

WOLVES OF SORROW:
A NEWSLETTER EXCLUSIVE SHORT STORY

*Sorrow's
End*

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Wolves of Sorrow:

Sorrow's End

By Elaina Roberts

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This short story is a newsletter exclusive prequel to the Wolves of Sorrow series. While the events in the story lay the foundation of the village which eventually becomes Sorrow, it isn't integral to those novels.

Thank you for supporting me and my work. I hope you enjoy this short glimpse into the pack's history.

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PROLOGUE

No one remembered the first stabilizer going up, but everyone on Earth Prime felt its fall. It happened on a warm Spring day while the human outpost of Sorrow's Summit bustled with an outdoor market failed. Children ran between merchants and customers. Three trade caravans hawked their wares. Even the local lynx pack had come to bargain. Beneath the shade of forest giants and merchant awnings, everything was normal. Until it wasn't.

They received no warning, no alarm to prepare the affected for the devastation to come. There was a discordant hum, a low whine, and then nothing. Literally. No screams of the dying. No cries of mourning. One moment, the cats were haggling over a spool of copper wire needed to repair their power generator. The next... absolute silence.

Birds fell from the sky in a silent rain. Within days, plants shriveled up and died leaving behind a barren wasteland. And since the stabilizer sat in the middle, no one could make the repairs. Surviving the scorching radiation and toxic air was impossible.

It became known as the haze due to the fuzzy, heat-shimmer distortion it left behind. The haze cut Sorrow's Summit in half and swallowed all of Agony Peak, home to the visiting lynx hybrid pack. It was terrible within the stabilizer's zone, but the area outside suffered as well.

The collapse created a vacuum in the area producing fierce storms which raged across the lands. Thick clouds rolled in, and bolt after bolt of lightning stabbed into the Earth below. Low lying areas flooded with acidic rain while lightning ignited the higher elevations and burned acres of forest. Temperatures jumped from intense heat to bitter cold in a matter of days. The planet had taken a devastating blow, and it howled its fury.

Thais had been seven years old during that first collapse, but she remembered everything. The shocked expressions of the city's residents as they watched the bodies fall to the ground. The storms and the fires. Her mother's fierce embrace and mournful tears. She remembered her Daddy never coming home again.

The human settlements around the remaining stabilizers fortified their defenses, and the remaining military bases went on total lockdown. They cut deals with the larger predatory hybrid packs—security in exchange for fresh water or safer land to build their dens—and allowed only the largest, most trusted merchant teams onto their land.

Thais's pack was neither the largest merchant pack nor the strongest. They were coyotes. Their advantage was their adaptability, and they used it to survive this latest blow. They took to the wastes, roaming from pack to clan to adder's nest. They traded cloth from the verdant lowlands for rare spices only found deep in the desert oases. Broken comm devices ensured the pack had fresh drinking water to last them a month. Working ones set them up for an entire season.

They scavenged and bartered and fought off raiders, took in new members orphaned by the collapsing stabilizers and made bargains with established packs and human settlements. For two decades, they adapted and survived until they were the largest merchant pack in the Midwest.

CH 01

He wandered into their encampment on the heels of a massive sandstorm. With his ebony hair dulled by dust and his amber eyes cold and assessing, he was a predator barely contained. Two guards stepped in front of him before he crossed the perimeter. Victor and Amelie, the strongest, most dominant warriors in the Merchanteer pack. Victor's eyes glowed pale green in the firelight. Amelie rested her hand on her knife. Thaïs didn't blame them. The stranger was far too close to his beast to be seen as anything but a threat.

Thaïs watched him from the safety of her small vardo. The colorful wagon used to hold a family of three. Now, it was just hers. Loneliness nipped at her, but her coyote nature refused to accept the loving touch of a packmate. It wanted something more. It wanted what her parents had. It wanted a mate. The amber-eyed stranger, however, caught the beast's attention and wouldn't let go.

She appreciated his smooth, rolling gait as walked beside Victor, his escort. Shorter than his coyote guard by several inches, he was lean and light on his feet. This one, she thought, would be a ghost in the wastes and a demon in a fight. Quick, decisive, and deadly. She moved to another curtained window when he passed from her view and watched him walk toward the bonfire in the center of their encampment. His butt was a thing of beauty above a muscular pair of legs that seemed to go on forever.

Carlos, the Merchanteers' alpha, was a big man with broad shoulders, arms as thick as Thaïs's thighs, and a booming voice which intimidated those who didn't know his heart. He towered over the stranger, yet the unknown male dominated the interaction. The stranger carried nothing more than a battered knapsack and a long blade on his hip, but

everyone at the campsite stopped to watch him speak with their leader. Yes, he was worth their stares.

Thaïs eased open her door and sat on the small step. She wouldn't approach. Her place in the pack relied on memories not welcoming new members, but coyotes were nosy. *She* was nosy. So, she wrapped her arms around her knees, settled into her vardo's shadow, and stalked the intriguing stranger with her gaze.

The wind shifted carrying the stranger's scent and voice. All the small hairs on her arms rose, and a shiver ran down her spine. She wasn't great at identifying scents, but he smelled divine. Like mesquite and desert sage but with a bite of iron to remind others of the predator within. She drew in a deep inhale, her inner coyote wary but intrigued. Then he spoke and woman and beast melted.

His voice was smooth as river glass and soft as a desert hare. It stroked over her skin and gave her all sorts of ridiculous ideas. Ideas she would not pursue no matter how tempting he was. She wasn't as submissive as her mother, but she was no match for this man's dominance. He'd eat her alive and never even notice it.

The men laughed, and Carlos clapped his hand on the stranger's shoulder. A sign of welcome. Their leader gave a sharp whistle, and her packmates poured from the ring of vardos to meet their newest warrior. Thaïs flowed into the crowd but kept her distance from this fascinating stranger. Her coyote paced inside her mind, torn between wanting a closer sniff at the man and scurrying back to the safety of her den.

“Merchanters, I want you to welcome a new packmate into the caravan. Tomás Ortega, last of the Dismal Canyon pack, has signed on as an escort and retrieval guard.”

Tomás. Thaïs tested the name and decided it fit him. This close, more details of the fascinating stranger—Tomás—came into view. His dark hair was tied back in a single

braid down his back revealing a long, angular face that spoke of his animal nature. Dismal Canyon had been a pack of wolves and fierce fighters. Had they faced a stronger enemy, or had they suffered her father's fate, lost behind a wall of haze due to a stabilizer crash?

He gave no indication that the loss of his pack hurt, but he was a dominant. Dominants seemed incapable of showing weakness of any sort. Still, Thaïs understood his hidden sorrow and mourned for him. Her parents were gone, but she still had the Merchanteers. She still had pack.

Tomás turned at that moment and their gazes collided. Thaïs froze, pinned in place by the fire reflecting in his amber eyes. He was... She didn't have the words, but he deserved them all. Forceful, compelling, alluring, and slightly terrifying. She wanted to run back to her vardo and dive under her blankets. Her coyote, insane creature that it was, wanted to move closer and get a sniff of this dangerously handsome stranger. Thankfully, her alpha kept her from doing something she might regret.

"Xennu," Carlos said to the caravan's head of security, "find Tomás a spot in one of the warrior wagons then show him around. I want him familiar with our routine before we head north."

"On it, boss."

Thaïs watched him walk off with the petite and fierce warrior. He hadn't spoken a word, yet all eyes were on him. Some watched him in fear, others in wary watchfulness, but none with the same fascinated longing as her. More certain of his welcome, he became more animated as he talked. His hands moved with elegance and grace which spoke to her on a primal level. How would that grace, that coiled power translate with a lover? Would he talk in bed, use that sinful voice to heighten his partner's pleasure? Face heating at the direction of her thoughts, she fled the bonfire for the privacy of her vardo.

But even as she reprimanded her foolish coyote for desiring such a man, she watched him. And she wanted.



They held a celebration that night to welcome their new member formally into the pack. The small bonfire glowed like a beacon, food and drink flowed, and a young scout played a lively tune on an old fiddle while couples danced. Midway through the night, Thaïs collapsed on a seat in the shadow of a scraggly bush where she could catch her breath. She loved to dance, but a wilder, more dangerous fascination held her attention tonight. Tomás Ortega.

He didn't dance, though he had ample opportunities. More than one dominant female (and a few males) sauntered past him, invitation in their eyes and their body language. He wasn't cruel, didn't growl or bare his fangs when a few got pushy, but he didn't dance. Every so often, he'd scan the area. Looking for potential threats or for someone in particular? Thaïs didn't know him well enough to guess. Moon's blessing, he had beautiful eyes!

Micaela, a talented scout for the pack and her best friend, dropped onto the smooth rock she'd chosen as a make-shift chair and sighed. "Why couldn't Carlos have found us a gorgeous new packmate instead of one so lethal he scares the whiskers off ninety-nine percent of the pack?"

Thaïs blinked, looking from her friend to the wolf. "If they're scared of him, they don't show it. He'd have his share of partners tonight if he wanted." A fact which made her coyote grumpy. "You don't find him attractive?"

“He’s as compelling as any strong warrior, but he’s not exactly swoon-worthy, you know? His eyes are amazing, I’ll give you that. His voice, too, but his face? He’s a wolf on two legs, and it shows. Narrow, angular, and harsh. He’d be an asset in a fight but not exactly a comfortable lover.”

“Yeah,” Thaïs agreed with some reluctance. “He’d be exciting but definitely not comfortable.” No one that dominant would ever be easy, but Carlos wouldn’t allow a rabid wolf into the pack. Comfortable or not, who wouldn’t find Tomás swoon-worthy? She nearly melted any time she got close enough to catch his scent.

“Maybe it’s the wolf?” The svelte scout rolled her water container between her palms and shook her head. “We only have one family, and they’re pretty low in the pack’s hierarchy. Tomás and Carlos are so close in strength I’m surprised our alpha allowed him in the pack.”

That was Thaïs’s read as well. Their former leader had been on that same merchant run as her father and suffered the same fate when the stabilizer collapsed. Carlos had been young, but he had a good heart and a willingness to listen to those with more experience. The last two decades had seasoned the young alpha into a man the pack would follow into the heart of an adder’s nest if he asked them. His strength was a familiar, warm presence to dominant and submissive alike.

Tomás, on the other hand, was an unknown. He should rub her fur the wrong way, and in many ways he did. But in others, she wanted to inch closer and steal a sniff, maybe a taste of him. She had obviously spent too much time in the wastes without water. He’d chew her up without a second thought. But still...

“I heard he was on a security patrol when a stabilizer down south collapsed,” Thaïs said. She needed to change the subject and soon, without alerting her nosy, teasing friend.

Micaela would tease her without end if she knew about Thaïs's insane obsession. "It took out his pack along with two others in the region. Just like Agony Peak. I don't know why he came here and not to another wolf pack, though."

"Because Carlos and I go back a long time," answered a voice as smooth and soft as a desert hare's fur. He had a soft accent which rolled over certain consonants like a lover's touch. Thaïs could listen to him talk for hours and never get bored. "His cousin mated my sister which makes him family."

Thaïs turned to find a pair of amber eyes watching her with predatory focus. Her coyote quivered at the intensity in his gaze but basked in it as well. Contrary creature. She gripped the edge of her stony chair and tried to remember how to form words. This close and with his scent wrapping around her like a protective embrace, she could do nothing but stare.

"Why didn't you join your sister's pack?" Micaela asked with a coyote's insatiable curiosity.

His grin softened his sharp features and stole Thaïs's breath. "Because she refuses to see that her baby brother is no longer a child in need of protection."

"She'd coddle you until you bit someone." Thaïs was grateful her voice remained steady and conversational. She couldn't let this strong, beautiful dominant know how much he affected her. He'd be flattered but disinterested, while she'd be mortified.

"Exactly so. Besides, Carlos said he visits her whenever the Merchanteers trade with Bright Perish, so I'll see her often." He looked down at the vivid orange petals of a delicate mariposa lily. When he raised his head, the wolf prowled behind his eyes though his voice remained soft. "Will you dance with me?"

“I... um.” Thaïs darted a wide-eyed look at her friend who returned her surprised look. Micaela recovered first and made shooing motions. “Okay.”

She placed her hand in his outstretched one and sucked in a breath at the contact. The warmth of his palm and the strength of his fingers sent her pulse pounding in her ears. Her tongue felt too thick for words, her nose full of the scent of him. Her coyote quivered, uncertain if it wanted to wallow in his nearness or flee into the night never to return again. This was such a bad, bad idea.

They remained on the edge of the bonfire, his arms loose around her as they swayed to the music. Each brush of his body sent sensation coursing through her. This was ridiculous. She wasn't some untried youth before her first romp. Not that he wanted a romp with her. It was a dance. That's all. Just a dance.

“If you're uncomfortable with me,” he said quietly, “please tell me. I don't want to frighten you.”

How to respond? She couldn't tell him the truth. That would humiliate her and embarrass him. She chose a different truth. One that allowed her to keep her dignity intact. “You're a new dominant to the pack. My coyote doesn't know you well enough to be comfortable with you.”

“Do you want me to go?”

She shook her head. She wanted to dance with this gentle yet powerful wolf. “Tell me about yourself.”

He talked for most of their dance, and she reveled in the smooth beauty of his voice. He told her about his pack and the jungle they called home. Of how their leader worked out a deal with the humans guarding the nearby atmospheric stabilizer to provide protection in exchange for fresh water from their purification machines. And in return,

she told him about life in the Merchanteer pack traveling from village to encampment to military installation.

Through it all, she remained blindingly aware of his hands around her waist, of his fangs just inches from her jugular, of the way his scent wrapped around her and urged her to relax. When the music ended, he slid his hands up her back and down her arms to hold her hands. He held her gaze and lifted them to his lips to press a kiss to her knuckles.

“Thank you for the dance, *querida*.”

Sand and sun, how had his voice gotten even sexier?

CH 02

Thaïs stared at the bolt of finely woven cloth and scowled. There was nothing wrong with the material. Nothing except the color. It was pink. Not just any pink, but a glaring color that practically fluoresced in the morning light. Pretty and cheerful and a massive target for anyone not secured behind city walls. She needed to dye it. A quick check of her supplies had her cursing under her breath.

“Something wrong?” asked a voice she’d heard all too often in her dreams since their one dance. Tomás stood outside her vardo limned in the rays of the rising sun. She squashed the sudden urge to pounce on him.

“I’m out of red dye.” She turned and sat on her back step and blew out a breath. “The closest oasis has the berries I need, but it’s a thirty-minute run one way. Do you know how long we’re stopping here?”

“A few hours. Victor and his team took down a pair of young gamaldrians, and Carlos wants to butcher and brine it before we move again.”

Victor would be feted like a king for that hunt. When the grass started drying up and deserts claimed most of the world, the human’s Genetics Modification Division needed an animal who could survive the harsh conditions. They created the galamdrians. Part camel, part desert bear, and all seething fury, one gamaldrian was a bitch to bring down, but two was damned near impossible. Young meant more meat. Plenty of time to run her errand if Carlos agreed to let her go.

“Good.” She jumped to the ground and headed toward her alpha’s vardo. Tomás fell into step beside her. When he didn’t veer off toward the warrior caravan, curiosity got the better of her. “What are you doing?”

“Carlos will require you to have an escort, *querida*.”

True, but did it have to be the wolf who made her coyote want to do foolish, foolish things? “Thank you.”

After a quick conversation with her alpha and a stop by her vardo to pick up a collection bag and her weapons, Thaïs and Tomás headed for the nearby oasis. Running beside such a strong predator usually stressed her coyote on the deepest level, but he didn’t crowd her or trail behind her as if she was prey. He ran beside her, adjusting his long strides to her shorter ones. It was exhilarating.

His demeanor changed when the oasis came into view. The façade of a comfortable companion crumbled to reveal the predator within. He positioned himself in front of her and slowed to a walk then a stalking prowl. Watchful lethality draped over him like a heavy cloak. It raised all the small hairs on her arm and was a necessary reminder to her coyote that he wasn’t just a potential playmate. He was dangerous.

When they reached the tree line, he motioned for her to stay hidden. A snarl curled her lip. She wasn’t a dominant warrior, but she wasn’t a timid mouse either. He raised an eyebrow. Great. He was calling on the hierarchy. Scowling, she jumped onto a low-lying branch of a leafy tree and stretched out along its length. His answering smile was brief and spectacular.

He melted out of sight within three footsteps. One moment, she was admiring his lithe muscle and warrior grace, and the next, he’d blended into the foliage and disappeared. No wonder he’d survived the trip across the wastes. The man was a ghost when he wanted to be. Three minutes turned into five. Ten. Something was wrong.

Thaïs slipped from the tree and pulled her mini crossbow from her supply bag. She took another moment to strap the small quiver to her left thigh just below the knife

sheathed at her waist. Loading a bolt, she trailed the scent of mesquite, desert sage, and cold, deadly iron in search of a wolf.

She heard them long before she saw them. Tomás fought against a pair of warriors from the local adder nest. Their sinuous movements and fluid attacks were lightning fast, but Tomás's blades blocked most of their strikes.

Why had they attacked? Oases were too few and scattered too distant across the wastes to be anything but neutral territory. To attack another pack at one meant banishment from all. Even the raiders didn't dare take the risk.

She couldn't get a clear shot, so she waited. Eventually, someone would tire. Someone would give her a target. Tomás caught a strike on the edge of his long blade, directed the force downward, and stepped in to draw his knife across the adder's throat. The man stumbled back, hands clasping the wound as his blood stained the sand. The other adder ran.

"Oh, no, you don't," Thaïs muttered.

She couldn't let him get away. If he claimed Tomás started the fight, the Merchanters were done. They'd find no rest at the oases and no trade at the villages which dotted the wastes. She fired.

Her first bolt struck him in the shoulder near his neck. Painful, but not debilitating. The wind had carried her bolt farther than she'd planned. Quickly loading a second bolt, she fired again. This one arced high and grazed the side of his neck.

"Gotcha!" Thaïs drew her knife and started for the adder.

"Thaïs." Tomás caught up with her, disapproval radiating off him like heat waves. "I told you to stay safe."

“And I did.” They reached the adder’s body, and she nudged him with the toe of her boot. “Ten minutes is too long to wait, Tomás.”

“I was handling it. You didn’t need to put yourself in danger like that.”

“I wasn’t in danger.” She turned over the body and poised to counter an attack. It never came. The warrior’s eyes were frozen open in death and gritty with sand. “Why did they attack?” Please let it be the adders who struck the first blow.

“Focus,” he ground out through his teeth. “You were in danger the moment you drew close enough for us to catch your scent. The adders are skilled fighters, quick and cruel. They don’t fight to win. They fight because they like causing pain. I don’t want you to be hurt, *querida*.”

Something in his voice made her look up, and she saw a wolf looking back at her. His beast was so strong, so close to his skin she was surprised he stood on two legs. She’d heard about hybrids like him. They were a throwback to the Alpha strain, as much animal as they were man. No wonder he was so damned strong.

“You’re pack, now, Tomás. I won’t let you get hurt, either.” Thaïs didn’t have many people who were hers. She loved her pack, but it wasn’t the same as having someone who belonged to her first. Her coyote had claimed Tomás as theirs, and though it was an impossible thing, the creature was adamant.

He brushed his fingers over her cheek and growled softly. He was still frustrated, still unhappy with her, but his words were soft and his touch gentle. “The snakes demanded I leave. I refused. They were less than pleased.”

“So, they attacked first?”

“Yes. Is that important?”

“Very. Oases are neutral ground. No one lays claim to one without consequences. If the snakes are trying to claim this oasis for their nest, they’ll have patrols. We can’t let them lie to the other packs that we attacked first. We need to move the bodies.”

His expression darkened and a growl rumbled his chest. “Gather what you need quickly. I’ll secure the bodies.”

She hurried to a clump of bushes dripping with plump, reddish-black berries. Genetically engineered to withstand Earth Prime’s harsh environment, the scientists enlarged a raspberry bushes’ thorns to a full centimeter in length and increased the hardness of a chokeberry. The berries it produced hung in thick clusters of smooth round fruit with a bitter flavor but produced a vibrant red dye. The scientists at GenMod needed a hobby, she grumbled quietly. Combining such disparate things often created horrors. One day, she hoped their hubris came back to bite them on the ass.

Tomás returned an hour later, soaked in sweat and smeared with blood. He kicked off his boots and walked into the lake. Dunking his head to wash the sand from his hair, Thais held her breath each time he surfaced. His wet clothes molded to his body and showed off every inch of muscle. Blessed moon and cool water. He was magnificent. Surely the wolf wasn’t that oblivious to the effect he had on helpless coyotes?

He turned and caught her staring. His eyes flashed wolf amber, and his smile grew predatory. She was trapped in place by that smile and her longing. The memory of his lean body against hers at the dance resurfaced in vivid color. She imagined her hands touching him, exploring those defined muscles. She imagined him naked.

Choking on a gasp, she spun around. Soft laughter sounded behind her, a little smug and a lot satisfied. Damned dominant predators. She busied herself with securing her bag and tightening her small quiver.

“What did you do with the adders?” Thank the universe her voice didn’t betray her thoughts. It was bad enough he caught her ogling him like a juvenile on her first romp, but he didn’t need to know just how deep that longing ran.

“Hung them from a tree just outside their nest’s perimeter.”

She risked a glance over her shoulder and found him lacing up his boots. “Why a tree?”

He grinned, his fangs sharp and his eyes predatory. “It’s a slaver warning for those who encroach on their hunting grounds.”

“That could cause a war.”

“A pity.” He rose and drew his blade. “Ready to return?”

At her nod, they turned toward the encampment.



A week after the run to the oasis, Thaïs decided she'd imagined the heat in Tomás's eyes. Sitting in the shade of her vardo, she grumbled softly to herself and stabbed a grilled cube of gamaldrian. Of course, she'd imagined it. Anyone would respond to such blatant admiration. It didn't mean he wanted her back. She bit into the meat with a rumbling growl. She was too old for such foolishness.

A familiar body sat beside her. Not close enough to touch, but close enough to feel the heat of him, smell the desert spice and danger of him. Great. Another meal with her coyote's crazy obsession. Maybe she could just ignore him?

"Carlos said the shirts you dyed fetched a good price at the market yesterday."

Why did his voice have to be so damned sexy? If she could shift into her animal form, she'd just rest her head on her paws and listen to him speak. She didn't care if he read the Alliance's manual on how to repair the stabilizers, she'd be content. He seemed to want a response, so she stuffed another cube of meat into her mouth and nodded.

"I heard you led recovery teams. Was the oasis run part of that duty or is it separate?"

He'd asked about her. Why? She swallowed her bite and washed it down with some cool water. Maybe he just wanted more information about how the pack operated. That made sense.

"Every member of the pack who isn't a warrior has a range of duties. I'm in charge of textiles. Amelie's mate, Nathaniel, keeps the armory wagon stocked and our leathers in

good repair. The infirmary maintains its own supplies as do the cooks. Spreading it out prevents any one person from getting overwhelmed.”

Thais worked with each of the other quartermasters since she ran selective recovery missions. Very selective. She only ran those which needed her particular skillset, her memories, but they were generally the most lucrative.

He remained quiet until he'd finished his lunch and set aside the empty plate. Tilting back his head, he took a long drink of his water. While he was occupied, she admired his silhouette in the midday sun, the way the shadows softened the angles of his face, the way his throat moved as he drank. She had to sit on her hands to keep from reaching for him.

“Were you born in the pack?” he asked once his bottle was empty.

She refilled it from a pitcher she'd carried over from her vardo and nodded. “Yes, as were my parents and their parents before them. The Merchanteers are home.”

Truth, but she wanted more. She loved her pack and especially her alpha, but she longed for a place where she could put down roots. Somewhere stable and permanent. Somewhere she could find a mate and have a litter of pups to raise in security instead of roaming the wastes never knowing when the raiders or a sandstorm might strike.

“Will you tell me about them?”

She froze. “About what?” Surely, she hadn't spoken her silly dreams aloud! How mortifying.

“Your parents. You never speak of them.”

She looked up and saw only interest in his amber eyes. He didn't know how his question hurt, how she missed her parents every single day. No one knew. But perhaps he'd understand. His pack were gone, taken in the same way her father had been taken.

So, she told him about their trips to Sorrow's Summit. How her father taught her to haggle with the customers, and her mother taught her how to use a knife and shoot the small crossbow she carried to this day. She talked about running wild with the cubs from Agony Peak and the humans from the settlement surrounding the stabilizer. And she told him about the collapse.

"Mama and I were in the clinic," she said around the knot in her throat. "Teesha, one of the lynx cubs, had challenged me to a climbing contest, and I'd fallen and broken my arm. Nothing too terrible, but it needed stabilizing. Then we heard the whine, some static which hurt my ears, and everything went silent."

She blinked back tears and drew in a deep breath. "It was so quiet. No cries from the market. No rumble of wheels over the broken remnants of asphalt streets. No snarls from the visiting lynx pack. No laughter. Everyone went outside to investigate, even the doctors, and we saw an odd shimmer cut through the city. You know the way the wastes look when it's midday and the sun is brutal? Yeah, like that. It was so quiet," she repeated. "Sorrow's Summit was never quiet, yet I could hear the rocks crunch beneath my feet as we walked."

"Thais." Tomás took her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles. "You don't have to continue."

But she couldn't stop. Now that she'd started, the words kept coming. She'd bottled them inside her for two decades, and his question had blown the lid wide open. Tears spilled from her eyes to run down her cheeks.

"No one said anything. Not at first. We walked to the edge of the haze, but we couldn't see through it. One of the doctors tossed a rock into the affected zone, and we never heard it hit the ground. Another decided to stick their hand through the shimmer. Sand and sun, I'll never forget his scream. When he pulled back his hand, severe burns covered his

exposed skin, dark red and blistered. It was odd, but it was like his scream gave us permission to speak. To call out to our families. To cry.” She stared at his hand holding hers and whispered, “Mama cried. I’d never seen her cry before, not even when she was wounded. She was a warrior, but she cried like her world had ended.”

Muttering a curse, Tomás moved closer and suddenly she was in his arms. Thaïs burrowed closer, crying the tears she’d been too shocked to shed on that awful day. He was warm and strong and a protector to his core. She let him hold her until her tears turned into stuttering breaths interrupted by hiccups.

“I’m sorry, *querida*. So sorry.” The soft pressure of his lips on her hair, the gentle strokes of his hands on her back were so soothing, she never wanted to move. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“When we returned to the caravan, Mama left me with Carlos’s family, and she, Carlos, and several warriors returned to Sorrow’s Summit to see if they could find any survivors in the haze. Only Carlos and the warriors came back. Mama walked into the haze to be with my Daddy.”

He swore, and his voice held a growl when he said, “She had a child to raise.”

“They were mated, Tomás. Truly mated. She couldn’t go on without him.”

“Her pain didn’t erase her responsibility to you.” His arms tightened. “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“I knew you’d understand.” He’d lost his entire pack to the haze. If anyone could understand her pain, it would be this quiet, gentle wolf. She inhaled his scent one last time then untangled herself from his embrace. “You should probably return to your patrol. Xennu will have your ass if you’re late.”

He brushed the tears from her cheeks. “You’ll be okay?” At her nod, he rose with fluid grace and offered her his hand. She let him pull her to her feet, suddenly shy with this man who knew her deepest heartbreak. “I’ll see you again soon, *querida*.”

Then, he was gone.

As weeks turned to months, Tomás always seemed to be where she was. He took his meals with her when he could, and he guarded her caravan as they skirted the border of the Mourning Sun nest of adders. Her beast’s possessiveness grew with every interaction. It *wanted* Tomás Ortega until it was an itch beneath her skin. No amount of arguing would convince the foolish coyote to change its mind, especially when he watched her like a predator ready to pounce.

CH 03

“Thais.” Carlos waved her over as the pack was preparing to move to their next location. “Micaela says you know of a good store of supplies near Sorrow’s Summit.”

She nodded. “That’s right. If the haze hasn’t moved, there’s a couple of storerooms in the clinic plus another at the town hall center.”

“We need to restock our medical supplies. We didn’t lose anyone to those damned adders, but we didn’t emerge unscathed either.”

Mourning Sun had proved as volatile and vicious as ever. They’d waited until the caravan stopped for the night and was mid-way through their set-up to strike, hitting the perimeter in a two-pronged attack which threatened to collapse the Merchanteers’ defenses. Xennu and a dozen warriors fought on one side, and Tomás and a dozen more defended the other. No one emerged unscathed, but the adders suffered heavy losses while the pack sustained only moderate injuries.

“They’re getting worse. They’re looking for something in this area and don’t like others encroaching.”

“Tough. They’ll like it even less when I toss their hissing asses into the haze.”

Thais bared her fangs in a grin. “Make sure I’m around when you do that.” She shaded her eyes with her hand and stared at the low mountain. “You want me to go up to the Summit and see if the supplies are still there?”

“No, I don’t like going back there, like even less asking this of you, but we need those supplies.” He scowled, but the hand cupping her cheek was gentle. “Can you do it?”

“With a good team, yeah.” Crouching, she grabbed a stick and drew a rough map of the village’s main buildings along with the main road leading to it. “This is the clinic. It’s

close enough to the surrounding wood for a safe recon. A small team would be ideal, two or three others at most. It shouldn't rouse the adders' curiosity. We'll check it out, make sure the haze hasn't moved, and see if the storerooms are intact. If they are, we'll grab what we can carry and discuss a return trip once we're back with the caravan."

"Do you really think the raiders, adders, and other groups have left anything up there?"

"The main storeroom doors were at least twenty centimeters of intergalactic grade aramidium and locked with a military-grade cypher lock. They'd just gotten it from the local military base when I was there last and said it ran on solar power. Unless the other packs have a tool powerful enough to cut through that much metal, it's intact."

A sigh laced with a faint growl. "Very well. You still remember it?"

"Yes."

Carlos brushed his hand over her hair in a comforting caress. He was the only other person in the pack who knew her secret. Before she walked into the haze, her mother had told Carlos how Thaïs's memory worked, explained the danger to her daughter and the pack if word got out. Children heard far more than adults believed, and if it involved numbers—especially numbers in a sequence—Thaïs remembered it. Always.

When Thaïs was a juvenile on the cusp of adulthood, she and Carlos worked out a way to utilize her skills without putting her life in danger. It'd been more than five years since they'd last done so. If they chose the right team, ones who wouldn't betray what they'd see at the Summit, she should remain safe a while longer.

They settled on a team of three: Thaïs, a scout, and a dominant escort. She'd led small recovery teams before, and the smaller number made it easier to adapt if things went wrong. Coyotes are very good at adapting to change.

She chose Micaela as her scout. Not only was her friend willing to take orders from someone lower than her on the dominance scale, but she also already knew Thaïs's secret and would keep quiet. Plus, she moved through forests like a wraith. An excellent advantage when heading into possibly dangerous territory.

The escort would be more difficult. A dominant warrior's instinct was to protect those weaker than them. Few were able to overcome those instincts leaving the team unbalanced and Micaela unprotected.

"Can you work with Tomás?" Carlos asked.

"I think so. He's been my escort on gathering errands, but I don't know how well he'll take orders from me." She laughed suddenly. "I don't even know why he takes orders from you. He's nearly as strong as you."

"Stronger, actually." Carlos's expression said he wasn't happy about that, but he didn't elaborate on how he discovered the power difference. "But he's one of our most stable dominants, and I want you safe up there."

Wow. Okay. So, Tomás was more powerful than their alpha? He must have iron control over his wolfish nature to keep from challenging him over every little order. Alpha strain throwbacks were seriously impressive.

"Okay. If he says yes, Micaela and I will teach him the signals as we travel. I'd like to do a trial run before we get there, too, just to make sure he really will listen to me."

"I'll talk to him now."

Thaïs waited until she was safe in the privacy of her caravan to drop her head into her hands and groan. This was going to be a nightmare.



Thaïs whistled, the notes traveling through the thin air of the mountain ruin. Tomás flowed from the shadows toward the eastern wall. Another whistle, and Micaela did the same to the west. Thaïs propped her small crossbow on her knee and lifted her nose in search of a betraying scent. She caught nothing but the familiar scents of her packmates, but her coyote's hackles were raised. She risked a furtive glance around. Though no sounds or scents drifted on the wind, the ghosts haunted her.

The city lost half their number when the stabilizer failed, the haze carving a shimmering line of demarcation between life and death. That line cut through the lynx pack on Agony Peak, claiming warrior and cub with equal hunger. The hybrids had also lost more than half their number that day. The other half? Thaïs ran a hand through her short hair and growled low in her chest.

The Merchanters remained at the base of the mountain for a week after the collapse. The pack needed to grieve, and Carlos needed to establish himself as alpha before they moved on. While they mourned, the lynx hunters who'd been away from their dens when the stabilizer collapsed returned to find their pack decimated. They blamed the humans for their losses. They demanded answers. They chose vengeance.

The humans tried to explain. The stabilizers were over a century old, and new parts were as scarce as fresh water in a rainstorm. They'd lost people, too, loved ones and family. The hybrids didn't care. Many had lost mates to the haze, and the bond between mates was a powerful force. Few survived such an abrupt loss. Some chose Thaïs's

mother's path. Others fell to feral madness, the complete loss of humanity which left only a maddened beast hungry for violence.

By the time Thaïs's pack returned to pay their last respects to their lost packmates, no one—human or lynx—remained alive. Some were carved into bloody ribbons. Others were thrown hallway into the haze. She'd been too young to return to Sorrow's Summit, but she'd heard whispers from those who'd seen the carnage, who'd pulled the bodies out of the haze.

The Merchanters agreed that burning the remains was the only respectful thing they could do for the victims. Burials were human rites, and they were no longer human. They'd seen the dangers a fresh corpse could bring, smelled the disease fouling the bloated meat. They wanted to honor their friends, but the scent of blood and death drew predators. As the fire burned, they raised their heads and howled their grief and sorrow, their songs echoed by a nearby wolf pack and an eagle's cry in the mountains above. It had been too much like losing her father all over again, and she'd cried as much for herself as for those lost.

It was a terribly fitting end for a village named after a doomed expedition over a millennia ago.

If it wasn't for the knowledge hidden away in her mind, she would've let Marisa's team make this run. Marisa was younger, had no memories of Sorrow's Summit while Thaïs remembered it all too well. The building behind her used to be the school, and the one which now protected her from hostile eyes was once the community center. If she closed her eyes, she saw it as it had been, crowded and noisy and *alive*. Now, it was just another carcass left to rot on Earth Prime, and she was just another scavenger picking its bones clean.

The corpse she'd chosen for this trial run was the old medical clinic. If memory served her right, the clinic's storerooms should replenish the pack's sterile bandages and pain blockers. They might even find something to satisfy Bright Perish's request for copper wire and aramidium. Her team was allowed to keep or trade anything beyond those items. A finder's fee designed to encourage the scavenging crews to take on the dangerous jobs.

Tomás's whistle pulled her back to the present followed quickly by Micaela's signal. All clear. She whistled an acknowledgment and slipped from the safety of the community center. They met her at the front entrance and flowed through the door in silence.

Heavy dust and cobwebs tickled her nose until she struggled not to sneeze. As they crept deeper into the ruin, their feet sent tiny motes into the sky to dance in the hazy sunlight filtering through the broken windows. It was eerie and sad, the sorrow lingering until it was a weight pushing on her chest.

"This place looks picked clean," Micaela asked. "You sure about this?"

"Trust me." Thaïs glanced over at Tomás and received his nod of support. The male's eyes practically glowed in the dark interior, wolf amber to her and Micaela's coyote gold. "I know this place like the back of my hand, including the storage rooms. Come on."

She led them down a dark hallway lined with examination rooms. They searched each one. Tomás scored a pair of comm devices hidden beneath a pile of rubble. Thaïs found a hidden cache of medications buried beneath an exam table. As they moved to the next set of rooms, she heard Micaela's quiet cry of triumph. She'd found something as well.

"Micaela's right, *querida*." Tomás's soft voice stroked over her senses like gentle hands through fur. "A human encampment this close to a stabilizer, especially a collapsed one, draws scavengers like flies to a fresh kill."

“I was here before,” she whispered and ducked into the last room. A pile of boxes caught her eye, and she moved in that direction. The hairs at her nape prickled at having the powerful wolf at her back, and none of it was fear. Her insane fascination with the wolf had only grown as she’d gotten to know him. “Before the failure, I mean.” They opened each box and dumped out the contents. From the scent and soiled rags, rats had used whatever had been in the boxes as a nest for their young.

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yes, but I remember.”

She always remembered. Cypher lock codes, comm codes, measurements, weights... essentially any information dealing with numbers. When her mother realized Thais’s ability, she’d convinced her daughter to hide the skill. Adults talked around children without a second thought, took them on adventures through locked doors. She’d learned more cypher codes than anyone suspected in villages all over the caravan’s range.

If the haze wasn’t so deadly, she knew the access codes for the stabilizer, too. As she’d grown, she’d understood the reasons her mother taught her to keep the skill a secret. The amount of knowledge in her head would fetch an impressive bounty.

The final box in the stack held an entire case of antibiotics. Tomás checked the bottles. They were all full and only a few months past their expiration dates. It was worth more than a pirate’s chest of gold. The longer the Alliance stayed away from Earth Prime, the more value such life-saving medications had. She’d hoped to find adequate supplies, but this was beyond her wildest dreams.

Tomás looked up, his eyes shining and his slow smile stirring feelings she’d fought against since he joined their pack. Slender and sleek with jet black hair worn in a single braid down his back, Tomás Ortega wasn’t handsome or (according to her packmates)

even marginally good looking. His face was too angular, his eyes too sharp, and his wolf too close to be anything but a predator barely leashed.

No, he wasn't anything as prosaic as handsome, but he had a fierce dominance which commanded attention. Though he no longer made her want to bolt into the wastes like a scared sand hare, she still fought the urge to tackle him to the floor and lick him all over. Having him on her reconnaissance and scavenging team was an exercise in control.

When he raised a brow at her silence, she realized she was staring. Great. Panting over a teammate was an excellent way to inspire confidence in her leadership abilities, she thought wryly. "Sorry. Chasing my tail." She flashed him a smile. "Pack it up. This makes the trip worth it even if the storeroom is completely barren."

"Your eyes tell a different story, *querida*," he murmured while opening his pack. "They drink me up."

Mortified, she opened her mouth to reply and was saved by Micaela's return. "I take it back," the other woman said as she walked through the door. "This place is—fuck me, is that an entire *case* of antibiotics?"

"Yep. We'll sort it out at the caravans. Are the exam rooms clear?" At their nod, she led the way to the final door at the end of the hall and felt Tomás's eyes on her the entire way.

Tapping in the code, she waited for the lock to disengage. It took a while. The small village had been abandoned for twenty years, and someone had tried to force open the door at least twice.

When the lock clicked open, Thaïs drew a throwing blade. "Ready?" At their nods, she eased open the door and slipped inside.

CH 04

Thaïs stepped to the left of the door, paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the dark interior, and then scanned the room. Her child’s mind conjured images of stacks of crates and piles of boxes on shelves which reached the ceiling. Now that she was older, and taller, she estimated the shelving units were closer to two meters with the boxes and crates stacked neatly. A fine layer of dust coated everything. It was clear no one had been here for decades.

“Wow,” whispered Micaela.

“I doubt we can carry it all,” Thaïs said. “Let’s grab the bandages and wiring first. Afterward, we’ll take as much as we can then come back later.”

She pointed Tomás toward the far-right corner where the equipment had been stored. He had a light hand with the electrical devices, could strip them down to their base components with barely a scratch to their coveted screens. The sexy wolf prowled into the darkness, his steps light and graceful. She swallowed a possessive snarl, her claws pricking her palms when she curled her hands into fists. Her coyote *wanted* the wolf, and it was starting to get pushy.

“So.” Micaela nudged her shoulder on the way to the first set of boxes. “You and the wolf, huh? I know you’ve lunched together a few times, but I hadn’t expected this. I haven’t heard even a whisper on the pack grapevine.”

“What? No, there’s nothing between us.”

“Puh-leeze.” Micaela waved her hand before slicing open a box with a claw. “That room was positively steamy when I walked in. You were undressing him with your eyes,

and he was practically panting at the thought. If I hadn't barged in, you'd have been naked in a heartbeat. The man even calls you his sweetheart."

"He does?" Thaïs found a box filled with individually wrapped gauze bandages. Pulling her knapsack off her back, she packed the bandages in neat rows. Sweetheart? Is that what '*querida*' meant? She never thought to ask. Maybe she should have?

"Yup." Her friend flashed her a smile full of fangs and mischief. "His original pack speaks their ancestral language as well as the Alliance's Trade Tongue. He's not much of a looker, but if he called me '*querida*' in that voice softer than a sand hare's fur, I'd do *anything* he asked."

Thaïs growled softly, her coyote's hackles raised at the sensual appreciation in the other woman's voice. No matter what she told her animal half, it insisted Tomás was hers. Micaela raised her brows before pointedly nodding at where the wolf sorted through discarded electrical devices. Heat scorched her cheeks until the tips of her ears felt like they'd catch fire.

"This isn't the time," she said when Micaela watched her with bright, knowing eyes. It was true. They only had a few more hours before nightfall would force them to remain in the village. No one traveled at night. The twilight hours belonged to the raiders and the adders and others with nefarious intent.

"Fine, but don't make the man wait too long. He looks ready to eat you up."

Thaïs stole a glance at the man in question and met eyes of wolf amber. His smile sharpened and gained a feral, possessive edge which stole her breath. He could tempt a girl to do bad, bad things with that smile, even persuade a coyote to play. It pushed her to claim the sexy wolf. Her coyote nature didn't care about logic or hierarchy when it came

to Tomás. It looked at the wolf and felt a need and a sexual hunger which had grown stronger over the last six months until it threatened to drive her to feral madness.

Tearing her gaze from temptation wrapped in a sleek male body, she forced her attention back on the mission. She wanted her team out of this ghost town and within the protective perimeter of the caravan before nightfall. Three hours later, they'd inspected every box, packed all they could carry, and returned the rest to the crates.

"We'll lock up behind us and return with a larger crew." Thaïs hefted her pack onto her back and adjusted the straps. A waist strap helped settle the weight on her hips rather than her shoulders, and she tightened it down to keep it from banging against her back if they had to run. "Everyone ready?"

She reengaged the cypher lock and tested it before joining her small team. Micaela took point while Tomás brought up the rear. Thaïs didn't like placing the less dominant coyote so far away from them, but her friend was an experienced scout with dozens of missions under her belt. She could handle it.

They were halfway down the mountain when she heard the signal. Trouble ahead. Tomás touched her shoulder and nodded toward the trees. This was the point where flexibility went both ways. She silently passed the leadership to him, and they darted off the path with as much stealth as speed allowed. Scrubby bushes scraped over her boots. Grabby limbs tugged on her hair. Dried leaves and branches snapped and crackled beneath their feet until they were deep in the trees. When she would've stopped, the wolf shook his head and motioned her to go deeper.

"Micaela," she said in a subvocal whisper.

"Safe," he growled softly. "Now go."

Every time they changed direction, Tomás mimicked the cheerful song of a local songbird. Thaïs's heart beat a little easier with each response. Her friend was alive and unharmed. A whip-o-will's cry would've signaled Micaela had been injured or taken captive, but silence was worse. Silence meant death.

A shout sounded behind them followed by booted feet crashing through the underbrush. A triumphant cry from their left. A knife thudding into a tree by her head. Their pursuers were gaining on them.

"Up?" She pointed at a nearby tree with low hanging limbs. "We can take them out from above."

"Good idea."

She lunged for the lowest branch and swung her legs up and over the thick limb. Tomás appeared seconds behind her and urged her higher. Bossy wolf. She snarled softly and heard his quiet chuckle. Insufferable. She pulled onto the next limb, and he pulled up beside her.

"Weapons?" he asked in a subvocal murmur.

"Mini crossbow with twenty bolts. Three knives. Claws and fangs. You?"

"Swap the crossbow with a long blade, and I have the same." He paused for her to respond to Micaela's call, then lifted a finger to his lips. "They're approaching."

Thaïs plastered herself against the trunk while Tomás stretched out along the limb. The first pair of hunters passed below them on silent feet. Forward scouts with a distinctly feline grace to their movements. Not the adders, then. They'd never allow another species into their nests.

She tapped the wolf on the leg and pointed. He shook his head. Holding up his hand, he spread his fingers then began curling them into his palm in a slow countdown. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Three more hunters prowled between the trees like a wraith with three equally silent shadows. More cats in human form. One paused at the base of their tree, raised his head, and sniffed the air. She and Tomás held perfectly still, barely daring to breathe. The hunter growled softly but moved on.

She waited another five minutes, but no one else stirred below them. Shifting to prepare to drop to the ground, she was halted by a clawed hand on her arm. Tomás touched a finger to his ear and pointed east. She listened but heard nothing. That was wrong. Why was that wrong? Frowning, she tilted her head and let her coyote augment her hearing. The rustle of leaves in the soft breeze. The distant hammer of a woodpecker. The haunting cry of an owl. Again, in the distance. She met his gaze with a dawning understanding. The hunters remained close by.

“This is all very amusing,” called a woman some fifteen feet behind them, “but I’m on a deadline. We want the girl.”

Thaïs curled her lip in a silent snarl. Micaela was a ghost in the forest. They wouldn’t find her if she didn’t wish to be found. Tomás’s claws dug into the branch, his body trembling in suppressed rage and a cloud of menace wrapping around him.

“How about a deal, wolf?” Cruel amusement filled the woman’s voice along with a growling purr of anticipation. “My client is eager enough I can afford to cut you in. He was here, you see, before the failure. He wants the coyote who stuck her snout into everyone’s business and is willing to pay. Two pallets of fresh water, another of Class Three nanoinjectors. Hand her over, and I’ll cut you in.”

Thaïs sucked in a breath. They didn't want Micaela. They wanted *her*, and they were willing to pay a king's ransom for her. One of the humans from the village survived and knew what she could do. She met the furious amber of Tomás's wolfish gaze. Even if her friend was wrong in her belief of his affections, he was a dominant with a dominant's drive to protect. If he did have romantic feelings for her, it'd be so much worse.

She slipped her hand under the edge of his leathers, pushing aside the material of his pants to reach warm skin. His silent growls didn't stop, but some of the tension eased from his body. He reached back, his clawed fingers brushing along her arm.

Tomás slowly pushed into a sitting position and drew a pair of daggers from hidden arm sheaths. He looked over his shoulder and arched a brow. Meeting his gaze, she nodded, pulled out her crossbow, and loaded a bolt. The shaft of the bolt was made of intergalactic grade aramidium, the point of the same material sported three barbs designed to ravage flesh when pulled free. She would not be prey.

They waited until the cat prowling below had his back to them. With a fierce kiss which shocked her coyote and stole her breath, Tomás leaped from the branch onto the hunter's back. Thaïs licked her lips, the wolf's taste her new favorite addiction, and balanced her small weapon on an upraised knee. Choosing her prey, she drew in a steady breath, and fired. She reloaded the weapon as the bolt struck home.

A howl split the air, followed by a roar of pain and fury. Her pack! Micaela must have alerted them somehow, or they had scouts watching for their return. Their presence changed everything.



Firing her last bolt, Thaïs hooked the crossbow to her belt and jumped to the ground. Tomás's claws glinted crimson in the dying light. He bled from three slashing lines along one cheek, and his shirt hung off his body in bloody ribbons, but he was alive. She sliced out her claws and pressed her back to his.

The cats fought in bursts of frenzied speed and vicious fury, sacrificing stamina in the hopes of overwhelming their prey. Coyotes and their wolfish cousins, on the other hand, could run for days without tiring but couldn't match the cats' speed. If she and Tomás could hold out during the worst of the attacks, they'd outlast their prey and tear out their throats when their strength flagged.

The battle was long and hard, but inch by inch the coyotes gained the upper hand. When the last hunter fell, Thaïs lifted her head to add her song to her pack's triumphant howls. Victory claimed, she searched for the sexy male wolf who tempted both sides of her nature. There he was, gathering his knives from the bodies of his victims. Safe. Kneeling to clean her claws on one of the hunters' shirts, Thaïs studied the woman who'd spoken for the attackers. The female was unfamiliar, her leathers stained black and red.

"Slavers," Tomás crouched beside her, his body pressing against hers from shoulder to thigh. "Pirate's Pride according to their colors. A nasty bunch of cougars which prowl the wastes looking for the young, weak, and foolish."

"They were looking for me."

"Yes, but they can't have you." He ran his fingers down her arm. "You're mine."

She jerked up her head and stared at him. His smile was warm, his eyes bright amber. He cupped her cheek, brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. Her pulse roared in her ears. He was so close, almost close enough to steal a kiss if she dared.

“What.” She cleared her throat and tried again. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly that. I plan to court you, *mi vida*.”

“Me? You want to court *me*?”

“Why do you sound so surprised? You’re beautiful and brilliant, strong and courageous. I’ve waited so long.” He coaxed her closer, his lips hovering centimeters from hers. “Say yes.”

“Please,” she answered in a breathy whisper.

Tomás nibbled on her lower lip, bit lightly, then licked over the sensual hurt. Thais crept closer, chasing his mouth with a soft whine of need. That seemed to be the signal he needed. He rumbled low in his chest and claimed her lips in a hungry kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, uncertain when he’d sat and pulled her onto his lap. She didn’t care. He was strong, honorable, brave, and hers. Finally, he was hers.

“Ahem.” Micaela’s amused voice. “The boss is on his way over.” She laughed when they both growled. “Fine! Fine. Don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

Thais rested her forehead against his and tried to regulate her breathing. “Tomás? Are you sure?”

“Since the first time I saw you.” He stroked a hand over her hair, stole another kiss. “You fascinated the wolf, but...” He shrugged. “I know I’m not an attractive man. I wanted to give you a chance to get to know me, see if I had a chance.”

She placed her fingers over his lips. “I wanted to pounce on you from the beginning. The coyote did too, but it was nervous about approaching such a strong dominant.”

“I’d never hurt you.”

“That’s good to hear.” Carlos loomed over them, arms crossed and feet set apart. The leader of the merchant caravan looked from one to the other. “You couldn’t have chosen a better time?”

Cheeks heating, Thaïs scrambled to her feet. Tomás rose at a more leisurely pace, his arm sliding around her waist to keep her close. “The enemy was defeated. Seemed good enough to me.”

“It would.” Carlos shook his head and touched Thaïs’s hair. “You okay with this?”

“Yes, sir.” She snuggled closer to Tomás and placed her hand over his heart. “I’ve wanted it for a while. I just didn’t think he’d notice me.”

“Then I won’t interfere. But if he makes you cry, you come tell me.” Tomás growled and pulled her into a tight embrace. “We’ll talk back at the caravan. Micaela says there’s more items at the facility?”

“Yep. A lot more.”

“We’ll return later, after you’ve had time with your—” Carlos left the question unasked. Thaïs wasn’t certain how to respond, but Tomás did.

“Mate.”

The caravan leader nodded and left to organize clean-up of the dead. They’d commandeer anything of use—armor, weapons, even food and water—and sort it in the safety of their camp. Suddenly shy with this man she knew so well, Thaïs stepped back.

“I should see if any of my bolts are salvageable.”

He caught her hand. “May I come with you?”

Her heart full to bursting, she twined their fingers together. “Always.”

EPILOGUE

Three weeks later, Thaïs guided the large team to the storeroom. One of her packmates whistled softly at the treasures within. Another gasped. They spread throughout the room and began sorting the items by type and need.

Strong, familiar arms wrapped around her waist from behind, and Tomás dropped a kiss to her neck. “This may take more than one trip even with such a large team.”

“You wanna know the best part?” His questioning hum tickled her ear and gave her all sorts of pleasurable ideas. “There are two more storerooms in the safe zone.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Carlos has been talking about setting up a permanent base of operations, a place the pack can build homes and raise their pups. The base of the mountain seems ideal. There’s fresh water, years’ worth of supplies, and close enough to other permanent settlements for the caravans to continue their routes.” She turned in his embrace but didn’t look up. Instead, she played with a buckle on his leathers. “If he establishes that base, would you consider living there?”

A gentle hand nudged under her chin until she met his gaze. The wolf prowled behind his amber eyes, fierce and strong and utterly devoted to her. “I’d follow you into the stars, *mi vida*. My home is with you. But,” he added with a slow smile, “if we stay here, we’ll have a snug den big enough for a few pups of our own.”

“Yes!” Throwing her arms around his neck, she lost herself in his kiss. Several members of the recovery team whistled, others shouted at them to wait until they returned to the caravan, but the teasing was good natured.

The return to the caravans was blissfully uneventful, and the pack celebrated their success. The less dominant members roasted a bettedeer buck over the fire. Musicians played lively tunes which drew the juveniles into the firelight for a joyful dance. Songs and laughter and more than a few howls echoed in the night. And Thaïs watched it all from the circle of her mate's arms.

When the scouts discovered an aquifer eight days later, the water pure and clear and cool as a mountain stream, Carlos once more raised the subject of a permanent settlement. The older coyotes supported the idea of a stable home. They were tired of the constant travel, longed for a den which didn't sway in a windstorm or catch fire at the touch of lightning. They wished to plant a garden, grow fresh vegetables, maybe raise a chicken or two.

The older juveniles and novice soldiers disliked the idea of being tied to a stationary location just as they reached the age to roam. They were coyotes, not house pets. They longed to see the lands around them, support their pack through trading, and support *other* packs through those same trades. Merchant caravans were often the difference between an isolated pack's survival or their demise.

Carlos talked to each member of his pack over the following three days. Long conversations which asked their preferences and the reasons for them. On the fourth day, he announced his decision.

Those who wished to remain and establish the pack's new village would bear the burden of building the dens, tapping the aquifer, and protecting their supplies and their vulnerable. Those who wished to roam would drive the caravans from village to village, negotiate for needed supplies, and bring their bounty back to the pack. Each year, five

elders needed to join the caravans to impart their wisdom. Each year, five warriors needed to remain at the village to protect the vulnerable.

The pack decided the edict was more than fair, and each group prepared for their place in their new life. Thaïs, Micaela, and the others who chose to remain in the village built their dens over three backbreaking seasons. Tomás and a small team of five worked tirelessly on constructing a well over the aquifer. When winter came, they were sore and exhausted and so damned proud it hurt. They'd done it. They had a home.

Placing a hand on the faint swell of her stomach, Thaïs passed the sign she'd painted to her mate. He'd growled at her when she'd pulled out the stepladder, the tug of war which followed more a game than a battle. With a laughing kiss, she'd surrendered the ladder to Tomás as she'd surrendered her heart all those months ago. He attached the sign, two boards held together by chains with a single word on each one, and jumped off the ladder with predatory grace.

Sliding his arm around her waist, he covered her hand with his free one. "Sorrow's End," he read. "In honor of the human village?"

"Yes, and a promise. To this pup and all the ones which follow. We've had enough of sorrow to last a lifetime."

The End?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a child growing up in rural Alabama, Elaina Roberts traveled the world through books. She battled Martians with John Carter, solved mysteries with Nero Wolfe, and sighed over happy endings with the likes of Johanna Lindsey and Barbara Cartland. Then she travelled the world courtesy of a military husband. And though it held significantly fewer Martians and murders, it did bring its own happily ever after.

As an author, she creates her own stories by bending reality to her will, altering locations, history, and even mythology with unrepentant glee. Vampires and werewolves, space pirates and edgeworlde smugglers, all deserve to have their stories told and to find their happily ever after.

You can find her on social media at:



OTHER BOOKS BY ELAINA ROBERTS

The Edgeworld Chronicles:

[*Journey to a Dream: An Anthology of Shorts*](#)

[*Subject 5691: Petri*](#)

[*Draxton's Destiny*](#)

The Ravyn's Revenge (coming soon!)

Wolves of Sorrow:

[*Shoba*](#)

[*Brienne*](#)

[*Izabel*](#)

[*Jelayan*](#)

[*Sorcha*](#)

Hinata (TBD)

Stand-Alone Books:

[*The Fox's Mate*](#)

The Other Half (currently unavailable)

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