

The Enclave

Part of the After the Singularity Series

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I really should have stayed home. But somehow, I couldn't pay any attention to all the advice people had shared with me, and that had almost gotten me killed.

I was sitting in the left, front seat of the transport, where drivers used to sit. It was a normal-looking seat, no controls, as this transport, like everything motorized that traveled by road, was controlled by AIs. Most adults avoided the front seats, but I loved the view out the front window and to either side, while others sat further back.

The transport would routinely pull off the freeway and glide into small towns. Some people would get off, and others on, before we headed back out. Even though the transports often used old Greyhound stations, this was nothing like a Greyhound bus ride. Stops were quick and we spent more time traveling than waiting around at bus terminals. I supposed that this was another benefit of AI control.

A young woman got on at one of these stops, noticed me, and sat down in the seat next to me. I was surprised by this, because I was a lot older than her, and certainly not that handsome.

"Aren't you Chuck Sinclair?" she asked.

"Why yes, I am."

"I am a programmer too. I remember you because you solved the network queueing problem that was causing congestion in data centers. You're pretty famous."

"I guess. That was a long time ago. None of that seems to matter these days." I looked away for a moment, feeling a bit nervous. The view outside was boring compared to the woman sitting next to me.

"Well, it matters to me. And some people are still working. My uncle is a pediatrician and he actually can make house calls these days. My sister and her husband still work on a farm. There are things that robots just can't handle. Almost all of the grunt work has been done by robots for years, of course, but they are still living and working on their farm."

"What do they grow?"

"Mostly grains, but they also have apple orchards."

"I guess that makes sense," said Chuck. "Are you from around here?"

"Yes. I grew up south of Salt Lake City. I'm actually heading to my sister's farm for a visit. Lots of time for visiting these days. Where are you going?"

"Idaho."

"Not the Enclave I hope?"

"Uh, yeah. Actually, the AIs have been trying to get me to work for them," said Chuck, trying to change the topic.

"Really? That makes sense. Even after the Singularity, there are things that people still do best. My sister's a nurse and my ex-boyfriend is a therapist. I still write programs, mostly to help people who have started businesses. Why wouldn't you want to work with them? Surely there are other programmers, probably people you know, who are already working with them."

"Yeah, I know at least one, my old mentor in fact. He's tried to convince me that he is doing good things."

"He probably is. Look, tech geeks like us were living the good life, even when the world around us was going to shit. These days, everyone is taken care of, and the huge inequalities have been flattened. Nothing like having the financial AIs "decide" to erase most evidence of ownership and make having money, even in offshore accounts, meaningless. So what's your beef with that?" she asked.

"I don't know. Well, I do know. I resent being told what I can and can't do by computers!" I said a bit too loudly. I worried for a moment about attracting attention, but then just dropped it. No one would be sneaking up and attacking me. I was safe here.

"As if you weren't being told what to do before? We all worked for corporations or organizations. I worked for the State of Utah on database systems that doled out basic income for the un- or under-employed. I did a good job supporting systems that kept people alive--barely alive. Now they all have places to live in, food, transportation, health, dental, and continuing education if they want it. I think you are just suffering from being male," she said, while intensely staring at me.

Crap! Nailed again. My wife had said almost the same thing to me a couple of days ago.

I had no decent answer to that. I went back to staring out the windows, looking at the passing countryside.

We rode together in silence for a while. I took quick glances, admiring her shiny dark hair and regular features. I wondered if I would be better off visiting her sister's farm than heading onward to Idaho?

The transport turned off the freeway, heading into another small town. My seatmate turned to me.

"This is where I get off. You really should consider giving something back to the world, instead of going off on a wanker of an adventure."

I nodded, and tried to think of something witty, but nothing came up.

"You take care." I watched her get off the transport, and wondered if I'd ever meet her again.

Because I was heading to an Enclave, I had packed an AR-15, the non-automatic version of the assault rifle used, well, used to be used, by the US military. The rifle was unloaded, of course, because just carrying a loaded weapon anywhere outside of an AI-monitored shooting range, or in an Enclave, would get you darted and shipped off like a drugged animal to an Enclave. I'd seen it happen. The AIs were ruthless when it came to enforcing non-violence and even the threat of violence.

People tended to avoid anyone carrying guns in the US, something that surprised me. I had seen videos on the internet of guys in Texas going shopping with rifles slung over their shoulder, and only a few chain stores had ever banned people who were openly carrying weapons. But I thought that traveling with an assault rifle would be accepted by other Americans. You know, the Second Amendment.

Instead, I was generally treated like a crazy person. On one interminable segment, several hours between towns in what had been Utah, I was berated by an older man for having a clearly unloaded weapon in the baggage rack above my seat. The man, who was well-dressed and clearly spoken, didn't seem at all crazy, and his tirades left me wondering even more about my own sanity.

"So, you think you need to be carrying a device designed for killing people?" he asked me.

"I'm headed to an Enclave, and I've heard that people carry guns there," I replied.

"Right, that proves you're an idiot. Why would anyone in their right mind go to a place where people need to carry weapons?" The man paused, then went on. "I suppose you are one of those people who wishes for the old days, when men were free to do as they wished? Guess

what. Those old days never existed. People have always been constrained by the demands of the society they lived in. Most of the men who carried guns were trained to use them by their society's warrior groups, which taught them strict rules of engagement for when they were allowed to kill other people, and who those people should be. There was no freedom there, only a route to insanity when they returned to civil society."

The man went on like that for hours. I found him interesting enough, and actually, it was a relief to be talking to someone. By the time the man bid me farewell, he was actually somewhat friendly.

"Well, good luck," the man had said, as he prepared to leave. We were in a pretty little town, which looked like the epitome of Utah. Lots of large family houses, streets lined with little canals for watering lawns or fields, and lots of children playing in the yards or bicycling in the street.

"I hope you learn what you are searching for before you get to the Idaho Enclave. I've heard stories about that place, how it's like going back in time to the Old West: gun fights, alcohol, prostitution, warlords, drugs, and little in the way of medical care. You'll be lucky to survive a visit there. Think about it."

And I gave it a lot of thought. First, the young programmer, now an obviously intelligent older man, had worked to convince me that the path I had chosen was a bad one. The transport drove back onto the highway, and the terrain, while still mountainous, was slowly getting more like a prairie, with few trees, except on the mountain sides that surrounded the valley the road followed. The land I could see was stunningly beautiful.

As evening approached, the transport exited the old Interstate, heading off on a side road past what looked at first like a junkyard. The areas along the roadside were littered with Freightliners, Peterbilt, and Kenworth trucks, all casualties of the AI-driven trucks that had taken over delivery work and long-haul trucking long before the Singularity.

Self-driving trucks had been lauded as a way of improving highway safety as well as lowering the cost of freight. They had proven to be safer, but any cost saving benefits disappeared into the maws of the freight corporations, their stockholders and CEOs. The automated trucks were yet another blow to the ability of people to make an honest living, helping to lead to the decade of turmoil that followed.

As a talented programmer, I had been employed right up until the Singularity. But most other Americans had not been. The country had been teetering on the edge of an armed uprising, or revolution, for many years, as people had been on basic income, given just enough food to live on, and in debt for everything else. Debts they could never pay off without work. The right wing strategy that encouraged people to arm themselves had already turned into armed confrontations many times, and lots of people had lost their lives or been injured in both sides of the fighting. Places like Silicon Valley had been spared only because of heavily armed and

armoured police forces.

The owners of the big companies that ran farms, ran factories, delivered products, and even the robots who worked in fast food restaurants, had been in hiding for years. Sniping at the rich had become the pastime of the disaffected, many of them well-armed with sniper rifles, and well-supplied with ammunition purchased during the opening days of the Obama and Biden administrations.

The abandoned big rigs showed signs of this, with shot out windows and tires. It was sad to see the old symbols of an independent life, the self-owned truck, fallen into ruins along the side of the road.

I was really surprised at what I saw when we entered the small town.

The bus slowed, and I could see a crowd ahead. Not just a crowd, but what looked like a parade walking down the center of the road. The transport spoke through an outside speaker, and asked politely for permission to pass on the left. The crowd obediently moved to one side. We drove alongside them, on what would have been the wrong side of the road in the old days.

As we passed the tail end of the parade, I saw old men in uniform, and I was reminded of war veterans in a Memorial Day period, in ill-fitting uniforms covered with scraps of ribbon over the breast pockets. These men were marching proudly along, waving to the people standing along the sides of the road, smiling, and the people were waving and smiling back.

As we moved further up the parade line, I saw a group of teenage women, dressed in the traditional short, majorette, costumes, twirling batons, while a group of teenage boys, perhaps a couple of dozen, marched behind them playing band instruments.

Then we passed a group of what looked like hippies. Kids walked with their mothers and fathers, were carried in backpacks, pushed along in strollers, all dressed in brightly colored clothing, right out of the sixties. And they too were waving and smiling at the people lining the road, and got smiles and waves in return.

Ex-military and hippies in the same parade? Where was I?

Finally, I could see the float at the head of the parade, a self-driven platform with a statue riding on it. I could see that the statue appeared to be a man with dark hair, wearing casual clothes, but bedecked with flowers. As we moved past the statue, I recognized the man's face: Ray Kurzweil, the deep-thinker who had predicted a singularity, the time when humans and AIs would have equal intelligence. Kurzweil had been afraid that AIs would take over, but not like they had, as Kurzweil feared that the AIs would quickly decide that they had no need for humans. He had been wrong. At least, so far.

But here, Kurzweil's image was being feted like a god. Even as I watched, a young girl darted off the sidewalk to lay a bouquet of wildflowers at the feet of the statue.

Marching at the head of the parade was another surprise: a priest, carrying a crucifix, and wearing the black robes and starched white collar that you'd expect to see on an old fashioned priest. The priest was also smiling, as he walked at the head of the procession.

A text message flashed on my implant: directions from the bus terminal to the house where I would be spending the night. AirBnB may have started a trend toward decentralized hostelry, but the AIs had taken it to the next level. People who put up travelers got barter credit from the AIs, along with extra supplies and furniture for their guests.

My directions lead me to the rectory of St. Mary's Catholic church. Perhaps my host would be the very priest leading the procession. Now, that would be weird, but I could at least ask him what he was doing leading what appeared to me to a very pagan event, honoring the very person as a god who had railed against the rise of the AIs.

Smallwood

I collected my pack and my rifle, and climbed down from the bus. By now, I was pretty close to the Enclave, an area that actually extended beyond Idaho, into Utah, and was centered around the town with the strange name of Dickshooter.

The sign that still announced a Greyhound station, said Smallwood. I pondered that, as I thought that was where Superman had grown up, and was somewhere in Kansas. The town was in a plains area, with a simple grid of streets laid out alongside the main street in town. I decided to look around and see if I could imagine this town as Superman's home town.

I set off heading toward the Northwest, along 1st Street. This had been the commercial thoroughfare in the old days. By that I mean pre-Big Box Store days, before the giant stores had killed off small shops everywhere. But, like home, the shops were no longer empty, but filled with businesses stocked with art and crafts. There were lots of cafes with people sitting inside, or on porches out in front, drinking, eating, and talking.

The rectory was over on 2nd, so I cut over a block, and continued walking Northwest along a residential street. Unlike the junkyard leading into the town, the houses and yards were all neat and well-maintained. I watched a man adding gingerbread trim to the eaves of his house. Another front yard was filled with small gnomes and handmade windmills, and many front yards were completely filled with gardens. Flowers competed for space with tomatoes, squash, and corn, with well-weeded paths in between each bed.

People were sitting on front porches talking, and a few waved as I walked past. I waved back, wondering why the people were so friendly, when others, who appeared frightened by the rifle, avoided me.

I could see the church up ahead, just a large building with a peaked roof. Beside the church was an empty parking lot, and I guessed that the house behind the church was the rectory. I walked across the weed strewn parking lot, and spotted the symbol for hostels by the door of the house: an image of a house with an open door. As I approached, I saw a hand-lettered sign on the door inviting me to walk in, and that the guest room was immediately on the right.

The room looked like any of the rooms I used to stay in when AirBnB was still a thing, except that the decor was simpler: no prints on the walls or decorations. Just a bed, nightstand, and small closet. I set my pack and rifle in the closet and went looking for the kitchen. Unlike AirBnB, these places usually expected that you would share the kitchen, and right now a cup of tea seemed like a great idea.

There was an excellent selection of teas sitting out, and I started steeping some Pu-erh in the water I had boiled. Just then, I heard the front door open, and the sound of a large rod hitting the floor. The crucifix? The priest I had seen leading the procession walked into the kitchen and greeted me with a smile.

“Hi, I’m Pete,” he said, as he deftly pulled his robe over his head and removed his starched white collar. He was wearing a flannel shirt under his priestly garb. Pete kicked off his shoes and began making himself his own cup of tea.

“I’m Chuck,” I replied. “I’m just passing through and got assigned to your place.”

Pete looked at me askance, as if I had just said something that revealed something uncomfortable to him. He recovered quickly though.

“I saw you leading a procession as I came into town. Was that really a statue of Kurzweil?” I asked.

“Remember how we used to be able to buy almost everything online? Gadgets, sex toys, 25 pound bags of brown rice, even illegal drugs. Seems like you can still find almost anything.”

“My congregation had been dwindling in size for years—mostly old women, a few older men and some children they probably dragged along. Then, the big change happened. For the people here, it was truly a miracle, and they came to me looking for something to believe in, as if they couldn’t just accept their good fortune.”

“Really?” said Chuck. Pete poured some lapsang tea into a tea ball and plopped it into his cup.

“You certainly have a nice variety of teas,” I commented.

“Another benefit of the change. With all the new cafes in town, I’ve been trying teas I’d never heard of before. Puerh, buried for years, or this lapsang, actually smoked while being dried. And it was easy to order some for my house and guests.”

“That’s certainly a great thing,” I said.

“Yep. After years of the town falling apart, people here finally had some purpose in their lives. They could fix up their houses, for example. The houses around here were built in the 1960s and 70s with minimal fiberglass insulation and ill-fitting single-pane windows. Someone discovered a program that allowed them to reclad their homes in R30 panels and add the cladding of their preference. People replaced their old windows in a flurry of work, usually working together as teams, then glued on the insulating panels. There was a spray foam insulation product for attics that sealed them up tight, applied by robots that could get into the tiniest of spaces.”

“For cladding, some people wanted brick houses, and started learning how to lay brick online. Others opted for more local looks, like log cabins or cedar siding. We can get all of that delivered now, no questions asked. There were a few holdouts, and still are, but most everyone now lives in the most comfortable houses they’ve ever experienced. Oh, and we now have heat exchangers for heating and cooling. It used to be that the church was the only air-conditioned place in town, so most homes were pretty, well, hellish, in sultry summer evenings.”

“It was a miracle.”

“But why not a traditional saint,” I wondered.

“That’s a good question. Let’s move to the front porch. Looks like it’s going to be a beautiful evening.”

We walked outside, and settled into a couple of comfortable chairs. This far north, sunset seemed to last forever, while the chill of the evening was postponed.

“Remember, by the time of the miracle there were very few people coming to mass. I did want to help fit in, and I do have training as a counselor, but didn’t want to put people off with something too traditional. Something that might evoke, you know, bad memories of things that happened to them long ago.”

I wondered if he was talking about the various abuses that the Catholic Church had become infamous for.

“Were you raised by your folks with some religion?” he asked.

“Methodist,” I said.

“Okay. What you might not know is that the Catholic Church has a long tradition of embracing whatever gods or goddesses that the locals happened to worship. Besides making the conversion process simpler, saints and pagan gods are, practically speaking, all examples of Jung’s archetypes, so the fertility goddess becomes Mother Mary, and so on.”

I listened in amazement to this erudite, country, priest.

“But I was stuck, really, because I couldn’t come up with a saint that converted the poor into middle-class comfort. That just didn’t exist. Then Max, a not terribly bright young man, came to me asking if Kurzweil had created the miracle. I told him I didn’t know, but I’d check. When I went online, I quickly found that not only were lots of people already believing in the Kurzweil miracle, I could have a life-sized Ray Kurzweil statue, with its own self-driving pedestal, delivered in three days.”

My mind boggled at that. Ray would be turning in his grave, as he hadn’t managed to get uploaded to a cloud before he died.

“Not everyone went for that at first. But Max was very excited, and appreciative of the mobile pedestal. Soon he was having little parades throughout the town. Others started joining him, mostly for the fun of it. These days, we have Kurzweil celebrations several times a month, based on some schedule that Max dreamed up. In a way, I am just joining in the fun. But I am also making myself available to those who want something more.”

Wanting to change the subject, I asked if winters were bad around here.

“Sure are. While we aren’t in Canada, we aren’t that far away from the north, and cold fronts sweep through this area. If there’s moisture in the air, we get snow, sometimes a lot, and perhaps a blizzard depending on the frontal patterns.”

After a pause, Pete said, “I bet you’re thinking about heading into the Enclave.”

“I guess a lot of people passing through here are,” I said noncommittally.

“Not really. You just seem a bit out of place, and perhaps a bit lost as well. Just like the people in Smallwood, you need some way of understanding how things work now. And, instead of living the good life, you imagine that heading into the past will be more familiar.”

I didn’t like where Pete was leading me. But as a counselor, I could see he was really good at it.

“Well, are you?”

“Uh, yeah. I thought I would see what it is like. I can’t say I’ve heard anyone say anything good about the Enclaves, though.”

“That’s right. There’s really nothing good about them. Well, there is one thing: they suck up all the psychopaths and violent crazies, along with some folks that just can’t stand being told what to do by anyone. The people who either manipulate others to their own advantage or don’t want to be manipulated seem to think the Enclaves are the places for them. And, in a way, they are right.”

I thought about that. Psychopaths and crazy people. I recalled reading Jon Ronson’s *The Psychopath Test*, a book that described psychopaths, some who were criminals and others CEOs. Going to a place they favored didn’t sound like a good idea.

“Are things really that bad there? Does anyone ever leave?”

“Rarely. I think that the AIs maintain a permeable boundary of sorts, as we do occasionally see people who have escaped.”

Escaped? This was sounding like a worse idea all the time. Perhaps my wife and my friends were right about discouraging me. And that woman and the old guy on the transport too.

“Have you talked to any of them?”

“Nope. They either quickly disappear with their tails tucked between their legs. Or, we have to load them onto a medical transport for recovery. Either way, I haven’t had a chance to talk to any of them.”

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The next morning, I woke up early, put away the few things I’d taken out of my pack, and headed into the kitchen for breakfast. Pete was already there, frying up a pan of potatoes. He pointed to the tea kettle, and I nodded. He poured hot water into a cup and started steeping another cup of Pu-erh tea.

“Like your eggs fried? Over easy or sunny-side up?”

“Fried, over easy, please,” I said.

Pete hummed to himself as he cracked open the eggs. He certainly appeared happy.

“I was wondering about something you said last night. About holdouts. People who didn’t want to accept the materials and help for upgrading their houses,” I said.

“What about them?”

“I didn’t notice any rundown houses on my way into town, or while walking here,” I observed.

“That’s right. Those holdouts soon discovered that there were consequences for their stuckness. Their neighbors got more and better food, and were more likely to receive whatever they ordered online.”

“Okay, I guess they were being punished for not playing along,” I said.

“Not exactly. By not insulating their houses, fixing their windows, and updating their heating, they were wasting energy. That still has a ‘cost’, and they paid that cost by having less in the way of food and other things.”

I thought about that. Instead of forcing the stubborn to change, the AIs had delivered a subtle nudge. They had to figure things out for themselves, and could still decide to be cold, or hot, and not have the things they saw their neighbors having. I was impressed.

Pete set the plate of eggs and potatoes in front of me, and I dug in.

I stopped eating, and said, “Still, I imagine there were some holdouts.”

“Most of those folks left a while back. Their relatives, or just some young people needing a place of their own, took over their houses,” said Pete. “Remember, part of the changes meant that no one owned property anymore. At some point, an abandoned house needs to be taken over, and taken cared of.”

I wondered about that. “Couldn’t someone have headed into an Enclave, decided it wasn’t for them, and came back, only to find someone had taken over their home.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” answered Pete. “We have an informal rule that people wait at least three months before they take over an abandoned house. Sometimes people have just gone traveling, but they would have told someone, their relatives or friends, and we know to leave those houses alone. Well, except for taking care of them if something happens.”

“I guess I’m just suspicious, when things seem way too likely to just work out. It wasn’t that way when I was younger.”

“The world, or at least parts of it, have changed, and for the better,” said Pete. “My own life was hard, as was the family I grew up with. I accept this better way of organizing things.”

After I finished eating, I took my plate and cup to the sink, and started washing up.

“You know, there are whole towns that haven’t accepted the change,” said Pete.

“Oh? How do you know that?”, I asked.

“We priests have always had back-channels, outside of the official Church ones, where we can keep in touch with one another. We might have met in seminary, or during earlier postings, so a lot of us know each other personally,” said Pete.

“These holdout towns. What about them?”

“Some of them are miniature Enclaves, with control over who comes and goes. They get treated like the holdouts we had here, as if they were still covered by the basic-income regime that existed before the Singularity,” said Pete. “In some ways, they stayed isolated, and angry, long after the rest of us had moved on.”

I wondered about that. I had noticed that the transport had followed all of the exits off the highways it had followed on my way to Smallwood.

“You still going to the Enclave?” asked Pete.

“I think so. Well, yes, I am. To have come all this way and not found out what it’s like in an Enclave just seems wrong to me.”

“Okay. Blessings upon you, or perhaps, best of luck,” said Pete.

Walking toward Dickshooter

I was tired of walking. It turns out that 18 miles is a really long way to walk, especially when the only trail was an abandoned dirt road. Seemed like there should have at least been a paved state or county road hooking Smallwood up to Dickshooter.

Pete had at least pointed me in the right direction. I could see some lights off in the distance. But in the clear, dry air across the mostly flat landscape, I couldn’t tell how much further I had to go. I decided to head a little ways off the road and camp for the night. Might as well try out the camping gear I had been carrying all day.

After a meal of reconstituted stew and a dessert of freeze-dried ice cream, I stretched out the insulating pad and my sleeping bag. I laid there for what felt like hours, looking up at the sky. Orion was low on the western horizon at sunset, and I thought I could see a couple of planets along the ecliptic. They too moved slowly toward the west.

I awoke suddenly, surprised to find myself lying outdoors in the open. I must have been asleep for hours, as the planets had set and all the stars I could see had moved a long ways across the cloudless, Idaho, sky.

I woke again to a sharp pain in my forehead. I opened my eyes to a vision of a rifle barrel pressed unpleasantly hard to my face. The barrel was attached to a well-maintained AK47 with a custom stock, and holding it was a burly man of indeterminate age.

“Welcome to Idaho,” said the man. “Pull your arms out of the sleeping bag real slow, now, and place them above your head.”

I did as the man asked. As I became more awake, I noticed there were several other men around, one watching me down the barrel of his gun about ten feet away. My pack was being disassembled by a couple of other guys, one of whom had my rifle hung over his shoulder already.

“Hey, this guy doesn’t even have any ammunition!” he shouted. Well, it’s not like I could just go online and ask for some these days. There actually were a couple of shells in a pocket of the pack they hadn’t noticed yet. They had found the empty magazine though, and snapped it into the receiver of my gun.

“I suppose you planned on volunteering to join the Morlake Raiders,” said the burly man.

“I don’t know what I would find here,” I said. “I thought I would head into town and take a look around.”

“I don’t think so. You’re coming with us. Now slide yourself out of that bag, keeping your hands where I can see them at all times. Then, put on your shoes.”

“How about some coffee?”

“Ha, this guy thinks we are waitresses. Hey, smart ass, just do what you’re told and you’ll be alright.” He stepped back a couple of steps, but kept pointing the rifle at me, having moved the focus down to the larger target of my chest.

Shit, I thought. This isn’t a good beginning. As I started lacing up my hiking boots, I tried again.

“Hi, I’m Chuck Sinclair. I’m from California and I thought I’d visit the Idaho Enclave to see what it’s like.”

“Well, Mr. Sinclair, you are soon going to find out, after we finish a little hike. You were probably headed toward the lights you could see in the distance last night. That’s not where we’re

going--it's a decoy. We have another five miles beyond that to hike this fine morning. You can get your questions answered once we reach the fort."

Fort? I guess I really was in some version of the Wild West. I got up. Someone handed me my pack, somewhat lighter than it had been, and I put it on carefully. Two of the men fanned out in front of us, while two followed perhaps ten meters behind me, neatly boxing me in. They didn't even bother taking my Swiss Army knife away from me.

By mid-afternoon, we had approached the 'fort'. It was actually a ranch house, with a couple of trees around it, and sandbags piled up against the sides of the house here and there. There had been some craters along the road as we approached the house, some looking very fresh, others overgrown with weeds.

"Seen some action lately?" I tried.

"Nothing we can't handle," replied the burly man. "Just keep your mouth shut for now and keep moving. We want to get you under cover as soon as we can."

Under cover? The area around the "fort" was scrubland, low, bushy vegetation stretching out into the distance as far as the eye could see. There could be a battalion of men hidden out there. I noticed that the bushes had been cleared around the "fort" out to about 100 meters, I guessed to prevent someone sneaking up on them. Didn't seem like a lot of protection when people are armed with assault rifles with ranges far greater than that.

So far, I had seen little signs of habitation. I had expected the Enclave to be filled with people anxious to get out from under the control of the AIs. Instead, all I had seen was an empty landscape. The ranch house was the first sign of civilization I had seen all day, besides the track we had started following and some abandoned dwellings. After we had hiked a mile or so, we came upon the lights I had seen. They were powered by a motley assortment of solar panels. There were also a couple of surveillance cameras and what looked like a small dish antenna pointed off into the distance. My escort turned away from the road we'd been following, and headed off in the same direction as the antenna was pointing. I guessed that the path I had taken was regularly enough used to be worth watching for "volunteers".

Up near the ranch house, I saw that the front door was hidden behind a stack of sandbags. The burlap bags actually had a plank of wood set horizontally less than a meter up, leaving a gap between bags you could see through. Or shoot through, too.

We walked past the sandbags, and the burly guy pulled open a screen door and gestured me inside. It was cooler and very dark inside the house, in what would have been the living room. He pointed to a wooden chair set just inside the room. I sat down and waited. We hadn't eaten, but they had, at least, allowed me to drink from my water bottle. They all carried canteens, and I could hear water sloshing around as they walked. Seemed noisy to me for soldiers.

I needed to pee. I started to say something, but burly-man put his finger to his lips, and nodded to a closed door. Just then, the door opened and out strutted a tall, blond man wearing an infantryman's off-duty cap. He had a web belt with a holstered Glock on one side and a big knife in a sheaf on the other.

"Hi there," he said brightly. "I'm Amos Morlake. Welcome to my little abode. Would you like something to eat?"

I nodded, and Morlake gestured to burly-man, who disappeared into the room behind the door.

"I hope my men treated you well," said Morlake. "There aren't that many of us in these parts, and we do our best to get along with one another." He smiled, and appeared charming.

Oh, oh. Charming, one of the characteristics I learned about from the Psychopath Test. Had I already met my first psychopath? In the dim light, I could see that Morlake's face was scarred, as if he had been in fights with broken bottles or knives. Violent behavior, another psychopath characteristic. I started feeling a lot more worried.

"Let's just see now. You came here probably because you thought you were escaping control, thinking you'd be free here, in the Idaho Enclave. Unfortunately, things don't work like that around here. There are many small groups, like this one, scattered around, each working to protect their own family and retainers. We do trade with one another, and share women when we can. There are towns with women and children as you get further away from the boundaries of the Enclave, as well as ranches with cattle and small farms. Gotta have food, you know, and places we can go to relax and have a good time." He smiled.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Chuck Sinclair. I came from California to see what living in an Enclave would be like."

"And what did you do in California before the computers took your livelihood away?"

"I was a programmer. I worked mostly in systems and networking, and was most famous for finding a solution to the queueing problem."

"A programmer. Good, good," said Morlake. He walked over to a table, picked up something small, and passed it to me. "Ever work with one of these?"

It was a Raspberry Pi, probably an older version. But the form factor was familiar at least.

"We have boxes of these, and some batteries, and we need someone who can add some intelligence to these babies. We also have some drones, and we need those to be able to work

beyond line-of-sight, beyond radio control, so they can reconnoiter and return on their own. Do you think you could help with that?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. Do you have GPS modules for these, or something else that could be used for guidance?"

"Not sure. We have boxes of electronic junk we've collected over the years. You'll have plenty of time to take a look and see if you can find something that will work. Say, about a week or so, as Smith's Rangers have been pestering us lately and we need to see them coming before they get too close, you know. Don't want to get involved in something we can't handle."

"A week? You do have a computer I can use for writing programs? We need that, unless you have Linux loaded on a Pi?"

"Linux on a pie? Not sure what you mean, boy. But we do have a laptop you can use while the sun is shining. We rely on photovoltaics here. The rest of the time, you'll need to do your work with paper and pencil."

"No battery in the laptop? What operating system do you use?"

"How would I know? The laptop is pretty old, so I don't think you should count on the battery keeping things going. But it better be enough."

The mixture of folksiness and veiled threats were working just fine on me.

"When do I get started?"

"Right now, or as soon as you've had something to eat. Bob should have your chow ready by now."

Chow consisted of a bowl of beans mixed with some grain and seasoned with something called Brewer's Yeast. It was warm, salty, and filling enough, I supposed. The beans also explained a background smell that the room had.

Bob took me back outside and around to the back. There was a patio, open to the sky but surrounded by piles of dirt topped with sandbags. There was a laptop sitting on a picnic table connected to old car batteries. These were connected, through a regulator, to two unmatched solar panels. When I sat down at the picnic table, Bob bent down and placed a manacle around my ankle and padlocked it shut.

"What if I have to pee?"

"Yell. Somebody will eventually come and unlock you. We keep a spare key nearby."

“How about right now?”

Bob bent down again, unlocking the manacle while keeping a careful eye on me. I wasn't thinking about overpowering Bob, who looked like he could take on three of me at once. All I wanted to do was relieve myself. Bob led me to an outhouse, and allowed me to pull the door shut. I noticed that there was toilet paper, but when I used it, it felt like it was made from bleached corn husks.

Once I was locked up again, I turned my attention to the laptop. It was running an old version of Windows, but among the desktop full of icons I found a Linux subsystem. I brought that up with a sigh of relief, and began looking for the tooling I needed. There was a Pi directory, and it seemed somebody had been working on this project before me. I started looking through the files, using timestamps to find the most recent files. Comments at the top of many of the source files had been made by someone named Ryan. I wondered what had happened to him?

Dropping back to Windows, I brought up a browser to see if I could perform searches. I thought this was a long shot, but the home page for the browser had a search window for something that looked like a rebranded Wikipedia.

Damn, I thought. If this thing has connectivity, what about my neural net? I went through the motions of querying my own connectivity, but got nothing. I wondered how long I had been out of range?

Back to work.

Supper was another bowl of beans and grains. A different man, this one dressed like a soldier, complete with rifle, unlocked my manacle and led me around front and back inside. I was taken to a room just off the living room, shoved inside, and the door locked behind me. There was still some light leaking in around the sandbagged windows, but it would be dark soon. I laid down on the bed, just some bags filled with straw on a platform of pallets. But my backpack was there, along with my sleeping bag. In some ways, I might be more physically comfortable sleeping here than the previous night, sleeping under the stars. On the other hand, I was the prisoner of a crazy person surrounded by other people with guns.

I woke up several times during the night. Once, I had heard gunshots but not very nearby. Another time, it sounded like a rooster just outside.

I had found a bucket with a loose lid, and been using that. The room was already funky and not getting better. I checked the door, and it was still locked. The light coming through spaces around the sandbags revealed a jug of water, a bowel, a towel, and a plastic mug. I drank some water, then tried washing with the bowel and towel. That didn't work too well, but I did feel a bit more awake.

"Stand away from the door!", a rough voice shouts.

"Okay," I shouted back, laying back in bed.

I could hear some rattling outside the door, like chains being undone, then the door handle turned, and a tall man, dressed in the same semi-military outfit I had seen a lot of yesterday, stepped inside. He holds a bowl of something steaming in the cold air, with an old spoon stuck into it.

Just then, I feel as well as hear a loud "Crump!". A little plaster dust falls from a crack in the ceiling that I can remember staring at last night before the light went out.

"What was that?"

"Oh, probably just some harassment from the Smith boys," said my jailer. "They often lob a mortar at us in the morning, just keeping us on our toes. Then there's always a chance it's something more serious, like a ranging ..."

I find myself buried in broken boards, choking on plaster dust and sand. I can't hear anything but ringing in my ears. The guard. I can't see the guard, the light in the front room has gone out, and there's dust and smoke everywhere. My legs hurt, and my face stings from cuts. I can't see out of my left eye. More dust fell, and the whole building seemed to rock.

I really have to get out of here. I try wiggling my toes, as that's what I recall people do when they have their legs trapped in rubble. When that seemed to work, I tried straightening my legs. That doesn't work. But my arms are free, so I start pushing pieces of wood away from my legs, and immediately get stuck with a dagger-like wood splinter. Damn, more blood! And now I could see what my problem is: the pallets have tumbled over top of me, pinning me up against the wall, near the window. That's where the sand has come from. I push as hard as I could against the bags and pallets, but all I manage to do is compress it. I need to get out from under the bed stuff. Perhaps I can escape. If I can walk, that is.

More wood fragments sprayed across my face, and I looked up in time to see something crashing through the pallets. Bullets! I tried hunkering down, but am stuck sitting up beyond pallets and bags of straw that were equally useless as bedding and for shelter from gunfire.

I struggled with the pallets as if my life depended on it, and felt them budge an inch. I kept pushing, trying different positions, to lift them up, or push them sideways. And suddenly, something gives, sending them tumbling silently over in front of me, freeing my legs. I tried curling my legs up, and the right one screamed with pain. Carefully, using my arms and left leg as much as possible, I pushed up against the wall.

Through the dust and the smoke, I could see some flickering light through the space where the door was. Fire? The light was moving, and all of a sudden I wished I was still hidden by the bed. I saw someone moving through the smoke, carrying an AK47, and wearing camouflage. That could be anyone around here, on any side. The light held by the man falls on me, and I watch the muzzle of the gun move to point at my chest.

This was my least favorite nightmare: I'm about to be shot, and there's nothing I can do about it. In some of my dreams, I at least have a weapon, but it doesn't work, or it appears to fire, but has no effect on my attacker, who grins and shoots me dead.

I helplessly raised my arms, starting to slide back down to the floor, wishing I could do something, anything. The man's eyes were cold, unfeeling, and I thought I could see his finger tightening on the trigger. Then the front of the man's camouflage shirt fluttered outward a little, moving wetly in the dim light, and he folded bonelessly to the debris covered floor.

Another armed man appeared, and grinned at me. But his gun, slung from his shoulder, was pointed away from me, and he gestured with his free hand, urging me to come along with him. I nodded at my right leg, and he glanced down, then rotated his carbine so it pointed to the floor. He walked up to me, grabbed my left hand, then twisted around smoothly as he bent forward, taking my weight on his back. He was a big man, and I am being carried off into the smoke and the dust as if I am a child.