

**The Shroud  
of the Second Coming**  
*Second Edition*

BY SCOTT SIMPSON

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### A Second Chance

Somewhere along the lines of Latitude 31 and Longitude 35 is a desert plain of two rolling hills that make up a valley stretching up to six miles in length and roughly one mile across. Some fourteen miles from Jerusalem inside the West Bank is known to the locales as the Corridor. It's there that these nomads, who prefer to be called pilgrims of the holy land, travel between these two places in search of valuable artifacts. And spending most of their days inside a valley with no name, they've been known to dig out relics as far back as two thousand years. The deeper they dig, the further back in time they go. It's this type of work that their very lives depend on. To find something in the ancient world of humanity is to provide food for their family until hunger forces them to search once again. And although most of these relics value in riches, the reality often dwindles to pocket change.

Inside this valley is an older individual who's been living in a cave for most of his life. Many have made it their homes in recent years, scavenging for values along the valley floor. And it's this simple man who's been entertaining himself by counting the campfires below. When he started this game some time ago, he remembers adding up to twelve a night. But those numbers have increased in recent days, and now it looks as if he'll break yet another record. Also, some of these fires tell the tale of the dish they dine for. Sometimes it's the pleasant scent of fresh fish and bread, others the sweet aroma of cooked lamb. But when he's almost at the end of his count, he notices a small amount of sand trickling on his head from the ledge above. And without any warning, the ground begins to tremble with forces that move boulders off their foundation, while rolling uncontrollably down the valley floor. Fortunately for the pilgrims below, they had enough time to run from these stones of death before being crushed by them. As for the older man above, it's the first time he's experienced such quakes during his lifetime. This is because the phenomenon lacks tectonic plates and lava flow to produce such seismic activities in the region. And it doesn't stop there either. Mass avalanches begin to slide toward the floor, where the crevices have formed. And even though the danger is all around, it has everyone running terrified toward the Corridor exits. Once outside, they get a chance to view an anomaly in awestruck. An eerily blue atmosphere, forming in the shape of a dome, now covers the corridor ceiling with its brilliant glow. And from here on out, it's a frantic foot race, all the way back to Jerusalem.

Early morning in 2046 at the Vatican City, it's late November, and the Pope has summoned a meeting for a possible exhibit on the Shroud of Turin. The cardinals have received emails from His Holiness about a date to display the holy relic in public. This meeting is to take place in his chambers as well as through holographic conferencing. When the Pope arrives, the cardinals quickly gather around the table, and like soldiers at attention, he looks across the room and sits. The entire congregation immediately follows. Next, the holographic platform comes alive, and Pope Cornelius begins.

"I take it that everyone received the proposal, and perhaps took the time to decide on a date for the unavailing?"

"Yes, Your Excellency, we did." Sodano, speaking up.

The Pope could see the troubled look on the cardinal's face and inquires him.

"Is there something you like to add, Brother?"

With a slight hesitation, Sodano nervously explains, “Your Excellency, don’t you feel that it’s a little too soon for such an event?”

The cardinal informs him of the age and degradation of the cloth and tries to sell him on a fifty-year delay. However, with this kind of understanding, the Pope tries explaining the other side of the equation.

“I see your point, brother, but consider this. Perhaps it’s because the image is fading that we should display it before it disappears altogether. After all, it does belong to God’s children.”

And with that being said, Sodano softly backs off with a nod.

“Well then, it’s done. Let’s all vote on it, shall we?”

Having been out on the road for several weeks now, Professor Charles Woodson opens the door to a stale odor fuming out in the hallway. Inside, he tosses his keys onto the dining table and heads to the bathroom for bed. And while looking into the mirror, he sees a reflection he can no longer recognize.

“Geez, Charles, is there nothing more in retirement?”

As a particle physicist, it wasn’t long ago that he was part of a major project at CERN involving the fabric of the universe. But these days he finds himself merely giving out speeches to those students interested in the Hadron Collider. And after the brief unpleasantness, he makes a small glass of brandy and takes his newspaper to bed. There, he notices a short article on the Hadron Collider.

“CERN has just announced a new detector to go online for the following month’s bench-testing.”

And as a result, Woodson sarcastically mutters out the words, “That’s just great!” and falls asleep.

Just outside of Geneva, beneath the French and Swiss border, is a complete overhaul of the Large Hadron Collider. About to go online, Professor Alwin Schmidt and a co-worker name Aaron Von Schamann are confronted with a crowd of reporters asking questions about the upcoming project.

“Mr. Schmidt, what kind of testing are we expected to see in the weeks to follow?”

“My team will be analyzing the success and flaws in the dynamics of sequences, taken by both the detector and T.M.P. interface, for the creation, transfer, and detection of particles to the Hadron Collider.”

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Professor. Could you please explain it to me in such a way that I can better understand?”

“He said that the detector and interface would be tested only. To see if the particles taken from any object can be transferred to the Hadron by way of T.M.P. And also, to see if the new Photo Sensor can make any detections from it.” Von Schamann clarifying.

“So, when will the new Collider be fully operational then?”

“That depends on the success of the new components. My guess would be around mid to the latter part of the year.” Schmidt adding.

Grabbing the opportunity, both professors attempt to leave the news media, with reporters trying to get in their last questions. When they finally get through the elevator doors, it shuts behind them to the sound of sweet relief. And inside, Von Schamann tries to comfort his employer.

“Sir, I just want you to know that we’re on schedule and have a green light for the new budget of 2047.”

“Good, because I’m not getting any younger. Oh, by the way, did you invite Professor Woodson? I’m sure he would love to be here.” Schmidt verifying.

“I was gonna call him tomorrow morning, sir.”

“Yes, please make sure you do.”

Just then, the door opens to an incredible sight of technological wonders in advancements. Resembling something out of science fiction, flat-screen monitors, no thicker than paper, hang on the walls, displaying the collider's performance. And walking around on four legs are probes repairing discrepancies under the pipelines. There are even those drones hovering effortlessly inside the tunnels, looking for hydrogen leaks from above. More so, are the presence of androids assisting engineers with the complexity of operations to help speed up the process.

Across the way is a room the size of a small city block, equipped with an array of computers serving a larger one. This supercomputer is integrated with the best of fiber optics and protein chips for optimum speed. It’s a processing room responsible for the innovative breakthroughs in recent years. And the engineers who’ve put it all together gave it a personality short of self-awareness. The logical name given is ORION: Optimize, RAID, Input, Output, Nano processor. ORION is programmed to take data from the collider, then process it into a 3D format. Afterward, it sends that data to the Holographic Room where it’s projected for 3D study.

Back at the office, Schmidt asks Von Schamann to go over the Hadron’s magnetic pipings once more. And thinking he’s already done it five times before; he doesn’t question the professor and gets on it right away—all twenty-six miles of it. Meanwhile, it’s Schmidt who finds himself gazing at a large equation on the wall’s touchscreen and discovers he’ll be pulling an all-nighter for this one.

“If you can’t handle the stress, Alwin, then you’re in the wrong line of work.”

In New York, Woodson finds himself waking to the long clock’s warning, and pulls himself out of bed. He wants to get an early start with the internet to get updates on the Collider. It’s a dynamic field in which constant changes are made due to the evolution of the project. But suddenly, his concentration breaks from the daily scheduling of the home system’s maintenance. The washing machine and vacuum cleaners’ startup, along with a few other appliances. And while overwhelmed with irritation, he has the urge to argue with the computer.

“Oh, give me a damn break! ... Computer, is all this really necessary?!”

Always getting the same answer, the computer replies with a simple statement. “I have been programmed to do so, Mr. Woodson.”

Going back to the schematics on the website, he gets yet, another interruption from the Comm Unit, alerting him of an incoming call. And with a verbal command to the system, he yells out the word, ANSWER! On-screen, he sees an individual to be a respectable member of CERN and immediately goes into his best behavior.

“Hello, and who do I have the pleasure of speaking with today?”

“Good morning, sir, this is Aaron Von Schumann from CERN. And how are you doing today?”

“Well, aside from the flight yesterday, I slept well and woke up to a beautiful morning.”

“Excellent, sir. I’m calling on behalf of Professor Schmidt’s invitation to a bench test we’re about to run. I’m under the impression that he’ll want your professional opinion. If you’ll accept, we’ve made accommodations for your stay.”

“My God, I haven’t spoken with Alwin in five years; how’s he been?”

“He’s fine, sir; deep in his studies. Sometimes he can be a little touchy with the pressures at work.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. Unfortunately, it comes with the territory.”

“...Sir, I just want you to know that I’m very much aware of your reputation and the popularity you’ve gained at CERN. The professor told me so much about you, and, well, I’ve become somewhat of a fan. The honor is mine if you’ll accept the invitation.”

“Say no more, Mr. Von Schumann. When do we leave?”

Von Schumann informs Woodson of a two-hour flight to Switzerland, and that he should pack for the week. The next morning, Charles secures his home and makes his way to the airport.

Upon his arrival, he receives the warmest welcome from an old friend approaching fast. With a full hug and a handshake, Schmidt enthusiastically asks how he’s doing.

“I want to thank you so much for the invitation, Alwin. My new career hasn’t exactly lived up to its potential.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, Charles. I’ve already been told of the brutality in retirement. Around here, you’ve been sorely missed. After all, you’re one of a kind.”

With a full day in front of them, it consisted of old friends catching up, with Schmidt asking a million questions.

It’s December 2046, and things go from bad to worst at the campus. The crew had already begun the installation with the Photo Sensor when they discovered it doesn’t fit. It seems that the designers in the assembly department created the wrong adapter for the Collider. And already under a tight budget, it’ll require a particular machine to create the piece. Also, one of the probes discovered a hydrogen leak somewhere in the piping, which means the Hadron will have to be shut down for repairs. As a result of these setbacks, it’ll take them at least another month to resolve the issues.

In shock, Schmidt expresses his outrage toward the progress, “How in the hell could this have happened on the day we’re to test in front of a dozen executives?”

“Well, part of it is the lack of communication between teams, Alwin. And the other is the failure to verify,” Woodson answered.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, at first, I thought the schematics were incomplete. But now I can see that the calibrations are way off on the Photo Sensor. I’m pretty certain the run would’ve failed without these corrections. But if it helps, this can all be resolved before the final deadline, depending on the extent of the leaks that is.”

Upon Schmidt’s request, Woodson agrees to extend his stay during the following weeks to come.

A month pass since the Hadron’s catastrophic delay with repairs coming along smoothly. After a full recalibration on the Photo Sensor, Professor Schmidt and Woodson have reestablished a new kind of friendship. And while resolving a large equation on the wall’s touchscreen monitor, Schmidt tells Woodson that the speedy recovery wouldn’t have been possible without him.

“Uh-huh.”

He goes on to say that his reputation is still intact because of his involvement.

“You got that right, Alwin.”

They looked at each other momentarily and chuckled a bit. Schmidt further explains how he spoke to the upper management and proposed a permanent arrangement for the professor. In

that, he would be a valuable asset if they were to make him second in command of the project. It's a position that puts him just underneath Schmidt. Woodson abruptly halts and looks at his friend.

"Don't you lie to me, Alwin!"

"I'm as serious as a heart attack, Charles."

With this good news, Woodson smiles and hugs his friend profusely. Next, he has his belongings brought in from New York and begins his occupation with CERN involving the project.

However, no sooner than two weeks have passed, an emergency meeting is held to discuss the project's current condition. Things go from bad to worse when an international crisis is threatening to shut down the project. CERN, which is a European organization, is fragile to these U.N. frictions as they occur. And it's the Syrians and North Koreans who're somehow involved with tensions between Russia and the United States. As a result, the sounds of moaning are echoed across the room to the catastrophic news.

At the Vatican City, the Pope and his cardinals are tallying up the votes on whether or not to display the holy relic in public. And when they finally get to the end of the count, His Holiness delivers the results they've all been waiting for.

"Very well, then. The tally is in favor of displaying the holy relic on the twenty-fifth day of December 2047, here in the church of Saint Peter's Basilica."

The pope then continues to read further into the program, nominating his leading cardinal for the task.

"The duration of the unveiling will be of two months' time. Cardinal Sodano has shown much love for the shroud, and I see no reason not to appoint our brother to organize the efforts for this historical event. So, then, are there any objections?"

When there are no challenges, he hands over the arrangements to Sodano and adjourns the meeting.

In France, there's a journalist named Sabine Aubard working on a topic about some friction between two superpowers. In a couple of days, a U.N. meeting will be held in Geneva to discuss the crisis along two regions of the world. And it's the body of this conference that'll focus on the Syrian and North Korean governments to satisfy the situation.

During this time, Sabine has managed to contact the Russian ambassador for a live interview that evening. When she finally arrives at the Geneva hotel, the journalist and her crew are escorted to the conference room where Mr. Gubanov Savelienvich is waiting for them there. Savelienvich welcomes the journalist and offers a seat. And with the presence of his staff, the interview begins. She starts off by thanking the ambassador for allowing the meeting to proceed on such short notice. She further brings her audience up to speed with the territorial issues at hand. It's understood that the North Korean regime had fallen some time ago and became a country of democracy like South Korea. However, the corrupted prime minister has recently made a new trading partner with China that conflicts with the U.S. trading policy still under contract. And part of this agreement involves military support from the Chinese. In addition to this, is a new Syrian government just after the civil war, which favors the Americans. However, it's this new government that puts them in conflict with a previous Russian occupancy. And it's these unstable regions that have the financial world on edge.

Although Russia has evolved into a country of democracy, one should never judge a book by its cover. As far back as 2031, Russia was accused, on several occasions, of supplying their allied countries with weapons against several coup attempts. A determined campaign to fight off any oppositions who threatens to destabilize the Russian economy. Iran and Libya are just a few to mention. Even the civil war in Lebanon wasn't immune to such conquest. The Russians went as far as targeting a general population just to kill a particular leader there. They've also taken back Ukraine by assimilating a government of their own choosing, which is something they consider to be a trophy on their wall. Finally, having had enough of this international bullying, the U.S. created a policy they call the No Retreat Act, which empowers them to stop any further aggressions. Moreover, are the United Nation's sanctions over Russia.

By no means is the No Retreat Act a U.N. policy, but a U.S. protocol with a hidden agenda. It seems the U.S. has made up their minds about the Russian campaigning and began throwing their own weight around. And even though Syria favors the U.S. over Russia, they never welcomed such a large military presence. As a result, the Americans have established bases across the entire southern region without any approval from this government. It's an uninvited policy to take away the monopoly from the Russians. And with this new influence, brings paranoia within the Kremlin ranks.

But ever since the U.S. aggression, Russia has gained economic support from their Chinese counterpart. Russia's most powerful ally created several trading policies that helped both countries immensely. Over the years, the Chinese have been starving of technology while Russia was in need of raw materials and food. Combined, they've become a world power, equal to that of the United States.

At the end of the interview, Sabine gets up and thanks the Ambassador for his valuable time. Next, she leaves the hotel embassy and gets on the next available transport back to the hotel room. Flying at a low altitude, the drone approaches the landing pad and lets her off. And once inside the hotel suite, she verbally executes the "balcony" command, and the living room extends out into the night air of an open roof. Unbuttoning her blouse in the warm breeze, she looks beyond the balcony to the neon lights of Geneva and wonders how rough the U.N. conference will get in a couple of days.

### Turbulent

It's Tuesday morning, and the U.S. ambassador wakes to the news on datavision just off to his bed. Crawling out of his sheets, Mr. Thompson carefully staggers toward the bathroom sink and splashes water over his face. And while brushing his teeth, he can hear the faint discussion about some ancient burial cloth and its biblical history. However, the ambassador vaguely remembers reprogramming the datavision to turn on to the CMD news. So why is it then that he hears a conversation on religion? He peeks through the bathroom doorway and sees Pope Cornelius discussing turbulence between countries around the world. Afterward, he prays for the leaders in Geneva and announces the shroud to be displayed. As always, Thompson thinks out loud. "It's gonna take more than prayer to get us out of this one."

Just then, the hotel's central computer alerts the ambassador that his attention is needed at the doorway. Giving the verbal command, the door slides open to a food trolley of breakfast waiting for him outside. He orders the computer to bring it in and to park it next to the dining table. Like a drone, it automatically rolls into position, and the hotel door slides shut. While drinking his coffee, he gets a call from the CIA to meet with the U.S. Secretary of State down in one hour. When asked why not on video, he's told of a sensitive issue to be displayed in person.

"I'll be there."

When the ambassador arrives at the conference room, Madam Gilbert welcomes him in with the others and goes right to work.

"There'll be no negotiations with Russia nor China. What I have in my hands are two documents with signed treaties from Syria and North Korea. The U.N. recognizes them as valid, and we're going to exercise it."

Next, Gilbert looks to the ambassador and gives him a direct order.

"Mr. Thompson, you will take these documents before the U.N. council and tell them that the Syrian conflict is over. The new government is intact and fully operational now. Furthermore, you will remind them of trading policies with North Korea, which are still in effect for another fifteen years. If they want to change their policies by then, so be it."

Madam Gilbert then looks across the room.

"If the Russians and Chinese will not comply with these agreements, then the U.S. president will have no other choice but to order a military buildup around Syrian and North Korea. This will invite naval blockades and military sieges over these regions, during which time General Felton and Admiral Gray will receive orders to deploy. Now, if there are no questions, then you're all dismissed."

Wanting to find a softer way, the ambassador speaks up. "Madam Secretary, the president must know that without further negotiations, it will surely lead to war, will it not? Perhaps with a little time to cool off, we can smooth things over."

"I'm sorry, Roger, but this is gone on far enough, and Congress's patience has worn thin. The only language that these two countries seem to understand is a show of force."

Thompson uploads the two treaties into his tablet and leaves in preparation for tomorrow's conference.

In Geneva's early hours, the conference hall is filling up, with leaders getting ready for an intense day. And after two hours of arguments, negotiations begin to break down to simple threats, forcing Ambassador Thompson to use the ultimatum card.

“If you don’t comply with these U.N. laws, the United States and its allies will be forced to take the appropriate actions.”

“If your government chooses to do that, Ambassador, it’s Russia who’ll defend itself alongside of China and her alliances.” Savelienvich Rebuttalng.

Understanding that things are going nowhere, the secretary-general of the U.N. finally steps in. “Order! ...I said, order! There’ll be no more threats from here on out. Until proven otherwise, the United Nations doesn’t recognize Asu Abadi as the leader of Syria anymore. Furthermore, the council has reverified a contract between the U.S. and North Koreans currently in progress. Now, if both Russia and China would like to negotiate a common ground with the United States, then perhaps they can be persuaded to adapt to your proposals. Is this something your country would be interested in, Mr. Savelienvich?”

Silence fills the theater as they wait for his reply. And while turning off his translation piece, he looks across the room of judging characters and back at the council once again. A calmness comes over him as the complexity of the situation simplifies. And with an even tone in his voice, he gives a warning: “You should be careful what you say, Counselor. You might regret it.”

And looking back at the audience, he makes his closing statement: “We will stand by Syria and North Korea to the very end. Russia and her allies have nothing more to say.”

Next, he walks out of the meeting with the Chinese ambassador trailing right behind him.

During this time, the U.S. president gives a general order to the military. And added to the status alert is a prepared speech to address the nation tonight. But before she does, she wants the vice president to try and re-establish contact with the Russian ambassador.

“I want to see if we can at least lower the threat level before notifying the public.”

She looks up at the conference wall monitor to see several leaders listening in, and picks the U.K. prime minister from the group.

“And what about you, Patrick? Do we have the ally’s allegiance?”

“We’ll be deploying our Royal Navy into the Mediterranean Sea within twenty-four hours, Madam. The Australians and Canadians will accompany us there, as with the support of the Germans and Japanese.”

In Russia, President Yegorovich is hard at work preparing his staff for war. With his most talented general, the two go over battle tactics, while his administration is busy coordinating with the Chinese government.

“We have a large navy deployed in the Black Sea and an army along the Turkish border of three hundred thousand strong.”

“Very well, then, I’ll need a speech for tonight’s lecture on the rising threat. I want everyone to stay on schedule, is that clear?”

They all immediately stand at attention and the Russian president exits the room.

The next morning creates panic around the U.S. and her allied populations. Not long after the U.N. meeting, there’s been an outbreak of antiwar movements across the country. Inside the Oval Office, the president is going over some paperwork when the computer’s Comm Unit addresses the door.

“Madam President, your attention is needed.”

“Who is it, Paladin?”

“I verified them as CIA.”

“Let them in.”

She expresses her frustration the moment the door slides open.

“You’ve been told that I was not to be disturbed, were you not?”

“Yes, ma’am, however, there’s a large crowd developing outside, and the situation is becoming unstable.”

She orders Paladin to open the exterior blinds as it reveals the warning. A crowd populating the streets has massed around the White House, and it's growing fast. The president immediately dispatches the security team across the premises and executes the deployment of National Guardsmen. And no sooner than the order is given, Hillhouse receives a call explaining rioting across the eastern coast. On datavision, she sees mass protestings in several cities. New York, Philadelphia, and Miami are just a few who are losing control out there. However, that’s just the beginning of the pandemic. The spread has also managed to reach the countries of Canada and London, with the Europeans affected as well. And with the focus on Paris, a French reporter tries to explain what’s taking place. Through the shouting of an angry mob, she attempts to report the news.

“This is, Sabine Aubard, live, in front of the Palais Bourbon, where the protesting has gotten out of hand. As you can see behind me, a group of people are picking up percussion grenades and throwing them back at the police. Another group has flipped over an enforcement car just to the right of me, and—”

Before she could get another word out, an angry mob tramples over Sabine in an attempt to storm the facility. And disgusted at what she sees, the U.S. president orders the screen off and has her staff update her periodically.

For several years now, the world’s population has grown nervous over tensions between two superpowers rubbing each other the wrong way. And with these new developments in both Asia and the Middle East, Global war has become a strong possibility.

In New York, what started out as a peaceful demonstration is now an angry crowd of several hundred thousand strong. And trying to control the situation are the county’s police departments who’ve barricaded themselves from a population about to overtake the city. They spent the day firing percussion grenades in an attempt to neutralize the advancing crowd. But every time a line of people fall, more keep coming. And just as they were about to be overrun, they retreated to the next barricade of well-armed national guardsmen. It’s there that they’ve planted microwave dishes, making it extremely uncomfortable to stick around when activated. Added to these stun weapons are rocket-propelled chemicals designed to explode over a selected crowd, putting the threat to sleep. Nonlethal, the aggressors will eventually wake up to migrating headaches and some nauseating discomfort, but nothing more. Soon after, the mob advances toward the final barricade, and the guardsmen prepare for the worst.

When the street reaches its maximum capacity, the computer calculates the accumulations and fires a microwave burst into the crowd. The rioters immediately retreat, leaving some to be trampled over. With such great success, the captain repeats the order, clearing several more blocks in front of them. And although it didn’t stop the crowd from reorganizing at the back end, it did give the police enough time to reinforce the lines.

Back at the White House, the protesting grows impatient with the same aggression and begins advancing toward the lawn. Fearing security isn’t enough, the president immediately orders an emergency dispatch of Marines around the premises. It’s a preemptive show of force

that should discourage the crowd from doing what the New Yorkers have already done. Dozens of military drones begin arriving and unloading Marines across the demonstrators. But unlike the New Yorkers, the troops have armed themselves with lethal rounds and several laser cannons. The White House isn't taking any chances and will use any means necessary to keep the crowd at bay. After the deployment, the drones retake flight and begin repeating a warning message over the PA system.

“The Marines are armed to kill! The Marines are armed to kill!”

And the Russians are not without their problems either. The unthinkable has happened when a crowd of demonstrators take to the Moscow streets, protesting in the name of peace. Even some of the police officers are beginning to question the president's decision. Nevertheless, the order is given, and an army is dispatched. While slowly advancing on the population, push comes to shove, and soon violence breaks out across the line. As a result, sporadic fire can be heard in and around the Kremlin when the line begins to fall apart. Finally, after what seems like several moments of horrific violence, the protesters disperse, and the army reorganizes a new front. Afterward, a general order is given to create a barrier around the citadel.

In his office, President Yegorovich receives word that the U.S. wants to meet with his ambassador to discuss a temporary freeze on military activities. Roger Thompson, the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, suggests that they meet in Poland to consider an alternative solution. Yegorovich immediately orders Mr. Savelienvich to pack and not to make any decisions until after the U.S. presidential speech.

“I want to know what's on her mind before we negotiate. Afterward, I'll contact you with the terms. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

It's midnight, and both sides have created enough tension to unleash hell at any moment. Along the northern border of Syria, General Felton is coordinating his ground troops with the air force. He's also planted detection units when it doesn't take him long to find the Russians patrolling the area. Felton immediately executes the droids into Turkey, and no sooner than they do, they begin transmitting an inventory of laser artilleries and heavy assault vehicles in the area.

The allied ships have also arrived along the two coastal waters of Syria and Turkey via the Mediterranean Sea. There, the fleet starts dispersing along the channels and begin patrolling the area. Along with the Armada, are aircraft carriers in close proximity for a quick retaliation. The allies now own the Mediterranean Sea, and the enemy knows it.

Along with Syria, the coalition has occupied the Sea of Japan to the east, and the Yellow Sea to the west. It's this kind of posturing that puts a blockade along the North Korean ports. And the U.S. air bases that are still inside this country are in full defense mode to respond to any attacks from within.

Back in America, it's 8:00 pm on a cold winter night of 2047, and the U.S. president applies the final touches on her speech. Shortly, the chief executive approaches Madam Hillhouse with a vital piece of information.

“Both the U.S. and Russian ambassadors have met in Poland, and will be watching your speech tonight. I was informed, they're to negotiate after you're finished.”

With a speech unprepared for this kind of development, it forces her to get creative during a live setting. And at precisely 8:30 pm, the director begins the countdown. “Madam President, you're on in 3, 2, 1.”

“Good evening, my fellow Americans and those across the seas. As you know, a national crisis has developed over the past two weeks. There seems to be a misunderstanding between nations on a couple of issues where one begins and the other ends. It’s to the understanding of this administration that a new declaration of government has been established in Syria. And it’s this new government who’s requesting our assistance. With this plea, I’ve ordered the military to stabilize law and order there. But for reasons unknown at this time, Russia has rebuilt an old regime to reinstall back into Syria. This creates friction between our two countries that must be addressed.”

Swiping to the next page on the desk’s touch screen, the president continues.

“The other issue is with the North Koreans. Five years ago, a U.S. military and trade policy had been established there to create a partnership with this government. But lately, the newly elected prime minister has overlooked this arrangement and formed a new agreement with China that conflicts with our trusted pact.”

Pausing for a moment, Hillhouse has a need to separate herself from the speech and searches for a compromise other than the written ultimatum. Like a balancing act, she tries to stick with U.S. policies while giving Russia something to negotiate with. Finally, after regaining her train of thought, the U.S. president stares into the lens and continues.

“I understand the bitter reaction of our adversaries over the new developments in these regions. If the roles were reversed, I too would feel the same way. However, if we’re to find some common ground to stand on, we need to communicate until both needs are satisfied. At least exhaust all our options before going to war. What we need to do is get back to the negotiating table. So, I’ve called on the Russian president to temporarily halt all military buildups until our two ambassadors can get together for such a meeting. And it’s been recently brought to my attention that the Russian leader has been showing an interest. If I’m wrong, then the U.S. will have no other alternative but to defend itself to what’s legally right.”

It’s a statement that puts the pressure squarely back on the Russian administration. Next, Hillhouse switches to another topic.

“The protesting, which occurred in several states, has somehow evolved into violence. While America has the legal right to demonstrate on the streets, this particular behavior will not be tolerated. If the violence persists, then it’s in the interest of this administration to authorize Marshal Law into those counties, respectively. And if it’s asked of me, I will further authorize the deployment of National Guard’s men to induce control there. Understand that it’s our duty as U.S. citizens to unite together under these conditions. There’s no time for divisions. So, please exercise your civil rights with caution, as I hate to enforce these laws. May the good night be yours, and a better tomorrow.”

She smiles, and the camera cuts off while her head falls forward with a sigh of relief. The entire staff applauds for the heroic effort and the vice president approaches her with some assurance.

“We may have just dodged a bullet on this one, Lisa.”

“Yes, but for how long?”

The following morning has both ambassadors on center stage to the monumental task in front of them. And with the news media present, they’re live in front of a viewing audience in need of a resolution. During the applause, Savelienvich leans over to Thompson and tells him that the Kremlin cannot tolerate a U.S. occupation in Syria. Ambassador Thompson leans back

toward the audience and smiles with a nod. After the formalities have ended, the peace talks begin.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Akram Mohamed, initiates the meeting.

“The council will now recognize the United States and Russia over disputed issues with the countries of Syria and N. Korea. We begin with the Russian Ambassador, Mr. Gubanov Savelienvich.”

“Thank you, Secretary-General. My government has informed me that peace cannot be achieved with a U.S. presence in Syria. The U.S. must withdraw all its forces before negotiations can continue.”

When finished with the opening statement, the U.N. leader calls on Thompson to give his side of the argument.

“Thank you, Secretary-General. The United States is willing to give up some ground in the negotiation process. However, the U.S. cannot and will not allow another civil war to begin; especially to satisfy the needs of an external nation. I ask of you...No, I implore you, Mr. Ambassador, to give us some leeway here. Give us something that we can use.”

“I understand your position, Ambassador. And we will, once you pull out of Syria.”

As arguments begin to heat up in Poland, an unexpected strike on a U.S. air base is currently in progress near the Syrian border. The enemy was spotted firing RPGs into the facility, taking out several buildings in its wake. Using extreme thermal composition, these detonations produced a shockwave that destroyed everything up to two hundred yards in diameter. Only the east side of the base was left standing. Moreover, are the casualties mounting with every strike.

In retaliation, U.S. missiles have hit several Russian targets along the Turkish border, ultimately taking them out. Military depots go up in smoke, melting everything that once resembled man-made vehicles. Other essential items include unmanned tanks, drones, and assault vehicles, all annihilated beyond recognition.

In the skies, both sides send up their high-tech fighters on a collision course to a global war that cannot be stopped once it starts. And within minutes, engaged in an incredible air battle unlike anything seen before in world history. And it's those U.S. bombers, skimming the top of the atmosphere, looking to knock out any missiles that may threaten their satellites. In effect, it has the two superpowers taking the necessary actions.

At the Oval Office, the president has collected her staff to figure out who fired the first shot.

“Gentleman, what the hell is going on in the Middle East, and why are we under attack?!”

“We're trying to get with the Kremlin on that now, ma'am.”

“Wait a minute; I don't see Ambassador Thompson on video. Where is he?”

“A Russian interceptor knocked out one of our satellites, terminating communications there. He's still in Warsaw, ma'am.”

“Well, how long before we get him back online?”

“With a few more orbits, we should have another satellite in position.”

“I said, how long, Mr. Boil!”

“In half an hour, ma'am.”

The room freezes to the news, and the president is not without her opinions.

“Good lord, Stephen, it might as well be an eternity!”

“Madam President, if I may make a suggestion; we should focus our attention on the Kremlin from this office,” Remington added.

“I suppose you’re right, Shawn. Okay, then, I want all levels of the administration to make contact with Moscow. Now, let’s get moving!”

At the focal point of the ignition, a U.S. general is waiting for orders to cross into Turkey due to several of his droids gone missing. Their last known coordinates were inside sector 18, with three enemy bases established there. It’s a critical condition that leaves the Americans blind to enemy movements. At best, the orbital satellites can spot a much larger force, but not when it comes to a smaller group of spying eyes. That’s where the droids come in. But having no other choice now, the general decides to call in on the Special Task Unit to take over the mission. And on a moonless night, they find themselves hiking through a cold dark atmosphere.

Beyond the airbase lights, the commander orders his men to turn on their nightscopes, and the surroundings become clear. Through high-tech helmets, the face shield makes it possible to see through the night and calculate enemy numbers at distances. When turned on, a digital screen lights up and begins scanning the territory. Suddenly, the detection unit sounds off with enemy droids in the area. And no sooner than they’re alerted, one is on an intercept course. It’s then that their sensor starts giving out vital information.

“Enemy droid, ten miles northeast, armed with missiles and preparing to fire.”

Everybody quickly points their helmets toward the known location and increase their magnification. Way out in the distance, they see the droid approaching fast with a blue flash in front of it. It’s a missile launch.

“Oh, crap. Everybody down! ...Johnny?”

“Yes, sir, I’m on it.”

Sergeant John Chapman points his shoulder cannon toward the inbound missile and fires. The rocket finds its target and destroys it at half the distance. The team begins to relax when suddenly the warning sounds off with another missile launch. Again, Sergeant Chapman fires another interceptor and finds the inbound. Next, the enemy droid closes the distance, and the commander orders everyone to fan out and surround it. Once he’s in position, Lieutenant Collins finds himself undetected and moves in for the kill. The droid, however, assesses the situation and activates a defensive poster. It then recalculates enemy distances and turns on the jamming frequency. Suddenly, the shield on everyone’s helmets scrambles with a bright flash, blinding them momentarily while it moves in on the lieutenant’s position. And in a panic, Collins drops behind a mound and pulls out his firearm. He quietly thumbs for his comm unit and whispers, “Is everybody else blind? If not, give me a position on the droid.”

Confused, he gets no answers from anyone and sees an approaching star appearing above the horizon. Slowly descending, the lieutenant ponders on what it could possibly be.

“What the hell? I’ve never seen a drone look like that before.”

Almost on top of them now, it drains the energy from the attacking droid, which falls lifelessly on the desert floor. And just when the lieutenant’s about to fire on it, he realizes it’s not man-made. To his astonishment, he sees a humanoid figure moving fluently inside a very bright light. And with the same illumination as the sun, this entity has turned the night into day. Not knowing what or where it came from, every cell in his body alerts him of impending danger, and he retreats behind another mound. And while leaning back against the dune, he looks up to the stars and shakes his head in disbelief.

“This isn’t happening!”

Suddenly, the entity starts communicating through some form of subconsciousness, and with absolute serenity, calls out to him, “Bobby, the husband of Samantha, and father to Alina and Carlie. Listen to me.”

Collins carefully raises his head over the mound and questions it, "Who are you?"

"The two distant worlds are in turmoil with each other, fueled by the evil desires of the local ones. Go back from once you came and warn them of the shadows that influence them."

Next, the entity softly vanishes, and the comm unit crackles back to life. He hears the chattering of confusion as his colleagues try to get a fix on the droid's position. But more importantly, he understood the message that the entity conveyed to him. Undoubtedly, the two worlds mentioned are the superpowers in conflict, triggered by the deception of rebel forces living near the air base. But how in the world is he to tell his superiors of the source from which it came from? Nevertheless, it's a message that needs to be delivered before tensions get further out of control.

Realizing there's no other way to say it, Collins simply gives his commander a full-frontal report.

"Sir, I never saw the droid, but I did see something else..."

"Well, I'm waiting, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. I can only describe it as a humanoid figure with an incredible amount of light emanating from it."

"A humanoid figure. Is that what you just told me?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, it lit the whole area up. I'm surprised you didn't see it from your location. And...well, it spoke to me, sir."

Looking around to see if anybody else is buying into this, the commander turns back to Collins.

"Okay then, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't ask what it said to you."

"Yes, well, the reason why we're out here in the first place is because of a hidden alliance. It was the insurgents that struck the air base, not the Russians."

The commander shakes his head unconvincingly.

"I don't know what the hell happened to you out there, but I'm having you escorted back to camp for reevaluation."

"Before you do, sir, why don't you call the air base and have them look at the casualty list on the enemy side? They'll discover they're not Russian, but an old Syrian regime. They'll find them hiding amongst the population in local villages."

"And just how in the hell can you possibly know that?"

"Think about it. Why did the Russians attack only one air base? And why didn't they finish the job? Do the world a favor, sir, and check it out."

Hesitating, he finally tells the lieutenant he'll look into it, but for now, relieves him of his duties.

It's early in the Kremlin, and tension escalates as the president and his staff try to figure out what happened last night. Notably, he orders the Federal Security Service and Council to the emergency hearing. He wants to get a grip on the extent of the ally's aggression and isn't getting it from his staff. Frustrated, Yegorovich pounds the table, demanding to know why the Americans attacked. Rodin Nikitovich, the head of federal security, is the first to speak up.

"Sir, we may have reason to believe that the United States is not at fault."

Hesitant, Yegorovich calmly leans over the table and expresses his point of view. "There are lunatics in the nut farm that make more sense than you! You had better start telling me something I can understand."

“Yes, sir. I’ve received a report from one of our outposts that a U.S. air base was hit at approximately 2:09 am. Also, the attack on the Petrovich occurred precisely at 2:17 am. This wasn’t a U.S. strike but a retaliation. Somebody hit the Americans, and they thought it was us.”

“Are you certain of this, comrade?”

“With the given evidence, I’m quite.”

The Russian president immediately turns to his security council, wanting to know the whereabouts of his Ambassador.

“Sir, due to bad weather, Savelienvich is still in Poland.”

“Bad weather?”

“Yes, sir. He claims he can’t make it out until later this morning.”

“I want you to contact him right away and tell him to get with the U.S. ambassador for a cease-fire. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

As a result, both sides finally agree to keep the war along the Syrian and Turkish borders as they try to ascertain who fired the first shot.

At the cripple U.S. Airbase, an officer receives a call from his superior.

“What can I do for you, General?”

“Commander, I sent a reconnaissance out last night and received some interesting news. They have reason to believe that the casualties you have in quarantine are locals from a nearby village.”

“Excuse me, sir?!”

“You heard me, commander. They’re believed to be a group of Syrian rebels.”

“With all due respect, sir, they were wearing Russian uniforms, firing Russian artillery.”

“Don’t you think I know that commander?! They’ve been receiving Russian shipments during the Civil War. To verify the report, I’ve ordered a team of forensics to analyze the dead’s DNA. They should arrive within the hour. You’re to cooperate with them, and call me as soon as you get in the results, is that understood?”

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

The sun rises over the White House to a team trying to get in touch with the Russians. Not getting any sleep from the night before, the administration is the first to witness another day of the unknown. Due to several down satellites destroyed in the last twelve hours, they’ve been getting nowhere fast. They’ve even tried the conventional method of relaying their messages through ships across the Atlantic, only to fall on deaf ears. It seems the Russian president is hidden from the rest of the world. However, as luck would have it, the secretary of defense has finally reached out to Ambassador Thompson. It’s believed that he may still be in contact with the Russians. President Hillhouse tells the room to quiet down as she establishes a video link.

“Roger, are you okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Please tell me you’re still in touch with Ambassador Savelienvich?”

“Yes, ma’am, I am. As a matter of fact, he’s with me right now.”

“Put him on for me.”

“Hello, Madam Hillhouse. It’s good to see you again.”

“The feeling is mutual, Ambassador. Now, listen to me very carefully. We have reason to believe your government may not have started the war.”

“Yes, ma’am, we’ve already established this. He’s unable to get in touch with you because of military protocols. However, given the situation, he’s contacted me with this message. He’ll disengage his military if you stand down as well. In doing so, it’ll bring back communications between our countries. Also, he would like to discuss a joint investigation on who attacked your air base.”

“Agreed. And as soon as he’s able to, Ambassador, I would like to speak with him. I would also like to reestablish the peace conference as soon as the investigation ends. Can we agree to that?”

“Yes, ma’am, I believe so. I’ll get with Mr. Yegorovich as quickly as I can.”

After the call, she immediately gets in touch with General Felton and orders him to stand down all military operations, one base at a time. A sense of relief fills the air when DEFCON 2 is finally brought down to three. Satellites climb back to their original orbits, and bombers return to their airbases. The computer defense system recalls all droids, drones, and unmanned vehicles across the borders. And with each step taken, the Russians follow. Although the world may have narrowly escaped a global conflict, military and naval blockades still exist around Syria and North Korea.

### The Aftermath

One week after the conflict, agents on both sides get together and begin analyzing the debris inside the crippled U.S. air base. The layout of the craters tells a story from which the small arms projectiles came from. And any verification from the deceased will be vital evidence to shedding some light on the assault. Once they get started, it doesn't take long for the Russian FSB and CIA to come up with obvious results. They quickly discover a link between a nearby village and what they found on an enemy soldier—family photos with written notes on the back that lead to an interrogation in a village next door. And before the day is out, they come up with three possible suspects.

After several hours of hardline questioning, a Syrian resistance proudly confesses to the attacks. He claims of a much larger force than initially believed. Furthermore, the attack was a coordinated one from multiple villages near the Syrian border. Wanting to know who gave the order, he tells them there's a new leader that goes by the name of Laith Malik, and his intentions are clear. He wants to cleanse the Middle Eastern world of western corruption.

“Know the name well, Americana. He's not going away.”

After the investigation, the two sides meet back at the airbase to discuss their findings. But, somewhere in the debriefing, they get sidetracked by another interest. The Russians would like to know how an American soldier could get such information inside the Turkish border. Not entirely clear on the matter, Rob Gase, who leads the team for the CIA, explains, “Because of the tight timetable, we never stopped to ask. We were in a hurry to verify the team's claim before the war got out of hand.”

But due to the intense situation between their two countries, Agent Denisovich makes a bold request.

“Well then, if you don't mind, we would like to question the team further.”

“And why would you want to do that, sir?”

“Because there's no way they could've obtained this kind of information unless it came from an unforeseen source.”

“...I see your point, Mr. Denisovich. ...I'll tell you what, I'll personally have them brought in immediately.”

At the base camp, the Special Task Unit has just received orders for another interrogation. And before packing, Commander Ward calls in the lieutenant to discuss the situation.

“I can't back you up this time, Collins. I'm afraid you're on your own.”

“What are you going to tell them, sir?”

“Only what I know. And I suggest you do the same. You're dismissed, Lieutenant.”

At the interrogation, they all gather around the table to take their seats. Commander Ward is the first to be questioned by the Russians.

“Unlike Mr. Gase here, I would very much like to know where you've received such vital information, Commander.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Don't play dumb with me, Commander.”

“Well, sir, if it’s about our knowledge of the rebellion force, it started after we regained power...”

“Wait! What do you mean ‘regain power’?”

“Yes, sir, we lost power to all our instruments. It occurred just before we lost communications.”

“Communications?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You mean to tell me that your sensors, night vision, and communications were all inoperable?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

For a moment, both sides look at each other with skepticism.

“How do you suppose you had such a catastrophic failure on one of the most important missions of your life? You’re supposed to be the best, are you not? If it were a Russian team, they would’ve most certainly tested the equipment before going out.”

Sounding a lot like an insult, Commander Ward retaliates.

“The fact that all systems came back online at the same time indicates nothing wrong with our equipment, sir, but a possible disruption from another source! Let’s say, a magnetic pulse fired from a droid perhaps? Does that sound familiar to you, sir?”

“Heh, heh. Although I can’t release such technology, I can say this. One of the engineers we’ve sent out found our droid lying on the desert floor. He informed us that the nucleus-excel pack had completely drained from it. I suppose you don’t know anything about that either, do you?”

“No, sir, I don’t!”

“You know what I find extraordinary, is that one would have to set it off while tampering with it. Can anyone here tell me why this didn’t happen?”

A hesitation momentarily fills the room without an answer.

“...No, I suppose not,” the Russian concluded.

After applying enough pressure on the commander, Ward finally admits to the lieutenant’s knowledge and orders Collins in.

“At approximately five thousand feet and closing, there was this bright light. When it came into proximity, it hovered gracefully within twenty-five feet of my position. I don’t know about the others, but that’s when everything went dead. And then it started communicating to me.”

But before Agent Denisovich could get a word in, Gase beats him to it.

“Oh, give me a damn break, Lieutenant! Do you really expect us to believe in little green men?!”

“No, sir. What I’m trying to say is that I saw something I couldn’t identify with. Maybe it was man-made, and maybe not. I just don’t know. I can only tell you what I saw, and—”

“And what it told you. Is that correct, Lieutenant?” Denisovich cutting in.

“Yes, sir, that’s correct.”

Realizing he’s losing his grip over the situation, Collins comes up with the only deception he could deliver.

“I may not have been able to identify it, sir, but it did sound a little like Russian.”

Stunned at the accusation, Gase looks to the FSB.

“Is there something you like to add, Mr. Denisovich?”

“No, of course not! His story is preposterous!”

“Tell me this; if Russia had such a device, would they acknowledge it?”

“You’re not actually going to believe him, are you!”

“To tell you the truth, sir, I don’t know what to believe.”

Gase then turns to the lieutenant. “So, Mr. Collins, is this it? Is this what you want me to write in my report?”

“That’s my story, sir, and I’m sticking with it.”

“Then this meeting is adjourned.”

“What do you mean it’s adjourned?”

“You had your time with him. You’ve asked your questions. Now, it’s over.”

Getting back to the negotiating table, all countries gather in Geneva with a different outlook on the world. Their patience with the two superpowers has worn thin in the past several weeks. Especially with military posturing. Once again, everyone gathers to take their seats while the U.N. council presents a new topic to be addressed. In his speech, Counselor Mohamed states that the crisis in Syria needs a peaceful resolution, which is why the fragile country will be of the highest priority. Mohamed further explains NATO’s investigation with the irresponsibility of the Americans.

“Even when world tensions were at an all-time high, the U.S. displayed an instinctive retaliation off an assumption. They acted with little or no regard toward the surrounding nations and in doing so, almost started a global war in the name of economic might. And it’s not the first time that these two superpowers displayed paranoid aggression toward each other. Ever since the creation of the First Strike policy, the U.S. has demonstrated a reckless behavior toward the economic globe. As a result, it’s no longer in the U.N.’s best interest to support this kind of conduct. The United Nations was founded by world governments who desire a peaceful planet we can all live in. And this morning, these countries have voted to maintain this purpose. In effect, action must be taken against the United States and its Congress.”

Ambassador Thompson is listening to all of this and can’t believe what he’s hearing. The First Strike policy is a U.S. law designed to keep Russia from interfering with the internal affairs of others in a civil dispute. So Thompson steps up to the mic in an attempt to rebuttal.

“With all due respect, Secretary General, try to understand the military’s point of view. The Russians had several strike forces set up along the Syrian border when the U.S. was deliberately attacked in the middle of the night. And because tensions were already at an all-time high, the U.S. acted in self-defense. Unfortunately, they targeted the wrong aggressor.”

“Yes, and that’s why the U.N. council will no longer tolerate the First Strike policy. Either ban this rule or lose world trading.”

Against a united world, Mr. Thompson is suddenly faced with an economic blackmail that won’t sit well with Congress. And if the U.S. resists, it’ll undoubtedly take the entire world into a depression that some may not survive in. But apparently, the U.N. is willing to gamble against a nation who’ll ultimately give in before they do. If not, then the alternative is a possible world war.

As for Syria, several weeks of arguments finally reach an agreement between the U.S. and Russia. America agrees to pull out of Syria if the Russians allow a voting system to decide the fate of the country. During such time, the two superpowers will be a part of a security system, preventing any voting fraud from occurring. And with consideration to terminate the U.S. embargo over Russia, both sides agree to the terms.