

Chapter 5 -Insurgents

The mud-brick building Jalauddin Razaq Nafez headed toward appeared to be a small barn for farm animals.

It sat on the outskirts of a remote village, and nothing about its bland exterior was remarkable. Double-wide, sun-bleached wooden doors led into a cooler, interior stable. Small mounds of hay dotted the dirt floor and scattered about were piles of goat dung. The only indication the building was something other than as it appeared was the number of guards standing around holding AK47's.

Akhund followed Nafez toward a ratty, canvas curtain. Two wary thugs searched them and took their weapons. Pulling back the curtain revealed a metal door sturdy enough to withstand the blast of a rocket propelled grenade. A guard rapped an odd sequence of knocks, and a lock clicked. The heavy door opened, and Akhund followed Nafez through the opening.

The door closed, and Akhund thought he had walked into a tomb. It was dark, and the air smelled musty. Rough hands grabbed his arms and guided him forward several steps. He heard a lock click, and another door swung open to reveal a well-lighted room with cushions circling what looked like a stone altar.

Without hesitation, Nafez stepped through the doorway. After a slight pause, Akhund's curiosity overcame his fear, and he followed. Walking up to one of the

cushions, Nafez stood behind it and indicated Akhund should do likewise. Akhund heard the muffled sounds of a television news report coming from a hallway to his right. The noise shut off with an audible click.

A short, bearded man wearing a dark suit and vest entered the room from a curtained hallway. He was followed by three larger men wearing ankle length robes and white keffiyahs. After they were all seated, Nafez sat and motioned for Akhund to join him.

"What news brings you here?" the suited man asked. "Your message indicated urgency."

"Excellency, in our latest battle with the US Soldiers, their defeat was imminent. Our men tasted victory. Knowing their coward lives were forfeit, the infidels used poison gas to kill my loyal Insurgents. This man witnessed the carnage," Nafez said as he gestured at Akhund.

Surprise and anger on Ghaffar's face turned to suspicion. "What is your name, survivor?" he asked.

Akhund stammered and bowed his head. "I am Abdul Akhund."

"How did you escape death, Abdul Akhund?" Ghaffar grated. "I am most impressed by this miracle."

Fear blossomed in Akhund's breast and his heart fluttered. One wrong word and his life wouldn't be worth the soap needed to clean the blood from his severed neck off the floor.

"Most Revered Leader, I was commanding the assault on the accursed US Soldiers. In order to better guide my men and assure no American pig escaped our trap, I stationed myself on the nearest high crag. My men had cornered the infidels, and the pigs lives were hanging in the balance. A few more moments and they would be dead. Then the unthinkable occurred. Gas canisters popped all around and my loyal Insurgents were overcome by the noxious fumes. They died by the dozens. All I could do was watch as the American pigs laughed at the carnage."

Ghaffar was silent for a few heartbeats. Without warning, he slammed his fist down. "Today will be the last time anyone uses such instruments of death in my Country," he snarled.

Turning to his men, Ghaffar issued orders. "Call up 300 of our best fighters. We will lay waste to the foreign serpents who killed our faithful followers. We will then go to their headquarters and wipe the remaining infidels from our existence."

Pointing at Akhund, Ghaffar said, "This man, Akhund, shall guide you to the place of carnage. I'm sure he wants revenge for the humiliation he suffered today. Go now."

Akhund's eyes widened and sweat dribbled down his armpits. Struggling to his feet, he shuffled after the men.

Shinol stared at the sandy wasteland with a disgusted look.

If it wasn't for the reward amount, he wouldn't have bothered going to a hellhole like this planet. The gravity was quite onerous. Shinol and his crew's normal work was on planets around three-quarters the size of Earth. Here, he felt like lead weights were wrapped around his wrists and ankles.

It was fortunate his armament made a difference. The bodysuit he wore had properties that eased some of the heavier gravity effects. It made lugging his Laz Gun easier. Trouble was the outfit was skintight and uncomfortable. Pulling it away from his crotch only helped for a moment.

His proximity sensor beeped. The screen indicated one of his cloaked men was nearby. The air shimmered, and Attozka appeared from nowhere.

"The GPS has pinpointed Diviak's location. He is on that ridge in a rocky clearing. There appear to be other lifeforms with him, but from this distance, I can't get a clear reading as to how many."

"It doesn't make any difference. We eliminate all the locals and liberate Diviak. Then we escort him back to our ship where we make sure all evidence of his presence on this planet has been eradicated," Shinol replied.

"It should be easy," Attozka said. Hefting his Laz Gun, he continued, "The locals don't stand a chance of surviving our tech."

Nodding, Shinol said, "I still want our approach to be from all sides. There can't be any possibility of escape. Somehow the locals managed to capture Diviak. We must assume they are dangerous."

"I'll tell the others," Attozka replied.

"Unload the Skimmer. With this gravity, it will be the fastest way to reach Diviak's location," Shinol ordered.

Attozka nodded and vanished.

Ty thumbed through the card box trying to find something that sounded like an effective defense against alien personnel and weaponry.

The Bio-Array Gun had been a lucky find. Ty was concerned it was the most powerful weapon in the U-10 arsenal. The thought was chilling.

He started to ask Koritt, but the alien acted like he knew what Ty wanted.

"I will not help you find anything that will harm my rescuers," Koritt said.

"How do you know anyone coming to find you is a rescuer?" Ty asked.

"What else could they be? You don't travel a thousand light years to an obscure planet for fun."

"Then why rescue you at all?"

"You would never understand civilized behavior," Koritt said.

"The cricket is too confident," Hashtag grumbled. "If his friends have any gear like what we've seen come out of that bag, we're way outgunned."

"Yeah," Sasquatch agreed. "Shouldn't we tie him up? He's not hanging around with us if he has the chance to go home."

"At last someone with a little common sense," Frost said.

Ty nodded, and Sasquatch grabbed Koritt. He began wrapping his arms and legs with some spare rope, and after a few enthusiastic moments, Koritt looked like a mummy.

"Natureboy is sending backup to our location. ETA two hours," Hashtag announced.

"Let the others know the timetable," Ty ordered.

Shinol grinned as his team crept toward the unsuspecting natives.

"This operation is too easy," he chuckled.

The Skimmer had made the 20-kilometer trip from the transport to Diviak's location in just a few minutes. It took only a short trek up the rocky hillside to arrive in the vicinity of the clearing.

His team's bodysuits were effective. Except for small disturbances from their footsteps in the sandy grit, their presence was undetectable without specialized equipment.

His bodysuit sensors indicated the natives each held some kind of metal stick that Shinol guessed was a weapon. Scanning the creatures for other possible threats, Shinol detected blades and several spherical objects his sensors labeled as explosives.

Flipping his brain comm to transmit, Shinol said, "Team Leader at zero degrees true North. Report your positions and available targets."

"Standing by at 90 degrees from true North," Falsa replied. "Two hostiles within arm's reach."

"Positioned at 180 degrees from true North. Two hostiles within range. Awaiting your orders," Attozka said.

"Positioned at 270 degrees from true North. Two hostiles crouching nearby. One is hiding some primitive explosive devices. No real threats detected," Exinat responded.

"A coordinated attack will be most effective. Lock-on your targets and wait for my signal," Shinol ordered.

Frost joined Ty as he thumbed through the cards. One of the more promising descriptions was 'Remote Sentry'. Ty slipped the card into the U-10 and was rewarded as the pouch expanded. Pulling back the flap, he pulled out two items. One was a tablet similar to an iPad mini. The second item was a softball-sized, metallic sphere.

Handing the sphere to Frost, Ty studied the tablet. It had a viewscreen and two buttons along one of its edges. The buttons were green and red. Since the green light on the pouch indicated a successful card operation, Ty pressed the green button on the tablet. Instantly, the sphere levitated off Frost's palm and shot into the sky. It rose so high, it disappeared. The tablet screen lit, and a clear, overhead picture of the surrounding terrain with the clearing in its center appeared.

Orange icons popped up showing the current locations of Ty and his squad members. Four of the orange human-shaped blotches were in the clearing with a blue icon where Koritt sat. They unmistakably represented Ty, Hashtag, Sasquatch and Frost. Six other orange blotches were scattered around the clearing at various distances, indicating the positions of Wraith, Fisheye, Wendigo, Psycho, Big Papa and Roadkill.

It was the four other blue icons that alarmed Ty. They were close enough to his team members to be an immediate threat. No proximity alarms had been triggered, yet the entities shown in blue were within 30 meters of the clearing.

Ty held the screen toward Frost and said, "Looks like we have some unwanted guests. They're almost on top of us."

Frost gazed at the screen and touched one of the outlying blue icons, "Is that what you're talking about?"

The moment she touched the blue icon, it became outlined in yellow. After a slight hesitation, Frost touched the other outlying blue icons, and they became outlined in yellow.

"This looks promising," Ty grinned. "I wonder what would happen if I pushed the red button?"

Shinol's sensors flashed a red warning to his visor. Something shot into the sky from the clearing. Shocked by the unexpected danger signal, Shinol hesitated while his computer identified the threat.

"Remote Sentry activated. Aerial attack imminent," his computer announced with calm indifference.

Shinol's eyes widened.

He screamed, "Attack now! The U-10 is operational."

Jerking his Laz Gun toward the airborne menace, Shinol waited the second necessary for his targeting computer to find it and lock-on. In the meantime, he heard the familiar electronic hums of Laz Gun fire. The natives not killed by his team's first volley returned fire with some kind of automatic weaponry.

Ty and Frost heard odd, electronic hums. Three of the orange icons closest to the blue icons disappeared from the screen, and automatic M16A4's opened fire. The blue icons began closing on the remaining orange icons.

At last, Shinol's Laz Gun sensor locked-on the overhead target and flashed red.

Realizing Ty was distracted with worry for his team members, Frost pressed the tablet's red button. The yellow outlines around the blue icons turned red, and four lightning bolts darted from the sky.

Shinol was about to push the firing button when a withering stream of energy from the Remote Sentry flashed. Shinol disappeared in a cloud of mist along with the rest of his mercenary team.

Thundering explosions shook the ground, and clouds of dirt and sand leaped into the air. The blue icons pulsed and disappeared. Moments later, the automatic gunfire ceased.

The tablet screen went dark and seconds later, the little sphere crashed nearby.

Throwing the now useless tablet aside, Ty activated his Molar comm.

"All team members report!"

"They came out of nowhere," Wraith answered. "Invisible."

"I confirm," Fisheye said. "I emptied a clip to ward off an attack but couldn't see any target. The only thing showing their position was a flash as they shot at me."

"I can't get a response from Wendigo, Big Papa or Psycho," Roadkill said. "I'm heading toward their last known location."

"Hurry," Ty said.

Turning with a snarl, Ty grabbed Koritt, pulling him to his feet.

"What just happened?"

"You activated a Remote Sentry. It looks like my rescuers guessed you were targeting them and took action," Koritt replied. He tried to keep his voice calm to counter Lavender's fury.

"Nobody could get that close to my people without being seen," Ty grated.

"You say that after your experiences with the U-10 devices. Fascinating," Koritt replied.

Hearing a shuffling noise, Sasquatch and Frost whipped their weapons toward the southwest corner of the clearing. Ty shoved Koritt away and turned.

Roadkill walked into the clearing carrying a body. Tears of grief streaked his cheeks. It was Wendigo.

"She's gone," he wailed.

Sasquatch and Ty rushed to his side. There was no doubt she was dead. Half her chest was a blackened, fused mess.

Just as he put her body down and crossed her arms, they heard footsteps. Wraith and Fisheye eased into the clearing. Big Papa was draped over Wraith's shoulder. Fisheye carried Psycho. No one said a word. The anguish on their faces was enough.

Sasquatch helped Wraith put Big Papa next to Wendigo. Ty and Fisheye were lowering Psycho when they heard him moan.

"He's still alive," Frost exclaimed.

Ty tore open Psycho's shirt. He had a bleeding, fist-sized wound in his chest. Another moan escaped Psycho's lips, and he shuddered from the pain. His lips began to turn blue.

Grabbing the card box, Frost looked toward Koritt and yelled, "There should be something in here for first aid. What's it called?"

"Of course there is, but it's designed for my physiology. I don't think it will help you much."

Psycho moaned again and coughed blood.

Ty's anger blossomed. Grabbing the alien and putting his combat knife under his mandibles, he whispered, "Tell her the card name, or I'll cut your throat and stuff the U-10 down it."

Koritt Diviak had never heard a genuine death threat directed at him, but the quiet, matter-of-fact way the Human sounded was convincing. The knife point digging into his neck was most persuading.

"Look for Differential Therapy."

"Found it," Frost said as she grabbed the U-10 and slotted the card. Moments later, she reached into the pouch and pulled out a device the size of a hand calculator fitted with three, suction cup tipped wires.

"Attach the white wire to his forehead, the yellow wire to his chest over his heart and stick the red wire into the wound," Koritt instructed.

Frost completed the setup and asked, "What now?"

"Push the green button on the device and wait."

Multiple lights on the device began blinking the moment she pushed the button. What began as a low hum rose in pitch until the tone hurt their eardrums. The suction cup tips on the wires started glowing, and the open chest wound began closing. The process gathered momentum, and the hole closed in seconds. As the wound healed, the new tissue pushed the suction cup on the red wire out of the hole. Psycho stopped moaning. After a few minutes of activity, there was no evidence Psycho had any injury. The device shut off.

Psycho blinked and clutched his chest, "I'm shot!"

Tearing the suction cups off, he ran his hands over his bare chest. His eyes were wild.

Realizing he wasn't alone, he stared at the faces looking down on him and asked, "Where did you guys come from?"

"How many more alien crickets are there?" Lavender demanded.

"Odds are none. The Company is on a strict budget. Besides, no one would expect a few savages on a backwoods planet to be able to defend against our weaponry tech," Koritt replied.

"Do you trust him? Frost asked. "I don't."

"No, and I'm not waiting around like a backwoods savage for the next rescuer ambush," Ty said. "Hashtag, search him. Find his locator device."

Ty started thumbing through the card box as Hashtag examined the alien. One of the cards was labeled Spotter.

Frost moved closer to him. For the first time since she met him, their shoulders touched. She was so close, he could see the fine hairs on her upper lip.

"What did you find?" she asked. Her voice didn't sound commanding.

"I'm guessing this card will give us some detail about the presence of other aliens," Ty said. "I think we need to be proactive."

"If anything is clear to me, we don't have the capability to win a fight against these aliens with our weapons," she cautioned. "They weren't expecting us to know how to use the U-10. We caught them off-guard this time, but luck is something we can't trust. Remember, we only get one use per device."

"We've only needed one use so far," Ty said.

Stepping away from him, Frost scowled. "Has it ever entered your mind that they just might have the capability of turning off the bag with a remote?"

Ty looked surprised. He had to admit the thought had never crossed his mind. He considered getting angry at her for pointing out his foolishness, but she was correct.

Taking a deep breath, he thought about Koritt's actions. From the alien's original perspective, Humans were unintelligent savages created by his people for mindless obedience. Ty had proven the opposite with his intelligent discovery and use of the U-10 tech.

Not only had Koritt shown surprise at the Human knack for intuition and cleverness, he had demonstrated his amazement by initiating communication with the savages. Koritt's curiosity seemed to be genuine.

Hashtag walked over and held up a plastic wristband with a tiny, blinking, white light.

"I think this thing is his locator gizmo. Of course, I'm guessing. For all I know, any item of his clothing could be a signaling device."

"Good work. I trust your instincts. Bury it under a rock."

Ty's gut reaction was to use the resources available and be aggressive. Pulling the Spotter card from the box, he slipped it into the U-10 slot. The pouch activated and expanded. Ty pulled out a long, stiff tube that held a rolled piece of plastic.

Grinning at Frost, he unrolled the plastic and spread it on the ground. It turned into a flat, video display. Starting with the center of the screen, a map of the topography surrounding the clearing began developing. The detail expanded toward the edges of the display. Ty and Frost watched with growing wonder as features emerged. The members of his Squad were indicated by orange icons. Koritt's location was shown as a blue icon. Even the dead bodies of Wendigo and Big Papa were depicted. Frost surprised Ty by placing a rock on each upper corner of the plastic.

"Keep that thing flattened and active," Frost warned. "Its one-time use may end if it curls back into a roll."

"Will do," Ty agreed and put some rocks on the lower corners of the display to hold it open.

The screen reminded Ty of a modern cellphone feature. Placing his thumb and forefinger on the screen, he closed them together. The scene zoomed out, and a wider area of surrounding territory was depicted. Spreading his fingers magnified the area between his fingers. The close-up magnification of the clearing seemed to have no limit. Continuing to zoom in, Ty was able to see footprints in the sand around him.

"I want one of these," Frost said. "The ultimate surveillance tool."

Nodding his agreement, Ty zoomed out until he could see kilometers in every direction. Two purple objects were divulged. Ty zeroed in on the nearest, smaller

object and magnified. It appeared to be some kind of vehicle which Ty guessed was the transportation used by the invisible alien rescuers to reach his team's location.

The second purple object was much larger. Magnification of it revealed the unmistakable profile of an aircraft. It had to be the alien spaceship. Based on Ty's knowledge of the surrounding territory, the spaceship had to be almost 20 kilometers away.

A line of moving dots appeared near the top of the display. Ty magnified the indicated dots and frowned. Several heavy trucks trailing clouds of sand sped across the desert floor. They were too far away to be sure, but their general direction would lead them straight to the campsite where Ty's squad was attacked. Further magnification left no doubt the trucks were packed with Insurgents. Ty estimated they were filled with at least 300 fighters.

"We can't stay here," Frost said. "I'm guessing they're out for revenge. When they don't find us at the camp, they'll track us to here."

"Yes and Natureboy's reinforcements aren't showing yet on our handy-dandy alien surveillance tool," Ty replied.

"I want to see an alien spaceship," Frost grinned.

"You read my mind," Ty smiled.

Akhund couldn't believe the series of misfortunes that led to his current dilemma.

Who could have predicted an aircraft would crash so close to his team of Insurgents? What right-minded leader would presume his fighters couldn't ambush and kill an unsuspecting American soldier? What possible curse could wipe out over forty combat-trained Insurgents in an instant? How could he predict that Supreme Commander Ghaffar would order him to guide the retaliatory attack?

Akhund cursed his decision to claim the US soldiers used poison gas to stop the last attack. A claim that a lightning bolt had skewered the Insurgents might not have been believed, but the story would have been true. Now, as soon as the bodies were checked, all would know he lied about the gas. His life would be worth less than nothing.

He glanced at the Commander of the mission and cringed. Nasir Maloof Fakhoury was a dark, hook-nosed man with the patience of a gnat and the determination of a mosquito. His face was frozen in a perpetual scowl. Imagining the angry reaction of Fakhoury to the fake gas attack story was mind-numbing. Akhund fought to keep his fear under control. His thoughts were interrupted by a radio warning.

"Enemy caravan detected 3 kilometers north of our current position. Direction of travel indicates its destination is the same as ours. Your orders?"

"Give me an estimate of enemy numbers and time of arrival," Fakhoury growled.

"Based on the number of vehicles, I estimate 40 soldiers. Their speed suggests we will have one hour to prepare for their arrival."

"Very good," Fakhoury said. "I want half our people to travel north, the other half to travel south. We will create a pincer from which no infidel shall escape. Once all are in position, await my order to attack. Today will see a great battle and victory for our people."

Misinterpreting the look of despair on Akhund's face for criticism, Fakhoury demanded, "Do you object to my plan?"

Shaking his head no, Akhund clutched his knees together to keep them from trembling.

Tearfully burying Wendigo and Big Papa, Ty and his team headed toward the alien vehicle indicated by the Spotter.

Psycho led Koritt by a rope tied around the alien's waist. It took longer to arrive at the spot where the thing was parked because they were forced to ramble along rocky ridges as long as possible to hide their trail. Frost held the Spotter open, and it led them to an open area dotted with scrub vegetation.

Staring around with a puzzled expression, she said, "It's supposed to be right here."

"Something's wrong," Ty said.

"The map indicates it's parked in front of us," Frost replied.

Ty turned to Koritt, but the alien kept his eyes locked on the horizon.

"Wraith, Fisheye, scout the area. Find some high ground," Ty ordered.

Fisheye glanced down as he walked away. Something caught his attention, and he squatted for a closer look.

"I see faint marks in the sand. They could be tire tracks," he said.

Stepping toward the spot he indicated, Sasquatch banged into something, lost his balance and fell down.

"What the hell?" Sasquatch exclaimed as he stood and probed the air with his hands. Hashtag joined him. They looked like mimes running their hands over an invisible box, only the outline they traced was much larger than a box.

"Something's here, but I can't see it," Hashtag said.

The tips of Sasquatch's probing fingers disappeared into a slot.

"Found something," he exclaimed as he pulled.

A door opened in the air, and the interior of a vehicle with two bucket seats appeared. Sticking his head into the opening and looking around, Sasquatch

stepped back, rounded the invisible open door and ran his hand along an unseen surface. Again, his fingertips disappeared just before he pulled an invisible handle. Another door opened, revealing two more bucket seats. In front of the nearest seat was a U-shaped steering wheel similar to one found on an Indy race car. There was a blinking button on the console near the steering wheel. Taking a leap of faith, Sasquatch pushed the button. It stopped blinking, and the alien transport appeared. It looked similar to a Humvee but with metal-mesh tires.

"Unbelievable," Koritt declared. The intelligence level of the Humans was surprising. Their threat level kept increasing.

"Load up," Ty ordered. "Our next stop should be quite revealing."

The pleasant surprise was the alien Humvee – Koritt referred to it as a Skimmer - was comfortable.

Due to its size, Sasquatch and Fisheye were forced to ride on the thing's roof. They discovered that some kind of energy field enveloped objects on the roof and held them in place. Despite the jostling terrain, the men rode with no fear of being knocked off their perch.

Koritt sat between Wraith and Hashtag in the rear seat floorboard. Psycho and Roadkill shared the back cargo area. It was cramped, but it beat walking.

Ty marveled at the similarities of the vehicle to an Army Humvee. Even the gas and brake pedals were equivalent. Frost sat in the front passenger seat with the

Spotter open on her lap like a big GPS screen. It verified the heads-up display on the vehicle's windshield. The path taken from the spaceship to the Humvee's parking place was shown by light-green lines in the HUD. Retracing the route was a simple matter of following the green trail. The destination ended up being a small valley about 400 meters in diameter, surrounded by a ring of high rocks. The Spotter depicted a large, purple object sitting in the open area; however, to the naked eye, the valley was empty.

"This is the place," Frost announced.

"This invisibility trick is effective," Wraith grumbled. "It's also a pain in the neck."

"There must be a way to deactivate it," Hashtag said. "Invisibility is great until it isn't."

Ty drove into the valley, and a golden silhouette surrounded by an orange circle appeared on the HUD. Whatever it was sat in the center of the valley and matched the position of the purple image shown on the Spotter. Inching the Humvee forward, Ty let the hood of the vehicle touch the orange line. As if a light switch had been flipped, the alien spaceship appeared in front of them.

"Fascinating," Koritt declared. His impression of the intelligence level of the Humans kept rising.

The ship was long and sleek. It was dull gray in color with white trim. The forward section of the craft had two bubbles of clear glass on either side of the

fuselage with a set of antennas over them that looked like eyebrows. The overall design was Insectoid in appearance. An open ramp, wide enough for the alien Humvee, led into the bow section of the ship below the bubble-glass ports. Wraith started to open her door but hesitated when Frost spoke.

"What if they left someone onboard to guard the ship?" Frost asked.
"Sasquatch and Fisheye sitting on top of us is a dead giveaway something is out of the ordinary."

"They would have closed the ramp and shot at us by now," Ty reasoned. "I think we're okay."

Wraith left the Humvee and walked to the bottom of the ramp with her pistol drawn. After a moment's hesitation, she marched up the ramp and disappeared into the ship. Ty realized he was holding his breath and exhaled.

Ty's Molar comm crackled, and Wraith spoke, "I'm in some kind of cargo hold. All clear."

Guiding the Humvee inside the orange circle and to the bottom of the ramp, Ty asked Sasquatch to walk outside the invisibility boundary and confirm the craft and the Humvee were still invisible. As he moved to comply, Frost walked up the ramp into the hold and began inspecting some of the odd equipment scattered around the deck. She kept her weapon pointed toward the interior of the craft as if she was expecting to be ambushed. After a moment, she moved out of sight.

Sasquatch stepped past the invisibility border and turned. He was still visible to Ty and his team. His eyes roved back and forth, and he studied the sandy floor of the valley for a few minutes. Then he lifted his arms before him like a sleepwalking zombie and walked back through the invisibility boundary.

"That's a weird experience," Sasquatch said. "I stepped through the barrier and all of you disappeared. I knew you were there, but all I could see was the empty valley. Then, I walked back through the barrier, and you appeared. It felt like I was moving through a curtain of thin, clear jelly."

"We could see you when you were outside the barrier, but you couldn't see us?" Hashtag asked. "This invisibility trick is radical!"

Automatic gunfire from an M16A4 pocked the sand, and everyone twisted in a crouch toward the source.

"With careful and slow movements, disarm yourselves," Frost said from the ramp entry. "I don't want to have to kill any of you but don't test me."

"What are you doing, Frost?" Ty demanded.

"My job, Lieutenant. This ship is too valuable to the United States and its defense. My SEED Team will reverse engineer all its technology."

"You will fail," Koritt replied. "Your intellects are not advanced enough to comprehend what few examples of our knowledge are incorporated in this outdated ship. Besides, my people will never let our tech fall into Human hands."

"I guess you're forgetting the U-10?" Frost replied. "We didn't have any trouble with it."

Koritt shook his head. Ty couldn't decide what the cricket meant by the gesture. Dropping his pistol and knife, Ty nodded to his team. They dropped their weapons and unbuckled their equipment belts.

"Tell Wraith you found something and need her, Lieutenant," Frost said as she walked down the ramp. "Don't try to warn her, or I will shoot to kill."

Ty activated his Molar comm and said, "Wraith, I found something and need you pronto. Come to the ramp."

Frost positioned herself behind Ty and his team.

"Keep your hands down. Don't do anything to suggest something is wrong," Frost said.

Without warning, her M16A4 jerked upward and belched auto-fire. Frost's eyes widened as she appeared to be struggling to maintain control of the weapon. With a powerful, twisting jerk, it wrenched from her grip and floated in mid-air like it was part of a magic trick. Then with a powerful, thrusting motion, the butt clubbed Frost's head, and she fell senseless.

Ty and the rest of his team were dumbfounded. The air shimmered, and a helmeted figure appeared wearing a skintight, light-blue bodysuit covered with

what looked like glistening sequins. It touched something under its ear, and the faceplate retracted to reveal Wraith's smiling face.

"I knew she was up to no good," Wraith said.