral Riles felt were best kept secret and used solely in the interest of the United States.

"Once he became aware that his unauthorized criminal activities had been discovered, Admiral Riles killed Dr. David Kurtz, the man whom he believed to be a government informant, and then turned his gun upon himself."

The vice president paused momentarily, his eyes shining with moisture.

"People often speak of the fog of war. Well there is another type of fog that can obscure the vision of those who have risen to a position of power through a lifetime of service to their country. It is the fog of personal beliefs. Sometimes that fog can become so thick that it obscures the one thing that serves as a constant beacon, leading our ships safely into port. That one thing is the Constitution of the United States of America.

"I close now, hoping that I have given you some sense of the man I knew. A good man, a brave and

honorable American, an old Navy hand who lost his way in the fog and allowed himself to lose sight of the beacon that could have guided him safely through.

"May God provide his mercy and forgiveness to my oldest friend. May God be with his family in these terrible times. May God be with us all."

As the image of the vice president disappeared, replaced with one of the myriad of TV analysts, Heather found tears rolling down her cheeks. She had never even heard of Jonathan Riles but, almost she felt that she knew the man. The sense of foreboding that had been growing in her mind these last few days now had substance. Apparently, their attempts to stop the Rho Project had failed.

From the kitchen, the periodic "food ready" beep of the microwave continued, unnoticed.

Those eyes.

They were a part of the Ripper's legend: the way the light refracted in his oddly shaped pupils whenever he was angry, so that they seemed to burn with an inner flame. Those who had seen that red glint and lived to tell about it thought that it was like peering into the depths of hellfire itself. The flames behind those pupils leaped and danced, as if to a tune that only Beelzebub and Jack Gregory could play.

But Janet knew. Lucifer might rule in hell, but here on planet earth, Jack Gregory was the reigning killer angel.

As she looked into Jack's face, a chill ran up Janet's spine all the way to her scalp, leaving in its wake a tingle reminiscent of the aftereffects of a jolt from a Taser. Amazing. There was no thrill on earth quite like what she got from staring into those eyes. God, it made her hungry. It made her want to wrap her legs around him and dig her long fingernails into the skin of his bare back. But that would have to wait.

"So we have confirmation?" Jack's voice disrupted her reverie.

Janet nodded. "Yes. The refrigerated truck will depart the special medical lab at Kirtland Air Force Base at midnight, get up on I-25, and head directly back to Santa Fe before turning off toward Los Alamos. It looks like they are going to turn the body over to Dr. Stephenson at Rho Division sometime before dawn, right back here at the Los Alamos National Laboratory."

Raymond Bronson leaned forward, placing both elbows on the table. "It sure didn't take long after Riles' death for the powers that be to get Priest's corpse transferred to the control of the Rho Project team."

Jack shrugged. "They are in full-blown cleanup mode. That's why tonight we are going to dirty things up for them."

Bronson frowned. "Jack, you know I never question your judgment. But don't you think we are really stepping out on the ragged edge on this one?"

"No more than we already are. We are completely out in the cold now. All our government contacts are cut, and we have to make damn sure to keep it that way. Somehow, Jonathan Riles managed to limit knowledge of our involvement to a group that apparently only included himself and David Kurtz."

"If that knowledge hadn't died with the two of them, you can be very sure we would have already had to deal with people sent to make us just as dead. Whoever betrayed Jonathan has to know that Riles had a special field team deployed, but they will assume the team will be doing its best to disappear."

Bronson shook his head. "Which sounds like a damn good plan to me."

"Maybe so, but we aren't going to be that cooperative."

Bobby Daniels, a tall, lanky man with a head as bald as a cue ball, stepped out of the shadows near the window. "I'm game, as always, Jack. We can't live forever."

Seeing Jack staring at him, Bronson shrugged. "Of course I'm with you. Just thought I'd offer you one last chance to take the easy way out."

"I'd rather be the hunter than the hunted," Jack said. "And I want that body."

Leaning over the table with the one to fifty-thousand scale military maps of the target area spread across it, Jack stuck a pin in a spot on the highway, sticking two others at locations where the terrain contours indicated that line of sight back to the first point terminated.

"Bobby, you'll wait right here, just at this bend in the highway, about a half mile before the ambush point. Bronson, you'll take the other spot, blocking the highway approach from the opposite side. Remember, when Bobby gives the signal, it'll take between thirty and forty-five seconds before the truck reaches me and you hear me take it down. There shouldn't be much traffic there that time of night, but if there is, you get it stopped."

"And if a car is too tight to the truck and makes it through before I can get the police detour set up?" Bobby asked.

"I'll deal with that on my end. Let's hope it doesn't come to that though."

Turning to Janet, Jack continued. "How's the Abdul Aziz recording coming?"

"I've still got about an hour's work left to do. I have the available recordings of his voice, and I'm using as many of his natural phrasings as possible. But for part of it I have to synthesize the vocal patterns in order to create the extra words we need and to keep a natural sounding sequence. By the time I route it through the disposable cell phone, the best analysts in the business won't be able to say for sure whether or not it was manipulated."

"That's good because even the local nine-one-one operations record everything. And we damn sure want the call recorded."

"And the chopper?" Bobby asked.

"I'll be appropriating one of the forest service birds from the site just outside Taos. Janet and I will be in it. You two get your hands on a couple of fast dirt bikes.

"Remember, you are going to keep the road blocked for exactly five minutes while Janet and I deal with the truck and its contents. After that, haul ass along this dirt road to the rendezvous point. Dump the bikes into the canyon. We'll be waiting with the chopper in this clearing right here."

Jack straightened up, handing a marked copy of the map to each of them. "Any questions?"

"Just the usual." Bronson's cocky grin had returned. "How'd I get so good-looking?"

"Just don't be late," said Jack. "We'll give you fifteen minutes to reach us before we leave."

"Wouldn't think of it," said Bronson as he and Bobby turned to the door.

As soon as the other two had left the house, Jack walked to the closet and retrieved a large box full of personal effects and other items of interest that they had purloined from Carlton "Priest" Williams' house. Two large files of information on Jack and Janet Johnson were among the contents, but it was not these that attracted Jack's attention.

Finding what he was looking for, Jack held up a skull-shaped key ring.

"I think it's time we paid one more visit to Priest's old haunt." Janet nodded, her right hand subconsciously checking the Heckler & Koch 9mm Compact strapped beneath her left armpit. The Los Alamos high country was about to heat up.

Jennifer didn't like lying, especially to Mark and Heather. But there was no way she could tell them that she had not been sleeping at all. Not without revealing the reason for her sleepless nights. And that knowledge would freak them out enough to put them both into low earth orbit.

Jennifer paused, her gaze sweeping out over the near-perfect darkness of the canyon and then up to the night sky above. There was no moon tonight to dull her view of the stars and planets that swarmed above her.

The night skies of the high desert of New Mexico were one of the most awesome sights on the planet. The large stretches of open country with no human habitation and the thin air and low humidity of the high altitudes combined to reveal a view that few on the planet had ever seen: a sky so full of stars and planets that it was hard to find gaps between them.

Jennifer loved looking at that sky. She often lay outside, gazing upward, imagining that the sky was down and that she was glued to the ground, gazing downward at the stars. If she were to come unstuck then she would fall, down and down, past the planets, to the very stars themselves. She pulled her thoughts back from the heavens to gaze down the steep slope.

Her theory had proven correct. The only thing that limited the effects of the neural enhancements each of the three of them had received on their first visit to the Second Ship was their self-image, but that limitation could be overcome by need. Her need had finally driven Jennifer to overcome at least some of her self-imposed limitations.

Only that need had driven her to believe that she could run like she now could. Not as fast or as powerfully as Mark, but fast enough and without tiring. Only that need had let her cast off her glasses and develop her eyesight so that she could now see in the dark almost as well as a cat. Only that need had driven her to lie to her friends and family so that she could sneak out on these nightly runs.

She knew she was risking discovery, should anyone check closely enough to discover the pillows stuffed under the covers on her bed. But her need drove her beyond the timidity that, only weeks before, would have left her a nervous wreck had she even contemplated doing what she now did. She was through playing the meek geek, through playing second fiddle to Mark and Heather.

Jennifer moved down the steep wall of the canyon, passing silently through the brush before turning left along an invisible but thoroughly familiar path. The soft magenta light of the ship cavern unfolded over her, the warm glow gentle enough that it did not blind her, despite the darkness from which she had just come.

Ducking under the smooth curves of the ship where it touched the wall, Jennifer moved directly to the spot where the alien weapon had punched a hole cleanly through all the decks of the Second Ship. The edges of the hole so smooth that it looked as if the deck and hull had been made that way. Without pause, Jennifer leaped up to catch the edge of the first deck, swinging her body smoothly up and in.

Continuing onward, she rapidly ascended to the room where the four headsets lay along the curving desktop, each positioned directly in front of one of the chairs that rode the narrow track in front of the table. Jennifer glanced down at the delicate, flexible bands with the small bubble at each end. It was odd, really, the way she, Mark, and Heather always left those headsets in almost the exact position in

which they had originally found them. Anything else just didn't feel right.

~~Jennifer picked up the first of the translucent bands, sliding it over her temples, pausing only momentarily as the feeling of relaxation swept through her body, like a shiver from a cool breeze. Then, once again, she began climbing up through the hole to the decks above.~~

Even before she had settled into one of the three swivel couches, the imagery that dissolved the smoothly flowing ceiling, walls, and floor of the command deck left her wrapped in the vastness of space itself. It was only a recorded section of this ship's vast travels, but Jennifer loved it.

However, tonight she only allowed herself a brief glance at the wondrous view, shifting her attention to the databanks provided by the ship's onboard library. It was the discovery she had kept secret from the others, telling herself that once she understood how to better access and understand the information it contained, she would reveal the treasure trove to her brother and best friend. And she still intended to do that. Just not yet.

After all, she had only just begun to scratch the surface. With each visit to the ship, Jennifer managed to solve more of the puzzle, each attempt uncovering some little clue that allowed her to delve a little deeper into the ship's databanks. Not deep enough to uncover anything of great importance, but the progress kept her going, feeding her thirst for knowledge. Not enough to quench. It merely stoked the fire of her need.

And as Jennifer lay back, engulfed by the alien couch, swimming in a sea of data, that fire burned white hot.

Chital, Pakistan. It had been in the rugged mountains due north of Chital, across the Kunar River, high up along that narrow strip of Afghan land that separated Pakistan from Tajikistan, where Jack had last worn full Arabic garb and carried an AK-47 rifle. Now, as Jack crouched in the darkness overlooking New Mexico Highway 502, just west of the intersection where Highway 30 curled away toward the sleepy town of Espanola, a whisper of déjà vu caressed the nape of his neck.

The Arabic clothing, the AK-47, and the weapons selected for this raid had all come from the special locker Jack had uncovered at the remote hideaway, which had formerly been used by one Carlton “Priest” Williams. That weapons locker had been one of many unusual discoveries Jack had made upon tracking down the site the day after he had killed Priest.

Priest had always been overconfident. It was one of many unprofessional aspects of the ex-Delta Force commando that Jack had despised upon first meeting the man. That overconfidence produced sloppiness, which had resulted in the insurance form Jack had found in the glove box of Priest’s truck. That form had revealed the truck was stolen from a man named Delbert Graves. A quick check of public records revealed that Graves was a hermit survivalist who owned a small ranch deep in the high country northeast of Los Alamos along the boundary of the Santa Clara Indian Reservation.

How many months it had been since Priest Williams had killed Delbert Graves and appropriated the man’s property as his hideout, Jack could not determine exactly. By the state of decay of the corpses Jack had found in the dry well near the main house, Priest must have been using it off and on for almost a year. There was little doubt that Priest had kept the place secret from everyone, including his unknown employer.

In addition to a collection of women’s bodies, there were two male corpses. One of these was probably that of the unfortunate Delbert Graves. Jack had recognized the other male corpse, despite the rot. Now he knew what had become of the assassin Abdul Aziz, for whom numerous agencies of the US government were still searching.

Here tonight, Jack’s earlier decision to avoid relaying the information of Priest’s hideaway to the people at the NSA was about to pay dividends.

Jack glanced down at the dimly illuminated display of his watch. 01:03. The drive from Kirtland Air Force Base to Los Alamos took an hour and a half under normal circumstances. The refrigerated truck carrying Priest’s corpse would be traveling the speed limit on roads that had little traffic at this hour. That meant that it would be turning off New Mexico Highway 84 onto Highway 502 right about now.

Pulling a small infrared flashlight from his belt, Jack flashed it twice, signaling Janet to begin the cell phone transmission. Then slipping his goggles into place and adjusting the infrared laser sniper-sight, Jack settled deeper into his hide position to wait.

The wait would not be a long one.

Yolanda Martinez was tired. It was never easy being a 911 operator, even in a small town like Espanola, New Mexico, but working the night shift was the worst. On weekends and paydays, the call volume built steadily as last call at the bars drew nearer. Drunk and disorderly were the most common calls, although stabbings and shootings happened often enough. Then there were the alcohol-related accidents and the late-night angry spousal confrontations.

But tonight was Monday night. Actually, it was now Tuesday morning, and it was most certainly nobody's payday. It was one of those nights when even the low-riders who liked to cruise town in the hydraulically enhanced hopping cars could not find the energy to stay out past midnight. Out in front of the police station, where the Los Alamos Highway met up with Paseo de Oñate, only an occasional vehicle rumbled past to break the silence. The place was dead.

That should have been a good thing. But Yolanda's daughter had stayed home sick from school, and Yolanda had been forced to take care of her until her husband, Roberto, had gotten home from work. She had barely had time to get ready for her shift, grabbing a microwave burrito at the Quick Stop on her way to the police station. Sleep was a distant memory. In the absence of things to do, drowsiness tugged at Yolanda's eyelids as she sipped at another mug of burnt coffee. It didn't help that Sergeant Billy Collins was fast asleep a dozen feet away from her, his booted feet propped on the desk at an angle that threatened to send a stack of unfinished police reports fluttering toward the floor. At least he didn't snore.

As long as she could remember, it had been like this. Some nights so busy and disturbing that she wanted to cry, some nights so dimly boring that she wanted to go start trouble herself, just so someone would call.

When the 911 line rang, it startled her so badly that she jumped. Shaking her head to clear the grogginess, Yolanda answered it before it could ring again.

"Espanola Police Department. What is your emergency?"

The voice that answered her was so heavily accented that it took her several seconds to understand the import of what she was hearing.

"Listen carefully. Do not interrupt me, because I will not say this twice and I will not be on the line long enough for you to trace this call. My name is Abdul Aziz. I am the one your government has been hunting with such utter futility. On this night, only a few minutes from now, I will take something that America, the Great Satan, has been hiding from the rest of humanity under the name of the Rho Project. Are you listening to me?"

There was a pause on the line as Yolanda struggled to simultaneously answer and throw a pencil at Sergeant Collins.

"Yes. I am listening."

The pause at the other end of the line dragged on for several more seconds before the man continued.

"If you hurry, it is possible that you might get some of your mobile police cruisers to the intersection of Highway 30 and Highway 502 before I have finished my business and departed, but I

doubt it. There will be dead bodies, so be prepared. If you are wise, you will have the officers take some blood samples that they do not turn over to your military.

"Inshallah, even Godless swine like you may yet be enlightened. Hurry now. Do not delay."

"Wait."

But the phone line went dead as the word left Yolanda's lips.

"What have you got?" Sergeant Collins' voice at her shoulder startled her again. Apparently, the man had not been as deeply asleep as she had thought.

By the time she had played back the recording, Billy Collins was already removing a 12-gauge shotgun from the rack and heading toward the door. He paused to yell back over his shoulder, "Get on the horn to Fred and Enrique. They are the closest cruiser, so get them rolling. I'll meet them on the way. After that, round up every other squad car we have out there and get them all moving that way."

"What about the state police?"

"Let them know as soon as you have our folks moving, and put in a call to the sheriff. I won't wait for them though."

The door slammed behind Billy Collins as Yolanda pressed the switch that activated the radio microphone. As she began speaking, the thought that she might never see Billy alive again tickled the back of her mind.

The feel of the stock of the AK-47 against his cheek felt good. Something about the solid feel of a Kalashnikov made it obvious why this was the most popular assault rifle in the world. The weapon felt like what it was: reliable.

Jack Gregory thumbed the infrared laser power on and peered out through the scope, which made the targeting dot visible. This was a sniper modification he had added to the rifle to fit this particular purpose, one that he had zeroed in exactly four hours before.

Jack had hand-loaded a hundred rounds of ammunition using the press and loading die he had found in Priest's basement. He always loaded his own ammunition if given the opportunity. A bullet's trajectory brings it out of the barrel of a rifle up through the sight line, continuing to rise several inches for the next hundred-plus meters. Then the round begins to drop, passing back down through the line of sight before running out of energy. Only by loading the exact measure of gunpowder into each round and by using the same weight and shape of slug can a shooter know precisely where the round will hit.

Priest had never bothered with such details. Jack did.

A three-burst crackle of static on the small radio at his side let him know that the truck had just rolled past Bronson's position and was rounding the curve that would shortly bring it into Jack's sight line. Jack had picked this spot so that the first shot would take the driver while the truck was still on the curve, causing it to veer off the road at that point. That would force the man riding shotgun to reach for the wheel, exposing him for the second shot.

As the twin high beams of the refrigerated truck swept around the bend, the driver's face swam into view, illuminated in the infrared scope by the lights from the truck dashboard. The laser dot steadied on the driver's mouth. At this range, the bullet would strike an inch above the dot. Jack's gloved finger squeezed the trigger smoothly, his shoulder kicking back with the recoil as the sound of the weapon split the night air like thunder.

The truck swerved and then straightened as the other man in the truck grabbed the steering wheel. Jack let the natural resistance of his body rock him forward again as smoothly as if he were on springs, his aim-point steady as his finger squeezed off the second round.

The sound of screeching metal mingling with the echoes of the second gunshot as the truck veered off the road and plowed into the rocks and trees on the far side. The trailer jackknifed past the truck cab, twisting and flipping over as it came to a sudden halt.

Jack was already halfway across the highway by the time the trailer rocked to a stop. A quick glance to his left revealed Janet lying prone a few feet off the road, her rifle leveled and ready to provide covering fire.

Jack reached the far side of the highway and plunged down the slight embankment. The cab of the truck had sandwiched itself around the thick trunk of a pine tree, the lower branches of which were illuminated by a headlight that had somehow survived the impact, although it now pointed skyward. A strong scent of diesel hung in the air.

Jumping up on what was left of the driver's-side running board, Jack tugged at the door, which

yielded reluctantly to his second effort. The inside of the cab was a ruin of shattered glass, crumpled metal, and blood. The driver's head was wedged between the spokes of the steering wheel, a large chunk of the rear and top of the skull blown away by the exiting bullet.

Jack cut the seat belt strap and heaved the body out of the cab and onto the ground below. As Jack climbed farther inside so that he could cut the seat belt off the guard, the man's head turned, revealing a perfectly round hole just above the junction of the man's eyebrows. The eyes fluttered open.

Jack cut the strap, grabbed the guard's shoulders, and pulled hard, sliding the body across the wrecked cab and out to fall beside the body of the driver. Jack jumped down, landing just beyond the two men.

If he hadn't already watched the miraculous healing powers displayed by the nanites that had infested Priest Williams' blood, the sight of the bodies of two men who should already be very dead trying to repair themselves would have shocked him to his core. Already, the wound at the back of the driver's skull had begun to knit itself closed although the damage was so severe that the operation would take some time, assuming the nanites could overcome the loss of brain tissue.

But the slug that had passed through the head of the guard had not created such a large exit wound. The man was beginning to show signs of recovered voluntary movement; his eyes followed every motion as Jack bent down, grabbed the driver's body, and turned it over so that it knelt, face to the ground, toward the west.

Jack repeated the process, positioning the guard's body next to that of the driver. Then, he drew the long, curved Saracen Sword from the sash that bound it to his waist and prodded the sharp point into the small of the guard's back. The body arched involuntarily, trying to move away from the poking blade, and as it did, the fellow's neck rose, raising his head with it.

In a motion so swift that the eye could barely follow, Jack brought the Arabic weapon around in an arc that swept the guard's head from his shoulders. The head rolled across the ground, chased by a large arterial spray of blood as the body collapsed forward once more.

Jack moved to the driver, once again prodding hard into the man's back with the tip of the sword. However, this time the body failed to respond. Apparently, even nanites had their healing limitations at least within the amount of time he had allowed them. Jack repositioned the driver slightly so that he could place a foot on his back. Then, grabbing a handful of hair, Jack simultaneously lifted and chopped. It took three short strokes with the sword before the head came free.

When a person is beheaded, blood does not gush or flow; it spurts forth, powered by the rapidly dying pump of the heart. And it is not brain or nerve death that kills the heart. It is the lack of sufficient fluid to fill the chambers.

Jack had been eight years old when he had seen his first man beheaded. It had been in the central square of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, a place euphemistically known by the foreigners in the Saudi capital as Chop-Chop Square. Jack had watched as the man had been forced to kneel so that he leaned over the chopping block.

At the last instant, a second Saudi had jabbed the kneeling man in the back with the tip of a knife, the involuntary reaction automatic. The man arched away from the knifepoint, the movement extending his neck. And the mighty sword had descended, sending the man's head tumbling into the basket that waited below. The heart of the dead man pumped the life blood from his body in one great pulse, followed by another much weaker jet, before extinguishing itself in a final set of small spasms.

Jack had watched it all from the front row of the gathered crowd, he and his mother guests of honor. The man had been his father.

Draped in the shadows produced by the headlight-illuminated branches above, Jack moved quickly to reposition the bodies in the kneeling position in which he had first placed them. The heads he placed two strides to the west facing back toward their respective body.

Then, retrieving a small plastic baggy from a pouch at his side, Jack extracted a section of fingernail and two hairs.

Hair and nails continued to grow long after a corpse was dead. Jack had taken these particular strands of hair and the accompanying piece of a fingernail from the corpse of Abdul Aziz after pulling the body from Priest's well earlier in the day. They would now serve a higher calling than they would have achieved had they remained attached to their previous owner.

With a quick scratching motion, Jack embedded the fingernail fragment beneath the skin of the driver's right wrist. He then dropped the two hairs onto the man's blood-soaked shirt, letting them attach themselves to the sticky garment.

Done with this portion of the crime scene setup, Jack glanced at his watch. 01:13. The cyan digital numbers winked up at him, as if urging Jack to move faster.

A handful of powerful strides carried him around the jackknifed rig to a spot at the rear of the trailer. It lay on its side, the silver metal warped and twisted, but intact.

As Jack expected, the rear doors were closed and secured with a high-grade lock. Not that it mattered. C4 had a way of dealing with locking mechanisms that was nothing short of spectacular. In this case, Jack used a foot-long strand of det cord, wrapping it through and around the locking mechanism before attaching the detonator.

Unreeling a strand of paired wires, Jack backed around the side of the trailer, securing the wire ends to a small green device with a handle. A quick twist of that handle sent another loud explosion echoing through the night, a sound that would cue Janet to abandon the over-watch position and move back to the helicopter.

The blast had torn open the downside door of the overturned trailer, allowing the refrigerated air to flow out, forming a slow-moving river of condensing fog. Jack switched on his flashlight and stepped inside.

It did not take him long to find what he was looking for. Priest's frozen corpse had been wrapped in a body bag and encased in a thick plastic box. Having been thrown open by the force of the impact, the case had spilled the body onto the overturned equipment that lined the wall of the refrigerated truck, wall that now formed the floor.

Jack unzipped the bag, scanning the contents with his flashlight just long enough to satisfy himself that it contained the autopsied corpse and severed head of Carlton "Priest" Williams before zipping it closed once more.

Tugging the body bag clear of the wreckage, Jack glanced at his watch. 01:18. Time enough for one last task before departure.

Jack withdrew a needle from his robes as he moved back to where he had positioned the corpse of the driver and the guard. Then, attaching first one Pyrex tube and then a second, Jack extracted a vial of blood from each of the two corpses.

Making one final circuit of the area to ensure he had not overlooked anything, Jack returned the sword to its spot at his waist and tossed the body bag containing Priest's body over his shoulder. By the time he made his way back to retrieve the AK-47 rifle, Jack could hear the helicopter engine winding up on the ridge above the highway.

High above, stars spilled across the moonless night sky, the Milky Way pointing a trail back toward the waiting chopper. With a deep breath, Jack hitched the corpse higher on his shoulder, then moved out, his powerful legs propelling him up the steep slope and into the darkness beyond.

For every one of his forty-seven years, Tribal Police Sergeant Jim “Tall Bear” Pino had lived here on the Santa Clara Indian Reservation. For more than half of that time he had been a tribal policeman.

It was hardly normal procedure for non-tribal police departments to call Indian police on things that were not considered Indian affairs. But Yolanda Martinez, a 911 operator for the Espanola police, was his third cousin by marriage, and she had sounded spooked.

Always, when they were children, Yolanda had come to Tall Bear whenever she needed help or reassurance. He had been the big brother she never had. While the years had sent them their own families and their own paths to travel, Yolanda and Tall Bear had remained close. Tonight, a dread premonition had made Yolanda call him and play the 911 recording over the line.

Although the Espanola Police had several squad cars on the way, Tall Bear was on duty and he was closer to the intersection described in the call. Tall Bear's tribal police cruiser was a Jeep Cherokee that had traveled country that most people thought only a man on a horse could reach. While he would never win any road races in the vehicle, it allowed him to use roads across tribal lands, which shortened the distance to his desired destination.

Crossing one last cattle guard, the Cherokee's wheels spewed a cloud of dust as Tall Bear left the dirt road to climb up onto the pavement of New Mexico Highway 30. There was no traffic tonight, and he did not switch on the police light bar atop the vehicle. No use broadcasting his imminent arrival.

As he rounded the bend in the highway from which the junction of Highway 30 and Highway 502 were visible, Tall Bear discovered the reason for the complete lack of traffic. A small line of cars and trucks were stopped at a roadblock just west of the road junction.

Switching on his flashing police lights, Tall Bear maneuvered the Cherokee around the waiting traffic, through the Y intersection, and west along Highway 502. The roadblock consisted of a couple of unmanned construction barriers with blinking orange lights. Perhaps a hundred yards beyond the barrier, at a bend in the road, the lights of a police vehicle cascaded through the woods.

Odd. Even the local police departments never set up haphazard roadblocks such as this. There should at least be one deputy manning the point where traffic was blocked.

Tall Bear eased the Cherokee off the highway, around the barriers, and then back onto the pavement again, moving the vehicle forward much more slowly now. If his black hair had not hung to his waist, it would certainly have been standing straight up on his head. He was close enough now to see the flashing police light bar in the woods to the side of the highway clearly, but he could see no other vehicle lights.

Why didn't the police car have on its headlights and parking lights?

As he angled the Cherokee toward the spot, Tall Bear got the answer to his question. There was no police car. The flashing police light bar had been connected to an automobile battery and hung from a tree branch to make it appear that a police car had pulled into the wood line.

Suddenly, the night air seemed to take on a chill that had not been present moments before. The 911 message had said there would be death here. As he stared at the flashing light bar in the tree, Tall Bear believed.

Leaving his own police lights flashing, Tall Bear grabbed the heavy flashlight from the floorboard, touched the handle of the 45-caliber revolver that hung in its holster, strapped to his side, and moved into the woods. Within seconds, he was away from the lights, moving west, parallel to the highway, a shadow among the shadows.

As a small boy, Tall Bear had worshipped his grandfather. The old man had taught him to hunt and fish, not with rifle and pole, but in the old ways of their people. His grandfather had instructed him to read trail sign, to understand what the earth said with each bent blade of grass, with the sudden silence of the insects, with the faint smells that hung on the breeze.

So few of the young people cared to learn the old ways now. They had been seduced by the call of the white man's world, lulled by the lethargic drone of the television, hunting only on an Xbox. But Tall Bear had stayed true to his ancestors, passing the old knowledge to his own sons. Here in the dark woods, as he moved silently among the trees, the voices of the ancients whispered to him.

The curve in the highway swept Tall Bear beyond sight of the roadblock, although a flicker of police lights lit the tips of the tallest trees. Continuing westward, the smell of cordite brought him to halt. Someone had been blasting, although this smell was different from the dynamite used by road crews. It wasn't gunpowder either.

He was close now. The scent of spilled diesel told him that much. From high up on the ridge above the sound of a helicopter rose in volume as it passed overhead before banking away to the north.

Tall Bear stepped to the edge of the road, trying to catch sight of it, but if it was up there, it must have been flying without lights.

Now that he had stepped out of the wood line, Tall Bear could see a light shining up into the trees from the far side of the road, no more than a hundred feet from where he now stood. It was a headlight.

Crossing the highway, Tall Bear moved more quickly now. Whatever the danger, there had been a wreck and the possibility that someone lay injured in the wreckage pulled him forward.

As he got closer, the extent of the accident became clear. A truck had left the highway at high speed, its momentum wrapping the cab around a tree, sending the overturned trailer sliding past the cab in a motion that had almost ripped it free of its moorings.

In the indirect lighting provided by the one surviving headlight, Tall Bear saw two people, kneeling facedown to the ground, less than twenty feet from the mangled cab of the truck. They were not moving.

"Hey, are you hurt?" Tall Bear yelled as he ran toward them, flipping on his flashlight as he ran.

Two faces stared back at him, eyes reflecting in the moving beam of the flashlight, a sight that brought him to a stop, weapon drawn. The heads sat side by side, at least five feet separating them from the kneeling bodies.

The silence of the night draped him like a blanket. Tall Bear did not bother to switch off the flashlight. If this were a trap, he would already be dead. No. Not a trap. This was a message.

His pulse still pounding from the initial shock of the scene, Tall Bear reasserted his self-control. Death was, after all, no stranger to him.

Moving forward once again, Tall Bear allowed the flashlight beam to sweep the bodies before returning to the two heads, each of which had a bullet wound in the forehead. As he passed the bodies he stepped around the large pool of blood that had spread out from the twin torsos of the murder victims. The initial spurt of blood had spewed out several feet, but the heads themselves sat on the ground beyond the furthest extent of the splatter.

Moving methodically now, Tall Bear noted the small details: The bodies were in military uniforms, both wearing side arms, military issue 9mm Beretta pistols. The torsos had been ritualistically positioned so that they knelt in the manner of Muslims at prayer oriented due west instead of east,

heads facing back to the east, five feet past the bodies.

The bullets had passed through the foreheads out the back of each head, although one of the exit wounds was much more massive, having blown out a significant portion of the skull.

What bothered Tall Bear had nothing to do with the way the corpses had been arranged. It had to do with where they died. It was all wrong.

Moving back to the cab of the truck, Tall Bear climbed up onto what was left of the running board and leaned inside. The force of impact had shattered the windshield. Shining his flashlight around the back of the truck's cab, Tall Bear found what he was looking for. Blood and bits of brain matter splattered the seats and rear wall. Within seconds, he located the holes where the rifle slugs had punched their way out of the cab after exiting the heads of the victims.

The sense of wrongness now had a reason. Both men had been shot in the head, right here in the cab of the truck, shot in the head by a high-powered rifle that had splattered parts of their brains around the truck's interior. How then, when they had been pulled out of the truck after it wrecked, had their hearts still been beating powerfully enough to provide full arterial spray when they were beheaded?

The chill bumps that rose along Tall Bear's arms and neck had nothing to do with the temperature of the night air. What was it that the Arabic-sounding voice on the 911 tape had said? Something about making sure to take a blood sample of the dead men before the federal authorities arrived on the crime scene.

The sound of police sirens snapped Tall Bear out of his reverie. That would be the boys from Espanola. If he was going to do something, it had to be now.

Jumping down from the truck cab, Tall Bear pulled a small round can of Copenhagen Tobacco from his pocket, suffering a momentary pang of regret as he dumped the contents of the nearly full can on the ground. Then he strode back to the spot where the corpses had spewed their life's blood into the dirt. Ignoring the Navajo aversion to touching a corpse, he scooped some of the blood into the can, then replaced the lid and slid the can back into his pocket.

As he stood up and turned to walk back toward the highway, Tall Bear stepped on the small spot where he had scraped up some of the blood, leaving a bloody boot print in its place.

Since he was about to be kicked off a crime scene that was outside of tribal jurisdiction, it bothered him very little to have disturbed such a small amount of evidence. No doubt, the Espanola Police would find some satisfaction in noting that the Indian cop had screwed up.

As Tall Bear reached the highway, the leading police car screeched to a stop beside him. Feeling the Copenhagen can in his pocket, Tall Bear had the uneasy premonition that he had just involved himself in something that felt like very bad medicine. It was going to take a powerful Ghost Sing to clear his mind to the point where sleep, once again, came easy.

"Hello?" Heather's head poked through the open front door of the Smythe house, followed immediately by the rest of her body.

"Hi, Heather," said Mrs. Smythe from the living room. "Mark and Jennifer are in the garage."

"Thanks."

As she stepped into the garage, Heather spotted Mark and Jennifer huddled together in the workshop area, peering intently at the cold fusion apparatus.

Mark spotted her first. "Hey, Heather. Get over here and take a look at these readings."

"Why? Is something wrong?" Concern colored Heather's voice as she moved around the workbench that held the tank.

Peering over Jennifer's shoulder at the laptop's flat-panel display, Heather's concern faded away. "Looks good to me," she said.

"That's just it," said Jennifer, her fingers flying over the keyboard, bringing up a scrolling display of recorded data. "It might be a little too good. The National Science Contest is next week, and I'm afraid this project is going to stand out as something a group of high school kids might not have been able to pull off."

Mark rolled his eyes. "In other words, Jennifer's worrying about nothing again."

Ever since they had each tried on one of the four headsets they had found on the alien ship, the three friends had experienced radical changes. Somehow, the metallic rings had formed a connection between their minds and the ship's computer, activating portions of their brains that had previously been dormant. And those changes to their brains and neuromuscular systems had remained, even after the headsets had been removed.

For Heather, the most pronounced effect was her savantlike mathematical abilities. She could glance at a pebble and know that its volume was 4.3583 cubic centimeters. The same applied to her ability to manipulate the most complex mathematical equations. The answers were just there. It was nothing short of magical.

Heather shook her head. "Jen, this time I have to agree with Mark. Yes, the control systems are allowing the tank to generate a level of energy that is above the norm. But we've toned down our output to a level that is below that produced by several scientific teams."

"I don't know," said Jennifer. "Those research teams are made up of graduate students or professional physicists."

Heather patted Jennifer's shoulder and smiled down at her friend. "Did you see last year's National Science Contest winning entry? The kid made a working microscale model of a wind tunnel, instrumented and calibrated accurately enough to provide test results comparable to much larger, professional systems."

"Maybe."

"Sis, there's no 'maybe' to it. If Rain Girl here says it's so, then that's the way it is."

Heather ran her hand along the tank, feeling the warmth that radiated out through the shielding. When they had first tested the thing, it had put off so much heat that a person could burn herself by

touching it, and the whistle given off by the steam-powered generator had been teakettle loud.

~~Their mechanical improvements had resolved these problems, and the power produced by the apparatus had completely eliminated the Smythe electric bill. Best of all, they had finished their project paper, except for one more proofreading pass.~~

"By the way, you sure took your sweet time getting over here this morning," said Mark, a broad grin spreading across his face. "What did you do? Have a sleep-in this morning?"

Heather slapped her hand to her forehead. "Oh crap. I almost forgot what I wanted to talk to you guys about. Did you watch the news?"

"News? No. We've been in here working on this damn science project since seven a.m. like we all said we would be. Or maybe you forgot that we need this finished to cover our collective asses. Besides, our TV's been on the fritz since the day before yesterday. Dad says the power supply is shot. He's going to rebuild it this weekend."

Heather tapped Jennifer on the shoulder. "Jen. Pull your head out of the computer for a second. You'll want to hear this too."

When Jennifer didn't respond, Mark rolled his eyes, reached over and smacked his twin on the top of the head.

"Ow! What is wrong with you?"

"Just trying to bring you back into the real world for a little bit. Heather's been trying to get your attention for five minutes."

"Mark, I have not. It's only been about thirty seconds."

"Whatever."

Jennifer's scowl indicated that it didn't matter greatly whether it was five minutes or five hours. "Well, you've got it. What's the big emergency?"

Mark raised his eyebrows. "Whoa. What's up with the attitude?"

"Attitude? I'll give you some attitude if you slap me on the head again while I'm working on something. You'd be a little angry if I did something like that to you."

"Much as I hate to break up the brother-sister love fest," said Heather, "I do have something important to tell you guys. I was late getting over here this morning because of the news. There was a terrorist attack last night, right here on the highway between Pojoaque and Los Alamos."

Jennifer's eyes widened. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. The government had Highway 502 closed for more than eight hours. It was a giant mess for all the people trying to get into town from Santa Fe this morning."

Mark leaned forward, his attention suddenly fully focused on what Heather had to say. "The government? Don't you mean the police closed the highway?"

"No, I mean the government. The news reporters were going nuts about it. A nine-one-one call was made to the Espanola police just before one a.m. last night. The caller claimed to be the terrorist Abdul Aziz."

"The one that killed the scientist and his family in Los Alamos last fall?" Jennifer gasped.

"Yep. Anyway, he claimed that a terrorist attack was about to happen and gave the location. The Espanola Police sent several squad cars toward the spot before calling the state police and sheriff's department. Although the report said a member of the Santa Clara Tribal Police ended up getting there first."

"So what happened?" Mark asked.

"A truck had been ambushed on the highway and two people killed. It was a big mess."

"Why was the government interested?"

"They said the truck contained sensitive US government equipment. The military kicked the local cops off the site and took control of the entire area."

"They kicked the local cops off the crime scene?" Jennifer asked.

"Yes."

"I bet they were mad as hell," Mark laughed.

"They didn't say so, but the policeman being interviewed didn't look happy about it. The FBI agent wasn't looking too pleased either."

Mark looked puzzled. "You mean they even had the FBI blocked? I didn't think that was possible."

Heather shrugged. "It sure had the press spun up. The only thing they could get out of the military spokesman was the same line about the classified cargo on the truck requiring special security measures. But there was something else."

Heather paused, rewarded almost immediately with a look of annoyance on Mark's face.

"Which was? Christ, Heather, if I'm going to have to pull the story out of you piece by piece, this is going to take all day."

"Someone in the Espanola Police Department leaked the nine-one-one tape to the media. They played it on the air. Talk about creepy. On the tape, Abdul Aziz mentioned that he was going to steal something from the Rho Project."

A gasp from Jennifer reminded Heather of the other twin's presence.

"And," Heather continued, "he said that the police should collect blood samples from the dead men. Aziz warned them not to share the samples with the government."

Mark, whose mouth had fallen open, closed it with a snap. "Holy crap. Aziz must know about the nanites. Did they say any more about the blood or what was on the truck?"

"The government spokesman just said that this was typical terrorist propaganda, lies designed to fool the Muslim faithful into believing wild conspiracy theories."

Mark had begun pacing back and forth beside the cold fusion tank. "But how could Aziz know that the Rho Project is working with alien nanotechnology? His people couldn't have intercepted one of our messages. We put those directly onto the NSA SIPRNet using the subspace transmitter."

"They must have an agent inside the NSA," said Heather.

"Oh, that is just great," said Jennifer. "The NSA director and his top computer scientist are dead, and now you think there may be a double agent on the team?"

Heather was surprised to see that her own hands were shaking. She clasped them together, hoping that Mark had not observed her nervous reaction to this line of thought.

"I don't know." The probabilities that cascaded through her mind for each of the possibilities were small. "Something doesn't add up. I just can't put my finger on what's wrong."

Mark stopped pacing, turning to stare directly into Heather's eyes. "What about the quantum twin bug I put into Janet's laptop? Those two are bound to know something. I think it's time we checked it out."

Jennifer rose to her feet so rapidly that she almost knocked over her chair. "Are you insane? Jack and Janet won't be able to detect a transmission, but that doesn't mean they can't detect the fact that files on the computer have been accessed."

"That's exactly why we have a computer whiz like you. Figure something out."

"Figure something out? I've already figured it out. It's okay for us to passively monitor what they're doing on that computer, but there's no way we can remotely browse the files on that system without leaving behind some evidence that it's been accessed. That's all there is to it."

Mark refused to be cowed. "Fine then. So they might be able to tell that someone browsed their system. They can't trace it, so what's the problem?"

Jennifer's forehead furrowed in frustration. "You don't get it. If they notice the system has been tapped, they'll tear it apart. When they do, they'll find the little QT microchip. Even though they won't be able to determine what it does, they'll know that it was put there by someone who was in their

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