



Sharina

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NIGHT IN DESERT BLUE

A Novella by
Margaret Marr

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Enjoy!

Chapter One

March, 2018

Sharina Creswell stood near the door of Mitchy's Bar and surveyed the rowdy crowd. The second moon of the month was in full swing, and the people around her acted crazier than a woman listening to a deathwatch beetle count down the seconds until her lover's untimely demise. They were afraid of the Moglith—dark spirits of the night who came to claim unoccupied bodies during the months of two moons. In those weeks, a person's body became like the old-world American Express card—don't leave home without it. The bar's patrons were harmless, for the most part, just drunk, talking loudly and stumbling around like idiots, trying to forget the government no longer cared what happened to them.

What's the matter with these people? If I were them, I'd want to be sober enough to face a Moglith with all my senses about me. Sharina spanned the room with a watchful gaze. So far, the place remained free of the Moglith creatures. Sometimes they weren't spirits, but flesh and blood monsters that killed without mercy, ripping a victim's heart from his chest with razor sharp claws. The rest of their bodies resembled prehistoric man as if evolution had reversed itself in a matter of days instead of billions of years. Sharina shuddered, remembering the first time she'd encountered one. It wasn't something she had wanted to face again in her lifetime, but she protected the city, even without the government's approval.

She wasn't old enough to remember what happened in the fall of 2003. The only thing she knew for certain, after the second Gulf war, America's president fell victim to the twenty-year cycle curse brought on by a Native American, which started with William Henry Harrison back in 1840. After a disastrous war with the white men, who had broken treaty after treaty, Tecumseh or his kinsman, the prophet Tenskwatawa, claimed Harrison would become the Great White Chief, but wouldn't live to enjoy his office. Every twenty years another American president would meet the same

fate. Curse or prediction? Most likely both.

After the president's fall, terrorists came back to bite the United States in the ass with a nasty surprise by turning most of the west coast, east coast and southern coastline into a desert wasteland. They called it the desecration bombs. In the deepest part of the ocean where no man had ever traveled, icebergs broke free and exploded to the surface turning it into a frozen tundra. Out of that rotten core the Moglith had been formed, half-human, half-monster with supernatural strength and zero mercy—or so legend said. Not many people had been to what some called the Moglith Desert, or Desert Blue. Fewer returned to tell about it. Sharina was one of the few.

The Moglith leader, Nero Galender, was supposed to be exceptionally sadistic. He stole children from their homes and used them for slave labor. If they didn't perform to his satisfaction, he poked out one of their eyes with a hot piece of iron as an incentive to work harder, and if that didn't work, he lopped off fingers and toes.

I'll take you down, Nero, oh yes I will. Sharina burned for the moment.

A group of teenagers with black, greased-down hair, wearing tight leather pants and skirts, spilled out into the night, arguing about where to go next. Their neon purple eye shadow and lip color glowed in the dark. One of the girls turned and stared at Sharina with a troubled expression in her eyes. Before Sharina could respond to the girl's despair, a young man, sporting eyebrow rings, reached for her arm and said something in her ear. The girl shrugged unenthusiastically and allowed herself to be pulled along with the others. Life since the desecration bombs hadn't been easy.

Sharina frowned and pressed against the wall. God, she hated this job—watching for predators amidst blue neon, but Mitchy's owner paid her well to protect his patrons from the deadly beasts that prowled the night. She wanted to go home and mourn the loss of her twin sister—taken by the Moglith fourteen years ago during the July 2004 blue moon. They hadn't just taken her body for child slavery; they took her soul too. *And it's my fault.*

She stepped outside in the chilly March wind, away from the stench of perfume, cigarettes, obnoxious noise, and bad memories and glared up at the moon hanging over the stagnate lake like a

bloated yellow balloon ready to burst at the slightest prick. "You unholy curd," she whispered, anger zipping through her veins. Mother Moon was supposed to be a protector, a guiding light, but the last few decades she had remained as silent as God had been for the last two thousand and some years. Oh, but the Devil proclaimed himself every chance he got—sometimes with a roar, and sometimes with a lethal whisper.

"It's not a good thing to curse the moon. Might bring you bad luck."

Sharina's head whipped around, her body coiled and ready for battle, searching the shadows for the speaker. She relaxed when she didn't sense he was a Moglith.

He stepped away from the mud-brick and into the pale light of the moon, transparent down to his shiny, black Dingo cowboy boots—a soul without a body. He'd been snatched. Or foolish enough to leave his body somewhere unguarded.

Irritated she hadn't been able to sense him before he had crept upon her, she snapped at him harsher than she intended. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I hear you're good at ancient martial arts."

"Among other types." A Gurukkal, a master of Indian martial arts, had taught her a form of fighting that was almost mystical and took seven years to train for. She had been taught how to kill with her bare hands, how to disable the enemy with a blow to one central nerve, and how to move her body almost quicker than the human eye could see. It wasn't magic really, just a demanding form of fighting that few had the discipline, strength and courage to become masters at.

Will Garrett, a Special Forces Soldier who had broken her heart and taken years to get over, taught her military secrets that had saved her life time and time again. Will had begged her to stop hunting the creatures before she ended up dead or worse. No one wanted to be a slave for the Moglith race. But she fought the Moglith out of duty and honor for her country, traveling from place to place, working for pay when she could, but just as often working for free. She also did it for her sister. Every time she took one of the hideous creatures down, she scored a point for Talina, and there was always the hope she'd find her again someday—find her and make good her promise.

"You also hunt the Moglith for a price." The stranger took a step forward, eyeing her warily as if he expected her to suddenly attack him.

"Only for certain military individuals I trust. Hunting requires me to wade into the enemy's territory—makes it much more dangerous. Although I'm not afraid of dying, I do value my life."

"How much?"

"Five million," she answered.

"Dollars? Are you out of your frigging mind?"

"I guess we have nothing to talk about then." She turned and started back toward Mitchy's.

"Look, I can't afford that price, but I can get your sister back if you help me."

Sharina's heart rate jumped a notch. *How the hell does he know about Talina?* "Get out of my site before I hurl your soul back into your body so hard you won't be able to breathe without pain for a year." Every muscle in her lithe body snapped taut, bringing her to her full height of five-ten. Most men were intimidated by her mental and physical strength, but the soul before her didn't appear fazed. He merely stared at her in mild amusement with those mesmerizing dark eyes.

He smiled. "Can I buy you a drink? Talk this over?"

"No," she said, fists clenched, teeth gritted.

Showing the first signs of frustration, he stared at the stars as if praying for a miracle. "Look, Sharina, I'm not full of bull—what's the late 20th century word—crap?"

An unblinking stare greeted his question.

"I can help you get your sister back—I can get both her body *and* soul back."

"How do you know my name?"

"It's inconsequential; I know a lot about you. I've spent the last fourteen years searching for one such as you. I need your help."

His voice had taken on a pleading tone, and Sharina's resolve weakened. *Has he been without his body all these years, nothing more than a vapor among the living, an undead ghost?* Her gaze flickered over his bodiless soul, and she came to the conclusion he must have a mighty nice body

somewhere out there.

He was built cowboy tough, and not like the fake cowboys of the last century who wore designer jeans and western shirts that never saw the dust of a real live ranch, but more like the ones of the old west, where sweat and honest to goodness cattle drives granted a man ripcord-muscles and sun-ripened skin. When her gaze reached his troubled eyes, she thought of dark, windy nights where storms of passion raged. Startled at where her thoughts had taken her, she glanced away.

With an irritated sigh, she turned and headed for the bar. "Follow me." If he could do what he claimed, she might as well talk to him. Was it possible she could get Talina back? Was she even still alive? Hope surged through her, a beacon of welcome warmth, but she immediately tamped it down. In the past, hope had brought her nothing but heartache.

They settled at a table in the corner with a good view of the entrance. Sharina sat with her back against the wall, half her attention on the door and the other half on her companion.

A waitress appeared as if she'd been summoned from the bowels of the earth below the bar and took Sharina's order. Her companion couldn't drink or eat in his soul state.

"You have five minutes to convince me, then I'm throwing you out of here."

"Jeez, Babe, lighten up."

She glared at him defiantly. "My name is Sharina. Use it."

He tipped his chair back on two legs and held his hands up in surrender. "Fair enough. My name's Snake Moriss." The last s rolled off his tongue with a hissing reptile sound. "Nice to meet you."

For the first time in a long time, mirth bubbled up from some place inside her she'd thought long dead. "Snake is your name?" The laugh slipped out before she could stop it.

Snake shrugged. "My mother hated my father, so when I slid out of her womb, she slapped the first name on me that leapt to mind."

Sharina sat back in dismay. "Why would she be so cruel to a child?" Another smile twitched at the corners of her mouth and she gave in to it. "Snake? That's—amusing."

He glanced away; a transparent muscle ticked along his jaw, and then he looked back at her.

"You're beautiful when you smile. You should do it more often."

The smile faded and she replaced it with a scowl. A man hadn't mentioned her beauty in a long while. "Look, I'm willing to listen to you, but I can't promise I can help you."

"You still know how to fight, don't you?"

"What do you think?"

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

"What kind of help do you need?"

"Lead me across Desert Blue before the second moon ends so I can retrieve my body."

Chapter Two

A shocked expression burst across Sharina's face as she abruptly stood, skirted around her chair and gripped it in white-knuckled ferocity. "Are you out of your freaking mind?" The spot between her eyes wrinkled in anger. A lock of straw-colored hair fell across her eye, and she swept it back with an impatient gesture.

Her beauty would cause a monk to trip over his own damn tongue.

Snake continued to study her, awed by her beauty more than anything. He hadn't expected a fighter to possess such stunning attributes. They were usually scarred and ugly from battle. The only visible scar she had ran in a thin, jagged path from the corner of her eye to mid cheek. Troubled eyes, the honest-to-goodness color of a field of violets, stared back at him.

"Do you have any idea what's in that desert?" she asked. "The tales those who survived it brought back with them? Those creatures can slice you to shreds with sharp claws before you even have time to draw breath to scream."

"I'm surprised," he said.

"Surprised?" she prompted.

He kicked aside naughty thoughts of lying entangled in sheets with Sharina and tried to get back to the business at hand. "You're scared."

Genuine amusement flickered across her face and she laughed. "I don't fear anything."

"Ah, but you do. You're afraid to cross the Moglith Desert during the blue moon."

"I'm not scared of what's out there. I've pledged to defend myself and those under my protection..." She stumbled over the words, caught herself and continued. "...Without harming another creature. If possible, I must escape to live another day. I've been taught to have no fear of death and abide by an honor system that won't allow me to back down from evil. Not ever. I will fight even if it means my death in the end."

Snake leaned across the table. "Then what is it that bothers you about the desert?"

"If I go—and I mean *if*—I go alone."

"No."

"I won't be responsible for another..." She stopped and blinked, fighting to regain control of some emotion Snake couldn't pinpoint. Surely it wasn't tears. A woman like Sharina didn't cry. Perhaps she blamed herself for Talina's capture. It wasn't her fault. She had faced the Moglith with more courage than most male soldiers, and that was when she'd only been a child. Snake knew. He knew a lot about Sharina. Now she had the skill to go with the courage, and she was the only one who could help him. No one else would do.

He glanced around at the bar's occupants. A dancer sat on a man's lap, wiggling erotically, joined together—no clothes, having actual sex to the rhythm of loud laughter, raised voices, and skull-thumping music. Around 2010, the government legalized prostitution in all states. Something inside him recoiled at such immorality. What had happened to purity of mind and body? The sacrilege of lovemaking? Taking his mind off what he couldn't change, he returned his attention to Sharina.

"You can't go alone. I have to be there when my body is retrieved, and it has to be before the blue moon ends."

"Do you actually think it's going to be fresh after fourteen years?"

Snake sat back and laughed. "I would hope so, Beautiful. It's been in a frozen-tundra all these years. Besides, there is documented evidence of Antarctic bacteria surviving for two thousand eight hundred years in an ice cap over a lake and coming back to life after being thawed out."

"You're not bacteria." Sharina stared at him, conflicting emotions warring across her face as if she fought over the pros and cons of agreeing to help him. "I thought you were looking for an assassin."

"That too."

"Spill it."

He leaned toward her. "Nothing I say here goes beyond this table."

She nodded in agreement.

“The military has asked me to go in and take out Nero Galender.”

“About damn time!”

Snake smiled. “I thought you’d see it that way.”

Suddenly Sharina stiffened and rose from her seat, glancing around the room, sniffing the rank air.

“What is it?”

“Mogloth.”

“Oh, crap!”

A creature crashed through the bar’s roof, landing on its feet with an unholy howl, before snapping the neck of the woman who had been performing public sex on her buyer’s lap.

More creatures spilled through the roof bouncing off tables and chairs. They flooded through the doors and windows, ripping down blinds and overturning furniture. Screaming customers ran for the exit, but when they found it blocked, some scurried behind the bar while others huddled in corners, arms over heads, screaming and crying, knowing they were doomed—powerless to fight back.

For the love of God! Why so many? Then Snake glanced at Sharina and knew they’d been sent to kill or capture her. *Damn! She must be better than I thought if Nero sent this many after her.*

Sharina drew her knives, gripped them tight and delivered a roundhouse kick to the creature on the right and buried a knife through the heart of the one on the left. She yanked her weapon out of its body and shoved him aside, then jumped upon a table and kicked several creatures, one after the other, under the chin, snapping their heads back and sending them crashing to the floor.

Snake cast about for a body to borrow and located one about to lose his brains through a split in his skull if he didn’t do something quick. He dove into the cowering body and ducked just as the ax whistled past his head and slammed into the wall behind them.

The creature roared his anger and came at Snake again, swinging another ax right and left, chopping a bloody path straight for him.

Snake jumped across the bar and ducked below it, casting about for the bow and arrow he'd made a habit of leaving with every bar owner who would allow it. Since he couldn't carry weapons in his soul state, it was imperative he had access to a weapon wherever he went.

Gripping the bow, he rose up, notched an arrow and let it fly straight through the eye of a Moglith who had Sharina by the hair, dragging her backward toward the door.

Sharina jerked loose from the creature and took a running jump, bouncing off the center of a table and flipping through the air to land on the other side of the room where she slammed her elbow into a creature's stomach, and then broke its nose with a backward hammer of her fist. She yanked a little girl up and tossed her to Snake—she couldn't have known it was him in the new body, but he must have looked like he was on her side. Or maybe because he was the only human not running around in crazy, panicked circles.

“Shove her under the bar!”

Snake pushed the hysterical child into a dark corner. “Shush,” he whispered, and the girl stopped crying, tears glistening on her cheeks as she nodded, lower lip trembling.

He rose up in time to see a Moglith punch Sharina across the face, a punishing blow that sent her smashing into a table, the pieces scattering around her. She crawled to her knees and took a kick in the ribs with gritted teeth and livid anger in her eyes. With one powerful thrust of her leg, she dislocated the monster's knee, and it crashed down like a giant redwood tree where she then buried a knife deep in its chest.

Snake shot arrow after arrow, but the creatures kept coming, spilling endlessly through broken windows and the damaged roof. He aimed for a Moglith with a child in his clutches, but another Moglith, grabbed the little boy, ducked around the enraged creature and deposited the child with the little girl behind the bar.

What the hell?

The Moglith grabbed a prehistoric rifle taped beneath the bar and blew the brains out the back of several of his kin's heads.

Sharina punched, kicked, and chopped her way through the dwindling Moglith until she slid over the bar and joined Snake and the creature. An ax whistled through the air and the creature caught it a hair of an inch from Sharina's nose.

The remaining Moglith paused and stared at the united force armed with a gun, a bow and bare hands, decided they'd taken enough of a beating, and loped out of Mitchy's bar.

The place grew silent except for the sounds of weeping and the groans of the wounded. A beer bottle rolled off a lopsided table and shattered on the hardwood floor.

Sharina and Snake stared at the remaining creature.

"Hi." His voice rumbled like an army of tanks crossing the desert. "Name's Methos." He held out a meaty paw, and Snake reluctantly shook it. The creature's huge eyes rolled in his head to look at Sharina, started to offer his hand, but thought better of it since she held a look in her eyes that said she'd just as soon chop it off as shake it.

Usually, she attacked a Moglith before it had a chance to rip her to pieces and asked questions later, but this intelligent being who spoke English gave her pause.

The creature favored a prehistoric man with a protruding forehead and deep-set eyes with generous lips, but his face was the color of frozen salt. Long arms reached almost to his knees, giving him an ape-like appearance. A massive black robe hung loose on his big frame, and the hem swept the floor, obscuring his feet. Black eyes stared back at her. She hated those black eyes; those eyes had stalked her for days while she was in Desert Blue.

Sharina shuddered, and in one blurred movement drew her knife and slammed the creature against the shelves of alcohol, knocking several off to break on the floor, splattering whiskey all over the place. She shoved the weapon against his throat. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you here and now."

"I saved your life."

"Damn it!" Sharina removed the knife from his throat and backed off. "Okay, what do you want?"

“I need your help.”

Sharina backed away from Methos. “What makes you think I would want to help a Moglith?”

Methos rubbed his throat as if Sharina had drawn blood. “I can lead you straight to Galender Nero.”

Suspicious, Sharina stepped closer and looked him in the eye. “You can, huh?” She wanted it to be true. She wanted to take Nero down so bad that sometimes it left a wicked taste in her mouth—a taste she was afraid would never wash out even after she put him in his grave.

Methos held her gaze without blinking. “I can.”

The man who had helped save the children stepped forward. “Why would you betray your leader?” He sounded like Snake, but he sure as hell didn’t look like him. And that body needed a good washing.

“Who are you?” Sharina demanded. “You stink to high Heaven.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Snake stepped out of the body, and Methos caught it and eased it to the floor.

Sharina stared at the crumpled body in dread. “Please tell me he’s not dead.”

“No, just out cold. He’ll awake with a skull-thumping headache and no memory of what happened, but other than that he’ll be okay.” Snake shrugged and grinned.

“Do you make a habit of borrowing bodies without permission?”

“Only in emergencies—besides, I saved his life. He was about to get his skull cleaved in two.”

Snake returned his attention to Methos. “Why would you betray your own leader?” he asked again.

“He’s not my leader. I serve no man or beast. Freedom without fear is what I seek.”

“Are you the only one?” Sharina asked.

“No. A small group of us have band together. We want America back the way it was. United as one, with a God-respecting government and a strong military.”

“Ah, but you ask for the impossible. America will never be the same.” Sharina swept broken glass off the bar. “Sometimes you can’t get back what’s gone.” Talina’s smiling face swept through her mind. *Damnation in a hand-basket*. She wanted the impossible too.

“Not with an attitude like that, it won’t,” Snake said.

Sharina waved in no particular direction. “Look around you...did you see those creatures? And you with no body, and Methos reverted back to prehistoric man. Tell me how we can be what once was?”

“All we need to do is unite,” Methos said as softly as his rumbling voice would allow.

“Who are we uniting against? Isn’t that always what got us into trouble before? We fought wars, and soldiers died, and what for? For this?” Sharina crawled across the bar and knelt beside a dying man. She held his hand and stroked his hair until the last breath rattled from his body. She slowly rose to her feet. “This is what we get. More death. Blood baths will never bring peace.” Hell, who was she to talk about spilling blood? She’d spilled more than her share over the past fourteen years.

“But we have to fight against evil,” Snake said.

“Evil like Nero Galender,” Methos added.

Sharina turned her back and rolled her shoulders. They were right, of course. The world didn’t need creatures like Nero, but they seemed to always pop up one right after the other, and it was an endless cycle of violence. When would it end?

She strode toward the door just as the faint sirens of an ambulance raced toward Mitchy’s Bar. There would be no police—the academy had broken apart long ago. But, at least, there were still good men and women in the medical field. Maybe they could save some of these poor humans.

Sharina stopped at the door and beckoned for Snake and Methos to follow her.

Methos gave her a big, scary grin. “You’ll help us?”

Sharina nodded. Why not? Maybe they would get lucky and make America a great place to live once again.

Chapter Three

They moved along the boardwalk as an ambulance's lights strobed in the dark. The stench of dead fish wafted from Fontana Lake—a lake once used for recreation. No one dared to venture into its depths now. Creatures far more hideous than the Moglith lurked beneath its surface. Radiation did weird things to living creatures.

A cold wind blew from the east. It was still early spring, but even in summer the wind would be cold because of the frozen tundra the ocean had become. Only winter dwelled there now.

"It's too late to do anything tonight. We'll go to my place and get some sleep," Sharina said as she picked up her pace.

"Won't the Moglith find you there?" Methos asked.

"Cara will alert me well before the creatures reach my home."

"Cara?" Snake asked.

"My cat."

Snake snorted. "A dog would better serve that purpose. A damn big dog, at that."

Sharina shot him an amused look, but when she glanced toward Methos, she frowned, still not sure if she should trust this creature even though he had saved her life. It could be a ploy to get her in a vulnerable position perfect for a fail-proof attempt on her life.

But he's intelligent, capable of reasoning. Most Moglith weren't, and it was a rare opportunity when you got to speak to one.

Still, they killed your parents and stole your sister.

Not the intelligent ones.

"I can sense the war going on in your mind," Methos said as they traveled farther from the light of the bar. "I can only give you my word as a gentleman that I won't harm you or allow harm to come to you."

Gentleman? God he sounds so sincere, so human.

“I did save your life,” he insisted.

“I know...but...”

“All I want is to free my people...” He paused, glanced at the night sky, and then at Sharina. “And reclaim my body.”

She slowed and paused near a side street, leading away from the lake. Brackish water ran in a filthy stream down gutters on both sides. “How is it you don’t own a body?”

“It was stolen by another such as me. I’m borrowing my twins for now.”

He has a twin, too? He’s really not that different from you. “What is it with you people that you can’t keep your body and soul together? And where is your twin while you’re borrowing his body?”

“He volunteered to place his soul into a deep sleep so I could use his body to carry out my mission. His soul is in a holy place for safe keeping.”

Snake skipped a rock across the lake. “Awfully nice of him.” A two-headed snake reared out of the water, searching for the source of the disturbance, looking for a yummy snack. “Why didn’t he take on the mission?” He turned from the mucky water and followed Methos and Sharina down the dirty street.

Methos laughed, a thunder roll moving up from the depths of his stomach. “My brother is many things, but brave is not one of them.”

They walked for another half a mile until they reached a cleaner neighborhood with well-kept small-boxed houses. The scent of fresh laundry wafted over the air, a welcome relief from the rotten smell of the lake and the streets closes to it.

“We’re here.” Sharina opened a gate and moved down a gravel sidewalk hemmed in by creek rocks. As she neared the porch, lights, sensitive to movement, blinked on. A huge cat rose and stretched with a mighty yawn, and then padded over to her mistress.

Sharina watched in amusement as Snake eased around Cara. The caracal, also known as the

desert lynx, was harmless as long as she wasn't provoked, but she probably wouldn't bond with him, either. She was a definite one-owner pet.

"Does it bite?"

Sharina smothered a laugh. "Not often. What was that you were saying about a dog?"

Snake reached toward the cat, hand folded, fingers pointed toward the ground, and held that position a few inches from the cat's nose as if she were a dog being offered a whiff of a stranger's scent.

Sharina leaned toward him and whispered, "I doubt she can smell you, seeing as you don't own a body at the present time." She straightened and frowned. His not having a body could be a liability she didn't need to deal with. *The idiot should stay behind.*

"Well, that's a relief." Snake withdrew his hand. "At least I won't smell like a tasty treat." His gaze rested on her face, caught on her eyes, and then dropped to her lips.

A strange chill washed over Sharina—simultaneously cold and hot, but not unpleasant—In fact, very pleasant, but disconcerting all the same. Was he looking at her like she thought he was? Like he *wanted* her? When was the last time a man had looked at her with something other than fear or amusement, depending on how cocky the guy was? God she couldn't even remember, it had been so long ago.

She unlocked the door and stepped inside. More auto-lights blinked on, throwing the shadows out of the front room.

Methos knelt beside the caracal and petted the top of her head. The cat sniffed his mouth and nose, and then licked his chin, causing a delighted laugh to erupt from the Moglith.

Stunned, Sharina could only stare in disbelief. *Cara actually likes the creature!*

"May I sleep on the porch?" Methos asked.

"I—uh. Sure. Wherever you're most comfortable." *Did a Moglith even know what to do with a bed if presented with one? He hasn't always been a Moglith*, she reminded herself. "Do you want a blanket? Or a pillow?"

“No, thank you.” Methos lowered his big frame onto the top step and stared across the yard as if sleep was the last thing on his mind. He snatched a lightning bug from the air and stared in fascination as a green light glowed in his cupped hand.

Sharina stared at him a moment longer, and then headed inside, motioning for Snake to follow. She cleared her throat nervously and headed toward her bedroom. “You better get some rest. We start early in the morning.” She dug around in the hope chest at the foot of her bed and brought out a pillow and blanket. Returning to the living room, she thrust the items toward Snake. “You can sleep on the couch.”

He gathered the bedding in his arms and tossed her a curious glance. “You aren’t afraid to let a man you barely know spend the night under the same roof?”

“I’ll take combat naps tonight.” She smiled wickedly, enjoying her fun at his expense. “Try anything, and I’ll slit your throat before you have time to be surprised.” She turned and headed back to the bedroom, Cara at her heels.

“Sharina.” Snake said softly behind her. “I don’t have a throat to slit.”

She smiled and entered her room, shutting the door firmly before locking it soundly with a flick of her fingers. She wondered if his soul could pass through wood. Would she kick him out if he decided he wanted to share her bed? Undoubtedly, sex with Snake would be the equivalent of setting a gas station’s pumps on fire, but she probably wouldn’t let him stay. An old-fashioned kind of girl like her wanted love with her sex. A soft breath escaped her. It would be awfully hard to tell him no, though. With a frown, she undressed and slipped into bed naked.

Methos prowled restlessly back and forth across the porch, his shadow looming outside her bedroom window, as if he were a hungry wolf looking for scraps—or a soldier on guard duty. Her heart said to trust him, but her head still argued the point. *Cara likes him*--a genuine miracle in a time when such things have no meaning. Cara wouldn’t lead her mistress into danger, and that she could trust.

For most of the night, Sharina twisted and turned, punched her pillow, sighed twenty times or more and stared at the moon—sleep remained an illusion. Was she doing the right thing in taking Snake

across the blue dessert? It was a sure-fired way for him to lose his soul, and she was responsible for his safety.

Last time, you failed to protect. But you were only a little girl, trying to lead your sister out of a place no longer familiar. After the bombs, the Moglith had taken her parents, then Talina. And if the military hadn't taken one more sweep, searching for survivors across the desolate, empty ocean after the terrorists attack, the hideous creatures would have taken Sharina too. The bombs hadn't affected a handful of the coastal people as if they were immune to whatever chemicals the bombs had carried.

After the military broke away from the corrupt government, she became a daughter of the Marines and grew up around rough, tough men who taught her how to be the same. Though the military no longer worked under the government's control, they were still good men and women, and the only hope for survival the United States had left.

You promised you'd go back for her.

She groaned and flipped onto her back, switching from gazing at the moon to staring at the particleboard-hanging ceiling. A blue moon month added to her worries. The Moglith would be out in force. It was the only time they could steal the souls of unoccupied bodies. She let out a long, weary sigh. What was it her mother had always reminded her and Talina about borrowing trouble from tomorrow? "Dear sister I miss you," she whispered to the night. She missed her whole family.

Methos' shadow crossed her window again. *What problems torment his soul?*

Cara snored loudly beside her, curled on her back with her feet straight up in the air, eyes half open, but sleeping as if there were no worries in the world.

"I should've been born a feline," Sharina murmured, and rolled onto her stomach again.

Cara jerked as if her mistress's thoughts had invaded her kitty dreams. The cat opened one eye, closed it, rolled on her side, and went back to snoring.

* * *

Five AM arrived much too soon after Sharina had finally fallen into a fitful sleep. Dreams of Snake had haunted her rest. In one, he'd stood behind her, and her body had reacted in a most primitive way; hands trembled, knees wobbled, her feminine core ached, and her heart did the fandango.

I don't need this damn distraction. Why now? Why Snake? Right when she needed to concentrate the most to keep them alive. *Crap.*

After a hurried shower, she marched into her front room and gave the couch a hard kick near his head.

He bolted upright, hair sticking out in the back, a bleary, where-in-the-hell-am-I expression on his face. She could see right through him to the brown plaid of her couch, reminding her he needed a solid body. *Too many freaking needs, and we haven't even started.*

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty." Sharina moved to the kitchen alcove and banged a jar of instant coffee on the dividing counter between the kitchen and sofa, trying not to look at his perfect male body clad only in the illusion of black, skin-skimming boxer shorts. *Soul!* she reminded herself. *He has a soul, not a body.* What kind of sex could a woman have with a bodiless man? Hellfire! She'd almost asked that out loud.

"Damn, woman. What time is it?"

"Time to put on some pants." She marched around the counter, picked his jeans up off the floor, tossed them in his direction and tried not to linger on the essence of his rippled abs.

The denim flew through his transparent fingers and hit the floor, the keys in one pocket clanking on the hardwood beneath his feet.

"Can't concentrate at this hour. I'll be back in a moment," he mumbled and disappeared out the front door of her house.

She thought about following him to see what he was up to, but decided against it. Maybe he thrived on fresh, morning air to thoroughly awaken his senses. More than likely he was going to wake Methos if the poor fellow even got any sleep last night.

After awhile, Snake returned, reached for his pants and slowly inserted one leg, then the other.

“Methos is stirring around out there. I think he’s hungry. I heard his stomach growling, and it sounded like a pride of angry lions.” He sniffed, pulled the jeans over his hips, zipped them but didn’t bother snapping the button.

Sharina gulped and turned her attention to the two mugs beside the coffee jar. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to have him get dressed. He looked even sexier, if that were possible, barefoot and bare-chested—and that tempting unbuttoned fly resting against his flat stomach. *Oh, God!* She needed to get a grip. She couldn’t lead him across a dangerous stretch of desert if her mind was on distracting things such as his stomach. *And, damn it, he needed a solid body.*

He shivered.

That’ll teach him to go outside on a cold morning in only his underwear.

“Can you borrow a body without too much trouble for this trip across the desert?” She stirred cream into her coffee. “Losing your soul will be one less worry if you have a body.”

“I can use my twin brother’s. He’s in a coma, and his body needs the exercise.”

“Everyone seems to have a twin these days. How did your brother end up in a coma?” She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of eggs. When he didn’t answer, she glanced up. A pained expression creased his brow. He mumbled something she didn’t quite hear.

Fine. He could keep his secrets—for now. She set the eggs on the stove and placed a pan on an eye, twisting the burner on. “Do you own a shirt?” *Of course he does! He’d worn one yesterday.*

Something rustled behind her, followed by a soft curse, then, “Your cat has it.”

Sharina turned. “What?”

“The cat,” he pointed toward the offending animal. Cara lay in a corner, meticulously biting at the buttons on Snake’s shirt.

“Cara!” Sharina stomped over and tugged the shirt loose from the feline’s mouth. The caracal made another grab for it as Sharina handed it to Snake. “Bad kitty.”

Snake laughed and shrugged into his top. “No harm done, just a little cat slobber to go with the dust and grime.” He didn’t bother to button his shirt either. Sharina was beginning to wonder if he even

knew how buttons worked.

“How can you wear clothes without a body?” she suddenly asked.

“It takes a lot of concentration.”

“Oh.” She cracked an egg on the edge of the frying pan, and it made a satisfying sizzle when the yolk hit the hot surface.

“I’ll need to swing by my place and pick up some fresh clothes.” Snake seated himself at the bar and watched her prepare a breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast.

Methos clopped into the kitchen sniffing the air. “Smells delicious.” Cara bounded over and placed her paws on the creature’s leg, begging for a scratch behind the ear. Methos reached down and absently rubbed her fur.

“You eat like this often?” Snake asked as Sharina cracked the last of a dozen eggs into the frying pan and whipped them vigorously.

“Most of the time I forego the bacon, unless I’m nervous or…”

Snake’s brow shot up. “Or?”

“Nothing.”

She dumped half the pan of scrambled eggs onto a plate for Methos. She’d almost said *horny*. Lord help! That was one of the words in the English language she hated more than anything. *Horny*. What on the moon had possessed her to think such a thing?

“Why are you nervous?” Snake eyed the food on Methos plate as if getting ready to grab a handful of bacon and stuff it into his mouth. Too bad he couldn’t eat in his state; he looked absolutely starved.

Methos forked a mouthful of eggs and washed it down with the hot coffee Sharina had plopped near his elbow, sloshing some on the white, Formica countertop where he promptly wiped it up with a napkin.

Sharina paused in transferring her portion of breakfast to her plate and set the frying pan back on the burner. Leaning across the bar, nose within inches of Snake’s, she said, “We’re not going on an

adventure. One of us could die out there, more than likely all three of us. I suggest you remember that if you plan to stay alive long enough to retrieve your body.”

Snake studied her, his smiling lips a breath from hers.

If he kissed her, she would self-combust on the spot. Damn it all to hell. Why was she so attracted to this man?

He leaned forward and tenderly stroked the corner of her mouth with his, lingering for just the tiniest second before withdrawing.

Ignoring them, Methos shoveled breakfast into his mouth like a creature that hadn't eaten in weeks.

“You best get a better attitude than doom and gloom, Beautiful, or that's what'll get us killed,” Snake said.

Chapter Four

Sharina strapped her guns, daggers, and small shield on a utility belt around her waist, and then packed light as she always did when she traveled. Since her wardrobe didn't change much from standard black, leather leggings and top, she wouldn't need much in the way of clothing. Snake had accused her of acting gloomy and looking for Professor Doom around every corner, but she believed in practical reality, which was usually the way a man thought. Hell, her last boyfriend had practiced practicality until he had knocked himself right out of a relationship with her. Practical or gloomy, it was still vital to get in and out of the Moglith Desert as quickly as possible, and she didn't want a lot of baggage dragging her down.

Speaking of baggage—*Snake*. She found him in the kitchen, watching Methos wash the dishes. *How the hell can I talk him out of going?* What if she couldn't protect him? What if he ended up like her sister, lost forever? Why would it even matter? It wasn't as if she really knew him or had any real feelings for him.

Snake turned and smiled. "Ready to roll, Babe—uh—Sharina?"

Instead of answering him, she knelt and snapped a leash onto Cara's collar. Why did he act as if they were going on a sunny vacation somewhere far away like Tahiti? At least he had made an effort to use her name. But truthfully, she kind of liked the endearments. She rose and started toward the door. "Let's go."

Placing the last plate in the drainer, Methos turned, drying his hands on a dishtowel. "I'm ready."

Darkness shrouded the early hour and a cold breeze blew in from the east, the direction they were headed. They would travel by Jeep to where I-40 intersected what used to be I-95. From there they'd have to sneak in and walk the rest of the way. No unauthorized personnel were allowed to cross the Moglith Desert, but Sharina wasn't about to call attention to them by filling out the proper

paperwork.

With a sigh, she slung her knapsack in the back of the Jeep, removed her shield so she could drive comfortably and took a deep cleansing breath. Cara jumped onto the seat beside Sharina's equipment and settled down for the long ride.

Methos vaulted in the back with Cara, taking a seat on the other side of the luggage. The cat sniffed his ear over a duffle bag, and then licked his cheek.

Why does Cara like him so much? He's scary beyond all the hounds in hell. Sharina scowled, forgetting the cleansing breaths she was supposed to be taking.

Snake brushed by her. "Cheer up. It's going to be a beautiful day, I can feel it." He hopped into the passenger's seat and waited for her to climb behind the wheel.

"Of all the people I get stuck with for a dangerous trip to the desert, it would have to be the Happiness Guru."

"It beats being mad at the world any day, Sunshine."

Sharina threw him a look of disgust, shoved the key in the ignition and cranked the engine. "The whole world is going to hell and you still find something to be happy about?"

"The world's been going to hell since its beginning." He snapped on his seatbelt. "Sheesh, woman, we need to work on your attitude."

"My attitude is just fine, thank you." A small smile tugged at Sharina's mouth as she backed out of the driveway and gunned the gas for a destination with a shaky outcome. Those little smiles were becoming a habit. When was the last time she had ever smiled as much?

Snake directed her to a hospital facility, down a dusty, red road. The hospital resembled a type of Bed & Breakfast establishment reminiscent of the 1990's.

Sharina pulled up next to the steps and left the engine running. "Now what?"

"I go in and merge my soul with my brother's body. All the paperwork has been taken care of." He opened the Jeep's door and slid out of the seat. "I won't be long."

"Need any help?" Sharina asked, hesitantly.

“Naw, nothing you can do, Sunshine.” He closed the vehicle door and jogged up the steps and onto the porch, before disappearing inside.

Sharina turned sideways in her seat, and looked at Methos. “Is it strange living in a borrowed body?”

“Not so much. Of course, my twin and I are identical, so everything looks the same in the mirror.” His voice rumbled above the idling engine. “But still there’s a feeling of being displaced, as if your soul doesn’t quite fit in the body you’re using.”

“Makes sense—we all have different souls. Different ways of thinking, acting...feeling, even if we are a mirror image of someone else.” Sharina wondered how different Talina had turned out. Was she even still alive? How long would a child last as a slave to such merciless creatures? *She may be dead, so brace yourself for the grief.*

Thirty minutes later the door to the hospital opened, and Snake stepped out. He squinted at the sun, and then moved across the porch and down the steps, a little weak and uncertain in his movements. Hopefully he would adjust to his twin’s body before they encountered any real danger across Desert Blue.

“All set?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” He slid into the seat and collapsed against the back of it.

Sharina stared at him a moment, and then put the Jeep in reverse, turned around, and headed downtown.

If he doesn’t get his energy back, we’re in trouble.

* * *

They arrived at his downtown apartment, and Snake packed quickly, wanting to get on the road and get this job over with. He figured he could trust Sharina in what they needed to do, since she had as much, if not more, military training than he did—he’d never officially joined any branch of the military.

Teknatoma, a Native American, had taught him how to use a bow with deadly accuracy. Sadness swept over him. Most of the Native Americans had headed for the hills after the desecration bombs, and no one had seen or heard from any of them since.

As far as he could see, Sharina had a lousy attitude toward most things, and maybe it was because of the loss of her sister, but he refused to feel sorry for her. Besides, he was the one without a permanent body; he should be the one with the crappy attitude, but he had realized early in life feeling sorry for oneself and dwelling on your losses only made you feel worse, and didn't do a damn thing to help the situation.

Weariness overtook him, and he almost let go of his twin's body. It was tiresome trying to hold onto it for any length of time, especially after borrowing the body of the man in the bar when he needed to help fight the Moglith, but it would serve him best to keep a solid form as much as he could on this trip. He wondered how Methos handled his borrowed body with minimal effort.

He hefted his bow and arrow equipment and settled it on the back floorboard, making sure the poisoned tips were pointed downward and their protective sheaths in place. One arrow would kill a creature almost instantly—first by paralyzing the body, and then systematically shutting down individual organs. A new blend of poison called Methdeath had been created for chemical warfare, as if the arrow itself wouldn't get the job done. A man was supposed to be trained to strike a killing blow with one arrow. Maybe the military wanted to be sure. If the arrow hit a non-lethal body part, the poison would guarantee death. Snake shivered. War had always been cold and merciless, but this—this went beyond any of that.

After they got on the road, he studied Sharina through his lashes as she drove. She appeared to be aware of his scrutiny, but chose to ignore him. The only time her eyes lit up with happiness was when she interacted with Cara. The cat seemed to hold genuine affection for Sharina, but treated him as nothing more than something to sniff at every now and then. Hell, the cat even seemed to like Methos. At least the cat hadn't decided to bite a chunk out of him, and neither had Sharina, although he had his suspicions she might want to, and not in any way pleasurable. He pulled tight on the reins of those

thoughts. He had a mission to accomplish and distractions weren't part of the assignment. *Such a beautiful woman wasn't part of it either, but you ended up with her anyway.*

For the most part, Sharina kept her distance from him, too, just like Cara. Only talking to him when necessary and she avoided his touch as if he were sick with the West Nile virus.

They drove until nightfall, but Sharina kept the gas pedal to the floor. She tossed him one of her rare looks when he glanced at her questioningly. "I'd prefer we didn't stop. If we drive through the night we can be there before dawn." She waved toward the windshield to indicate the darkness beyond it. "It's best we get there while we're still cloaked in black."

Methos had slept most of the drive, his snores rumbling from his chest as loud as a herd of stampeding cattle.

Snake straightened and stretched his arms high above his head, letting out a loud yawn. *This is not the time to get tired, Moriss. You need this body for a while longer.* While sleeping, the borrowed body usually let the soul go unless he concentrated subconsciously to hold onto it, something he didn't have a whole lot of practice in. Once he shook off his sleepiness, he turned to her. "Why don't you let me drive the rest of the way? You might want to get some rest before we try to talk or bribe the border guards into letting us through."

"We aren't talking or bribing anyone into anything. It's not possible—well, maybe a tad possible, but not easy."

"Okay, then how are we getting past them?"

"We slip by them."

"How? We won't get two steps into the desert before we're spotted."

She gave him one of her rare smiles and it sapped the breath from his lungs. "I know a secret," she said. The moonlight washed her in a beauty he had seldom seen in his twenty-five years. *Focus. Damn it!*

"A secret?" He suddenly had a hard time concentrating on their conversation.

"I dated a soldier once."

That explained everything and nothing. Snake scowled and motioned for her to pull over. “Let me drive.”

Sharina pulled the Jeep to the side of the road and put it in park before slipping from behind the wheel to allow him to take her place.

Snake drove for a while in silence, but his curiosity got the best of him. He had to know about her soldier. “What happened?” Will Garrett had told him only what was on a need-to-know basis about her.

Sharina opened one eye and squinted at him. “What?”

“Between you and the soldier?”

“Oh.” She closed her eyes, and he thought she wasn’t going to answer him, but then she straightened and pushed her hair from her face. “Nothing.” She yawned.

“Did he die in battle?”

She turned to him, her violet eyes as cold as ice. “No.”

“Then what happened?” he asked softly, unwilling to let it go at that for some reason he couldn’t even begin to conjure up. *Just curiosity, Pal. That’s all.*

“If you must know, he decided that being a soldier was the most important thing, nothing else mattered—not even me in the end.”

Snake studied her in the darkness as the wind whipped by outside the Jeep. “What was his name?”

“Will Garrett.”

Surprise zipped through his veins, turning his muscles to water, and he swerved off the road, but immediately bumped back onto it again.

Methos jerked awake, alarm blaring across his face, big eyes rolling in fear. He glanced around and then returned to snoring like a motorboat skimming across a lake.

Snake glanced in the rearview mirror, and then back to the road. Will hadn’t told him he knew Sharina on an intimate level. No wonder the man had threatened him with dire circumstances if he failed

to bring her back alive. Good God he didn't need any more worries. "I'm sorry. I guess it still hurts."

She turned from the window. "No."

"Liar," he whispered. *Damnations!* How was he supposed to explain his association with Will Garrett when she found out? And find out she would—eventually. Suddenly he wasn't so sure he wanted to use Sharina to carry out the military's orders. He certainly didn't want to be on her top ten most wanted revenges.

The next time he glanced over at her, she was asleep. He let her sleep until they neared the I-95 blockade.

* * *

Near the dark edge of dawn, Snake lightly tapped Sharina on the shoulder, waking her. Neck stiff from sleeping at an odd angle, she turned it until it popped, loosening the tight muscles. Cara offered her a good morning lick on the cheek, but she shoved the cat away, wrinkling her nose in reaction to harsh kitty breath.

"Ugh, Cara. What did you eat while I was sleeping?"

"Sardines," Methos answered,

"She let you feed her?" Once again surprise jarred her. Cara didn't take up with strangers, especially not ones who looked more predator than human.

"Give 'em what they want and they're putty in your hand," Snake said. "Ain't that right, Methos?"

Methos raised his busy eyebrow as if he didn't quite know what Snake meant, or just didn't want to be in the middle of a male/female debate.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sharina asked.

"It means everyone has a price."

Sharina frowned. Had Talina been her price? "Pull over. We don't want to get too close."

Tourists frequent the barrier, but I'm not a tourist and they know it."

Snake pulled to the side of the road and drove into the bushes, out of sight. "What are we going to do about the Jeep?"

"Leave it."

"But won't they get suspicious when they discover it?"

"No." She slid from the passenger's seat, grabbed the shield and her gear and tugged on Cara's leash, encouraging her to jump from the vehicle. After the cat landed beside her, Sharina unsnapped the leash and tossed it back into the Jeep. Cara wouldn't need it in the desert.

Sharina waited for Snake and Methos to join them. When they reached her side, she pressed a button on her key chain and smiled. "State of the art auto-theft deterrent."

Snake stared open-mouthed as the entire Jeep vanished right before his eyes.

Chapter Five

How had Sharina gained access to one of the military's highest classified technological advances? Although she was trained like a soldier, she was never an official one. Just how much information had Will Garrett given her?

"Where did you get that?" Snake finally asked.

"I borrowed it." She shrugged into her knapsack and headed deeper into the brush.

"You mean you stole it."

"No, I mean I borrowed it—just haven't had the chance to return it yet."

Snake started to argue when voices rose in alarm somewhere behind them. Hell, they were caught already.

Sharina grabbed his arm and yanked him to the leaf strewn ground where they crawled out of site beneath the scrub bushes. Methos ducked behind a thick tree.

"Why don't you wave that car-disappearing thingy over our bodies?"

"Shush!" she scolded him as if he were a five-year-old. "It doesn't work on humans."

"Groovy," Snake muttered, earning him another scowl. God, he sucked at this field stuff. It had been awhile since Teknatoma had taught him battle skills, Native American style. He could only hope he wouldn't screw up during a crucial moment. Will Garret had sent him out here with only a brief course in military training—just enough to keep him from getting killed. Maybe. Time was of the essences it seemed. *The man must place a lot of faith in Sharina.*

Leaves crunched under boots as the shadowy figures of two soldiers, moved toward their hiding place.

"Do you see anything?" one of them said in a loud whisper.

"Yeah, a damn cougar. Funny looking one, at that."

"Well, shoot the fucking thing and lets get back to our post."

Sharina stiffened beside Snake. He placed a reassuring hand over hers.

Cara leaped away and out of sight among the trees as the soldiers opened fire. Dirt flew up and peppered Snake's face as the bullets ricocheted off the ground. He ducked, shielding his eyes from the onslaught. Hell, they might get shot by a couple of bored soldiers before they even got started.

Finally the soldiers laid off the trigger and moved back in the direction they'd come.

Snake started to ease to his feet, but Sharina tightened her hold on his arm and shook her head. "Wait," she mouthed.

They remained on the cold, dry ground for at least fifteen minutes before she cautiously rose and quietly backed deeper into the trees, motioning for him to follow. They met Cara on the other side of the ridge, unscathed from the bullet parade that had followed her through the bushes, sitting beside Methos who waited patiently for them to catch up.

Sharina dropped to one knee and rubbed the cat's face, cooing soft words of praise. "Good kitty cat," she said, and then rose to catch Snake's questioning look. "It's our plan. If we were heard, Cara would stay visible, making the soldiers think it was her and nothing more."

"Brilliant—but what if they'd shot her?"

"They wouldn't have."

"But what if—"

She silenced him with a scowl furious enough to intimidate a Moglith drill sergeant, if such a thing existed. "I don't deal in what-ifs." With that, she turned and headed down the mountain parallel to the desert blockade.

After a few seconds, Snake followed. Would he ever get on her good side? Did she even have a good side? She had to have one or he wouldn't be so attracted to her, or maybe that was part of the attraction. Shoot, he didn't know. One thing was certain; he needed to screw his mind on straight. This mission held importance in more ways than one. He wanted his damn body back, but he had to assassinate the Moglith leader for the United States military before he was allowed possession of what already belonged to him. Otherwise, the military wouldn't have allowed him to set foot in the blue

desert. If you had a body stuck in the frozen end of the Moglith desert, tough. No one went there without permission. Period! Snake had unofficial permission, so the two soldiers on guard duty didn't know anyone was supposed to be here, thus the shooting.

He blew out a tired breath and stared toward the tree line. It was the strangest landscape he'd ever seen. It looked as if a giant jigsaw had screamed through the trees, cutting them neatly—except for a lone peninsula—leaving a stark forest on one side, a sandpit on the other, and a large portion of the ocean a chunk of ice.

Too bad they couldn't just step out of the trees and start across the desert, but they would have to go through the hollow peninsula to avoid the guards.

Morning shrugged off its dark cloak, and the sky brightened to a crystal blue except for a few vapor trails left by jets as they crisscrossed the heavens. Helicopters patrolled the first mile of the desert land. After that, if a soul made it that far, they were on their own. Nothing like protecting people from themselves.

When Snake took his gaze off the skyline, he noticed Sharina had disappeared. He looked first behind him, then in front. "What the...?" He twisted one way, then the other. *Now what?*

"Psst!"

"Where the hell are you?" He peered toward a stand of bushes that rustled before Sharina stepped from behind them.

"Come on! Before the helicopters spot you." She knelt by an unconscious soldier and injected a pink substance into his veins, repeating the same thing with the other soldier.

"Are they dead?" he asked.

"No, but they'll sleep for three days. Hopefully they'll be found before then, because I'd sure hate for a wild animal, or worse, to carry them off just because they had the misfortune of drawing guard duty on the same day we needed to use this tunnel." She placed their army jackets under their heads, and stood.

Snake followed her into the cool interior of a cave, its entrance hidden by the natural growth of

shrubs. “Well, this is convenient.”

“The Moglith used it to move between our world and theirs.” She dropped her sack on the cave floor.

“What are we doing in it?” He glanced around, expecting a Moglith to leap out of the shadows and swallow him in one gulp. He actually jumped when Methos stirred in the gloom next to him.

“Relax. I said *used*, not use. They haven’t traveled through this tunnel for at least ten years. They climb to the top of the mountain and cross over that way.” She spread her sleeping bag and sat on it, removing her boots. “We should be able to catch a few hours of sleep before the guards change.”

“Why don’t they travel through the mountain anymore?” Snake asked.

“They’re afraid of the witch,” Methos answered and curled up in a corner, the whites of his eyes giving off a glow in the darkness. “The Muravian Witch resides in a hidden chamber along the tunnel.”

“Why are they afraid of her?”

“Because she can kill you with just a whispered incantation. She’s reported to be over two thousand years old.” Methos removed a rock from beneath his hip and shifted until he appeared comfortable.

Snake whistled low. “If that’s true, she lived around the time of Christ. What is she? Some kind of vampire witch?”

Sharina snorted. “You better get some sleep. I don’t want to risk moving about in the desert during the day. We’ll start across Desert Blue as soon as it’s dark again.” Sharina crawled into the sleeping bag and closed her eyes. Cara dropped down beside her and laid her head on her paws, snuggling next to her mistress.

Too restless to sleep, Snake sat with his back against the cave’s wall, staring from the ceiling to the floor and all around, fascinated by the depictions of demons and ghosts painted on the rocks. Was it some kind of ancient voodoo meant to guard the entrance and scare people away? It might if a person put stock in superstition, which he didn’t. Still, one drawing sent chills racing up and down his body.

Black eyes stared at him from under a hooded cloak, the whites gleaming and lifelike. Snake had the uncanny feeling the demon watched him. He shook his head to clear his vision, and then he attempted to get some sleep.

Hours later he awoke and glanced toward the drawing of the demon, but the eyes were gone, and so was Sharina. A quick glance to the corner proved Methos missing, too.

Great! Haven't even gotten started, and I'm already missing most of my group—hell, all the group. Cara didn't appear to be around either.

Chapter Six

Sharina ignored Snake as he stumbled from the cave in a panic, shivering, his skin a shade of cold blue. She held the warrior pose without so much as a quiver of her muscles. It was a simple way to relax her mind and body. The blue moon held warmth as it shone above them, adding to her feelings of peace and well-being.

“You sure know how to jump-start a man’s heart,” Snake grumbled.

Uncoiling her limbs, she came out of the pose. “I assume you’re not talking about my yoga skills.” A smile touched her lips.

He stared at her without comment, a mixture of anger and relief on his face. He glanced at the sleeping soldiers. “Maybe we’d better get started.”

Sharina approached him. “Look, I didn’t follow you out here to abandon you. What purpose would that serve? You’re going to have to place a little trust in me.” She swept past him to the cave’s entrance and paused, turning toward him. “Just like I have to trust you, and we have to trust Methos.”

Guilt charged across his face, and he wouldn’t meet her gaze.

She narrowed her eyes. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing,” he mumbled as he headed toward the cave. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Sharina grabbed his arm, but let go when her fingers encountered ice-cold skin. “I *can* trust you, can’t I?” Her gaze darted back and forth across his face. *Why is he so cold? A side-affect from borrowing a body?*

He hesitated. “Of course you can.” He gave her a cold glare and entered the cave.

What the hell kind of look was that? She’d better keep her guard up. Snake appeared to have a whole other agenda, and he wasn’t willing to share. Fine. As long as he kept up his end of the bargain...help get her sister back...she didn’t care what else he was up to. All that mattered now was Talina, and getting out of the Moglith Desert alive. Taking out Nero was a bonus.

Cara bounded out of the trees with traces of blood and feathers decorating her chops, Methos right behind her munching on a fat purple fruit. At least two of the crew had eaten breakfast. Sharina and Snake would have to make do with energy bars that tasted like sugarcoated sawdust. She had no idea what Methos was eating, but it looked far tastier.

Methos reached into a pocket inside his robe and tossed her a piece of fruit. “Here.”

She caught it and studied it. “What is it?”

“Plum...I think. It tastes like one anyhow.”

“Really? They still grow here?”

“Yeah. It’s about the only thing that grows in this pathetic wasteland.”

When Sharina entered the cave, Snake was studying one of the paintings on the wall. He poked a depiction of a hooded man as if he were checking to see if it were alive.

She shouldered her knapsack and adjusted it to a comfortable position on her back. “Ready?”

He nodded absently, gave the picture one last perplexed look, and then gathered his gear. Cara dropped to her haunches in front of him, licking her paws.

“Lovely. She’s had breakfast.” Snake grimaced at the sight of blood and feathers.

Sharina let out one of her rare laughs. “What did you expect? She’s a wild animal. Chasing birds is one of her favorite sports.”

“Sports? I didn’t know animals did anything for sport.”

“If they’re trained. Maybe she’ll catch our supper tonight.” With a secret grin, she started down the dark tunnel—which wouldn’t have a light at the end of it for about a mile—munching on the juicy fruit. “Let’s get going or we’ll lose most of our night coverage. I don’t relish spending another day sleeping in this cave.”

The farther they traveled, the darker it became, until total blackness took over. Sharina didn’t need light to see. Trained to feel the earth beneath her feet, she became one with it, and detected its subtle changes. The air around her would shift if they were in danger of dropping into an abyss, and she could stop them before it happened. Fortunately this cave didn’t have such hazards. The Moglith

wouldn't have used it otherwise.

Methos traveled with a surprising depth of stealth for such a big creature, almost as if he wasn't made of seven feet of solid flesh and blood.

Snake suddenly spoke behind her. "We need one of those hard-hats with a light on it like those the coal miners used in the hills of Kentucky and West Virginia." His voice echoed in a hollow ring off the cave's walls.

She stopped and he bumped into her, knocking her backpack askew. The shield strapped to her belt dug into her outer thigh. Irritation tap-danced across her nerves as she readjusted the pack and turned to face him. "We don't need light, it's a useless waste of energy. This tunnel is straight and narrow. When you collide with a wall, you're going in the wrong direction."

She couldn't see him, but his breath fanned her cheek. An erotic chill washed over her, and she inhaled sharply, her irritation flying out the cave entrance several yards behind them. *Good grief! I actually want him to kiss me.*

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing—let's go." She turned, started forward again, and then froze as the hackles rose on her neck. They were being watched, but not from behind or in front. She glanced to her left, then to the right. Her senses picked up movement along the wall on her left.

Not possible.

There was no way anything could be beside them. The tunnel was so narrow she could stretch out her arms and touch both sides. She did so now, but only encountered the cool dirt of the walls. Cara growled next to her.

Snake stirred behind her. "Sharina?"

"Shush." She held her breath and listened, but couldn't tame the loud beat of her heart. The tunnel was reportedly haunted, though she'd never believed the tales. But they weren't alone, and she didn't know who or what was sharing their space. The unknown scared the hell out of her.

"Methos, what is it?" she asked.

“Not sure,” he answered. “Could be the damned.”

“Damned who?” Snake asked.

“Mogloth,” Sharina answered.

A subtle breeze ruffled the fine hairs on her skin and sent an army of chill bumps across her flesh. *Were they that close to the cave’s exit? Where else would the breeze come from?* They needed to get through the passageway in a hurry, but her mind moved in slow motion as if it slogged through a mud pit.

Cara hissed and pressed against Sharina’s legs, successfully breaking her trance-like state. She reached for Snake’s hand. “No matter what you see or hear, keep going. They’re dead, and the dead can’t hurt you.”

“What?”

She jerked him forward. “Close your eyes if you have to, but ignore them. If you make eye contact, they’ll haunt you for the rest of your life.”

“Damn, you didn’t tell me we’d have to deal with ghosts.”

“I haven’t told you a lot of things. If I had, you probably would have abandoned the notion of retrieving your body, and I couldn’t allow that because I really want my sister back.”

“I would have still come. I *really* want my body back. What kind of ghosts are these?”

“The lost souls of the Mogloth, among others.” Sharina moved forward, hanging on to Snake’s hand; she didn’t want to lose him in the dark. And if she were totally honest with herself, his touch gave her strength. “Their body has died but not their souls, and they wonder the earth looking for a body to steal. Sometimes they take on the form of someone close to you, and then lure you to your death if they can’t steal your body.” She was glad she hadn’t been able to talk him out of going with her now.

“Gee, I thought you said the dead can’t hurt you?” Snake’s fingers tightened around hers. “And why would anyone follow them if they know the person they see isn’t really who they are?”

“The ghosts invade your mind and try to take control. Those of a weak mind are easily

conquered. During a blue moon month the ghosts are at their most desperate; it's the only time they can attempt to oust your soul and steal your body," she said.

"How strong is yours?" he asked.

"Very."

"Good. I'd feel guilty for the rest of my life if you lost your body because I dragged you all the way out here to help me."

They moved through the darkness for another hundred yards without incident. The lost souls seemed to keep to themselves as if not wanting to invite outside trouble. *Or waiting for the perfect moment to attack.*

A transparent light flickered a few feet ahead of them, zoning in, then out like a fluorescent light in a public restroom. It took on the shape of a person standing with back turned to them, hair in a dirty, tangled mess spilling to her waist.

Slowly the apparition faced them, showing features twisted with anguish. It beckoned for Sharina, leading her forward, begging for help.

"It's Talina," Sharina whispered.

Chapter Seven

The apparition looked exactly like Sharina from the long golden hair to the same violet-colored eyes. Twins. Sharina stood frozen in a trance, her expression twisting into an agonized mixture of delight and horror.

Snake shook her arm. “Sharina, look at me.” Panic swept through his veins. He’d never forgive himself if she lost her body to that—that thing. Whatever it was, it sure wasn’t Talina—Talina wouldn’t stare at them through eyes of pure evil, not if she was anything like Sharina.

Slowly she swung her gaze his way but didn’t speak.

“That’s not Talina,” he said.

She tried to look at the creature again, but Snake gripped her chin and forced her to focus on him. “We’re going to walk around it and be on our way. You can do this. Close your eyes if you have to.”

Sharina nodded and together they started forward, Methos’ big body lumbered behind them, all stealth gone from his movements, his breath wheezing from his lungs in scared spurts.

A myriad array of expressions flickered across the apparition’s face as if a host of personalities were fighting for dominance. A sane face won and she whispered, “Be careful, Shar.”

A cackle rose in the air and flames of fire whooshed around them. Talina’s apparition cowered in a heap on the ground, seemingly too terrified even to look upon the witch.

“The witch of Muravia,” Methos whispered. “Lord, I hope she’s in a good mood.”

A dark woman appeared among the flames, pointed at Sharina, and began to speak, her voice amplified in the small tunnel. “You shall bare the child of a Moglith and die within its darkness. Evil follows you to the grave, but death does not find you. Lost and alone you’ll wonder the earth for a season, love’s light not far behind.” The witch of Muravia switched off like a television set, and the tunnel went black once more.

Snake glanced at Methos. “What does she mean by that?”

“Her predictions are accurate, but not in the way they sound. You can’t trust them, the truth is buried within.”

“Lord, just what we need.” Snake tugged on Sharina’s hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

Light glowed and Talina’s apparition rose from the ground. Her soft features hardened as another took over. “Help me,” the ghost entreated, reaching toward them with one bony hand, feigned sadness and fear prominent on its funeral parlor face.

“You’re not real. You’re not real. You’re not real,” Sharina chanted.

“That’s it,” Snake whispered. “Close your eyes.”

She obeyed and they slipped past the spirit, then the tunnel went dark once again.

“Whew! That’s something I don’t wish to experience ever again,” Snake said as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure the ghost was in fact gone.

When Sharina didn’t respond, he moved to stand before her. “Hey, you okay?” His hands slid up her arms, and he tried to make out her face in the darkness. One hand slid up farther and he cupped the side of her neck and chin, running his thumb across her lips. He was glad he had his twin’s body at this moment and could touch her, feel the beat of her heart pulsing, the heat of her skin beneath his fingers.

A tremble shook her body. “I’m fine. I don’t normally get that shaken up, but it—that thing looked so much like my sister it was hard to ignore it.” She pressed his hand away. “I’m fine,” she repeated and took a step back.

“You don’t always have to shoulder all the responsibility. Let someone else help carry the load.” *Why won’t she let me get close to her? Is it because her relationship with Will had gone sour, and she expects nothing less from me?* He continued to fume to himself as they moved down the tunnel.

“I’ve learned throughout life I can only depend on myself—no one else. I don’t dare let down my guard, because that’s when someone you thought you could trust betrays you.”

Irritated, he said, “Man, you have a snotty outlook on life.”

Sharina stopped and faced him. The softness of her breath fanned his skin and sent a pleasant ripple over his body. “When you’ve walked a mile in my shoes, then you can have the right to criticize me.” She turned and marched down the tunnel once again.

“Sharina, come on, everybody has problems. No one has an easy ride on the merry-go-round of life. At least you have both your body and soul, unlike me.”

“Snake, I don’t wish to spend the remainder of this trip arguing with you. Let’s just drop it and get on with this mission. I really would love to see my sister again.”

He sighed and started after her. She had experienced a moment of weakness in front of him, and that was probably what bothered her more than anything—what had put her on the offensive. He wished she’d let him in—let him help her fight her demons. But why did he want that so much? He was only with her until he got his body back, and Nero became history at the end of an arrow. Then what?

Cara rubbed against his leg, startling him out of his thoughts. *Damn!* The cat had nearly given him his third heart attack of the night. The animal hadn’t ever got this close to him or seemed this friendly. He wished he knew what he’d done to gain the cat’s confidence; maybe it would work on Sharina.

Ten minutes later, pale light from the blue moon spilled into the exit end of the cave. Snake rushed to catch up with Sharina, Cara trotting along beside him.

Sharina stood in the entrance, staring across an endless sea of sand. Snake joined her and took in the sight of Desert Blue. Only a few tufts of grass grew in this god-forsaken place. Dunes, strewn with dry pieces of tree limbs, rose in small hills across the horizon. The air smelled of fish and salt, and dusty gravel. Lunar shadows played across the sand like fairies set loose on a magical night. The moon seemed to be the only thing that hadn’t changed; it stared down without expression like it had for billions of years.

Cara rubbed her head against her mistress’ thigh, and Sharina absently reached down and scratched the cat behind its ears.

Snake wasn't too keen on crossing the desert where there was nothing to hide behind. They'd be a sniper's dream-come-true out there in the middle of all that open space. But, then again, where would the sniper hide? "Now what?"

"We listen," she answered.

"Listen for what?"

"For sounds that don't belong in a desert."

"How on earth can you determine what does and doesn't belong?"

"I've been trained and my hearing has been enhanced."

Snake wondered if the training had been courtesy of one Will Garrett. Jealousy bit at his stomach, something he hadn't experienced since his teenage years. *This is ridiculous*. He didn't need to complicate things further by falling in love with the woman he was using for his own means—and the military's. He blew out a mouthful of air and rubbed his head. It wasn't supposed to get this complicated. And he was beginning to feel guilty as hell about Talina.

"Would you be quiet?" Sharina glared at him.

"Sorry," he mouthed.

A mild breeze kicked up and brushed the hair back from her face. She closed her eyes and appeared to be in deep concentration. Suddenly she opened her eyes and stared at Snake as if she didn't know who he was.

"Mogloth at ten o'clock."

Confused, Snake stared in the direction he thought she meant, a little to his left. "I don't see anything."

"It's the brown lump about a hundred yards ahead."

He almost laughed, despite the serious circumstances. "Everything's brown out there."

"That particular spot is breathing."

How can she tell with just the light of the moon to guide her? "Oh, man, this just gets creepier and creepier."

“Damn, I had hoped not to run into anything so soon,” Sharina mumbled as she lowered her backpack and drew a wicked-looking silver gun. “This is going to make some noise, and it’ll draw unwanted attention.”

Snake eyed the small gun skeptically. “Then don’t use it.” He removed his bow and slid an arrow from his arsenal. “Point me the exact location of the Moglith.”

Sharina cast him a doubtful look. “How can you shoot something you can’t even see?”

He notched the arrow and pulled the bow back, a grin on his face. “I have talents too.”

Sharina moved behind him and put a hand on his arm. With a light pressure she pushed his aim a little toward the left. “Aim low,” she whispered. “The creature is flat on the ground.”

“Great. As if I need another challenge.” He let the arrow fly, and they watched it sail, low to the ground, and hit the clump of brown cloth, worn by the Moglith, just above where the head connected with the neck.

The object jerked, staggered to its feet, took two steps and hit the sand without moving again.

“Is it dead?” Snake asked. He cast a glance at Methos, wondering what his feelings were as he watched one of his own kind die. No expression showed on his face as he stepped back into the cave.

Sharina put a finger to her lips and cocked her head as if listening for something.

The creature’s heartbeat? Snake wondered.

After a moment, she turned to him and nodded. “It took its last breath. We can start our journey now.”

“Why was the creature even there?” he asked.

“My guess, it’s supposed to guard the entrance to the cave, but since no one has been through it in ages, it let down its guard and went to sleep.”

“Way out yonder? Wouldn’t it make more sense to sleep closer to the cave?”

Something rustled in the darkness behind them, and they whirled around.

Methos stepped out into the moonlight and appraised them with one raised shaggy eyebrow.

“Didn’t it occur to you that one might be inside the cave?” The creature’s voice rumbled like a convoy

of fighter tanks rolling across sand, as he dragged a dead Moglith behind him.

Chapter Eight

“Where did it come from?” Sharina asked. It sure hadn’t been in front of them while they were in the cave.

“I think it might have followed us in,” Methos answered and tossed the creature aside. “Maybe from the bar.”

“You killed one of your own kind?” Snake asked with surprise.

“I’m nothing like those creatures,” Methos said coldly.

“Ah, I see, you’re a rogue warrior. A loner,” Snake said.

Methos sighed and rubbed his head as if it ached. “Maybe that’s what I am, but there are more like me, and we only want to live peacefully in our corner of the world. Just because we look like animals doesn’t mean we have the IQ of one.”

Cara growled as if she’d been insulted, causing Snake and Methos to laugh, breaking the tension.

A shiver passed through Sharina—an internal warning that something was not quite right with the whole desert. She scanned the darkened horizon, but caught no movement, not even a sound, which was just plain eerie. Shouldn’t the desert be alive with something—anything?

“Sharina? What’s wrong?”

She returned her attention to the handsome man in front of her. A jolt of desire hit her from out of nowhere. This was not the time or place for such feelings, but she couldn’t seem to stop them. For now, the desert was forgotten. Snake was all male, not the watered-down, emotionally over-sensitive version men had become in the past twenty years. *Stop it!*

Sharina grabbed her backpack and slung it over one shoulder. “Let’s get going; I don’t want to waste any more of the night.” She glanced up at the sky as black clouds scuttled across the moon. “We may not have much light soon.” She strode ahead of them, Cara close on her heels.

“I doubt if that’ll stop you since you seem to be able to see in the dark,” Snake muttered.

“I heard that.” She tossed him a scowl over her shoulder. When she returned her attention to the desert, she shuddered. It remained as dead as the bones of a sun-whitened carcass.

* * *

They walked through the night without incident, trudging through the sand, Sharina and Cara out front, Snake and Methos trailing behind. As the sun rose over the desert, they made camp between two dunes, and took turns sleeping the day way. Once darkness gathered, they continued onward.

Methos leaned toward him and whispered, “Is she always so stiff in the backbone?”

“As long as I’ve known her,” Snake answered.

“Why?”

The question took Snake by surprise, because he really hadn’t thought about it much. His mind had been focused on getting his body back and figuring out a way to accomplish what the US military had sent him to do. Finally he shrugged and attempted an answer.

“I think life dealt her a tough hand and instead of rolling with the punches, she remains iron-clad and steadfast—unbendable.” He paused and watched Sharina’s long blonde hair blow across her back in the night wind. “She never lets her guard down, and I believe that’s more harmful in the long run.”

“Must make for a pretty lonely life,” Methos said.

Snake turned his attention to his companion. Maybe it was time to find out more about this creature and his habits. But where did one start with the questions?

“You want to know about me, don’t you?” Methos cast him a sideways glance, the desert moon lending an eerie ripple to his face.

“I admit, I’m a little curious.”

Methos raised one bushy eyebrow in disbelief.

“Okay, so maybe I’m a lot curious.”

Breath whooshed through Methos’ lungs, and he continued a few paces before he began to

speak. “Not all of us are the same. When the desecration bomb was dropped on this part of the New World, those closest to the Ocean were transformed into the legends you’ve heard—horrible creatures with no conscience or mercy, just a will to survive at any cost. Some of us—a few others, were luckier. The devastation only partially transformed us. God only knows why,” he said with a sad shake of his huge head. “We retained our intelligence and moral beings, but the humans still wouldn’t allow us to cross over to the part of the United States that wasn’t affected by the bomb. We had no choice but to dwell among the barbarians, hiding from them, praying we’d survive the days and nights.”

Snake’s stomach churned in outrage and pity, but mostly sadness that the inhabitants of the world still hadn’t learned to accept those who were different. “How many like you remain?”

“Not many—just a few here and there. No telling how many hide out here.” He indicated the desert with a sweep of his hand. “The only reason I wasn’t killed outright was because the barbarians needed my body to house one of their souls.”

“Are there enough of you to drive out the Moglith and take over the desert?” Snake’s heart accelerated. Maybe there was hope Desert Blue could be turned into a thriving part of the United States once again. It was what Will Garrett envisioned—why he was risking everything to make sure the mission succeeded.

Methos swung his gaze Snake’s way and studied him in squinty-eyed mistrust. “Why do you ask?”

Snake stumbled around in his mind for an answer. “Don’t you want to lead a normal life again, without fear—to be able to come and go as you please?”

An amused laugh rumbled up from the creature’s chest. “What’s considered normal? Is it something you Americans do?”

Snake frowned. *Technically, wasn’t Methos an American?* “No, not necessarily. Normal is what you, as an individual, perceive it to be. Or a society as a whole.”

Methos threw back his head and roared in laughter, causing Sharina to stop and face them.

“What’s so funny?” she called across the distance.

Methodos stopped laughing and shook his massive head again. “Did you stop to think that a psychological killer believes what he does is normal? Take Osama Bin Laden for instance. He honestly believed it was okay with God for him to attack the Twin Towers in New York close to twenty years ago, murdering all those innocent people. No wonder the world is all mixed up.” He clapped a hand on Snake’s shoulder. “Normal, my friend, does not exist.”

Snake grinned. “Never thought I’d meet a philosopher among the Moglith.”

They resumed walking in silence, Snake pondering what Methodos had said. It made sense in a weird sort of way. But if there was no such thing as normal, how had the world persisted—survived? Maybe it had because of it or in spite of it.

“So, Methodos, who has your body?”

“Galender Nero.”

An electrical jolt zapped Snake straight through the heart. *Hellfire and damnations!* Not Galender Nero, the Moglith Warlord—the man Snake was sent to assassinate. Of all the rotten luck.

Chapter Nine

The higher sand dunes shimmered in the moonlight as Sharina switched places and lagged behind her two companions so she could watch them both, especially Snake. Something was off with him, and it had grown more noticeable with each passing hour. *What are you up to, Snake?* Had he lied to her about his body being buried somewhere in the frozen tundra? What was he keeping from her? What was he afraid to tell her? A sudden chill skittered across her body. What if he had lied about helping her rescue Talina?

Trailing behind Sharina, Cara stiffened and growled low in her throat, staring to the south. The wild cat slunk low to the ground and moved away with the stealth of a Native American warrior.

“What is it, Girl?” Sharina whispered and drew her silver gun. A tiny heartbeat reached her hearing-enhanced ears, and she remained motionless, listening for other sounds.

Without warning, Cara sprang forward and swatted a huge, bird-like creature with one swipe of her paw. Then she pounced on the doomed fowl and snapped its neck between her powerful jaws.

Sharina relaxed and slid her gun back into its loop as Cara brought the prize and dropped it at her feet.

“Midnight lunch, I presume?” Snake stood near her elbow looking down at the kill. “What is it?”

“Looks like turkey,” Methos answered, and a faraway look clouded his eyes. “Haven’t had one of those in years.”

“How risky is a fire?” Snake asked. “I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m not eating that thing raw.” He turned to Sharina. “Got a gadget that can roast a turkey with the press of a button?” A mischievous grin touched his lips.

“Sorry, my *borrowing* spree ended with the invisible, anti-theft device.” She tossed him a quick, playful smile.

“I think roasting the thing is the least of our troubles. How are we supposed to de-feather it?” Methos glanced about him. “I don’t see a pot of boiling water to help with that.”

“We don’t have that much water, let alone a pot to boil it in.” Snake fingered a button halfway down his shirt. “We could burn off the feathers.”

Sharina motioned for silence, moved a few feet away from them, listened to the wind and shivered. The desert was alive again, as if the inhabitants had returned after being scared away by a dangerous intruder. Unease settled in the pit of her stomach as she eyed the endless expanse of sand before turning back to her companions. “I think a fire will be okay for a short time.” She hoped she wasn’t making a mistake, but they needed to eat if they planned on keeping their strength for a battle that was sure to come.

Methos gathered rotten pieces of limbs that had been blown from the trees when the bombs were dropped. Snake produced a fire-starter log, and they soon had a blaze going, sending out warmth and a signal to any Moglith that might be within a couple of miles.

Sharina wasn’t sure how she knew it, but there weren’t any out there now. Eventually, though, there would be; it was just a matter of time.

Methos proved to be a good outdoor cook, and he had the turkey turning on a spit over the fire, fat dripping and sizzling in the flames.

The aroma of roasting meat wafted over the air, overwhelming Sharina’s olfactory nerves, and stirring old memories she thought she had buried. She was reminded of Talina and the last Thanksgiving they had shared. She had been too young to recall the details, but she remembered the closeness of her family as they sat around a table laden with food, laughter and love.

Sadness rose from her stomach and settled in her chest, weighing her down with a thousand regrets. Would she ever be reunited with Talina? Or was she just chasing the impossible, believing in the power of faith and the endlessness of hope? Had she committed the sin of complacency by not trying to rescue her sister before now? So many questions that she wasn’t sure she wanted answered. If she started questioning her ability to survive, she’d never make it out of here alive, and too many

people depended on her strength. Not only did she need to get Methos and Snake out of the desert, she had to continue protecting the innocent from the Moglith.

Snake handed her a plate of steaming food and sat down beside her. She poked at the cooked bird with a plastic fork he had the forethought to pack. She smiled. Maybe he was worth something after all.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked, then popped a piece of turkey in his mouth, sucking air at the same time to cool it.

“Nothing.” She speared a chunk of meat and forked it into her mouth. “Mm, this is good.”

Methos set a plate in front of Cara and patted the cat’s head, then went back to his own food, shoving it around with his fork, not eating, and paying little attention to the humans. Sharina marveled at how this monster could be so gentle when the occasion called for it. *We all have some kind of talent*, she mused.

A hyena cackled somewhere nearby, startling the small group. Methos jerked and nearly tossed his plate into the fire.

“Lord, we’re jumpier than an army of gophers in a minefield.” Snake said and set his food aside.

“It’s good we’re on our guard and remain ready for anything,” Sharina said. “Our progress so far has been too easy. It makes me nervous.”

“I didn’t know there were hyenas in North America.” Snake looked in the direction they’d heard the animal.

Methos stood and moved to the edge of the fire, warming his hands over the flames. “Didn’t used to be. They were brought over sometime in the past ten years, although I don’t know why. They’re mostly useless scavengers.”

Perhaps they were brought over to help “clean up” the bodies in the aftermath of the desecration bombs. Surely hyenas didn’t eat human flesh. They might if they got hungry enough. A sickening shudder shook Sharina at the thought.

The hyena started again, but was cut off in mid-cackle.

Sharina froze and listened.

Nothing.

Not a creature stirred. *Not even a mouse.* This was a far cry from Clement Clarke Moore.

“Douse the fire!” She jumped to her feet. “Now! Do it quickly.”

Methos yanked his extra robe from his pack and tossed it over the flames, smothering the fire.

Gray smoke seeped around the edges of the black garment.

No one moved, didn't dare breathe as Sharina turned in a slow circle, searching the night for predators—the two-legged kind. “They're out there. I can feel them, almost taste them, and they know we're here, too.”

“If the Moglith know we're here, why haven't they come for us?” Snake asked.

“They like to play with their prey,” Methos answered, staring across the moon-swept desert.

“They tormented me for days before they attacked and stole my body.”

Sharina shivered. She, too, remembered the endless nights of being stalked after they took Talina, the nameless terror and fear of being hunted relentlessly. But they never got her, and they wouldn't succeed this time either.

“Just great,” Snake mumbled as he reached for his backpack. “Maybe I'd be better off without my body. I've done pretty well without it this far. If I stay in one, I'll eventually get killed.”

Sharina gave him a hard stare, and then shouldered her backpack. “Let's get a move on. No sense in staying here playing sitting duck.”

Methos removed his robe from the ashes and heaped sand over the smoldering campfire until all signs of their campsite had vanished.

Snake walked alongside Sharina. “I wish we didn't have to be right out here in the open.”

“Look on the bright side, Mr. Happiness Guru, if they can see us, we can see them.”

“Not if they make like a pile of sand.”

The urge to laugh overwhelmed Sharina. “Now who has the negative attitude?”

They traveled on, four dark shadows under the moon, trudging toward a destination few had

seen and from which fewer had returned. Sharina continuously glanced from side to side and straight ahead, her senses strung so tight her jaw ached from the tension.

Sharina!

She stopped and listened for the disembodied sound of her name again, not sure if she'd heard right the first time.

Sharina...stay away.

She frowned. Was that Talina in her mind?

Go back! Now! The voice reached a frightened peak. *You don't need to find me!*

Snake placed a gentle hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

She looked down at the gun in her hand—the one she hadn't remembered drawing. *What the hell is going on?* She met Snake's gaze. "I don't know." She tightened her grip on the weapon. "I—I think I hear Talina in my thoughts. She's warning me to go back."

"We can't go back," he said softly.

"I know." She looked into his eyes and for the first time in her life she was glad she had a man with her, glad she didn't have to face the unknown alone. "My sister is close. I can feel her." She frowned. "But something's not right about it."

Methos stirred next to them, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Everything okay?" he finally asked.

Behind you!

Sharina spun around and fired at the dark shape loping toward them. A mini-bomb launched from the barrel of her gun, opened and expanded before contact, making one hell of a racket when it exploded and reduced the Moglith to a raging, shrieking inferno.

Chapter Ten

“Damn!” Snake looked at Sharina’s smoking gun, then back to the obliterated Moglith. “Did you borrow that from Will, too?”

Without bothering to answer, she aimed the gun and fired again. The blast exploded another Moglith into the air, burning him to the color of tarpaper, as more deadly shadows erupted from the sand. “Shoot, they’re everywhere.” She released the spent cartridge and slammed two more mini-bombs home.

Snake grabbed an arrow and put his back to Sharina. He let an arrow fly, striking a beastly Moglith square in his chest. The creature stiffened, fell-face first into the sand, twitched once and then lay still.

The Moglith arose out of the desert two and three at a time as if they had no battle knowledge of how to attack all at once. Though they had archaic weapons from the last fifty years of the twentieth century, their aim wasn’t much straighter than the trail of a sidewinder snake.

Two more fireballs erupted under the moonlight, one right after the other, and the air clouded with the scent of explosives, burnt hair and flesh. Snake wildly glanced around, searching for Methos. *Where the hell is he?*

Suddenly Methos raced across the sand, hopped a large, rotten tree limb, and lobbed a hand grenade into the night.

Sharina and Snake hit the sand as it exploded and slung shrapnel in all directions. Then they belly crawled toward Methos, who leaped up and Hail-Maryed another grenade over Snake and Sharina’s heads, before hitting the sand again.

“We’re in a gal-darned war field,” Snake yelled. “Where the hell did you get those grenades?”

“Found them,” Methos said and grinned as if he were having the time of his life.

The noise pounded Snake’s eardrums, making them feel muffled and full of sand.

Machine gun fire erupted with a *splat splat splat*, kicking up sand that stung his eyes. At first he had the inane thought the soldiers had followed them into the desert.

He took a deep breath and started to let go of his twin's body. He sure as hell didn't want to get killed while using his brother's body.

Sharina rose to a crouching position and reloaded. A stray bullet ripped through the flesh on her arm, splashing a bloody, jagged path across her upper arm, but she didn't so much as flinch.

Ah, hell! Snake held on to his borrowed body and tackled her. They hit the ground with muffled oaths. A grenade from the other side whistled over their heads and exploded behind a sand dune.

"Damn it, we need to get out of here before we end up dead," Snake said, sprawled atop Sharina.

"Watch out!" She shoved hard enough to dislodge him, launched upward—for a moment appeared to be suspended in air—and fired another bullet bomb. She landed on her feet, but immediately dropped to her stomach again. The explosion faded away into the night and once again all was quiet, except for the rapid rush of air from between Snake's lips.

Methos crawled up beside Snake, his robe decorated with grains of sand. "Are they gone?"

"I think so, but I won't feel better until I know *where* they've gone." Snake scanned the dark horizon, but didn't see so much as a shadow under the moonlight. The Moglith had withdrawn as quickly and quietly as they had arrived.

Sharina eased to her feet, holding her arm as blood ran like a small creek, dripping off her fingers to pool in a puddle beside her. She gulped in oxygen and closed her eyes, swallowing hard enough to cause her throat muscles to contract visibly.

Snake moved to her side and lifted her arm, inspecting the damage with gentle but thorough probes. He expelled a breath of relief. It was only a flesh wound, although a nasty one. When she tugged away from him, he glanced up and their gazes locked. "You need to get that cleaned and bandaged."

"I can do it myself," she said, teeth gritted.

“Let me help you,” Snake said, his voice low and commanding.

They continued to stare at each other until Sharina looked away. “Fine, but make it quick. I have some first-aid in my bag.” She gestured toward where she’d dropped her pack, and then lowered herself to the sand once more.

Snake pulled the knapsack toward him and rummaged through it until he found a roll of bandages and some antiseptic ointment. Pouring water on a section of gauze, he gently cleansed the blood and sand from her wound, swabbed it with rubbing alcohol, applied the ointment, and then wrapped her arm in a white cloth cast. All of this was done in silence while Sharina glanced rapidly back and forth, searching for the enemy.

He tightened the bandage, causing her to wince, the only outward sign she’d shown thus far of her pain. Snake had to hand it to her—she was one tough cookie and a hell of a fighter. He clasped her hand in both of his, absently stroking her palm with his finger. “I think you’ll live,” he said with a thin smile. “It may need stitches, but I’m short on medical supplies.” On impulse, he leaned forward and kissed the corner of her mouth, lingering for a few seconds. “We’ll make it out alive,” he said against her lips. “I promise.”

Cara slunk from her hiding place—a small dip in the sandy floor—and rubbed the side of her face against her mistress’s leg. Sharina stroked the cat’s head, burying her fingers in its fur.

“Thank you, Doctor Snake.” She rose to her feet in one fluid movement, swaying slightly, but when Snake reached out to steady her, she held him off with one raised hand. “I’m fine.” She brought her hand to her forehead, closing her eyes. “Just don’t touch me anymore.”

He cursed and turned away. How could he *not* touch her when that’s all he wanted to do? Everything was getting out of hand. All he’d wanted to do was recover his body, but instead the US military had sent him on an assassination assignment, and he’d promised to help get Talina back for Sharina. How could he have made such a stupid promise when he wasn’t even sure he was capable of coughing up his end of the deal? Hellfire! He was just a boy from the hills of western North Carolina, not a battlefield soldier—and he was no hero, either.

Methos patted him on the back as he moved past him. “We’d better get going. The quicker we get to the frozen tundra, the quicker we can recover your body, find Nero, get my body, and then hightail it out of here, as you Americans would say.”

“I agree.” Sharina adjusted her pack and joined them. “Let’s go before those creatures come back with reinforcements to try and finish us off.”

A subtle wind feathered across Snake’s body, caressing his skin with a light touch. He glanced up at the stars and silently implored God to help them make it through the desert. Most people no longer believed in God, but Snake always had and always would.

Methos moved restlessly beside him. “We have one small advantage.” The creature glanced toward the heavens as if to offer up his own prayer of deliverance. “Since the Moglith love to play before they go in for the kill, it’ll buy us some time.” Methos trudged ahead of them, a huge, dark shadow under the moonlight.

“Has he earned our trust?” Snake asked.

Sharina slanted a look his way. “I think he earned it back at Mitchy’s Bar when he saved that little boy—and my life.”

“Well, then, let’s go and help him kick some Moglith butts.”

A smile twitched at the corner of her mouth, but was quickly replaced with sadness. “I wonder how long he’s been alone out here?”

“He said there are more like him.”

Sharina stared after the creature. “I know he did, but still he seems so alone.”

Snake blew out a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. “The Moglith leader is using Metho’s body as a resting ground for his soul.”

Sharina’s eyes widened in surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Methos told me.”

“They can’t kill his soul or his body will die, and Nero needs the body. For now.” She guessed and stared after Methos, tenderness tugging at her heart. “We have to help him.” Her voice was firm

with conviction.

Snake nodded.

“And you can begin by telling me what secret you’re keeping from me,” Sharina said.

Chapter Eleven

Sharina slowed and then stopped completely when Snake didn't answer her question right away. "You are keeping a secret, aren't you?"

He wouldn't look at her. "Yeah, I am."

"So? Are you going to tell me, or not?"

He made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Does it matter?" He stared right through her—no emotion on his handsome face.

"Hell, yes, it matters." Pain etched her heart, and she took a deep breath to diffuse the hurt. "Aren't we partners? Didn't we agree to do this together? To me, that means no secrets."

Why do I feel so wounded? She had always done things alone, and it never bothered her when other people had their own agenda and left her out of it. The ability to keep her heart out of romantic affairs had served her best. "Damn it." She gritted her teeth and walked away from Snake. *Let him keep his stupid secrets.* And if he had no intentions of rescuing Talina, she'd do it herself. Alone. Like it was meant to be.

Sharina joined Methos and matched her pace with his as they trudged along in silence until the horizon began to lighten.

She squinted up at the early morning brightness. "It'll be daylight soon. I don't like the idea of sleeping out in the open again."

"Perhaps we shouldn't sleep." Methos kept up his slow plod across the sand.

"I don't think our bodies can handle the stress. Not if we're here for more than a few days."

The creature stopped, rummaged in his robe pockets and brought out a handful of lake-green pills. "Take these and your body won't need sleep for a long time. I saved them from when I needed to keep ahead of the barbaric Moglith."

Sharina reached for one, but drew back her hand. "Are they safe?"

Methos shrugged. “Side-effects include nausea, stomach pain and heart attacks.”

“Heart attacks?”

“Yeah, but those were in people who spent most of their lives as sand potatoes. Too much adrenaline for lazy hearts.” He thrust his hand closer. “Here. Risk it. You appear to be in good shape, and we need to get to the frozen tundra as soon as possible. Galender Nero wants to get rid of my body. He doesn’t stay in a borrowed shell for long.”

“What will he do when he lets it go?”

“Burn my body, then hunt down and kill my soul.”

Sharina took one of the pills and swallowed, grimacing as it went down. “Tastes like pond scum.”

“How would you know? Have you ever eaten pond scum?”

She laughed. “No, but I imagine it would be about as pleasant as those pills taste.”

The capsule landed in her stomach and sat there like concrete meatloaf. She took a couple of deep breaths to quell the nausea, and bent forward, placing her hands on her knees. Sweat popped out on her forehead as bile rose in her throat. Forget the damn heart attack, the taste alone would kill her.

Methos spread his fingers over her back and leaned in with a worried crease on his brow. “You okay? You turned a few shades of green before you went white.”

With another deep breath, she straightened and let the air out of her lungs. “Whew! That stuff’s nasty, but I feel the energy racing around inside me.”

“Good. Now if you make it past the heart attack stage, you’ll be just fine.”

Snake joined them, anger bursting across his face in rapid-fire succession. “What did you give her?”

“Cool it, Snake.” Sharina stepped between the two males before one of them started throwing punches. “Methos gave me an energy pill so we don’t have to stop for the day. Maybe you two should take one also.”

Methos nodded. “Good idea.” He popped a pill into his mouth and handed one to Snake.

“It’s not going to hurt her, is it?” Snake demanded as he eyed the ugly, green pill.

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid I’ll die before you can get your precious body back?”

He blinked and backed up a step.

“That’s all I am to you—someone to use for your own selfish reasons.” Sharina was surprised to find herself close to tears. She was getting way too emotional. This shouldn’t have happened. No one was allowed that close to her heart. *No one, dammit!*

She abruptly turned and hurried across the sand, not sure why she was doing it. She picked up her pace and ran as fast as the shifting earth would let her. She needed to feel the wind in her hair, outrun her feelings and leave them far behind where they could never touch her again. Leaded pain weighed her heart down, and a tear slipped off her cheek. *No!* She would not cry. She would not let Snake in that deep. But he already was, and God help her, what was she supposed to do with that? If she allowed herself to love him, would fate be cruel once again and take Snake from her too?

Cara kept a steady pace beside her, only stretching her legs far enough to keep up with Sharina. She could run for hours. Exhilaration pumped through her blood and she was tempted not to stop. *Lord what an energy pill!* Casting a glance toward Cara, she noticed the desert lynx was panting and falling back in exhaustion, so she slowed to a walk. She kept up the slower pace for five minutes before she dropped to the sand and took a long draft from her water bottle.

“Here, kitty, kitty,” she called softly and held out her hand to scratch the cat under her chin. “I’m sorry, girl. I didn’t mean to leave you behind.”

Cara flopped down beside her and gratefully allowed her mistress to squirt water into her mouth. Sharina fed the cat water until she was sated, and then replaced the thermos in the loop on her backpack.

A sudden wind kicked up, swirling sand in the air, momentarily obstructing her view of Snake and Methos as they took their sweet time catching up to her.

What am I going to do about Snake? Just when she thought she had life figured out—learned how to deal with things the way they were—something totally unexpected came along and tossed

things around like a shaker salad from a twentieth-century McDonald's.

The sun rose over the desert behind her, its warm rays caressing her back. It brought her peace for a bare second, and then Snake's shadow fell across her path.

He stood there for a long time, but when she didn't speak he stepped beside her and lowered himself next to her. "We need to talk."

"I know." She tilted her head and finger-combed her long tresses. A hot shower would feel wonderful right about now.

"Will Garrett sent me to assassinate Galender Nero, the Moglith Warlord and leader—that part you knew, but not about Will. You were invited along to make sure I stayed alive long enough to accomplish my mission."

Will Garrett! Damn his sorry hide. He'd found another way to use her. "Why didn't he ask me to do the deed?"

"Would you have done it for him?"

"No."

"Then you know why."

The sun ate the shadows as it spread farther across the arid land. Strangely, other than the brief flare of anger a moment ago, she felt nothing for Will—no love, no hate—just an emptiness that sat in the center of her heart waiting to be filled by something or someone else. Snake?

Snake absently stroked Cara's fur, scratching behind her ears, lulling the cat into relaxed bliss.

"And my sister?" Sharina asked.

He looked up at her, conflicting emotions rippling across his face. "Will said to offer your sister as a bribe, but I'm only allowed to help get her back if it doesn't interfere with my mission."

Son of a bitch! Another one of those emotional pains kicked her in the stomach. She blinked rapidly, focusing on Methos, who stood on top of a dune staring toward the east, the sun's rays glinting off his shaggy head. She swallowed hard and reined in her feelings before turning back to Snake. "Will must hate me."

“No.” A smile touched his lips. “I’m to bring you back alive above all else, or Will said he’d do more than separate my body and soul.” Snake picked up a handful of sand and let it sift through his fingers. “If things go wrong, he’ll be dishonorably discharged. You’re not an official soldier, and neither am I, we’re not supposed to be involved in this.”

“Then why did he allow it?”

“Because he believes Desert Blue has good inhabitants among the Moglith, and he needed the best to help free them—and you’re the best.” Snake stood and dusted the sand off his jeans. “Will said so himself, and I don’t doubt it, coming from a man like him.”

“Will thinks you’re one of the best also, or he wouldn’t have sent you on such an important mission.” Sharina reached for his hand and curled her fingers with his. “We’ll get out of here alive. I promise.”

Snake tugged her to her feet, and they walked together, with the cat on their heels to join Methos. When they arrived at his side the Moglith said, “We’re here.”

Sharina jolted in surprise. “Already? How? That can’t be.”

“The frozen tundra has been moving slowly inland over the past fifteen years.”

She looked at the solid white ocean with frozen shards of ice jutting out of its depth. How on earth were they going to find Snake’s body in all that? She squinted and caught movement near one of the icebergs. A Moglith stepped from the other side of the berg and stretched as if he’d just awakened from a long winter’s nap.

Sharina dropped to the sand. “Get down!” She tugged on the hem of Methos’ robe. “We’re not alone.”

Chapter Twelve

Snake studied the activity below. Other Moglith joined the lone one, and they appeared to be getting ready for something. Then it hit him. “The Moglith back at the bar.”

“What?” Sharina whispered beside him.

“Those things that attacked us...maybe one lingered behind and heard our plans, then tried to eliminate us in the desert before we reached the base camp, which didn’t happen, so they know we’re coming.”

“Not good.” The first hint of anxiety spread across her pretty features since they’d started this mission. “I was hoping we could go in, snag your body, and get out.”

“You’re forgetting about Nero,” he reminded her.

She scowled at him. “He’s a separate problem.”

Methos peered over the dune, and then ducked back down. “We’ve got one thing going for us right now. They don’t know we’re here *yet*.”

“They’ll expect us to attack at night,” Sharina said. “Methos, take a another look and see if any of them appear to be sleeping.”

The creature peered over the edge. “They’re moving around down there, but not much. I’d say maybe three or four guards at most.”

She nodded. “We take those out first, and as quietly as possible. If we’re lucky, we may get in there and retrieve Snake’s body without further combat.”

Snake shook his head, a grin of mild amusement on his lips. “Since when has luck ever been on anyone’s side?”

“Now is not the time to get pessimistic on me.” She touched his hand and waited until he glanced up at her. “We will get your body back. We will get out of here alive. We will free Methos and his people.”

He grinned. “Sounds good to me, Sunshine.”

“I have to leave you for a time, but I won’t go far.”

He grabbed her hand and tugged her back toward him. “Where are you going?”

“To prepare.”

Crouched low to the ground, she disappeared over the next dune and for a panicked second, Snake wanted to go after her. He no longer cared if he kept her safe for Will—he needed to keep her safe for himself. Sometime after a night in Desert Blue he’d fallen in love with her. He couldn’t put a finger on how or why; it was just a part of him that knew beyond a doubt. He’d die for her, and he was sure she would do the same for him—but out of duty? Or love?

He clutched his head and groaned low in his throat. He needed to focus. Above all else he needed his body back or nothing would work out the way it was supposed to. Fourteen years was a long time to float through life. And he couldn’t keep on borrowing his brother’s body. He had hope his brother might come out of the comma someday.

“What’s on your mind?” Methos asked.

Snake glanced at his newfound friend. “I’m wondering where to start looking in the proverbial haystack for my body.”

“Just beyond the sharp mountains you’ll find an ice graveyard. There you’ll find your body.”

Dang! The creature’s proven to be invaluable.

“Is the graveyard guarded?” Snake asked.

“It wasn’t before, but it might be now.” Methos bumped him with a canteen. “Here. Drink. You look like you’re about to sink into the sand.”

“Might work if we—” he stopped, heart pounding in excitement. “That’s how we can do it!”

“Do what?” Methos tossed him a puzzled frown.

“Sneak up on the guards. We can let go of these bodies, take on the form of sand, and fly in there like a storm.”

Methos shook his head. “I’ve missed something. How is flying in like a storm sneaking up on

them?”

“Don’t you get it? The Moglith will think we’re just sand stirred up by the wind.”

A grin of understanding spread across the creature’s face. “I do believe you’re on to something.”

Both of them turned as Sharina walked toward them dressed in a tan leather loincloth, attached to a tube-like top that covered her breasts. Slick with oil, her fading summer tan glistened on her skin. She carried a small shield and a dagger, focused and ready for battle. Supple and beautiful. A female warrior—trained with deadly force and compassion for the innocent—the perfect soldier.

Snake suddenly realized he wasn’t sent to rid the world of Nero. Will Garrett wanted Sharina to accomplish the mission. The soldier had known only the best could take the evil leader down and few could match Sharina’s skill.

She stopped before them. “Galender Nero—I can’t kill him, can I?”

“Not if you want to save Methos.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay, I’ll just disable him and make his soul leave the body so Methos can get back in.” She gave the creature a long, hard look. “You’ll experience great pain when you reclaim your body, but I’ll heal you as quickly as I can.”

Methos flinched, but he inclined his head in agreement. “I trust you.”

“We can take out the posted guards, leaving it open for you to find Nero. After that, Methos and I will take out the rest of the Moglith, get them out of your way.”

“How do you purpose we do that?”

Snake explained to her what they had planned. “We still don’t know how many we’re up against, but if we can take them out quietly one at a time, we should gain the advantage, which will leave you free to hunt Nero.”

Sharina stared into his eyes, searching for something—trust? “And what of your mission to assassinate the leader?”

“The mission is still a go—it’s Nero’s soul that needs to be destroyed now.” He cast a side-

ways glance at Methos.

“Let’s do it,” the Moglith said with a healthy dose of fear in his eyes along with a stubborn determination to see things through to the end. No matter what that end might be.

Snake turned toward the top of the dune, but Sharina grabbed his hand and pulled him back.

Then she kissed him.

A deep, tongue-tangling kiss filled with passion and raw need. He sensed years of loneliness as it seeped from a well deep inside her, a trickle that grew to a flood as she let it pour out. The taste of her mouth, the breath from her lips, sent his mind to the stars, and then she abruptly let him go.

“Be careful,” she said as she slid her hands down his chest in a slow, sensual stroke. “I didn’t come this far to lose you now.” She kissed him again, her hot, hungry mouth clinging to his.

“If that’s not a reason to dodge them bullets, I don’t know what is,” Methos said and laughed low in his throat.

Snake pulled himself out of the drunken stupor her kisses had landed him in and touched her cheek with a gentle finger. If for no other reason, this was worth retrieving his body.

Before their shared desire delayed him further, he moved a few paces away and let go of his body as Methos did the same. “Hide our bodies until we can come back for them. Our twins will need them.” Feather lightness washed over him as his soul rose and floated toward the frozen tundra. He turned and glanced at Methos and said, “Let’s kick some Moglith butts.”

Chapter Thirteen

The Moglith soldiers on guard stiffened and eased away from the icebergs, hands on their weapons, bodies coiled and eyes filled with fear as Snake and Methos headed toward them in a sand storm so thick and furious God himself couldn't see through it.

Before the creatures could awaken their companions, Methos attacked—crunching necks and breaking spines with his bare hands. Snake was almost useless without his body. Most of his energy had gone into maintaining the sand storm, but Methos had no trouble bringing death and destruction. Someone had taught him well how to fight in his soul state. The agonizing cries of the dying were muffled by the false wind, but the storm itself brought the others out of sleep.

Snake settled behind a berg, Methos right behind him. A Moglith rose up in front of them, and Methos kicked it hard below the chin, snapping the creature's head back, before ripping out its vile heart.

An explosion rocked the ground around them. Chunks of ice flew in all directions, ripping through flesh, severing body parts, and knocking the last breath from the Moglith' lungs.

Snake frantically searched for Sharina in the mess, as Methos broke off huge chunks of ice and hurled it toward the enemy with the force of a bullet.

A flash of fire glinted somewhere above. Sharina crouched behind a tall dune, shooting her mini-bomb gun. The modern weapon was a hell of a lot better than the ice Methos was hurling, although Snake was grateful the good creature had the intelligence to use ice as a weapon.

“Have you seen Nero?” Methos bellowed above the thundering explosions.

Snake shook his head and yelled back, “Maybe we'd better lay off the killing until we locate him.” He poked his head around the jagged ice-rock, scanning the cold field for Nero. “We don't want to kill him accidentally.”

Something whistled over their heads and landed behind them with a bone-jarring explosion. The

earth moved under their feet as the ice broke loose and jutted up out of the salty water.

“Damn, the ocean is still here.” Methos grinned and stuck his hand in the cold water.

Snake nodded toward steadier ground. “Rejoice later. We’ve got a battle to win.”

Suddenly, the day grew silent. Dust settled and a cloud slipped in front of the sun, sending a chill over the land, and through Snake’s soul. The Moglith Warlord, tall and menacing, stepped around the bodies of the dead and stopped before Sharina.

“Nero,” Methos whispered.

Sharina stood before the huge warlord, hands at her side, feet spread as she stared the monster down. A monster that looked exactly like Methos.

Nero’s soldiers rushed forward, but stopped when their leader’s hand rose, palm outward, without looking at them. They backed off and waited.

“Been a long time since I’ve faced a worthy opponent. Word of your heroics against my people has come back to me.” A wicked smile spread across Nero’s lips and self-assuredness radiated from cold, listless eyes. “But still, you’re a mere woman.”

A hiss whistled through Snake’s teeth. *Wrong thing to say, Nero.*

“How do you expect to defeat a warlord with an army of ruthless beasts only I can control?”

She said nothing, and with a nod, she drew her dagger and raised her shield.

Even though Snake knew Sharina could protect herself better than he could, he still wanted to put himself between her and danger. Sensing his thoughts, Methos gave a quick shake of his shaggy head. “She’s been trained for this.”

Quicker than the eye could process, the two fighters collided, Sharina’s shield ringing like a bell with each blow from Nero’s spiked club. They fought like leopards greased with lightning, their bones appearing to melt away with the swiftness of each move.

Sharina air-tumbled over Nero’s head, flipping through the air like an acrobat and landed on her feet facing his back. Nero turned, hooked the back of her knees with one huge, booted foot and swept her legs out from under her, but she sprang up the second she hit the ground, and punched the warlord

hard enough to send him crashing against an iceberg.

They went at each other again, blows landing with sickening accuracy, drawing blood even as weapons clanged together.

Snake watched in awe as both warriors leapt into the air and flew with invisible wings, legs extended as they appeared to sit on empty space, before they collided and hit the sand—Sharina on her feet, Nero down on one knee.

For a moment the battle paused. Sharina backed off, chest heaving as she replenished her lungs.

Without warning, the mutant rose and sprang toward her again. She sidestepped him and dropped her weapons.

Nero landed hard, smashing into a jagged boulder, ripping the flesh from his hairy arm. He slowly rose with a grimace of pain etched across his ugly features. A weaponless Sharina caused Nero to falter. He glanced at her empty hands, uncertainty in his expression.

“What the hell is she doing?” Snake said hoarsely to Methos.

A grin lit Methos’ face. “Watch.”

Nero lunged.

As the huge beast closed in for the kill, she jabbed a nerve in his neck with a single finger. Nero dropped to his knees. Surprise twisted his features as he fell onto his back and stared up at the sky, eyes open, unmoving.

Snake had forgotten to breathe, and almost choked when oxygen circulated through his spiritual essence once more. *Jesus! I hope she didn't kill him.*

Nero’s soul rose from the body he could no longer control. A furious wind blew the disembodied spirit out to sea, infuriated screams raging and echoing over the frozen mountains.

Before the last sounds of rage dispersed on the angry wind, the Moglith soldiers scattered, frightened by what they had witnessed.

Silence echoed in the cold wind as it blew Sharina’s hair to the side, and then whipped it back the other way. She stood in one position for a long time, watching the surviving Moglith scatter like

cockroaches in the light.

When the three of them were finally alone, she motioned for Methos to come forward. Snake saw the sorrow gather in her eyes. “You must enter the body before I can heal it.”

“It’s going to hurt like hell when I do, isn’t it?”

Sharina nodded. “What about your twin’s body? Will it live without a soul?”

“Yes. As long as the soul survives, the body will linger in a comma until I can get it back to my brother.” Methos answered and shut his eyes for a moment, whispering ancient words of prayer and strength Snake couldn’t understand, and then his soul floated gently down and melded with the body.

Sharina dropped wearily to her knees and began the ancient art of healing that which she had broken.

Chapter Fourteen

As the last rays of a silver sun sank below the frozen tundra, Sharina dropped to the sand next to Snake, where he'd built a campfire to drive away the chill of the ice. While she had taken care of Methos, he had gone to retrieve his twin's body. He would need it a little longer.

"Methos?" Snake searched her face, concern in his eyes.

She let out an exhausted breath. "He'll live."

"How did you do that thing with your...?" He jabbed the air with his finger.

"It's a blow to the nerve center meant to disable or kill."

Alarm leaped to his face. "What if it had killed the body?"

"It was a chance I had to take. I couldn't do anything else without killing him outright." Sharina curled up next to the fire's heat. "I need rest now." Her eyes grew heavy as she fell asleep, assured Snake would watch over her through the night.

The last night of the second moon—the blue moon—hung heavy and low to the ocean, and blurred out of sight when sleep claimed her. *Did Snake still have time to find his body?*

* * *

Sharina.

The voice called in her dreams, and she twitched, squeezing her eyes tighter together, trying to shut out the sound of her sister's voice. She didn't want to know what Talina had come to tell her—what she knew deep in her heart.

You did something worthy, but you must let me go now. I can't be your prize. I no longer have a body and my soul is ready to move beyond the earth.

"No," Sharina whimpered in her sleep.

It's beautiful in God's world. Death is the beginning of life. Sharina, take care of the child.

Methos knows.

* * *

When next Sharina awoke it was still dark, a seagull honked as it sailed over the frozen ocean, flapping its wings, and then spreading them to glide on the wind across the shadowy blue moon.

She stood and stretched the kinks from her muscles, working out the soreness. With a sad sigh, she glanced toward Heaven. Talina wouldn't be coming back on this side of life, but one day Sharina would travel to meet her in a place where life is eternal, and that thought was enough to create a smile to lighten her broken heart. But what had Talina meant by a child. Whose child? She had a lot of questions for Methos after he regained his strength.

She moved to Methos' side and placed a hand on his body, starting at his forehead and slowly moving across his body down to his toes. Working each muscle with her mind and hands, forcing healing heat to flow through his battered body.

After some time, he opened his eyes and groaned.

"How do you feel?"

"Like I've been in a train wreck and most of it landed on top of me." The words croaked from his parched throat.

Sharina twisted the lid off her canteen and lifted his head to help him drink.

Methos swallowed a mouthful, and then stiffened. "Did Snake retrieve his body in time?" Before she could answer, the battered warrior lost consciousness again.

She gently lowered his head to the ground, and then sprang to her feet. *Snake!* How could she have forgotten him? Alarmed, she scanned the frozen water, but didn't see him among the white peaks of ice. Shading her eyes with her hand, she gazed across the icy land for signs of the missing Snake. *He wouldn't have gone in search of his body by himself, would he?*

* * *

Snake had left Sharina and Methos with Cara standing guard. It was urgent he located the icy graveyard Methos had told him about as soon as possible. Only a few more hours of the blue moon remained, and he needed to reclaim his body or he'd have to wait until the next month with a double moon. Since the next blue moon might be years away that was something he planned to avoid at all cost. Especially now that he had found Sharina.

When he found his body's resting place right where Methos had said it would be, a chill colder than the windy night washed over him. The place resembled a graveyard—only the bodies were covered with ice instead of dirt. He quickly shook off the eerie prickles tap-dancing up his spine and searched for his body among row after row of ice-covered graves. He found it in the third row. With meticulous ease and painstaking slowness he chipped away until his body was exposed. He covered it with a thermal blanket and let it warm a little.

With a deep breath, he let go of his twin's body, and then sank his soul into his own long lost body. Pain hit him as a thousand ice-cold needles launched into his skin. His lungs burned, and he choked when he tried to take a breath.

“Must get warm.” Shivering uncontrollably, he attempted to rise from the arctic, shallow grave, but fell back in exhaustion, pulling the warm blanket around him. *This might take awhile.*

After an hour, he forced himself to rise to his feet, wrapped his twin in a silver blanket with a battery-operated blanket to keep his brother warm and alive until he came out of the accident-induced sleep. Then he pulled the blanket around himself and headed back for camp—back to Sharina. Hypothermia would soon set in if he didn't hurry.

Sharina would warm him better than a roaring blaze could. A wry smile twisted his lips as he took slow painful steps toward his destination. Each step pumped his sluggish blood and heated his body to a bearable temperature. After a few yards, he lay his brother down. He'd come back for him

when he regained his strength. After making sure his brother was properly warm, he stood and headed for camp.

Dang, it was good to have his body back, even if it was a little weak at the moment.

An hour later, Snake stumbled from behind an ice boulder, nearly pitching face first onto the hard ground, colder than he had ever been in his life, but overjoyed he'd made it back to Sharina.

She raced to his side and supported him with her body. "Are you out of your mind? You should have waited for me to help you."

"Couldn't. Methos needed you." His teeth clacked together, and his entire body shook. "I feel like I've been stored in a meat locker for a century."

"I imagine close to fifteen years encased in an iceberg would make you feel like that. Here, let's get you near the fire." She helped him to a sitting position across from Methos, and began to vigorously massage his frozen body. A different kind of heat spread through his limbs, and he wanted to roll on top of her and make love to her right there in the icy sand, but exhaustion stilled his ardor.

When she was done, she tenderly wrapped him in the blanket and held him until the shakes subsided.

"I'll protect you always," she whispered as his eyes closed. Then, so softly he almost didn't hear it, she added, "I love you."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and he opened one eye and stared up at her. "You better, 'cause you're stuck with me." He closed his eye and settled into sleep. "I love you, too," he whispered.

* * *

Two days later, the Moglith appeared out of the desert. Old and young approached the three outsiders with caution, but also with hope, looking for a leader to give them freedom and rebuild their tattered life.

Had they watched the battle from their hiding places and witnessed the Moglith Warlord's defeat?

Sharina's thoughts turned to Will. He'd risked everything to help these people, and she couldn't help feeling a stir of admiration for the only man who had ever broken her heart. Will Garrett was a good man—just a lousy boyfriend. An inner smile lifted her spirits, and then she sobered as her mind returned to Nero.

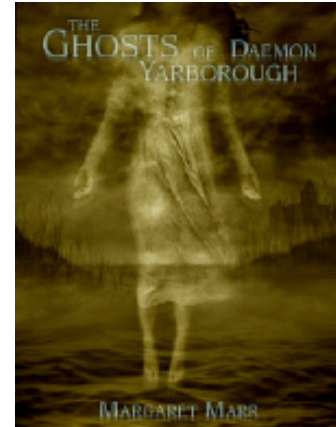
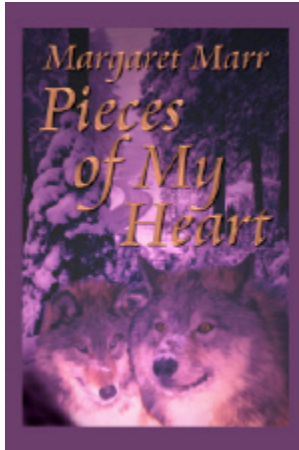
The Moglith Warlord wasn't really defeated. His soul still wandered the planet, and one day Sharina would have to hunt him down and finish what was started in Desert Blue.

You shall bare the child of a Moglith...



Cara

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Margaret Up Close

What I wouldn't do to return to childhood one more time and experience fishing from the bank as a little girl, especially in the dark. I'm country to the core. I fish, camp, swim in the lake, eat from a garden, drive a pickup truck, work outside, live in jeans and T-shirts, and my accent is a blend of country and southern. My favorite get-together is a barbecue in the back yard. I prefer tea to beer. I prefer the Outback Stake House to The Four Seasons Restaurant. I believe in God and the saving grace of His son Jesus. I believe in miracles and fairy tales, and I learned the secret of hope from a Dean Koontz novel (Frankenstein: City of Night).

My boyfriend, who I absolutely adore and cherish with all my heart, is back from the Middle East, but not with me yet. Hopefully soon! Miss ya, Baby! :-)

I have an unstoppable curiosity about the world around me. I want to explore the coast of North Carolina, explore as many castles of the world as I can, visit haunted places all over the United States, and I absolutely love old graveyards! I know, it sounds a bit morbid, but I love all things strange and unusual. I want to see Australia someday, visit Ireland, Italy and Egypt.

During the summer months I like to swim, hike, camp, fish and just be outdoors. Other hobbies include reading, writing poetry, and exploring the Internet. I also love music! I listen to country, 80's rock and some 90's rock. Savage Garden is by far my favorite rock group of the 90's followed by Aerosmith & Matchbox Twenty. In country, I like to listen to Garth Brooks, Toby Keith, Tim McGraw, Faith Hill, Sara Evans, Trisha Yearwood, Clay Walker, Kellie Coffey, Chad Brock. I could go on and on! My favorite Christian Rock band is Petra. I also like Point of Grace, Steven Curtis Chapman and Carmen.

I love pretty pictures, puppies and kitties and have a soft spot for soldiers. Daisies are my favorite flowers. Ideals, Cowboy & Indians, and Fate are among my favorite magazines. I love the smell of vanilla, honey-suckle, Stetson Cologne for men, and the scent of my boyfriend ;-). My favorite cartoons are Scooby Doo and Rocko's Modern Life and Pinky & The Brain.

Visit me online at: <http://margaretmarr.bravehost.com> or drop me an email at: mizz_scarlet@hotmail.com. I love hearing from my readers!

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