

## Chapter 19

It took a few seconds for the information to sink in and Uncle Joe blurted. "Seventy five yards? In what direction? How do you know this?"

Neba turned off her L.E.D. "It is located in the same direction that we came. I have a very keen sense of hearing and I am familiar with the sounds that it makes."

Uncle Joe and I flipped down our optics visors and crept to the edge of the counter. Slowly we raised our eyes above the counter so we could get a look at what was outside the building. Looking through the dirty front windows of the gas station I could see two objects in the distance. I dialed in the magnification of my visor.

One of the objects was a military style, four wheeled vehicle. It was military green in color, heavily armored and had large wheels and tires. The visor gave me an approximate weight of eight thousand two hundred pounds and an estimated height of eight feet. The second object was taller than the vehicle. It had two appendages that appeared to be powerful mechanical legs and a round portion in the middle that connected the two legs together. It looked similar to a mechanized Tyrannosaurus Rex but without an upper body and head. It was black in color and on each side of the circular section of the T-Rex was what looked to be a weapon. The data from the visor gave a height estimation of a little over eleven feet and a weight of six thousand pounds. Obviously this was the Barghest that Neba had described just a few minutes before.

After getting a look at the threats just outside of the gas station, Uncle Joe whispered his first instructions. "Sling your 12 gauge. Pull out your PR and set it to level three. Fire only on my command. Understand?"

I followed Uncle Joe's orders and whispered back. "Affirmative."

Uncle Joe continued. "Give Neba your side arm. Show her how to use it."

Neba cupped her hands around her L.E.D. to minimize the light and turned it on. I handed her my .45 caliber and said. "This is..." She touched my hand to cut me off.

Neba pulled the .45 caliber from my hand. She used her thumb to release the magazine. She checked it, and then slammed it back into the gun. With her finger off the trigger, she clicked off the safety and pulled the action to draw a round from the magazine to the chamber. Uncle Joe and I looked at her in amazement.

She smiled and with a swagger she said. "Just because I am an intellectual does not mean that I am stupid." She turned off her L.E.D. and held the gun with both hands and pointed it safely toward the ceiling.

Uncle Joe whispered through the communicator. "I'm startin' to like this chick."

I returned to my place behind the counter and looked at the threatening objects in the distance. They had not moved and did not show any signs of activity. Uncle Joe and I had our PRs resting on the edge of the counter with the objects outside dead center in our sights.

Then I heard the crack of an audio signal through my communicator. "Greetings, worthless chattel of these fine fifty one United States of America. I am quite impressed that common citizens from the unwashed masses have chosen to visit the circle of my immanence. My name is Commander Manson Kurse. I have been christened as the commander and supreme leader of the Lancaster Science and Research Facility."

Uncle Joe's voice came through the communicator. "So this is Kurse."

Kurse's words were calm and measured. His voice seemed to have a slight English accent to it, or it could have been that he had spent time overseas. His tone sounded very smug and elitist and his choice of words made me question his level of sanity.

The audio signal returned. "The matter at hand is that you are in possession of my property. Property that I wish to appropriate."

Neba pushed between Uncle Joe and me and whispered. "As you can see, Commander Kurse is quite rude and very abrasive. He is a scientist by degree but performs the duties of control and command at Lancaster. He has used himself as a test subject for various brain-machine interface experiments, so he is not one hundred percent human. Overall, he is not a good person. "

Kurse's voice appeared in the communicator again. "Yes Neba, I am a prick, you know me oh too well, but a prick with an intelligence quotient of one hundred and fifty six."

Uncle Joe looked at me. "Click off your communicator. He's monitoring our chatter." I followed his orders.

Without the communicator we could hear Kurse as his voice boomed from the military vehicle outside. "You may be thinking that it would have been much quicker for me to just collect my property and forgo all of the theater and introductions. But I will rather enjoy watching your panic and terror as I describe to you the manner in which I will end your life. Likewise, in a few seconds the only one you will be able to repeat this information to, will be your god. First things first. I will now appropriate my property."

After his last words an apparatus began to extend from the top of the Barghest. It extended straight into the air about ten feet and then started to lean over toward the gas station. The apparatus took on the mechanical movements of a giant octopus tentacle and employed a slight swimming motion as it moved toward the station. Within a few seconds we heard a loud thud on the roof above us as the tentacle had reached the roof of the gas station.

The three of us fell back, away from the counter and looked toward the ceiling with panic. We pointed our weapons at the ceiling above us and Uncle Joe yelled. "Fire on sight. Fire on sight."

Then a loud screeching noise that grew in volume and frequency could be heard above us. My eyes shot left and right expecting something to pop through the ceiling at any second. The building shook and the noise became even higher pitched as the tentacle above us drilled its way through the roof of the gas station. Within a few seconds the tentacle had made it through the roof and punched its way through the plaster ceiling. The three of us tried to protect ourselves the best we could as dust and wooden debris flew in every direction. The tentacle had lowered itself a foot or two below the level of the ceiling, exposing an opening about four feet in diameter.

All three of us began to unload our weapons on the mechanical intruder above us. Each deafening blast from our pulse rifles destroyed major sections of the roof around it but produced no damage to the tentacle itself.

Then a light flashed from the opening of the tentacle and quickly scanned left and right through the plaster dust hanging in the air. Once the light had detected our position it moved in our direction. The light was a part of an optic system that was attached to the wrist of a mechanical arm. On the end of the arm was a three fingered end effector device. The three fingers moved fluently on a number of servo controlled axes like the legs of a spider. As the mechanical arm moved closer to us, Uncle Joe and I continued to unload round after round of pulse energy on the tentacle opening and the mechanical arm to no avail.

The intruder's optics had identified Neba and the mechanical arm quickly moved in her direction. Neba darted left and right in an attempt to escape but the three fingers of the end effector wrapped around her waist with mechanical precision. She yanked at the fingers in an attempt to free herself but she was unable to.

Uncle Joe chomped down hard on his cigar and yelled. "Target the arm close to the opening!" Then he unloaded more pulse energy rounds at the mechanical arm that had trapped our friend.

Effortlessly the arm picked Neba off the floor and began to draw her toward the four foot opening at the end of the tentacle. Neba fought frantically to remove herself from the monster's mechanical grip and continued to yank at the fingers wrapped around her waist. As she was pulled closer to the tentacle opening, our eyes met and I could see the look of terror on her face. As she came to the edge of the tentacle opening, she began to fire the .45 caliber into the opening of the mechanical monster hoping to randomly hit something vital that would release her from its grasp. The slide of her .45 caliber slid back to say it had just released its last round, so she began to use the gun like a hammer to pound at the mechanical arm and end effector. Uncle Joe and I both ceased fire hoping not to hit Neba with an errant blast and watched as the arm quickly pulled her, kicking and fighting, inside the tentacle opening. Immediately the tentacle retracted itself from the top of the gas station, throwing more debris in every direction and leaving a gaping hole in the ceiling.

I fell backwards onto the floor and looked at Uncle Joe. Both of us were covered with plaster dust and small pieces of debris. I exhaled and took a deep breath, since I couldn't remember having taken a breath during the entire abduction.

Uncle Joe spit out his cigar. "What the friggin' fruit loop was that!"

We scrambled to take cover behind what was left of the counter and looked out the windows of the gas station. The glass in the windows had broken during the skirmish and we could clearly see the enemy outside. The tentacle was retracting itself into the Barghest with Neba on board.

Kurse' voice boomed from his vehicle. "It is my pleasure to inform you that I am the absolute ruler of this region and the ultimate bringer of death. To challenge me is futile and will only result in failure. Failure that will be accompanied by torturous pain and inevitably your physical death. I have wasted too many words. Now that I have what I came for, I will dispose of you by the most efficient and effective means possible. The pleasure has been all mine."

## Chapter 20

Two men dressed in black military uniforms came from behind the vehicle and ran to the Barghest. We could see them pull Neba from the monster and push her into the back of the vehicle. Immediately the vehicle turned and sped off across the desert, leaving the Barghest behind.

Uncle Joe looked at the charge indicator on his PR and it showed thirty three percent of capacity. "The PR hasn't been very effective at stopping that son of a biscuit, but we need to try and cripple it somehow." He fired two pulse rounds at the creature and said. "Aim for the boney sections of the legs. Maybe we can maim it."

Immediately I raised my PR and followed his orders. As we fired, large parts of the front wall of the gas station began to disappear. Almost every shot we took hit the Barghest but it seemed to be impervious to the blasts. The mechanical monster turned to square itself to our position and then raised its starboard side weapon to a firing position. The end of the weapon began to glow a faint red in color which grew in intensity.

Uncle Joe yelled. "Cease fire! We're just wasting ammo on this thing. We need to take cover immediately."

Both of us turned and looked around us to see if there was something that could shield us from the weapon that was about to be unleashed. The place was littered with debris and had roofing shingles, portion of the ceiling and broken sections of wall plaster thrown everywhere. The only furniture around was a few empty shelves and the old ice cream freezer that was close to the front door.

I watched as something caught Uncle Joe's eye. He stopped and looked down at the old tile floor of the gas station. A few feet to our right was a metal handle that was attached to the floor with a couple phillips head screws. It looked similar to the handles found on the heavy duty case that we used to ship electronic components from our harvester, to the manufacturer for repair. Uncle Joe quickly cleared the debris away from the handle and noticed a rectangular shape cut into the tile of the floor. He lowered himself to his hands and knees and frantically yanked on the handle. The floor did not move. He took a closer look, knowing there must be a reason for a handle to be attached to the floor and pulled horizontally on it. The tile floor slid sideways to the left and exposed a small unlit compartment below. He gave the handle another yank and the size of the opening increased. The compartment was below floor level and looked to be about six feet deep, about three feet wide by about six feet long and was full of dust and spider webs.

Uncle Joe jumped to his feet, grabbed me by the collar of my A.C.U. and pushed me down through the opening of the compartment. "GO!"

I fell through the opening but caught myself as I hit the floor below. The impact jarred my A.C.H. and I closed my eyes. I could feel Uncle Joe jump down next to me and then I looked and saw him pull the cover of the compartment back across the opening.

It was then that the Barghest fired its weapon. The noise from the blast was incredible. It echoed across the desert and sounded like the release of energy from the beginning of the universe. I screamed and covered my ears with my hands as the sound of the weapon discharging nearly pushed my ear drums to their breaking point. The sound was not the typical sound of a traditional weapon that uses gun powder as a propellant. But more of a combination of a scream, a growl and the blast from an oil tanker air horn. I opened my eyes for a fraction of a second to see Uncle Joe crouched next to me and covering his ears the same as I was.

As the energy pulse from the Barghest's weapon reached the gas station, the full effect of the blast could be felt. The concussion permeated my entire body, from head to toe and felt like I took a punch to the gut, but more accurately like a punch to my entire body. I could only imagine what was happening above us and that the old gas station had taken the brunt of the blast and was now reduced to rubble. I choked out a feeble attempt to scream as I fell limp to the floor of the compartment with the pain coursing through every part of my body. My eyes were closed. I could feel the cool concrete floor of the compartment pressed against the side of my face and could taste the dust in my mouth. I could hear nothing but the high pitched, rhythmic sound of my blood moving through my veins. It was at that point that I must have fallen unconscious.

I am not sure if it was seconds or minutes or exactly how much time passed before I started to regain consciousness. My ears were still pretty useless at that point but my visor seemed to still be in working order. I saw Uncle Joe lying next to me so I grabbed his arm and shook it in an attempt to rouse him. His eyes blinked open and tried to focus and he spit small bits of debris from his mouth. I could see his lips moving but I could only faintly hear the words. I didn't know what to do so I tried to answer him but only an incomprehensible babbling came out. I pushed myself up and leaned back against the side of the compartment. I closed my eyes again and tried to relax myself to control the pain. Uncle Joe lifted himself from the floor in an attempt to stand but his legs gave out on him and he crumpled back to the floor.

After a few minutes, my senses were slowly starting to return as well as my hearing, as I pulled one of the bottles of water from my pocket. I took a sip of the water and handed the bottle to Uncle Joe. I used my left hand to feel for Dozer's software drive in the pocket beneath my flak vest. It felt intact and none the worse for wear. Uncle Joe pushed himself against the wall of the compartment and took a sip of the water. We sat there for a few minutes in silence.

Uncle Joe drank the last swig of water and pulled himself to his feet. "Ready your PR. Fire on sight." This Marine had taken a serious beating but was still in the fight.

I located my PR, found the strength to lift myself from the floor and stood next to Uncle Joe. I pushed out a response. "Affirmative."

Uncle Joe slowly slid the cover of the compartment to the side which gave us a view of the night sky and the faint glow of the stars above. Uncle Joe carefully raised his head out of the compartment to see what type of threat still existed above us. The gas station was gone. The walls, the ceiling, the

counter, the old ice cream freezer, everything was gone. There was no debris. It was as if somebody had laid a square of tile floor in the middle of the desert.

Most importantly, the Barghest was gone. It had done its job. It had left a smoldering path of destruction in its wake. And thinking that it had achieved its objective of eliminating us, had left the area to regroup with Commander Kurse.

Uncle Joe tossed his PR onto the floor above us, pulled himself out of the compartment and bent down with his hand extended to help me back to ground level. I slung my PR on my back and grabbed Uncle Joe's hand as he pulled me out of the underground compartment that had saved both of our lives.

I straightened my A.C.H. and looked at Uncle Joe. "Is that some kind of cellar? Or is it a storage area? What is..." I was still groggy and ran out of words.

Uncle Joe inspected his PR for any sign of damage and said. "It's a tornado shelter. I take that back, it's probably a nuke shelter. I guess it could be both. Remember that this place was built in the nineteen fifties which was at the height of the Cold War and everybody was afraid that the Rue-skis were going to start lobbing nukes at us. No matter which it is, that thing saved our lives."

I shook my head side to side to try and clear some more of my grogginess. "That Barghest is one nasty mother." I brushed dust and debris from my A.C.U.

Uncle Joe cleared his throat and spit on the tiled floor. "I've been in a variety of combat situations but I have never seen anything like that before. With the weapons we have, it is utterly unstoppable."

I scanned the horizon and noticed that daybreak was not far away. In a faint voice I said. "And they took Neba." The memory of her being pulled into the Barghest's tentacle flashed into my mind. The look of terror on her face dug at my insides and made me wince.

Uncle Joe touched his A.C.U. to feel for his handheld. "We need to stop the chit-chat and beat feet outta here. That thing thinks we're dead and I want to keep it that way. We need to retreat to the storage facility where we can regroup and figure out our next move. It'll be light soon so we need to move out. I'm on point."

Thanks for your interest in my book, "Footprints". I hope you enjoyed it. If you have a second, please give it a star rating and a review at Amazon.com and Goodreads.com. It would be much appreciated. Your feedback is important to me and it also helps other people find books they will enjoy. To see other books I have written, please visit my author page. Thanks and Take Care – John A. Autero

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John A. Autero is an author of tactical, science fiction and adventure novels. An engineer by education, John employs a technical style of writing that combines existing technologies with those that are yet to be developed. John enjoys anything sci-fi, automotive, heavy metal and ballistic. Always a fan of government conspiracies and black-ops, stories like "The Terminator" and "The X-Files" are always on his list of favorites. John was born in the United States and has spent his entire life there, where he happily lives with his wife and pets.

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