Eric was in a meeting when he received the text message. Any other message he would have ignored, at least for the moment. But the 911 he received meant one of two things.

He clapped his phone shut and excused himself. As he walked out, he wondered if Ted was concerned about the Plato project. Everyone in Washington had been a bit on edge since its recent initiation after years of debate in Congress.

But the 911?

Eric grimaced. Either Ted was concerned about security and couldn't send a proper message, or else there was a Red Hat.

He wasn't sure which was worse.

Eric quickly worked his way back to his office, where there was a secure phone. He closed the door and called his boss.

"Eric Sheppard here."

"Eric." Ted managed to sound both relieved and worried at the same time. "Is this line secure?"

"Yes, I'm at NSA, in my office. Ted, what's going on?"

"It's about Plato," he said quickly. "I don't have much time to explain, but something's gone terribly wrong. We've been given orders to shut it down immediately. Report to the briefing room; everyone is getting their orders there."

"Sure, Ted. I'll be right there."

"Eric," Ted said a bit hesitantly. "This is hot. Real hot. The orders came from Mom. Everyone is buzzing like it's the *War of the Worlds*."

Eric knew there was public pressure against Plato. It's been fairly controversial since its inception. Ted's tone and the president's involvement didn't feel right at all. The last time there was

a Red Hat, it was a career-changing moment for a lot of people, not to mention the chaotic aftermath. It took years to clean up, sifting through the legal red tape, subpoenas and trials--as well as the personal cost.

"Okay, Ted. I understand."

He hung up the phone and swiftly moved to the briefing room. The room had no windows, and the walls were soundproofed to ensure privacy. It often was used to discuss confidential matters. By the time Eric arrived, the room was awash with people coming and going. It seemed haste superseded privacy.

"Mr. Sheppard, come in," an older man with a mustache commanded from inside the room. Eric recognized him; his name was Gene Calico. He served as the acting director of the "R" division at the National Security Administration, and often dealt directly with the president.

He shuffled through a small pile of folders. "I have your orders here. Please read them and see they are shredded."

He found the correct folder and handed it to Eric, but as Eric took it from him, the man didn't let go. He looked Eric in the eye. "We are on Red Hat, Mr. Sheppard, I don't need to tell you how urgent this matter is."

"I understand sir," Eric said, his curiosity getting the better of him. "But can I ask, what is this all about?"

"You'll find the details in your report," Gene answered. "The Secret Service is already on the scene, debriefing the on-site staff. Mr. Sheppard, you will be the senior member at the Plato location. Everyone is counting on you, even the president."

Eric took the folder and turned to go, a bit surprised at the gravity of the situation. As he noticed many others getting similar folders, Eric curiously opened the folder and looked at the contents.

Protesters of the Plato project have infected the Plato production software application servers with a worm. It has caused irreversible damage and has tainted the Plato data with the purpose of causing a propaganda war. If these data get out to the public, they will cause irrevocable political damage, controversy and even widespread panic.

The Plato testing facility will be shut down immediately. All data must be gathered and destroyed, including all digital media including hard drives, CD and DVD ROMs, flashdrives and even MP3 players. Any printouts of data also must

be destroyed. It is unknown when this worm was planted, so we are unsure how far back the backups are tainted. It all must be destroyed.

Any members of the Plato project on site must be debriefed, condition Mercury. You will carry out these orders and report back when the center is shut down and all data are destroyed.

Eric read the memo twice. As he went back to his office, he considered these orders. It made no sense. Sure, all of this was plausible, but why was the NSA going to such lengths to shut down the project? Why the emergency? Viruses and worms have come through to computer systems before, why not simply load an anti-virus?

He shredded the document in his office and left immediately for the Plato testing facility.

By the time he arrived at the Plato site, the police had the protesters and media roped off, but chaos reigned inside the building and out. Well-dressed men exited the building, escorting the staff out--and the staff appeared none too happy.

As members of the media shouted questions in their direction, the staff said nothing. To Eric, it actually looked as if the staff were afraid.

"Eric. Over here."

Eric turned and recognized Marty Wasaloski. Marty was an employee of the NSA; he often was referred to as a "16," which, in the NSA, was slang for a foot soldier. Foot soldiers often did the work nobody else cared for; they were just happy to work for an organization that was above the law.

"What have you got Marty?" Eric said.

"A lot," he answered happily. He seemed to thrive on the excitement of the moment. "Some of these people are upset about the shutdown and are threatening to go to the media. Others are saying they won't honor their non-disclosure agreement. But the Secret Service is putting the fear of God into them."

"Have the data been destroyed?"

"Yeah," Marty said. "Come on, let's go inside; I'll show you."

Boxes of documents and materials were being gathered and moved out of the building. Former members of the Plato staff were in a state of what appeared to be forced cooperation. And, slowly, the building was being emptied of everything.

As Eric entered, he saw a large box of broken discs, disc drives, memory cards and other pieces of electronic equipment.

"The discs have all been shattered; the hard drives demagnetized. All data have been destroyed," Marty explained. "But we're still going to take all this stuff and burn it. Apparently some of these eggheads can reconstruct the information if they really wanted to."

Eric nodded.

"We actually had one guy smashing monitors and cutting cables," Marty chuckled. "Three of us had to explain to him how unnecessary that was."

"Have all of the laptops been confiscated?" Eric asked.

"Yeah. Some of the Plato staff had laptops and other equipment at their homes, but the NSA dispatched personnel to everyone's home. It's all been taken."

Eric sighed. He didn't really understand the urgency here, but he wasn't one to question orders. Whether or not the place was infected with a computer virus was no longer important. Clearly something in the data at this facility was a threat to national security, and the fact this had the president's attention spoke volumes. His orders mentioned condition Mercury, which meant no information leaks under any circumstances. In the past, violating the Mercury order had led to imprisonment, relocation or worse.

Whatever the reasons were, Eric would ensure the data were destroyed.

"Marty, I'm going to sweep the building and have a look," Eric told him. "It seems you've got a handle on the digital media; just make sure all of these people are debriefed. We've got a horde of reporters out there; the last thing we need is somebody with a wagging tongue."

"Will do, Eric," Marty answered. "And don't worry, nobody's going to talk."

"Also, make sure the Secret Service follows up on e-mail," Eric ordered. "Some of these people may have sent messages before their systems were shut down."

"Good point; I'll tell them."

Eric made his way to the upper level and started sweeping the rooms. Other than an occasional government official throwing away data or debriefing someone, there wasn't much left. The place was completely cleaned out. Boxes, broken equipment, books and papers lay strewn about in various rooms. It looked as if a storm hit, unexpectedly, in the middle of their research.

As he made his way down the hallway, he heard a mumbling sound. It seemed to be coming from one of the research rooms on this floor. As he continued down the corridor, the mumbling grew louder and louder. Eric noticed a painted steel door, ahead and to his right, which was slightly ajar. There was a glow of florescent light emanating from that particular room.

Startled, Eric paused; this area was already secure. The only possible noise could be a government official, but the noise was incoherent and didn't sound at all like the business being conducted throughout the rest of the building.

He came upon the door cautiously, and as he reached for the door handle the mumbling suddenly became intelligible.

"*Sentiant omnes tuum iuvamen, quicumque celebrant tuam sanctam commemorationem. Assiste parata votis poscentium et reporta nobis optatum effectum."* From there it repeated like a mantra, not stopping.

Eric was confused. He quickly opened the door and looked inside.

There were two long tables with several workstations, and all of the computers were intact. At one workstation sat a man, mumbling his incantation and intently watching the screen, rocking back and forth in his office chair. He wasn't typing, he merely rocked and stared at his screen as if he were watching water boil.

Eric recovered from his shock and entered the room, making his way toward the man. How was it this room remained unsearched? The circumstances here were extreme; there were officials everywhere, combing through reams of data and ensuring the silence of the staff. This room was clearly untouched. Computers not only intact, but still powered on. And one, apparently, still in use.

"Who are you?" Eric demanded.

The man looked at him in shock and fear. There was another emotion in his expression, which was hard to read, but the most surprising thing to Eric was that this man wore the clerical vestments of a priest.

"I'm sorry, Father," Eric said, taking a more respectful tone. "But I'm going to have to ask you to move away from the computer."

As if on cue, the computer beeped. Eric's eyes jerked to the screen, and he swore at what he saw. The priest had just sent an e-mail, or, more accurately, the e-mail just finished uploading. And from the looks of it, it contained a large amount of data. Instead of yanking out the plug before more damage could be done, Eric approached it calmly. He would simply find out where the e-mail was sent and dispatch the 16's.

The priest complied. He pushed his chair backward, away from the computer. "Tell me," he asked. "How did you find me?"

Eric looked at him, astonished at the question. He began to wonder if the priest had connections, or somehow had bribed the other officials to stay away. Then it dawned on him, the other emotion he detected. It was surprise. Not because he remained undetected up to this point, but that Eric found him at all.

"With all due respect, I will ask the questions Father," Eric said. "You do understand what is going on here, don't you? The facility is being shut down, and all of the staff is being removed. Hasn't anyone briefed you?"

The priest smiled softly, as if the question were foolish, "No. Nobody has come to this room yet."

Eric paused. He wasn't above taking things into his own hands here, priest or no priest. Eric had dealt with members of clergy from various religions in his past. His own brother was a Catholic priest, so he was comfortable taking this in whichever direction it had to go.

"Let's start from the beginning," Eric said. "What is your name?"

"I am Father Troy," he answered. "I work here at the Plato project."

Eric nodded.

"Father Troy, there is no more Plato project. The computers here have been infected with a virus. Now, I'm not sure why, probably sabotage of some sort. Whatever the reason, this has become a matter of national security. You shouldn't be here, and I think you know that. I'm going to give you a set of instructions; if you don't follow them, things will become very unpleasant."

"I understand," Father Troy said. "I will not try to resist. But you must understand something. Plato is not being shut down because of a virus, if that is what they told you."

Eric didn't want to bite, but this whole scene was making him curious. How in the world had Marty missed this room? It smelled like a conspiracy. A virus, a project under a Mercury shutdown and a room left alone during the sweep.

"Why is it being shut down then?"

Father Troy smiled. "Because of the results. The Plato project was more of a success than any of us ever imagined. The data we've--"

"The data you just e-mailed," Eric interrupted. "The data I am going to get back. Whatever you just did, I can promise you that information will not get to where you intended."

Father Troy remained silent, whether he took the threat seriously or not was hard to tell, but he looked a little less sure of himself.

"Furthermore," Eric continued, "your theory about the successes of this place doesn't fly. If that were the case, the government officials who went through so much trouble getting this project off the ground would be thrilled to hear it. They wouldn't react by shutting it down."

"You don't understand the dynamics of the forces against this project," Father Troy responded. "Are you aware of what we do here?"

"Yes, yes," Eric said impatiently. "Plato. It's an acronym. It stands for, well, I don't remember what it stands for, but you use science to analyze spiritual phenomenon."

"It's much more specific than that," Father Troy explained. "We study prayer and the scientific effects of prayer. It's quite fascinating what we dis--"

"I'm really not interested," Eric interrupted. "The last thing I want is to get in the middle of a propaganda war between various religions."

"So you're a skeptic then."

"Yes," Eric said.

"But what if there were scientific data to back up what I am saying?"

"I don't believe in science any more than I do religion," Eric stated flatly.

"But how can you say that?" Father Troy asked. "Science is analytical and empirical. It's the observation and explanation of unfamiliar phenomenon."

"Look, I don't want to debate this with you right now. Let's just say I don't allow myself to be manipulated by any side. If you torture numbers, they will confess to anything."

"If you only saw the data," Father Troy pleaded. This tone became desperate. "Please, let me show you. I will explain why I sent that e-mail. If you will only listen, you will let this information get out. It must not be suppressed."

"I'm sorry Father, but I can't allow it." Eric opened his phone and called downstairs; he asked for support staff to be sent up to this room.

Father Troy began to look upset for the first time. His body language indicated he wanted to do something but couldn't. He looked at the computer as if trying to come up with a way to cover the tracks of his data transmission, but Eric stood between him and the computer,

"They're on the way up, Father," Eric told him. "Plato and its research are over. Now, tell me who that e-mail went to."

The priest looked on edge, like a cornered badger, not responding. He looked uneasily at Eric, a question of his own reflected in his eyes.

"All right," he conceded. "Just tell me one thing: How did you find this room?"

Eric shrugged, "I just came up here. I heard you mumbling to yourself and followed the noise. Why is that such a big deal? You're lucky you went so long without being discovered."

Father Troy rubbed his temples in frustration. "It wasn't luck, I made that happen. Only you shouldn't have come either; that part confuses me."

Eric frowned. "You made that happen? How?"

He shook his head, as if the explanation would be thrown out.

The two men turned toward the door as approaching footsteps became audible. Eric turned back to the computer. "Let's see where your e-mail went."

"What will you do to the person I sent it to?" Father Troy asked as Eric navigated to the Sent Folder.

Eric responded amid the mouse clicking, "We'll make some phone calls and dispatch some men. The mail servers will be shut down temporarily, and your target of this data will be debriefed. If he has an agenda and will not cooperate, things could get ugly. It all depends on--"

The color drained from Eric's face when he saw the name of the recipient.

"Oh, my God," he gasped.

His reaction was so profound, even the priest was taken aback. "What is it?"

Eric didn't respond.

Calls came from the hallway. "Agent Sheppard?" Agents of the NSA were right outside the room looking for Eric.

This time, Father Troy gasped. "Sheppard? Your last name is Sheppard?"

Eric didn't answer; he stared at the e-mail recipient's name.

Father Daniel Sheppard.

Eric's brother.