

Tyler Hooper

An Old World

The crack of lightning woke me as smoke swirled around the midnight sky. I quickly came to, realizing the danger I was in, and tried to open the car door. After pushing with all of my might, I resorted to kicking and crawling out of the window as I had realized the accident had caused the car to lose power, leaving the doors locked. As the thunder continued to crackle, I tried to connect with the emergency servers, but the storm had wiped all connection to the AI assistants. After a while I finally connected to emergency services. "Hello? I've been in an accident and need help," I helplessly croaked. The operator responded "You've reached emergency services. However, we are currently unavailable to send any help due to the AI outage. Please hold where you are until our systems can locate you." "AI outage?" I replied, confused as the line went cold. Another strike of lightning brought back Grandpa's story of the storm that once crashed the AI servers, shutting down entire cities and forcing millions to shelter in place as though the world had slipped back into the age of natural disasters. As the thunder roared across the sky, I realized this storm had done the same, tearing the networks apart and leaving me stranded with no help in sight. Filled with unease, I looked on only to find an abandoned, run-down home as my only shimmer of hope. With no other solution in sight and no help on the way, I decided to trudge towards the decrepit building.

I continued to trudge on, only stopping once I'd reached the worn down door of the old relic. The building looked like the houses from centuries ago that Grandpa used to show me, before the government outlawed unauthorized teachings of reading and writing. Nearing the

entrance, I shouted “Hello?” nervously, but was only met by the sounds of the storm. I then crept through the front door, looking for anyone that could help. Then, as I stepped through the front door, an old man emerged, meeting me with a hunting rifle. “Who are you and how did you find this place?” The old man shouted. “I’m just looking for help.. I’m not here to steal anything or hurt you!” I nervously exclaimed. “I was in a car accident and emergency services can’t be sent because of the information outage,” I continued. The man then lowered his rifle and motioned me over to a room in the back of the house. I followed, still bloodied and hurting from the accident. The old man then reached for and opened a red kit I’d never seen before, grabbing what looked to be a bandage out of the box. Before I could question his methods, the old man began wrapping my bloodied arm with the bandage. “What is this?” I nervously asked. “You’ve never seen a first aid kit before?” The old man questioned. “No, I’ve never seen anything like it,” I replied. “I knew they outlawed reading but I at least would’ve thought they’d teach you what a first aid kit is,” the old man scoffed. Before I could reply, a strong gust of wind exposed a scar on the man’s shoulder, marking where an AI assistant should’ve been implanted. My own chip lay dormant, silent when it should’ve been walking me through every step of treating my wounds. “Do you know your way out of here son?” The old man asked. “No—without my AI assistant working I have no way to get directions,” I replied. Without saying another word, the old man drew an ancient-looking scroll, and began asking me where I was headed. The old man then picked up a stack of smooth, pale sheets and a slender yellow stick before ripping a sheet out and beginning to scribble ancient symbols. His eyes then met mine as he quickly scribbled the symbols away, knowing I wouldn’t comprehend them. My shoulder suddenly tingled with a sudden shock, followed by my AI assistant’s hesitant apology. The old man froze, his face draining of color at the unexpected message.

“You aren’t safe here anymore,” the old man nervously blurted. Before I could protest, a loud thump shook the house followed by a voice belting, “Police, open up!” The old man quickly pointed to a couch near the corner of the room and I instinctively hid behind it as the old man answered the door. “How can I help you sir?” The old man asked cautiously. “We received a call about a car accident from this location,” the policeman coldly replied. While the old man assured the policeman that no help was needed, I thought back to the call I had made after the accident—the very call that brought the police here. The policeman’s gaze landed on the table in the back, freezing on the map the old man had used to help me. “Sir, you do know distributing unauthorized teachings of reading and writing are highly illegal,” the policeman proclaimed. Before the old man could protest, the policeman bolted past the old man and took hold of the map, sealing the old man’s fate. “You’re under arrest for possession of illegal teachings of reading and writing,” the policeman said as he began to walk towards the old man. As the policeman walked towards the old man, my eyes darted to the rifle from before laying a few feet from my hiding spot. Carefully, I crawled out from behind the couch and grabbed hold of the rifle, my mind set on stopping the policeman. As the policeman grabbed his handcuffs, I inched forward and took aim, ready to fire. The old man’s eyes then met mine, halting my steady yet slow steps, and I hung on his every movement for direction. He then gave me a slight nod, leading me to take aim and wait for his next movement. As the policeman drew his cuffs, the old man nudged him away, placing him directly into my line of fire. Before the policeman’s cold body could hit the floor, the old man immediately motioned me towards him and exclaimed, “We are both in danger, the AI assistant in your arm tracks your location.” The old man continued, “More police will be here any minute—we need to get that chip out of your arm.”

The old man hurriedly rushed to the kitchen of the house as I quickly followed. He then opened what looked to be the freezer compartment of the fridge and removed a tray full of ice cubes to reveal a syringe filled with some substance. “This will disable the AI chip in your arm,” the old man proclaimed as he swiftly jabbed the syringe into my shoulder, injecting me with the mysterious serum. I felt a small jolt throughout my shoulder as the serum took effect, quieting the AI voice that had guided me through my entire life. Without another word, the old man frantically pushed the fridge out of the way to reveal a trapdoor below it. “Down here!” The old man ordered as I quickly opened it and climbed down, the old man following close behind. I discovered that the trapdoor led to a ladder leading down to a secret passage created beneath the house. After following the old man through the passage for some time, the tunnel opened into a cave, where a vault-like door blocked the way, its keypad requiring a code to enter. The old man then entered the code for what felt like an eternity, likely with a sequence of thirty or more digits. The old man then stepped away from the door as the door began to slowly swing open, revealing a place unlike one I'd ever seen before.

The swinging door opened to reveal a small village of houses and farmland without any semblance of technology, all nestled in this underground cavern. “Welcome to the Old World!” the old man exclaimed as I looked on, filled with angst and curiosity. He then led me through the village, showing how people lived centuries ago without a glimpse of technology. Farmers worked the soil with tools, growing crops without the guidance of any AI. Nearby there were men carrying water in buckets from a well, while a woman sewed torn clothes back together by hand. The old man then walked me to the schoolhouse, where inside there were kids flipping through the pages of ancient texts, reading and interpreting the symbols inside, a practice that was outlawed in the world I knew. I then sank into a worn wooden chair, where the old man's

voice drew close as he proclaimed “You’re going to gain the gift they took away from you: literacy, and with it, the ability to think independently.” Another man stepped forward, pushing a worn book in front of me, and with a calm, steady voice he assured me that I would be taught to read and write. As I looked out of the schoolhouse window into the unfamiliar village, I realized how distant the world I had known had become.

Works Consulted

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