



EDEN EMBER

SHADOWED

by the

TALOS

MONSTER SENTINELS

INVASION OF MONSTERS

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INVASION OF MONSTERS



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CHAPTER 1



Arlet

The plane touched down in the Pacific Northwest. A rush of cool air hit me as I stepped onto the tarmac. A world away from the concrete jungle of New York City. I took a deep breath, the scent of pine and saltwater filling my lungs. It was a far cry from the smell of exhaust and garbage that permeated the city.

The rented car carried me towards my new home, the towering evergreens and snow-capped mountains a stark contrast to the skyscrapers and bustling streets I was used to. A sense of awe flowed through me as I took in the breathtaking scenery.

But with every mile that passed, the weight of my decision grew heavier. I was no longer Charlotte Bruno, the mafia princess, the daughter to the big boss. I was Arlet Rune, a name I had chosen for myself. It was a fresh start, a chance to leave the violence and corruption of my past behind. But it was also a life of secrets and lies. And really, I had no choice. Stay in New York as Charlotte Bruno and remain the target of the Bruno's rival family, or die and become someone else.

I pulled into the driveway of a small cabin nestled in the woods. It was quaint and cozy, a far cry from the penthouse I had grown up in. But it was mine, and for the first time in my life, I had a sense of ownership.

I unpacked my bags and settled in, trying to push the memories of my past life away. But it was hard to forget the life I had left behind. The life of luxury and power, but also the life of violence and corruption. I was the daughter of a mafia boss, and I had grown up in a world where my father bought loyalty with blood and money.

But that was all behind me now. My name was Arlet Rune, a name I had chosen for myself. I was in the witness protection program, and I had to keep my identity a secret at all costs. It was a daunting task, but I was determined to make it work. Back in New York City at a cemetery on the outskirts of a suburb, a grave with the name Charlotte Bruno held a graveside service recently. The contents of the coffin, an urn with the ashes of Jane Doe with blonde hair, and similar to me.

The first few days, I explored the area and got to know my new surroundings. The long hikes in the woods brought me to the breathtaking scenery. While visiting local shops and restaurants, trying to blend in with the locals, I made a few friends, something I had never done before.

My new role as an environmental researcher at Wild Trust, a non-profit committed to safeguarding the Pacific Northwest's pristine landscapes, gave me an opportunity to contribute to a cause with real impact. My new career excited me.

On my first day, I entered the office to a warm welcome from a group of friendly colleagues. My boss, Sarah, introduced me around and led me on an office tour, showcasing the innovative equipment and the team's passionate dedication.

"We're thrilled to have you with us, Arlet," Sarah smiled warmly. "Your expertise in biology and conservation is precisely what we need."

Sarah tasked me with a wildlife conservation project, working alongside researchers to study local fauna, their habitats, and devising protection strategies.

This project was a dream come true. My passion for animals and the environment now had a direct outlet through my work.

I quickly immersed myself in the project, learning about local wildlife and

joining field trips for direct observation and data collection. Collaborating closely with my team, we shared ideas and planned strategies.

My colleagues' commitment and expertise struck me. Each person shared a deep passion for their work, striving to make a real difference. I had found my tribe.

With each passing day, my involvement in the project deepened. I spent hours in the field, scrutinizing wildlife and gathering crucial data, and stayed up late analyzing our findings to craft effective conservation strategies.

Making a tangible difference was exhilarating. I had transitioned from a passive observer of the world to an active contributor, positively impacting the environment.

However, despite my love for the job, the shadow of my past lingered. Arlet Rune was my chosen identity, yet Charlotte Bruno's legacy remained a hidden, ever-present specter.

I struggled to compartmentalize, focusing on my present work and life. Yet escaping my former life of opulence, power, and its underlying violence and corruption proved challenging. Raised as a mafia boss's daughter and secured loyalty in my past life through blood and money.

Hidden within the witness protection program, maintaining my new identity was critical. Despite the challenges, I resolved to succeed.

"Hey Arlet, you coming to the team meeting?" my colleague, Jake, interrupted my reverie.

"Yeah, I'll be right there," I responded, managing a smile.

Taking a deep breath, I followed Jake to the meeting room, determined to compartmentalize my past.

The first solo trip into the forest was like stepping through a portal to another world. The canopy above shielded me from the rest of existence, a mosaic of green filtering the sunlight into emerald hues that danced on the forest floor. With each step, the sounds of civilization faded, replaced by the rustle of leaves and the calls of hidden birds.

The air was fresh here—alive and vibrant. I inhaled deeply, the earthy scent of moss and soil mingling with the subtle sweetness of wildflowers. I relaxed as the unconscious tension easing its grip.

I found a rhythm in my stride, my boots crunching over fallen branches and pine needles. My hands brushed against ferns that unfurled like green scrolls holding ancient secrets. This was my mission, to uncover the mysteries of these woods for conservation. Yet, as I walked further into the heart of the forest, it seemed to reveal something far more personal.

My gaze fell upon a stream, its waters a clear ribbon winding through stones and roots. I crouched beside it, watching as tiny fish darted in the shallows, sunlight glinting off their scales. The icy water swirled around my fingers, a stark contrast to the warmth that seeped through the canopy.

I followed the stream for a while, letting it guide me deeper into the wilderness. The trees stood like silent sentinels around me, their trunks marked by time and weather. It was here that an unexpected connection to the land grew within me, a sense of belonging that had eluded me amidst concrete and steel.

There was peace here—a peace I hadn't realized I was seeking. In this solitude, without expectations or pretense, I could simply be Arlet Rune.

I found a clearing bathed in sunlight where wildflowers carpeted the ground in splashes of color. Dropping my backpack beside a rock, I sat down and pulled out my notebook and pen.

As I jotted down observations—the flora and fauna around me, the quality of light, the patterns of growth—I realized this wasn't just preliminary research; it was an introduction to my new home. A home not built on fear or falsehoods, but on discovery and truth.

A squirrel scampered near my feet, eyeing me curiously before bounding away through the underbrush. Birds sang from hidden perches—a symphony composed by nature itself—and somewhere in the distance, water tumbled over rocks in a soothing cadence.

Leaning back against a sturdy oak tree, I closed my eyes and let myself become just another part of this living tapestry. My breathing slowed to

match the whispering breeze; my heartbeat seemed to sync with the subtle pulse of life around me.

With my eyes shut tight and senses wide open—I was at one with nature.

A shiver crept up my spine, unbidden, as I lounged against the oak. The sensation prickled across my skin like the subtle shift of shadows at dusk. I'd been here countless times before, but this was different—like eyes were boring into me from somewhere unseen. I scanned the clearing, searching for an intruder, but only the regular rustle of leaves greeted me.

“Get a grip, Arlet.” I chided myself for letting old ghosts haunt me in broad daylight. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling. It was as if my past had sprouted legs and followed me here, ready to leap out from behind a tree and drag me back to a life I'd fought hard to leave behind.

With a deep breath, I stood up and stretched, my movements deliberately casual. My hand rested on the pepper spray in my pocket—a habit from a former life that I couldn't quite kick. The woods were safe; I reminded myself. The real dangers lay in human hearts and dark alleyways back in New York.

I packed away my notebook and started back toward the path that would lead me out of the forest. As I walked, my senses stayed on high alert, attuned to every snap of a twig or whisper of movement in the underbrush. Birds still sang their carefree tunes, oblivious to the tension knotting in my gut.

It wasn't long before I emerged from the tree line and into the warm embrace of sunlight. The field station came into view, its wooden structure a beacon of modernity amidst nature's domain. My colleagues would be there—real people with genuine smiles and no hidden agendas. People who knew me only as Arlet Rune.

As much as I tried to immerse myself in this new world and identity, remnants of my old life clung to me like cobwebs—sticky and stubborn. But here was my chance at redemption; here was where I could make a real difference.

I pushed through the door of the field station, greeted by the hum of activity with researchers poring over maps, discussing conservation strategies with

fervor that matched any high-stakes deal from my past life.

“Arlet! Just in time.” Sarah waved as she caught sight of me entering.

I smiled at her, grateful for her enthusiasm and for pulling me back into the present moment.

“We’re just about to review some data from the tracking collars we placed last month,” she said while gesturing toward a large screen displaying maps dotted with colorful blips.

The room filled with passionate voices debating corridors for wildlife migration and protective measures for endangered species. It was invigorating to be part of something so vital and pure—an endeavor that sought no power or retribution, but only to preserve beauty for generations yet unborn.

As we huddled around tables littered with charts and notes, that unsettling feeling from the forest dissipated like mist under the morning sun. Yet, even surrounded by this camaraderie and purpose, there remained a whisper at the edge of my consciousness—a reminder that shadows don’t always need darkness to exist.

I threw myself into discussions with fervor, determined not to let paranoia disrupt this new life I was building. But even as we laid plans for a brighter future for these woods and their inhabitants, I couldn’t help but glance occasionally at the windows overlooking the forest that had become both sanctuary and source of unease.

CHAPTER 2



*H*ayze

Leaves crunched underfoot, but not mine. Mine were silent, a whisper against the forest floor as I moved, invisible among the towering firs and cedars. I kept my gaze fixed on Arlet; her form a stark contrast to the wild greenery around her. Her hand trailed along the rough bark of a tree, her eyes wide with the wonder of this new world she had embraced.

I admired her. She walked with resilience, her chin held high when she assumed she was alone. Arlet wasn't merely surviving; she was actively making this place her own. And I, Hayze Russel, protected this life she had found.

She knelt by a cluster of wildflowers, jotting notes in a small book she'd pulled from her backpack. A gust of wind tugged at her hair, pulling strands across her face. She brushed them away with an impatient hand, never taking her eyes off the petals and leaves she studied so intently.

From my vantage point among the shadows, I could see every line of concentration etched into her forehead, every subtle movement speaking volumes of her focus and passion for the work that brought her here. I was told to be a phantom, an unseen protector to step in only if dire circumstances called for it. A guardian against the darkness that might reach out for her from hidden corners of the world—or perhaps from her past.

She stood again, stretching out limbs that had been still for too long. Her head tilted back as she took in a deep breath of the crisp forest air. It was then that she paused, a slight furrow between her brows. She glanced over her shoulder, scanning the trees. Could she sense me? A flicker of amusement warmed my chest; humans were often more perceptive than we originally thought.

But then she shook off the feeling and continued on her path, deeper into the thicket, where dappled sunlight played tricks with vision and where silence reigned supreme.

I followed at a distance that allowed me to see without being seen. My footsteps remained silent; my presence was nothing more than a passing shadow amidst the many that danced between sunbeams and leaves.

It wasn't part of my directive to appreciate anything about Arlet beyond what was necessary to protect her. But as I watched her stop by a babbling brook, kneel to collect water samples with hands that did not tremble or hesitate despite their delicate appearance—I took in more than just her beauty.

There was strength there too; strength and beauty intertwined like vines around an ancient tree trunk. And as much as I tried to remain detached—the stoic sentinel from Thion J5—I couldn't deny that something about Arlet resonated within me: an admiration for this human who carried on with such purpose in a world that was not quite hers but would be soon enough if she had any say in it.

I shifted my weight slightly, my bronze skin catching none of the fading light as day surrendered to the evening's approach. And there I remained—a silent guardian watching over Arlet as she mapped out a future in which she didn't even know I existed.

The sterile light of the *Monsters for Hire* agency office glinted off the metal furnishings, a stark reminder of my composition—a being forged, not born. Across from me sat the agent, his features as bland as the room itself.

“Your assignment,” he began, sliding a manila envelope across the desk. “It's a protection detail. Lifetime offer.”

I stared at the envelope, my bronze skin reflecting on its glossy surface. “A

sentinel for a human? That's child's play."

He leaned back in his chair, a calculated movement designed to feign indifference. "Not just any human. This one has a price on her head."

I picked up the envelope with an expression that remained unreadable, despite my inner turmoil. "What's her story?"

"You don't need the details," he replied curtly.

But I needed them. It was the details that made me choose which assignments to take. It was the details that told me if the cause was just.

"Try me."

He sighed, his eyes locking onto mine. "Fine. Her name is Arlet. She had a different name formerly."

My gaze didn't waver from his as I processed this information. "Formerly?"

"A witness protection situation," he continued, folding his hands together on the table. "Now she's trying to start fresh in the Pacific Northwest."

The room grew colder suddenly, or perhaps it was a chill from within—a reaction to the weight of her plight.

"And why would Monsters for Hire care about one human's fresh start?"

"Because," he said, leaning forward now, "the ones she testified against aren't human."

That caught my attention.

"Who then?" I asked.

"Let's just say they have resources that extend beyond our planet's borders."

I pondered this new information, turning it over in my mind like a puzzle piece seeking its place in the grander scheme of things.

"You'd be her shadow," he added, watching me closely. "Her silent guardian angel, if you will."

The thought was oddly appealing—protecting someone without their

knowledge, ensuring their safety while allowing them to live freely.

“And if I refuse?” I asked, though the decision took root within me.

He shrugged. “We find someone else who can move with your level of stealth and control over the elements.”

“No,” I said before I fully realized I had spoken aloud. “I’ll do it.”

The agent smiled thinly—a business smile that held no warmth but plenty of satisfaction.

“You start immediately,” he said as he stood up and extended his hand.

I didn’t take it; instead, I pocketed the envelope and rose from my seat.

“I need no further instructions,” I stated firmly. “For being unseen, there’s none better than me.”

As I exited the agency and stepped into the thrumming heart of city life outside, my mind was already shifting gears. Arlet’s safety was now my purpose—a purpose given not by creation but by choice. And as I made my way to her new world hidden within nature’s embrace, I knew this task would redefine what it meant for me to exist among humans.

In protecting her, perhaps I would find something worth protecting within myself as well—a semblance of humanity that Thion J5 could never have instilled in me with all its advanced technology and cold logic.

Perched on a sturdy branch high above the ground, I watched Arlet from my secluded vantage point. The leaves formed a natural screen, allowing me an unobstructed view while I remained cloaked in the foliage’s embrace. She stood outside the environmental research center, her laughter mingling with that of her colleagues—a sound as bright and clear as the mountain streams that cut through these woods.

She had a way about her that drew people in. Her gestures were animated as she spoke about something with fervor—her hands painting the air with her words. Her colleagues nodded, their faces alight with interest and occasional bursts of shared amusement. Even from this distance, I could see the genuine smiles she inspired in those around her.

There was an ease to her interactions, a fluidity that belied the fact she was still the unfamiliar face among them. Arlet wove herself into the fabric of their small community like a skilled artisan, blending threads until the pattern accepted her as part of its design. It was a skill that fascinated me; to adapt and blend so seamlessly required a keen understanding of human nature—something I was still learning to grasp.

She leaned back against a table strewn with maps and documents, sipping from a mug I presumed held coffee—a human addiction to warmth and caffeine I found curious. Her eyes scanned the documents before her, the light of intelligence in them unmistakable. She pointed to a section on one map, engaging in what appeared to be a serious discussion about their next project.

I couldn't hear their words from where I watched, but it wasn't necessary. Body language spoke volumes more than spoken language ever could. The way her colleagues leaned in toward her, how they nodded and gestured—they respected her thoughts and valued her input.

Despite this new beginning and all its challenges, Arlet had not only found her footing; she was running.

I shifted my weight slightly on the branch, my bronze skin blending perfectly with the tree's bark. My presence was unnecessary here—her colleagues posed no threat. Yet still I observed, fulfilling my role as sentinel. It was duty that kept me here, but also something more—an admiration for this woman who navigated through life's currents with such grace.

The group broke into laughter again at something Arlet said. She threw back her head, allowing herself a moment of unrestrained joy. The sound resonated through the clearing and up into my hidden perch, stirring something within me—a sense of connection to this place and its people that I hadn't expected.

I noted each person there: their faces, their mannerisms—their potential to harm or help Arlet. It was all part of my job to ensure nothing disrupted the delicate balance she had created here.

As the gathering dispersed, Arlet stayed behind to gather up the papers on the table. She stacked them neatly, sliding them into a folder with care that suggested reverence for the work she was undertaking. Then she turned and

started walking toward the forest path—the one that would eventually lead her past my hidden position.

My muscles tensed in anticipation—not for action, but for observation as she approached. Her steps were confident yet unhurried; every move she made spoke of someone who had learned to find peace in each breath and step forward despite past turbulence.

And there I remained—silent and watchful—as Arlet passed below me on her journey deeper into both the forest and her new life.

Night fell like a thick curtain over the forest, its darkness an old friend to me. I circled Arlet's cabin, my feet leaving no trace on the dew-kissed earth. The moon, a slender crescent, provided scant illumination, but my eyes cut through the gloom with keen night vision.

My nightly patrols became routine—a ritual that grounded me in this world so different from the sterile environment of Thion J5. The sounds of nocturnal creatures and the soft rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze punctuated the silence of the night only.

As I moved, I remained ever vigilant, my senses extended to detect any threat that might approach. It was then I caught the distinct musk of a predator—a cougar drawn to the scent of human habitation. Its padded steps were cautious, stealthy, a mirror of my own.

With a silent command to the earth beneath me, I called forth a subtle vibration—enough to unsettle the creature without causing harm. The cougar paused, its ears twitching as it scanned its surroundings with wide, reflective eyes. Another gentle pulse from beneath the ground sent it bounding away into the darkness. It would hunt elsewhere tonight.

Arlet remained oblivious inside her cabin, her safety intact for another night. A faint smile crossed my lips as I resumed my patrol, but it quickly faded as solitude wrapped around me once more.

Loneliness was not an emotion I enjoyed; yet here among these ancient trees and under this vast sky, I could not deny its existence within me. Talos came for a purpose, not companionship—our lives were solitary by design.

The irony did not escape me; here I was on Earth, tasked with protecting a

human who was forging connections with others while I remained in her shadow—an invisible sentinel.

I paused by a large pine tree, placing a hand against its rough bark. The living pulse of the tree resonated against my bronze skin—a stark reminder that this planet thrived on connection and life in all forms.

Arlet had sparked an unexpected curiosity within me—a desire to understand what drove her passion for conservation and research. There was an authenticity to her actions that challenged my perceptions of humans as self-centered beings.

I glanced back at her cabin, where a single light still glowed through the window. She was up late again, no doubt immersed in her work or perhaps lost in thoughts of her own past—a past she sought to leave behind just as I sought an understanding of this new existence.

My gaze lingered on that window before turning back to the forest. This connection to Earth and its inhabitants—it was unfamiliar territory for someone like me. Yet as each day passed, I found myself more attuned not only to Arlet, but also to the natural world she fought so fiercely to protect.

I continued my silent circuit around her home, always close enough to intervene yet far enough to grant her the illusion of solitude. As much as I protected her from physical threats, I also guarded her right to live freely—without fear or awareness of my constant presence.

It was a strange duality that defined my existence now: guardian and observer, protector and ghost. And as dawn's first light touched the horizon, heralding another day on this vibrant planet, I couldn't help but wonder what revelations it might bring—for Arlet and for myself.

CHAPTER 3



*A*rllet

The morning mist hung heavy between the trees, their branches stretching skyward like skeletal fingers. I wove through the forest, a familiar path etched into my boots' soles, the scent of pine and damp earth mingling in my nostrils. A red-tailed hawk screeched overhead, its cry piercing the quiet. My hands, gloved against the chill, clutched a clipboard to my chest—a shield of sorts against the unknown.

For days now, a prickling sensation had crawled along my spine whenever I ventured too deep into the woods. I couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on me, tracking my every move. Today was different; today, I'd confront whatever—or whoever—had taken such an interest in me.

With a steadying breath, I laid out my plan. The trap wasn't elaborate; it didn't need to be. Nature was on my side. I gathered fallen branches and leaves, creating a semblance of a trail that veered off from my usual route. Hidden beneath a layer of detritus, I placed my old smartphone set to record any movement.

Nearby, I scattered some berries and nuts—irresistible to local fauna and hopefully distracting enough for whoever was tailing me. The slightest disturbance would send a notification to my watch, a simple but effective alarm system.

Satisfied with my handiwork, I retreated to a natural alcove formed by two large boulders and an ancient cedar tree. The perfect vantage point. From here, I could see the faux trail and still have a clear view of the surrounding area.

I nestled into my hideaway, patience becoming my closest companion as the forest continued its symphony around me—the rustling leaves playing percussion to the woodpecker’s rhythm section. Hours might pass before anything took the bait, but time was something I had learned to master.

A chipmunk scampered across the forest floor, its tiny paws skittering over fallen pine needles as it made its way toward the bait. My eyes remained fixed on the creature for only a moment before scanning beyond it for any sign of movement that didn’t belong.

As shadows lengthened and daylight waned, tension coiled within me tighter than the ivy that clung to nearby trunks. My ears strained for any sound out of place: a step too heavy for any woodland creature or breath too ragged against the silent backdrop.

Then it came—a vibration against my wrist so faint it could have been mistaken for the shiver that often accompanied the twilight chill. My eyes darted to my watch; someone or something had triggered the trap.

Heart hammering in anticipation, I edged closer to the opening between boulders and peered out with bated breath. The smartphone lay undisturbed from where I could see it; yet something had activated it—a shadow passing, or perhaps more?

Silence settled back over the forest like snow upon mountaintops as I waited with every muscle tensed for revelation. The mystery observer had made their move; now it was time for mine.

My fingers coiled into the damp moss beneath me, a feeble attempt to ground myself as the sensation on my wrist subsided. I had laid the trap with a mix of scientific curiosity and the self-preserving tactics learned from a past life I longed to forget. Now, the moment of truth loomed like a thunderhead on the horizon.

The forest’s ambient noise had dimmed to a whisper, as if every creature held

its breath in collective anticipation. My own breaths came in shallow gasps, my body primed for flight at the first sign of danger.

I dared not blink as I scanned the woods for the source of the disturbance. My gaze darted from tree to tree, seeking any hint of movement, any clue to unveil my shadowy sentinel. That's when I saw him—or it—emerging from between two towering pines like a wraith given form.

He stood taller than any man I'd ever seen, his skin shimmering with an otherworldly bronze hue that caught the dying light and refracted it back into the world. His presence was at once magnificent and terrifying—a creature sculpted from earth and metal, something born of myth rather than flesh and blood.

My heart thundered against my ribs, fear and fascination warring within me. This Talos monster before me was no figment of an overactive imagination; he was as real as the chill seeping through my clothing. For a fleeting second, I wondered if he harmed me, his stature and silent approach speaking of danger as clearly as any weapon.

But his eyes—his eyes held no malice. Instead, they were pools of deep curiosity, mirroring my own. In them, I saw intelligence and something akin to loneliness. It was enough to temper my fear with a thread of empathy.

“Who are you?” The words spilled from me in a rush, my voice barely above a whisper but slicing through the quiet like a blade.

He tilted his head slightly, considering my question, or perhaps considering me. “I am Hayze Russel,” he said at last, his voice resonant like wind through chimes. “Your guardian.”

My guardian? The notion sent a fresh wave of shock through me. A myriad of questions pressed against my lips—how, why, who had sent him—but they remained unspoken as I tried to reconcile this revelation with the world I thought I knew.

“You've been watching me,” I stated more than asked, pulling myself up to full height without breaking eye contact. “Why?”

“To protect you,” Hayze replied simply. It wasn't enough; it couldn't be enough. Yet, in that moment, all thoughts of demanding further answers

faded under the weight of his gaze.

I remained perched on my feet, muscles coiled tight as springs ready to uncoil at any second. Every instinct screamed at me to run—to flee this enigma that stood before me—but another part resisted a strange urge to understand him, to know why our paths had crossed.

In that twilight standoff between fear and intrigue, between running and reaching out, I knew only one thing for certain: life in this quiet corner of the Pacific Northwest was far from ordinary—and perhaps so was I.

The woods hushed around us as if they, too, were straining to hear the truth spill from Hayze's lips. His gaze never wavered, those eyes holding mine with an almost tangible intensity.

"I was born on Thion J5," he began, his voice a low thrum that seemed to harmonize with the forest's quiet murmur. "A cyborg planet forged beings like me for distinct purposes. My skin, this bronze you see, is not just a covering—it's an armor made for resilience, for protection."

I drew my coat tighter around me, the chill in the air suddenly biting deeper. My rational mind reeled at his words—a cyborg planet? Beings forged for purpose? Yet the earnestness in his voice pinned me in place.

"And your purpose... is to protect me?" I asked, the skepticism in my tone belying the shiver of intrigue that ran down my spine.

"Yes," he affirmed with a nod that seemed to carry the weight of worlds. "The agency I work for—*Monsters for Hire*—they tasked me with guarding you. There's more at stake than you realize."

I swallowed hard, my mind racing as I processed his revelation. *Monsters for Hire* sounded like something out of a B-movie, not the reality of someone trying to make a fresh start in life. But then again, here stood Hayze—a living testament that the universe was broader and stranger than I'd ever imagined.

"Why me? I'm nobody special; just someone trying to forget her past and do some good in this world."

He tilted his head slightly, studying me as though I were one of the curious specimens I often cataloged in my research. "You underestimate your impact,

Arlet Rune—or should I say, Charlotte Bruno?”

My breath caught at the mention of my former name—a ghost from a life I’d fled. “How do you know about that?” I whispered, lost amid the rustling leaves.

“The agency knows much,” Hayze replied cryptically. “Your past made you a target. My job is to ensure your present—and future—are secure.”

I was rooted to the spot, torn between incredulity and an innate sense that he spoke the truth. Part of me wanted to dismiss him as a delusion or trickery; another part resonated with an inexplicable trust in his solemn promise.

“And if I choose not to believe you?” The challenge hung between us, my defiance masking the tremor of fear that threatened to surface.

Hayze’s expression softened slightly. “That is your right. But belief does not alter reality. Threats exist if we acknowledge them.”

The forest seemed to lean in closer, as if eager for my response. In this strange communion with nature and the supernatural being before me, I wrestled with a lifetime of skepticism against the visceral intuition urging me to trust this... guardian.

My hand moved almost of its own accord towards him—a gesture seeking proof or perhaps connection. The moment our fingers brushed, a jolt of static electricity passed between us—startling but not unpleasant.

“You’re real,” I breathed out, more statement than realization.

“As real as your determination to start anew,” Hayze confirmed. “And just as committed to seeing it through.”

A myriad of questions still clawed at my mind—how he found me, what threats loomed over my head—but they would have to wait. For now, this peculiar encounter had drawn back a curtain on my new world, revealing layers and complexities I hadn’t expected.

So I stood there with Hayze in the gathering dusk—my shadow guard—and let silence wrap around us once more than I pondered what it meant to be under the watchful eye of a Talos monster who claimed he was here for my

protection.

My breath misted in the air, the surrounding forest a theater of shadows and whispers. Hayze stood before me, his very existence a challenge to everything I thought I knew about the world. His revelation hung heavy between us, a secret tether binding us together in the waning light.

“You’re real,” I murmured, still reeling from the touch that sparked between us—a confirmation of his physicality and perhaps of our fated connection.

“As real as your determination to start anew,” he echoed back with a steadiness that belied the strangeness of our encounter.

I couldn’t deny the truth of his words. My past as Charlotte Bruno—a life steeped in danger and opulence—was as undeniable as the man... no, the being before me. And now, this new life I’d carved out as Arlet Rune intertwined with his.

The sense of being watched that had dogged my steps for days had materialized into Hayze, an enigmatic protector whose mission was to guard me. But from what? The threats I’d fled from in New York or something even more sinister? A shiver ran down my spine, not from the cold, but from the possibilities that loomed in the dark corners of my mind.

“An ally,” I whispered to myself, more than to him. The idea was ludicrous—how could this Talos monster be an ally? Yet something in his demeanor suggested he was not an enemy, either. There was a quiet strength about him, a sense of purpose that resonated with my drive to forge an alternative path.

His eyes held mine, unwavering. “Yes,” he said, as if reading my thoughts. “An ally.”

It rolled strangely off my tongue, foreign yet fitting for this unlikely sentinel who had come into my life unbidden. The surrounding trees seemed to hold their breath, awaiting my next words.

“Why should I trust you?” I asked, my voice steady. It was a fair question—one that anyone in my position would ask. After all, trust was a commodity I could ill afford to squander.

“You shouldn’t,” he said simply. “Not yet. Trust isn’t a gift, it’s earned.”

His honesty surprised me; it was an unexpected admission from someone who claimed to be my guardian. It told me more about him than any reassurance ever could.

“What happens now?” I ventured further into this new reality unfolding before me.

“Now,” Hayze replied with a tilt of his head toward the darkening sky, “we ensure your safety as you continue your work here.”

“And you’ll just... what? Hover around like some ghost?” I couldn’t help the edge of sarcasm that crept into my voice despite myself.

A faint smile touched his lips—a brief flash of humanity on his otherwise stoic face. “I will be your shadow,” he clarified. “Unseen but ever-present.”

The notion unsettled me—this constant vigilance from someone I barely knew—but it also provided an odd comfort. In a world where danger had once been a daily companion, perhaps having Hayze as a hidden shield was a luxury I could grow accustomed to.

“Fine,” I conceded with a nod, folding my arms across my chest as if to ward off further surprises. “But no more lurking in the shadows without warning me first.”

“Agreed.” His response came without hesitation—a pact sealed in the silence of our secluded meeting place.

The forest exhaled as night fell completely; creatures called out to one another, reclaiming their domain now that our conversation had ended. And there we stood—Arlet Rune and Hayze Russel—two beings from vastly different worlds brought together by circumstance and necessity.

As we parted ways for the evening, each retreating into our respective solitudes, I grappled with this new partnership that fate had thrust upon me. Despite everything—the shock, the uncertainty—I sensed an unexpected ally in Hayze, one who might just help me navigate this uncharted territory of second chances and shadow guards.

CHAPTER 4



*H*ayze

With my feet planted firmly on the forest floor, I watched Arlet's every move. The moment I stepped out of the shadows, the game changed. I had broken protocol—Monsters for Hire wasn't in the business of introductions. We worked best undetected. Yet here I was, exposed.

Arlet returned to her work, but her demeanor had shifted. The lines of her body, once tense with an unknown fear, now relaxed slightly with the knowledge of my presence. Her focus was sharper, her movements through the forest more confident. It was as if knowing a pair of unseen eyes belonged to a guardian rather than a threat freed her from some weight I hadn't realized she carried.

Why did I trust her? It wasn't just her resilience that struck me—it was that innate sense of trust she seemed to emanate. A trust that pulled at me, compelling me to step into the light. A Talos didn't have such lapses in judgment, but then again, Arlet wasn't your typical human.

She knelt by a stream, collecting samples with hands that were steady despite our recent encounter. The way she treated each vial with care spoke volumes about her dedication to preserving these lands.

“You will tell no one about me, are you?” My voice cut through the silence between us.

Arlet paused, a small smile playing on her lips before she replied without looking up. “And risk them thinking I’m insane? No, your secret’s safe.”

I chuckled at her pragmatism.

She continued her work, and I observed from a respectful distance. She’d glance over her shoulder at me—a silent acknowledgement of my presence.

It was during one of those moments that she stumbled upon an illegal poacher’s trap hidden beneath a pile of leaves. Fury ignited in her eyes—a fierce protector of nature’s sanctity.

“Damn it,” she muttered under her breath as she worked to dismantle the snare.

“Need help?” I offered.

Arlet shook her head. “No, I’ve got it.” And true to her word, she did—her fingers deftly unhooking and unwinding until the trap lay harmless on the ground.

As she stood and surveyed the area for more threats to the wildlife she so loved, something akin to pride swelled within me. This human was remarkable in ways I hadn’t expected when I accepted this assignment.

The forest seemed to hum with life around us—the chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves in the wind—yet all my senses tuned to Arlet. She moved with purpose now, eyes scanning for any other dangers lurking unseen.

She spoke little as we continued through the woods together; neither did I. Words seemed unnecessary when actions spoke so clearly.

The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting elongated shadows that danced around us as if celebrating this unusual alliance between human and Talos monster. For a moment, I allowed myself to forget my solitary existence and bask in the companionship that working alongside Arlet provided.

As we headed back toward her cabin with dusk approaching, there was a quiet understanding between us—a partnership formed not out of necessity but out of mutual respect and an unspoken promise to protect what mattered most.

The cabin loomed ahead, its windows glowing warmly against the encroaching night. Arlet strode ahead, her steps surer now that she was back on familiar ground.

“Come on,” she called over her shoulder, “I don’t bite. Much.”

I hesitated, surprised by the invitation. Entering her space crossed an invisible line, but curiosity—and something I couldn’t quite name—drew me forward.

The interior of the cabin was cozy, a stark contrast to the wildness of the forest we’d just left behind. Arlet hung her jacket and gestured to a chair at a small wooden table.

“Sit,” she instructed as she busied herself with setting a kettle on the stove. “I could use some insight from someone who knows these woods better than I do.”

Perching tentatively on the edge of the offered seat, I watched her movements. The kettle whistled with readiness as she poured two mugs of tea and set one in front of me.

“So,” she started, wrapping her hands around her own mug, “tell me about yourself. What’s it like being... you know, not human?”

I pondered the question for a moment before answering. “Different,” I said finally. “There’s a lot I’m still learning about your world.”

She nodded, taking a sip from her mug. “And your abilities? You said you can call up the elements?”

I could sense where this was going—her researcher’s mind piecing together how my talents might serve her work.

“Yes,” I replied cautiously. “But why do you ask?”

Arlet set her mug down and leaned forward. “I’ve been studying patterns in local wildlife behavior. There are anomalies I can’t explain—shifts in migration routes, unusual foraging patterns... If you can really sense the elements, maybe you’ve noticed something I haven’t.”

My respect for her deepened as I recognized the passion in her voice. This wasn’t just a job to her; it was a calling.

“I’ve noticed changes in the earth,” I admitted. “Subtle shifts that most wouldn’t notice.”

Her eyes lit up with interest. “Like what?”

“There are places where the ground is more alive—areas that draw animals to them.” As I spoke, images of specific spots in the forest came to mind—places where life thrived more abundantly.

“Could you show me these places?” Her voice held a note of excitement.

I hesitated before nodding slowly. To guide her to those spots would be to share secrets of my connection with this planet—a connection I wasn’t sure I fully understood myself.

“We’ll have to be careful,” I warned her. “These areas are delicate; human presence could easily disrupt them.”

Arlet’s nod was solemn, understanding the gravity of my words. “I’ll follow your lead.”

We sat in silence for a moment before she spoke again.

“You’re helping me more than you realize, Hayze.” Her gaze held mine—a silent thank you passing between us.

“It’s my job to protect you,” I said simply, but it was becoming more than that.

Arlet rose from her seat and moved to a shelf lined with maps and field notes. She spread one out on the table between us—a topographical representation of our stretch of forest—and pointed to several areas marked with handwritten notes.

“These are my current study sites,” she explained, looking up at me expectantly.

Leaning forward, I studied the map before pointing out a few unmarked regions. “Start here,” I suggested softly. “You might find what you’re looking for.”

She scribbled notes beside each area I showed her before turning back to me

with renewed vigor shining in her eyes.

“Thank you, Hayze.” Arlet’s gratitude was genuine; it warmed something inside me that had long been cold.

Our discussion meandered through the intricacies of her research, touching on the subtle patterns and myriad possibilities that lay hidden within the data. As the minutes stretched into hours, the nature of our relationship subtly shifted, transforming with each exchanged theory and insight.

“I never realized the forest held such complexities,” I mused aloud, my voice a low rumble of wonder.

Arlet chuckled, her eyes alight with the thrill of discovery. “Every tree, every leaf, it’s all connected in a delicate dance. You see, the rhythm of it after a while.”

I nodded, the gesture slow and deliberate. “It’s akin to understanding a new language, one spoken by the earth itself.”

She leaned back in her chair, considering my words. “Exactly. And once you’re fluent, the secrets it holds unfold before you.”

The revelation that we were no longer merely sentinel and charge, but collaborators—perhaps even friends—settled over us with the gentle finality of dusk. It was a partnership neither of us had foreseen, built on mutual respect and an unexpected camaraderie. Our shared secrets, whispered beneath the watchful gaze of twilight’s canopy, sealed the bond.

As Arlet and I pored over her maps and notes, the connection between us growing stronger with each shared discovery, I couldn’t shake the prickling sensation at the back of my neck. My instincts, honed by years of sentinel training, were never wrong. Danger was close.

I stood abruptly, causing Arlet to look up with a frown. “What is it?”

“Stay here,” I instructed, my voice taut with urgency.

Before she could protest, I slipped out of the cabin and into the cool embrace of the night. The forest greeted me with its usual chorus of nocturnal sounds, but beneath it all was a discordant note that set my teeth on edge.

My senses extended outwards, searching for the source of the disturbance. There—northwest, where the trees grew dense and shadows pooled like spilled ink on the forest floor. My feet carried me swiftly in that direction, silent as a ghost.

A low growl reached my ears before I saw them—poachers, armed and creeping through the underbrush. Their malicious intent was a tangible thing that made my skin crawl with disgust.

I hesitated for a fraction of a second. Revealing myself could compromise everything. But as they moved closer to where Arlet and I had been working earlier, I knew I had no choice.

Summoning the elements to my aid, I reached deep into the earth beneath their feet. With a mere thought, roots and vines sprang from the ground, ensnaring ankles and wrenching weapons from greedy hands.

The poachers cried out in shock and fear as my command of nature dragged them down. Their panic was music to my ears—a symphony of retribution for their transgressions against this land.

Once it immobilized them, I stepped into their view. Their eyes widened at the sight of me—bronze skin gleaming in the moonlight, an avenging force conjured from their nightmares.

“You’ll find your traps disabled,” I said coldly. “Leave this place and do not return.”

They nodded vigorously, terror rendering them speechless as I released them from my earthen grasp. They scrambled away into the darkness, tripping over themselves in their haste to escape.

With a sigh, I turned back toward Arlet’s cabin. There would be questions now—questions I wasn’t sure I was ready to answer.

Arlet met me at the door with wide eyes. “Hayze? What happened? Are you —”

“I’m fine,” I cut her off before she could finish. “But we had visitors.”

Her gaze sharpened with understanding. “Poachers?”

I nodded once.

Arlet stepped aside to let me in before closing the door behind us. The warmth of the cabin did little to ease the tension coiling in my gut.

“How did you...?” She trailed off as if unsure how to phrase her question.

“I called upon the earth,” I replied simply.

She studied me for a long moment before speaking again. “Thank you for protecting this place—and me.”

“It’s what I’m here for.” But even with it, we both knew it wasn’t just about duty anymore.

Arlet crossed her arms over her chest. “And how many times have you done this without me knowing?”

“A few,” I admitted reluctantly.

She let out a slow breath. “Hayze, your abilities... they’re incredible.”

“I have certain advantages,” I conceded with a shrug which was too casual for what we were discussing.

Arlet moved closer until she stood right in front of me. Her gaze was intense but not fearful—a mixture of gratitude and curiosity that seemed to pull me in.

“You’re not just here to be my shadow,” she stated firmly. “You’re here to be my ally.”

I couldn’t deny it any longer; our bond had become something far stronger than either of us had expected when this arrangement began.

“Yes,” I said—the word feeling like a vow between us.

The silence that followed wasn’t uncomfortable but filled with unspoken promises—a pledge to stand together against whatever threats might come our way. As we stood there in the cabin’s soft light, whatever lay ahead, we would face it side by side.

CHAPTER 5



*A*rlet

The forest was still, as if holding its breath. Hayze stood there, an enigma cloaked in the shadows of towering pines. The silence between us stretched like the expanse of wilderness that separated my old life from this new, uncharted existence.

“I want to... Can I touch your skin?” My voice broke the quiet, tentative yet driven by a hunger for understanding this connection that sparked between us.

His lips curved into a half-smile, the gesture softening the hard lines of his otherworldly face. “It may feel cold, but I am very much alive.”

My hand reached out, trembling slightly with a cocktail of fear and fascination. As my fingers brushed against the bronze of his arm, the coolness was a balm to my racing pulse. But then, a warmth blossomed beneath my touch, spreading like wildfire through my veins. My breath hitched in surprise, and I looked up to see a similar astonishment mirrored in Hayze’s eyes.

“Your skin...” I whispered, unable to find words that could encompass the experience.

“It’s never reacted this way.” His voice was a low rumble, resonating with

the same warmth that now pulsed from his arm.

Compelled by a force I couldn't name, I moved my hand to his chest. Through the fabric of his shirt, heat radiated as if his heart were a forge and our connection the flame fueling it.

Hayze's hand enveloped mine, his grip firm yet gentle. He peered into my eyes with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. There was a universe in those depths—a vast expanse of stars and secrets that I yearned to explore.

I leaned forward, drawn by an invisible tether that pulled me closer to his lips. Our kiss was soft, a whisper of possibility that lingered just long enough to kindle desire within me. But reality crashed in like a wave against the shore, and I retreated slightly, our lips parting but still inches apart.

My heart hammered against my ribs as if trying to escape its bony cage. The feelings unfurling within me were wildflowers—untamed and vibrant—bursting forth after a long winter.

“Hayze,” I breathed out his name like a prayer or perhaps a spell meant to anchor me to this moment when everything shifted.

He didn't speak but held my gaze as if he too was navigating uncharted territories within himself. The air between us crackled with energy—a current only we could feel—and in that silent exchange, I understood that whatever path lay ahead would be the one we'd traverse together.

The forest had always been a place of solace for me, a sanctuary where the whispering leaves and the rich, earthy scent of the undergrowth spoke of ancient secrets and timeless wisdom. But now, as I stood beside Hayze, the forest was different—alive with a new energy that pulsed between us like a heartbeat.

I saw Hayze not just as my shadowy protector, but as a partner in my quest to safeguard these woods. My heart stirred at his presence, a sensation that was both exhilarating and unsettling. I wasn't sure what it meant or where it might lead, but for now, I was content to let it unfold, petal by petal.

We worked side by side, collecting soil samples and documenting the flora and fauna that made this ecosystem so unique. His knowledge of the natural world was vast and intuitive, his eyes catching subtle signs that I would have

missed..

“This way,” he’d say, guiding me toward hidden groves where rare plants thrived and to crystal-clear streams teeming with life. It was as if he were part of the forest itself, attuned to its rhythms and needs.

We broke our silent communion when we stumbled upon a clearing that shouldn’t have been there. The sight that greeted us was like a wound on the land—trees felled haphazardly, their trunks strewn across the ground like discarded matchsticks.

Anger flared within me. “Illegal loggers,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

Hayze’s eyes narrowed, and a low growl rumbled in his throat. “We need evidence,” he said with quiet determination.

I nodded, my mind racing. We had to act quickly and discreetly; confronting them was out of the question. I pulled out my camera and began snapping photos of the devastation—the tire tracks marring the soil with the chainsaws left carelessly on the ground.

Hayze moved with silent grace through the trees, gathering physical evidence without leaving a trace of our presence. His hands were deft as he collected bark fragments and soil displaced by heavy machinery.

“We should set up trail cameras,” I suggested. “If we can catch them in action...”

“I’ll place them high,” Hayze agreed. Hayze agreed and placed them high so that no one would see them.

As we worked to set up our covert surveillance system, every snapped twig or rustle in the underbrush sent adrenaline coursing through my veins. The danger was real, but so was our resolve.

Hayze climbed trees with an agility that left me in awe, securing cameras in positions that would offer clear views of the clearing without being obvious to anyone below.

Once we finished, we retreated into the shadows to wait. The tension hung thick between us as we watched from our hiding spot. Time crawled by until

finally—footsteps approached.

Men entered the clearing, their laughter grating against my nerves as they called out to one another, oblivious to our watchful eyes.

Hayze's hand found mine in the dark, a silent promise of protection. I squeezed back—a wordless vow of my commitment to this cause that had brought us together under such strange circumstances.

As the loggers began their destructive work once more, our cameras clicked away quietly in the canopy above them. Evidence gathered pixel by pixel—a testimony to greed's disregard for nature's sanctity.

There was no conversation between us. We forged our partnership with purpose and an unspoken understanding that ran deeper than words could express.

Hidden within the embrace of ancient cedars, I watched Hayze work with a reverence that swelled in my chest. He was a guardian, not just of me but of this entire living entity we call the forest. His hands moved with purpose, setting up cameras with such finesse they became one with the bark and leaves.

“Remarkable,” I murmured under my breath.

His eyes flicked to mine, the corners crinkling with a silent chuckle. “You're not so bad yourself, Arlet Rune.”

I couldn't help the smile that danced across my lips. The name—my real name—sounded different when he said it, as if he wrapped it in layers of unspoken trust and camaraderie.

We retreated further into the underbrush as dusk settled over the forest. The fading light wrapped us in a cloak of invisibility as we observed the men return to their nefarious work. Each snap of a branch under their boots was like a stab to my heart.

With Hayze beside me, I documented their every move, capturing evidence on camera. I tapped and swiped on my device, ensuring not to miss a single detail. The night grew colder, but our shared resolve kept the chill at bay.

Once we had enough footage, we made our way back to my cabin. Inside, Hayze and I poured over the images and videos spread across my kitchen table—each one a piece of the puzzle we were determined to solve.

“We’ll take this to the authorities first thing in the morning,” I said, conviction firm in my voice.

“And your organization,” Hayze added. “They need to see this.”

I nodded, my thoughts racing ahead to tomorrow’s challenges. But then I paused and looked at him—the mysterious Talos who had stepped out of the shadows and into my life. His presence had shifted something within me; his protective nature had become something more—a partnership rooted in respect and shared purpose.

“Hayze,” I began, unsure how to voice what was blooming inside me. “I... We make quite the team.”

He studied me for a moment before replying. “Yes, we do.” There was warmth there, something akin to pride—or perhaps it was just the reflection of my own feelings.

We spent hours planning our next steps, carefully crafting our approach to ensure our evidence would have maximum impact. It wasn’t just about exposing illegal loggers anymore; it was about protecting a piece of the world that couldn’t defend itself.

As morning light crept through the windowpanes, we were ready. We’d compiled all our documentation into a coherent report—one that told a story not just of crime but of defiance against those who would harm this place I called home.

I looked at Hayze as he stood up, stretching his tall frame. He caught my gaze and held it for an extended beat before breaking into a grin that matched my own.

“Let’s do this,” he said simply.

Together we walked out into the dawn’s early light, our steps synchronized—a human and a Talos side by side—united by purpose and strengthened by an unexpected bond that promised new beginnings for both of us and for the

forest that had brought us together.

The morning light caressed the contours of my face as I stood beside Hayze outside the cabin. We'd spent the night fighting a silent battle for the forest, and as the sun rose, like a salute to our minor victory. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of pine and a hint of the sea far off. I inhaled deeply, feeling a sense of accomplishment weave through me.

Hayze's gaze met mine, his bronze skin catching the dawn's glow. He had been an enigma, a guardian spirit who'd stepped from shadow into light, and now stood firmly in my world. His presence had sparked something new within me—a fusion of courage and vulnerability that I hadn't known I possessed.

We headed into town together, the evidence we'd gathered secure on my laptop. The drive was quiet, each of us lost in our thoughts. The hum of the engine was a steady backdrop to my racing mind as I considered what lay ahead. There was excitement bubbling inside me at the thought of making a difference, but apprehension, too. The world we were taking on was larger than us, its roots dug deep into greed and corruption.

At the sheriff's office, we laid out our case with precision. Hayze's quiet strength bolstered my resolve as I spoke to the officers, presenting our footage and photos with unwavering clarity. They listened intently, their expressions shifting from skepticism to concern as the reality of what was happening in their own backyard became undeniable.

And then it was over—the report filed, promises made to investigate and pursue those responsible. As we left the building, there was a palpable shift between us—a shared sense of purpose solidified.

“We did it,” I said once we were outside, allowing myself a small smile.

Hayze's eyes crinkled at the edges. “We did.”

The ride back was different—lighter somehow—as if by sharing our burden with those who could help, we'd lifted some of its weight from our own shoulders. The landscape rolled by in a blur of green and gold, and a profound connection to this land that became my sanctuary.

Back at my cabin, we stepped inside and without a word began cleaning up

from our night of strategizing. But there was an undercurrent of energy between us now—an awareness that buzzed softly like bees among flowers.

As I put away papers and straightened chairs, I couldn't help but steal glances at Hayze. He moved with such grace and purpose; it was mesmerizing to watch him inhabit space so completely.

“Thank you,” I said finally, breaking our comfortable silence. “For everything.”

He looked up from where he was tidying up my cluttered desk. “You don't have to thank me.”

“But I do.” My voice was firm with conviction. “You could've stayed hidden... but you stood with me.”

Hayze stepped closer, closing the gap between us until the warmth emanated from his skin. “Standing with you feels right,” he said simply.

My heart skipped at his words—a tiny dance of joy in my chest—and before I could think better of it, I closed the remaining distance between us.

His lips met mine in a kiss that felt like coming home—gentle yet full of promise. It wasn't just a meeting of mouths but of souls recognizing each other amid life's chaos—a moment both fleeting and eternal.

As we parted, breathless and smiling shyly at one another, there was no need for words. Our kiss had spoken volumes—of gratitude, connection, and a shared path forward.

I leaned back against my kitchen counter, watching Hayze as he moved around my cabin with an ease that spoke volumes about his comfort here—with me.

“Tomorrow is another day,” he said after a moment.

“Yes,” I agreed, warmth flooding through me at the thought of what *tomorrow* now meant—with Hayze by my side.

CHAPTER 6



*H*ayze

Arlet's eyes sparkled with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. She leaned in, her lips brushing against mine. An electric current ran through me, something I'd never experienced before. It was foreign, yet exhilarating.

As we kissed, she pulled me closer, her fingers tracing the contours of my chest. The sensation, both unfamiliar and enticing, took me aback. My Talos form had adapted to blend in with humans, but this was a new level of interaction.

Arlet's touch was gentle, exploratory. She savored every moment, every new discovery about my body. I responded in kind, my hands roaming over her shoulders, her waist, her hips. Each curve, each line, fascinated me.

She broke the kiss, looking up at me with a soft smile. "Is this okay?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," I replied, my voice husky. "More than okay."

She laughed then, a sound that filled me with warmth. It was a simple significant moment. In that instant, I realized I belonged here, with her. This was purpose I hadn't known before, a connection that transcended my duties as a protector.

Our lips met again, more urgent this time. Arlet's hands moved to my face,

her thumbs tracing my jawline. I marveled at the contrast between us - her delicate human form against my sturdier Talos build. Yet, there was harmony, a synchronicity that defied logic.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed in my pocket, jolting us out of our reverie. We pulled away, both breathless. Arlet looked at me, her cheeks flushed, her eyes wide.

“You should get that,” she said, her voice still husky from our kiss.

I nodded, reaching for my phone. As I answered the call, I couldn’t help but steal a glance at Arlet. She was watching me, a small smile playing on her lips. At that moment, I knew things had changed between us.

The vibration in my pocket tore me away from the moment, a stark reminder that even as I ventured into uncharted emotional territory, duty remained my shadow. Arlet’s eyes held a question as I fished the device from my pocket, and I offered her a reassuring nod before stepping away to answer.

“Hayze,” I whispered into the phone, my voice betraying none of the chaos that had just unfolded.

“Bronze, it’s Vex from the agency. We’ve got a situation,” the voice crackled with urgency. Vex was a fixer, one who only surfaced when the tides turned foul.

“What’s happening?” My gaze flickered to Arlet, who watched me with an expression of concern.

“The loggers you two exposed, they’re not taking it lying down. They’ve got connections, dangerous ones. There’s chatter—Arlet’s in deeper waters than we thought.”

A chill shot through me, more piercing than any northern wind. I thanked Vex and ended the call, pocketing the phone with a clenched jaw. Turning back to Arlet, I saw her eyes narrow, reading my posture like a seasoned scout.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Let’s talk. Inside.”

Once we were back in the cabin, I wasted no time. “The people you’re fighting against, they’re more than just illegal loggers. They have resources and aren’t afraid to play dirty.”

Her brow furrowed. “What resources?”

“The kind that makes them more than just a threat to trees.” My hands gestured vaguely, as if trying to pluck the right words from the air. “They’re coming after you.”

Arlet stiffened. “What do we do?”

I locked eyes with her. “We prepare.”

Over the next few days, our routine shifted. No longer was I just her shadow; I became her coach, her mentor. Each morning before dawn broke over the forest canopy, we began with the basics—how to fall without injury, how to strike effectively.

“Keep your wrist straight,” I instructed as Arlet threw another punch at the pad I held. “Good. Now pivot on your back foot when you hit.”

She exhaled sharply with each blow, her determination palpable in the chilly morning air. Her resilience was like steel tempered by fire—unyielding yet adaptable.

Afternoons were for awareness training; sharpening her senses became as crucial as honing her reflexes. “You need to feel your environment,” I explained as we walked through dense underbrush. “Every sound, every movement can tell you something important.”

Arlet listened intently to my instructions, absorbing each lesson like parched earth soaks up rainwater.

As twilight descended one evening after an intense session of sparring and strategy discussions, we sat on the porch steps catching our breaths. The cabin stood silent behind us—a sanctuary in an increasingly hostile world.

Arlet broke the silence first. “Thank you,” she whispered, rubbing a bruise that was forming on her forearm.

I looked over at her, seeing not just my charge but my partner—someone

who'd become an integral part of my life on this strange planet that was slowly becoming home.

“You don't have to thank me,” I replied earnestly. “Protecting you is my job.”

She shook her head slightly. “No, Hayze. It's more than that now.” Her gaze met mine and held it—a silent acknowledgment of our shared bond.

The stars above us seemed to blaze brighter as we sat there together—the warrior and his charge turned comrade—each bracing for what may come with the rise of the next sun.

The dusk had painted the sky a deep purple by the time we sensed them—local troublemakers, probably thinking they could intimidate Arlet into backing down from her environmental crusade. They didn't know about me, or if they did, they underestimated what it meant to have a Talos as a shadow guard.

Arlet caught the flicker of movement first. Her newfound vigilance was an asset I had helped to sharpen. She nudged me, nodding subtly toward the treeline where shadows danced with a menace that didn't belong to the forest.

I nodded back and whispered, “Stay close.”

As we walked toward her cabin, our steps fell in rhythm—a silent dance we had been perfecting since my arrival on Earth. We tuned in to each other and the world.

Two figures emerged from the trees, blocking our path. One leaned against a bat like it extended his arm, while the other smirked with false bravado.

“Well, well,” the one with the bat drawled. “Thought you might need some convincing to stop poking your nose where it doesn't belong.”

Arlet's chin lifted slightly, defiance etched into her features. “I'm not afraid of you,” she said, her voice steady.

The smirking one stepped forward. “You should be.”

Before he could finish his threat, I moved. In one fluid motion, I positioned myself between Arlet and our would-be intimidators. The surrounding air

seemed to thicken as I called upon the elements—a subtle whisper to sway the branches above and rustle the leaves at our feet.

“Leave,” I said, my voice low but carrying a weight that made both men pause. “This isn’t your fight.”

The one with the bat scoffed, but took a hesitant step back as a gust of wind whipped through the clearing. Arlet stepped up beside me then, not behind—her courage bolstering mine.

“You’re trespassing,” she stated firmly. “We’ve documented everything. The authorities are already watching.”

The second man’s smirk faltered as he glanced around nervously, clearly unnerved by the forest’s sudden liveliness and Arlet’s unwavering stance.

“Let’s go,” he muttered to his companion. “This ain’t worth it.”

They retreated into the woods as quickly as they had appeared, leaving us alone once more on the path to safety.

Arlet let out a breath she’d been holding and turned to me. “That was...”

I couldn’t help but smile at her attempt to find words for what had just transpired between us—between human and Talos working in unison.

“It was teamwork,” I finished for her.

“Yeah,” she agreed with a nod and an appreciative glance. “Teamwork.”

We resumed our walk to her cabin in companionable silence. It wasn’t just the absence of words between us; it was an understanding that what we shared went beyond protection or partnership—it was a kinship forged in adversity and trust.

As we reached her front door, Arlet paused and looked up at me with eyes that reflected gratitude and something deeper—recognition of our shared journey.

“Thanks for being here,” she said simply, but with a sincerity that resonated within my bronze form.

“I’m where I’m supposed to be,” I replied before following her inside, ready

for whatever lay ahead—as long as we faced it together.

The shadows lengthened, stretching like dark fingers across the forest floor as Arlet and I returned to her cabin. The encounter with the local thugs left a sour taste in my mouth—a reminder of the dangers lurking just beyond the safety of these wooden walls.

As I locked the door behind us, the weight of my promise to protect her pressed down on me. The cabin, once a sanctuary, now stood like a fragile shell—one that I had to fortify.

“I’ll make us some tea,” Arlet said, her voice cutting through the silence that had settled between us. She moved with a grace that belied the tension in her body.

I nodded and watched her fill the kettle. Her resilience astounded me; even now, she kept a steady hand. “You don’t have to keep doing this,” I said finally.

She turned, a small smile gracing her lips. “Doing what?”

“Acting like you’re not scared.”

Arlet’s smile faded, replaced by a contemplative look. “Maybe I am scared,” she admitted, setting the kettle on the stove. “But fear doesn’t get to call the shots—not anymore.”

I admired her for that. Even in the face of fear, she stood unyielding—a quality we shared.

As the kettle whistled, its high-pitched sound seemed to echo my growing unease. The steam rose in ghostly swirls, dissipating into nothing—a stark contrast to the very real threats that refused to vanish so easily.

Arlet poured the water into two mugs and brought them over to where I stood by the window. The warmth from the cup seeped into my hands as I took it from her, a slight comfort against the chill that had nothing to do with the temperature outside.

“Thank you,” I said, our eyes meeting over the steam.

She nodded and took a sip from her own mug before speaking again. “Hayze,

what happens next?”

I hesitated. How much should I reveal? How much would only heighten her worry? But Arlet deserved honesty; it was part of the trust we'd built.

“We stay vigilant,” I began. “We make sure you're not just safe, but prepared for anything they might throw at us.”

She set her mug down and crossed her arms—a shield against vulnerability. “And if they come back?”

I placed my mug beside hers and reached out, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Then we stand our ground,” I said firmly. “We've already proven we can.”

Arlet's posture relaxed slightly under my touch. “Together?”

“Always together,” I affirmed.

As night fell and enveloped us in darkness, save for the soft glow of cabin lights, I couldn't help but feel conflicted about what lay ahead. The dangers surrounding Arlet were increasing by the day; they were like storm clouds gathering on an otherwise clear horizon.

I knew one thing for certain—I would protect her at all costs. It was more than duty; it was a vow I made not just as her sentinel but as someone who cared about her well-being far beyond any contract's terms.

Standing there beside Arlet, our reflections mingling in the windowpane against a backdrop of an uncertain world outside, my resolve hardened like steel tempered by fire.

Whatever threats might come charging out of those woods, whatever shadows might seek to engulf this haven we'd carved out—nothing would breach these walls without facing the full fury of Hayze Russel. That was my silent vow as night wrapped around us—an unspoken promise that carried all the weight of my bronze form and steadfast spirit.

CHAPTER 7



Arlet

I tossed and turned in bed. The events of the past few days played in my mind like a movie on repeat. The sound of the wind howling outside didn't help matters. I tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable position, but it was no use. My thoughts were racing, and I couldn't shut them off.

The clock on my nightstand read 2:56 a.m., and I had been in bed for hours. I sighed, frustrated with my inability to sleep. My eyes wandered around the room, eventually landing on Hayze. He was on the sofa, his feet hanging off the end. He looked so peaceful, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

I didn't know why, but I was drawn to him. Maybe it was the protection he provided, or the way he made me feel safe in this unfamiliar place. Whatever it was, I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to be closer to him.

Quietly, I slipped out of bed and padded across the room to where Hayze slept. I stood there for a moment, watching him, before gently shaking his shoulder.

"Hayze," I whispered. "Hayze, wake up."

He stirred, his eyes fluttering open. He looked at me, confusion etched on his face. "Arlet? Is everything okay?"

My head shook. “I can’t sleep. I’m sorry for waking you, but I... I need to talk to someone.”

Hayze sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Of course. What’s on your mind?”

I hesitated, not sure how to put my feelings into words. “I don’t know. Everything, I guess. This new life, my past, the threats we’re facing... It’s all just so overwhelming.”

Hayze nodded, understanding in his eyes. “I know it’s a lot to handle. But you’re not alone, Arlet. I’m here for you, and we’ll face this together.”

His words were reassuring, but a knot formed in my stomach. I moved closer to him, sitting on the edge of the sofa. “I know, but it’s just... I can’t stop thinking about everything that’s happened.”

Hayze reached out and took my hand, his fingers warm and strong. “Hey, it’s okay to feel scared and uncertain. But you’re strong, Arlet. You’ve been through so much already, and you’ve come out the other side. We’ll get through this too.”

I looked into his eyes, seeing the sincerity there. Something inside me shifted, and I experienced a sudden urge to be closer to him. Before I could think twice, I leaned in and pressed my lips to his.

Hayze responded, his lips soft and warm against mine. We kissed passionately, our bodies drawn together as if by some invisible force.

As our kiss deepened, Hayze’s body grew warmer under my touch. I ran my hands over his bronze skin, feeling the contours of his muscles. To my surprise, he grew excited beneath his pants. He groaned, his hands moving over my body as I removed my nightgown.

A mixture of excitement and apprehension bubbled forth as we explored each other’s bodies. Hayze’s touch was gentle yet firm, and I marveled at the contrast between his metal exterior and the warmth he exuded.

We continued to kiss, our bodies pressed together on the sofa. Hayze’s heart beat rapidly, and mine matched its pace. Our breaths mingled as we moved closer, our bodies drawn together by an invisible force.

Hayze's hands roamed over my skin, sending shivers down my spine. I moaned softly, my body responding to his touch in ways I hadn't expected. He seemed to know exactly what I needed, his fingers dancing over my skin with a delicate precision.

As we lost ourselves at the moment, I couldn't help but wonder what this meant for us. Were we just two beings seeking comfort in each other's arms, or was there something more? I didn't know the answers, but at that moment, it didn't seem to matter.

All that mattered was the feeling of being connected to someone, of not being alone in this crazy world. Hayze made me feel safe and desired, and for once, I allowed myself to be in the moment with no reservations.

We explored each other's bodies, our passion growing with each touch and kiss. The world faded away, leaving only the two of us in our own private universe.

I sucked in a deep breath as Hayze revealed his bronze cock. It was thick and softer than metal, yet hard and incredibly hot. My desire for him intensified as the heat flooded into my pelvis.

Hayze explored my body, kissing me everywhere. His lips traveled down my neck, over my breasts, and along my stomach. I shivered as his warm breath caressed my skin, sending waves of pleasure through me.

When Hayze reached between my legs, he stayed there, teasing me with his fingers. He circled my clit, applying just the right amount of pressure. I moaned, my hips bucking against his hand.

As he continued to stimulate me, my body tensed, and my breath came in short, rapid gasps. The pressure built inside me, like a coiled spring ready to explode.

Hayze sensed my impending release as he increased the pace. I cried out, my back arching off the sofa as waves of pleasure coursed through me.

My body rocked hard, the sensations more powerful than anything I had ever experienced before. I shuddered violently. The trembling continued in the aftermath.

Hayze kissed me gently, his warm lips soothing my flushed skin. A deep sense of connection to him emerged.

As Hayze hovered over me, the uncertainty in his eyes gave me pause. “Are you sure about this?” his voice was heavy with concern. I reached up and grabbed him, pulling him towards me.

“I’m sure,” I whispered, my breath hot against his skin.

Hayze’s bronze cock pressed against my entrance, hot and hard. My body tense in anticipation as he slowly pushed inside me. His cock filled me, stretching me in a way that was both intense and incredibly pleasurable.

We moved together, our bodies synchronized in a primal rhythm. Hayze’s hips pumped steadily, his cock sliding in and out of me with a delicious friction. Each thrust sent waves of pleasure coursing through my body, and I couldn’t help but moan his name.

Hayze’s hands roamed over my skin, his fingers leaving trails of heat wherever they touched. He kissed me deeply, our tongues entwining as our bodies moved together.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him even closer. His cock drove deeper inside me, hitting all the right spots. My body trembled with pleasure, and my orgasm built once again.

Hayze increased his pace, his thrusts growing harder and faster.

“OH!” I cried out, my back arching off the sofa as the intense pleasure washed over me.

My body rocked with the force of my orgasm, and I shuddered violently. Hayze continued to thrust, his own release building. With a final and powerful thrust, he came inside me, his body tensing as he groaned with pleasure.

We collapsed onto the floor, our bodies still joined. Hayze’s weight pressed me into the soft rug, but I didn’t mind. I was safe and content in his arms, our breaths mingling as we slowly came back to reality.

As we lay there, our hearts still racing, I marveled at our union. It was more

than just physical; it was a connection that went beyond words.

Hayze kissed me softly, his lips gentle against mine. "This is all new to me," he whispered.

I smiled, my fingers tracing the contours of his face. "Me too."

We fell asleep in each other's arms, our bodies entwined as we drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER 8



A^{rlet}

I took a deep breath as I looked out at the sea of faces gathered in the community center. It was now or never. Clearing my throat, I stepped up to the podium, my research notes clutched tightly in one hand.

“Thank you all for coming,” I began, my voice echoing through the silent room. “I’ve called this meeting because I have evidence of serious environmental violations taking place right here in our backyard.”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. I glanced at Hayze, lurking in the shadows at the back of the room. His presence steeled my nerves.

“Over the past few months, my colleague and I have documented extensive illegal logging and poaching in the state parklands around the county. We’ve compiled photographs, videos, even DNA samples.” I held up the folder containing our findings.

The murmuring grew louder, with a few angry shouts. I stood firm. “I know this is hard information to hear. But we can’t ignore what’s happening to our beautiful home. If we don’t take action now, irreparable damage will be done.”

A man stood up, jabbing his finger at me accusingly. “And just who do you think you are, missy, making wild allegations against hardworking folks?”

I met his glare steadily. “My name is Arlet Rune. I’m an environmental researcher with the conservation non-profit Wild Trust. Evidence supports everything we’ve shared today.”

The man snorted. “We’re supposed to take the word of an outsider against our own? I’ve lived here for sixty years and I ain’t ever seen any of this supposed illegal activity.”

Nods and shouts of agreement followed his words. My confidence faltered. Then I spotted Hayze gazing at me encouragingly. Drawing courage from his strength, I doubled down.

“You’re right. I haven’t been here long. But I care deeply about protecting these lands and wildlife. That’s why I’m bringing this to your attention. Because together, we have the power to put a stop to it.”

For a moment, the crowd was silent. Then a woman stood up. “I believe her. My husband’s a park ranger and he’s noticed unusual activity lately. But his superiors told him to keep quiet.”

The mood shifted as others chimed in with their own experiences. I flashed the woman a grateful smile. “It’s going to take all of us working together to protect our home. We can start by contacting the authorities and demanding a full investigation into illegal operations in the area. Are you with me?”

Voices rang out in assent. I exhaled. I hadn’t realized I was holding. As the crowd dispersed to take action, I locked eyes with Hayze. His proud smile sent a rush of warmth through me. We’d done it together.

I collapsed onto the couch, exhausted but exhilarated. The town hall meeting had been a success. Now to keep the momentum going.

Hayze sat down beside me, the cushions barely depressing under his weight. “You did well today,” he rumbled.

I smiled at him gratefully. “We did well. I couldn’t have rallied the town without the evidence you helped me gather.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. We made a good team, human and Talos. United by a common cause - protecting this land.

“So, what’s our next move?” I asked. “We need to keep the pressure on while the issue’s fresh.”

Hayze considered for a moment. “Perhaps another expedition, to collect additional proof.” His white eyes narrowed. “Whoever is behind this will not surrender easily. They will retaliate.”

I nodded grimly. He was right. Our actions today would provoke dangerous foes. But it was a risk worth taking.

“Then we’d better be prepared for them,” I said with determination. “I’m not about to let these criminals continue destroying our home.”

Hayze gazed at me, his expression unreadable. But I sensed his respect. “Nor will I,” he rumbled.

A fierce kinship rose between us. We would fight to defend this land we both cherished, no matter the cost.

I stood, energized by purpose. “Let’s regroup tomorrow. Tonight calls for celebration.”

Hayze rose as well, ducking his horns under the ceiling beams. “I shall continue patrolling the area.” He started for the door.

“Wait,” I blurted. I didn’t want him to go just yet. I stepped closer, my eyes meeting his. “Stay awhile.”

He went still, surprise flickering across his stony features. The moment stretched between us. Wordlessly, he sank back down onto the couch.

I sat beside him, acutely aware of his nearness. Drawn by an impulse I didn’t understand, I reached out to trace my fingers along his arm. Smooth granite, shot through with crystalline veins. Beautiful.

Hayze’s breath caught at my touch. The sound emboldened me. I leaned in closer, tilting my face up to his. Strong arms enfolded me, pulling me against his broad chest.

Our lips met, tentative at first, then more urgently. I gave myself over to the sensation, a heady rush sweeping through me.

We sank backwards onto the couch, shedding clothes with eager hands. His body covered mine, skin against bronze. Primal need awakened in both of us. All thoughts faded but this exquisite moment of connection.

My phone chimed from the coffee table, snapping us back to reality. We drew apart reluctantly. The text could wait - I had everything I needed right here.

I reached for the phone, the afterglow still warming my skin, and swiped the screen to life. The message was a stark contrast to the intimate quiet of the room, its contents a cold jab into my past.

I know you aren't who you say you are.

The room seemed to tilt. My breath caught in my throat. I read the words again, but their meaning didn't change. Someone knew—or thought they knew—about Charlotte Bruno.

Hayze's voice broke through my spiraling thoughts. "Arlet?"

I handed him the phone without a word, watching his expression as he read. His jaw set, eyes hardened like ancient shields.

"This could mean several things," he said finally, his voice low and even.

I nodded, pulling the blanket tighter around me. "Someone's onto me. Onto my past life."

Hayze handed back the phone and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "It's also possible they suspect you of having ulterior motives here. Your environmental work has stirred up the community."

"I'm just an environmentalist," I insisted, though a knot of anxiety tightened in my stomach.

Hayze leaned forward, his gaze piercing. "To us, yes. But consider how it looks to others. You've come out of nowhere, rallying people against local industry —"

"And now someone thinks I'm here to do more than save trees." The realization was like a splash of cold water.

Hayze nodded slowly. “It’s a threat we can’t ignore.”

I shivered despite his warm presence beside me. It wasn't just about me anymore; other factors were also involved.

“What should we do?” I asked him with faltering confidence.

“We tighten security,” Hayze replied without hesitation. “And we stay vigilant.”

I bit my lip, thinking of all the potential dangers lurking in shadows I thought I’d left behind in New York.

“Will you be able to keep me safe?” The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Hayze’s eyes softened slightly, but his voice remained firm. “Always.”

Despite everything, I believed him. His presence had become my anchor in this new world.

“We should inform your organization,” Hayze suggested after a moment of silence.

My mind raced with potential consequences—exposure, panic—but he was right. Transparency would be our best defense.

“I’ll draft an email tonight,” I agreed quietly.

“Good.” Hayze stood and stretched his towering frame. “In the meantime, I’ll make sure nothing comes near this cabin tonight.”

His words comforted me, but they only served as a reminder of how fragile this semblance of normalcy really was.

“Thank you,” I murmured as he walked toward the door.

He paused at the threshold and looked back at me with an intensity that sent another kind of shiver through me—one that wasn’t fear.

“Sleep well,” he said before stepping out into the night.

Alone now, surrounded by silence and the weight of that message on my

phone screen, sleep became a distant hope. But with Hayze on watch outside, maybe the rest would find me after all.

I sat there, the phone's screen dimming to black, its message lingering like a ghost in my mind. A shiver raced up my spine—not from the chill in the air, but from the specter of a past I thought I had buried deep beneath layers of new soil. Charlotte Bruno, a name I had shed like an old skin, seemed to claw its way back to the surface.

Yet as I wrapped the blanket tighter around me, I couldn't help but feel an ember of defiance glowing within. My new life wasn't just a facade; it was real, tangible. The work I did, the bonds I formed—they mattered. They were worth fighting for.

Hayze's assurance echoed in my head: *Always*. It wasn't just a promise; it was a statement of his own conviction. The Talos monster with skin of bronze and a heart that understood loyalty better than anyone else I'd ever known had become my fortress against the encroaching darkness of my former life.

I leaned back against the couch, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. Each inhale drew in the pine-scented air of my new home, each exhale released some of the tension that knotted my shoulders. I had to focus on what I could control. The environmental fight we'd embarked on together needed us—needed me—to remain strong and clear-headed.

I would write that email to Wild Trust tonight. Full disclosure, no holding back. They deserved to know that their newest researcher might bring more than just controversial findings to their doorstep.

But not yet. For now, I took a few moments to sit in the stillness of my cabin—my sanctuary—and let go of the fears that threatened to unmoor me from this life I was crafting.

I rose eventually, moving to the window and peering into the night where Hayze kept watch. Even though I couldn't see him, knowing he was out there offered a sense of protection that was as solid as his bronze form.

This complex tapestry of fear and confidence wove itself tighter around me. Fear for what remnants of Charlotte Bruno might emerge from shadowy

corners, and confidence in Arlet Rune—the woman who stood before town halls, who fought for nature’s voice, who found an unexpected kinship with a creature from another world.

A faint rustle outside caught my attention, and for an instant, I tensed. But then I remembered Hayze was there—my shadow guard—and I allowed myself a small smile. He was out there somewhere among the trees, a silent sentinel between me and any threats that dared approach.

With a renewed sense of purpose fueling me, I sat down at my desk and booted up my laptop. The soft glow of the screen lit up my determined face as I began typing the email that would lay bare all that had happened since moving here—leaving out no detail about the danger that might inch its way toward Wild Trust because of me.

The night stretched on as words flowed onto digital paper—a confession, an appeal for understanding and support. When finally done, I hesitated only for a second before hitting send.

Leaning back in my chair, exhaustion claimed me like a debt long overdue. But sleep would have to wait; there was one more thing left to do—a response to that ominous text message.

Picking up my phone again, thumbs hovering over the keyboard, it took me several heartbeats before I typed out a simple yet powerful reply:

I am Arlet Rune.

And with that affirmation sent into the void, whether it reached friend or foe, I allowed myself to close my eyes and rest—even if just for a little while—in this life that was unequivocally mine now.

CHAPTER 9



*H*ayze

The night draped itself in a shroud of mist, the moon a hazy smudge above the treeline. I perched on a gnarled branch of an ancient fir, overlooking Arlet's cabin, my senses alert. The cool air carried whispers of the forest, and the occasional rustle of nocturnal creatures foraging in the underbrush.

My role had shifted subtly since I first watched over her. Initially, I was a sentinel assigned by Monsters for Hire to guard a human marked by past dangers and current threats because of her fight for environmental preservation. But as I gazed at the cabin's windows, warm light spilling out into the night, I acknowledged a truth that had crept up on me like spring thaw on snow: Arlet had become more than an assignment. She was my mate, a concept foreign to my kind until now.

I shifted on the branch, my muscles tensing as I thought about the dual threats we faced. Arlet's past, a specter that had followed her from New York City to this tranquil refuge, could resurface at any moment. And then there were those who pillaged these lands, stripping them bare without thought or remorse. My protective instincts didn't just heighten—they roared within me like a tempest.

As I kept vigil outside her home, rooted yet drawn to her human warmth, I

realized my reasons for protecting her had become deeply selfish. She wasn't just a charge to me; she was the lifeblood of my newfound humanity.

A soft noise from within the cabin drew my attention. Arlet emerged onto the porch, wrapping her arms around herself against the chill. Her eyes found mine in the darkness, an unspoken connection passing between us.

"You don't have to stay out here all night," she called up to me with a soft smile that made my heart lurch in ways I didn't understand before her.

I dropped lightly from the branch to land near her. "The forest is where I'm most attuned," I replied, stepping closer so that our breath mingled in the cool air. "Besides, I sleep better knowing you're safe."

She nodded, looking out into the dense woods that surrounded us. "I feel it too—safer when you're here." Her voice held a note of wonder, as if she couldn't quite believe the reality we shared.

We stood in silence for a moment before she broke it with practicality laced with concern. "We need to strategize about these threats. Your protection is invaluable but..." Her voice trailed off as she searched for words.

"But we need more than vigilance," I finished for her. "We need action."

Arlet nodded emphatically. "Exactly."

"First," I began, drawing closer still until our foreheads nearly touched, "it is likely that any threat will come from those who don't understand your transformation from Charlotte Bruno to Arlet of these woods."

Her eyes flickered with gratitude for not saying her old name too loudly—as if it might summon ghosts.

"Second," I continued, feeling a pull toward her that went beyond words or reason, "the environmental adversaries are more immediate and tangible. We've disrupted their operations; they'll want retribution or at least a return to their harmful ways."

"What do you suggest?" Arlet's gaze held mine with unwavering trust.

"We turn their greed against them. They leave traces because they believe they're above reproach. We use that—gather more evidence and set traps if

necessary.”

Her smile returned, fierce and bright like dawn breaking over mountains.
“And if they come after me?”

“I’ll be here,” I assured her with an intensity that made her blink in surprise.
“Always.”

Arlet stepped back into the warmth of her cabin, but paused at the door.
“Hayze,” she said softly but firmly enough that it resonated through my very core.

“Yes?”

“You’re more than just my guardian; you know that?”

The statement hung between us like mist above water—visible yet untouchable—and before I could respond; she slipped inside and closed the door behind her.

Left alone with my thoughts under the celestial dome, one thing became clearer than ever: Guarding Arlet wasn’t just duty. It was desire—a deep yearning to keep her safe because she was mine in a way no other being ever had been or would be again.

My chest swelled with emotions too complex to dissect under this watchful moon; instead, I let them wash over me like tides embracing shores—a Talos monster falling hopelessly for his human mate.

I resumed my position in the trees as guardian and silent confidant to stars whispering secrets above—secrets of love unfolding in shadow and light below their eternal gaze.

The moon rode high in the ink-black sky, its light filtering through the dense canopy of trees that surrounded Arlet’s cabin. From my perch, I kept watch, but my thoughts wandered. It was no longer just about guarding her; it was about building a fortress around the life she was creating here, brick by brick.

We’d spent the days following her bold stand at the community meeting fortifying her home. Not just with my presence, but with cameras concealed like watchful eyes in the foliage and sensors that whispered to us of any

approaching danger. We didn't just prepare for threats; we created a sanctuary.

I couldn't help but marvel at Arlet's determination as she rallied more support for our environmental cause. She had a way of speaking that made people listen, made them care. With every meeting, every conversation, our ranks swelled with those who wanted to protect the land as fiercely as we did.

But tonight was quiet—a reprieve from our efforts. The cabin glowed warmly behind me as I descended from my silent vigil and approached the back door. Arlet sat at the kitchen table, poring over maps and notes by lamplight.

“Planning your next move?” I asked as I stepped inside.

She looked up, her eyes reflecting a fire that wasn't just from the light. “Always,” she said with a wry smile. “But I could use a break.”

I pulled out a chair and sat across from her. “We're making progress,” I said. “The community's behind us.”

She nodded, leaning back in her chair and stretching like a cat basking in sunlight. “Thanks to you.”

“It's your conviction that's won them over,” I corrected her gently.

We sat in companionable silence for a while before Arlet broke it with a soft sigh.

“What is it?” I asked, attuned to every shift in her mood.

“I'm just... it's been a lot to take in,” she admitted. “I never expected to find someone—something—like you when I came here.”

“Neither did I,” I confessed, and then hesitated. My thoughts were a tangle of fears and hopes, and voicing them was stepping off a precipice into an unknown depth. But if there was anyone I could share these with, it was Arlet.

I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of what I was about to reveal. “I have fears too.”

Her expression softened, inviting me to continue.

“I fear for your safety,” I began, my voice barely above a whisper. “Not just from those who would harm you for what you’re doing here, but from those who might not understand what you mean to me.”

Arlet reached across the table and placed her hand over mine—an anchor in turbulent waters.

“And I have hopes,” I continued, feeling my heart hammer against my ribs. “Hopes that this place we’re defending becomes more than just a battlefield—that it becomes home.”

Her grip tightened on my hand as if she could hold on to the words and keep them safe between us.

“Hayze,” she breathed, “Seeing you open up like this... it means everything.”

I met her gaze squarely, allowing myself to be vulnerable under her scrutiny.

“We will face whatever comes,” I pledged to her, my voice steady now with resolve. “Together.”

She nodded solemnly, but then smiled—a radiant thing that seemed to push back the surrounding darkness.

“Together,” she echoed.

We stayed like that for a long moment before Arlet rose from her chair and moved to stand beside me.

“Come on,” she urged gently, tugging at my hand. “Let’s go outside for a bit.”

Curious at her sudden change of mood but willing to follow her lead, I let her pull me up and guide me through the back door into the night air.

The cool breeze blew refreshingly against my skin of bronze as we stepped onto the porch. She led me down the steps and into the open space where moonlight pooled on the grass like spilled silver paint.

Arlet released my hand only to wrap her arms around herself against the chill—yet there was warmth in her gesture as she looked up at me through lashes kissed by moonbeams.

“This is our fight,” she whispered, but with an undercurrent of steel. “But it’s also our life—and we can’t forget to live it.”

“Yes,” I agreed simply because there was nothing else that needed saying.

Arlet reached out again and took my hand in hers—small and warm within my larger grasp—and together we walked out into the open field behind her cabin where wildflowers whispered secrets only they knew.

Arlet’s breathing settled into a gentle rhythm, a lullaby composed by the night itself. We stood together, her hand in mine, until the cold seeped into her bones, and she shivered. It was a subtle tremor, but enough for me to insist we head back.

“I should let you get some rest,” I said, releasing her hand as we approached the porch steps.

A flash of something crossed her face—reluctance, perhaps, or the faintest trace of longing. But she nodded. “You’re probably right.”

We stepped inside and I watched as she made her way to her bedroom, each step seeming heavier than the last. I lingered in the living room, the afterimage of her silhouette against the soft glow of the hallway light imprinted on my vision.

Once I heard the soft click of her door closing, I moved to the window, gazing out into the darkness that cloaked the forest. My vigil was silent but no less intense for its quietude. The world outside lay in repose, and yet my senses remained sharp, attuned to any disturbance that might shatter this fragile peace.

From this vantage point, I could see the outline of her form beneath the covers through the bedroom window. She was still now, surrendered to dreams that I hoped were kinder than some of her waking moments. Watching over Arlet as she slept was a sacred duty—an honor that stirred something deep within me.

My thoughts wandered through our shared mission—how each day drew us closer not just to our goal, but to each other. There was a synergy between us now; we moved together with purpose and understanding that surpassed mere companionship. It was as if our separate paths had merged into one, winding

through these woods and beyond.

I pondered what tomorrow might bring—more threats, more challenges—but they seemed distant concerns compared to this moment. Here in this cabin, surrounded by ancient trees and whispering winds, there was a sense of timelessness that soothed even my deepest worries.

The connection Arlet and I had transcended duty or even desire; it was as if our very souls had recognized something in one another—a kinship born not just of circumstance but of a shared vision for what this world could be.

I moved away from the window, drawn by an inexplicable urge to be nearer to her even though I knew she slept. Quietly, I approached her door and stood outside it for a moment, listening to the soft cadence of her breaths.

It would have been easy then to slip into shadows—to become once again the silent sentinel who watched from afar. But I sank down against the wall beside her door, my back pressed to the cool wood as if it could anchor me in this sea of emotions that threatened to sweep me away.

I closed my eyes and let myself imagine—for just an instant—what it would be like if there were no threats looming over us; no need for guards or sentinels. In that imagined world, it was just Arlet and me and the life we might build together in these woods.

But dreams—even daydreams—were luxuries I couldn't afford for long. With a sigh, I pushed myself back to my feet and returned to my post at the window. There would be time enough for such thoughts when our work here was done, when we'd secured not just this place but our place within it.

For now, though, there was comfort in knowing she slept safely because of my presence—that I could stand watch over her and ensure another night passed without incident.

As dawn's first light glimmered through the trees, painting shadows with hues of gold and amber, I remained vigilant.

CHAPTER 10



Arlet

The forest's heartbeat pulsed under my feet, a rhythm I'd learned to read as easily as the data scrolling across my laptop screen. The dense canopy above whispered secrets on the wind, leaves rustling in a language only Hayze and I seemed to understand. He lurked just beyond sight, a sentinel in the shadows, his presence a silent vow of protection.

"Look at this," I called out, not bothering to turn around. "Look at this," I called out, not bothering to turn around. The poor saplings lay broken on the forest floor. It's possible a bear or large game did this. But it's also likely someone came through trampling where they weren't welcome.

I trailed off, knowing he was listening, always listening. The forest held its breath for a moment before resuming its symphony of life.

Evening crept upon us like an afterthought, darkness nipping at the edges of daylight as we retreated to my cabin. The scent of pine and earth clung to my skin, an invisible cloak woven from the day's labor.

"Goodnight, Hayze," I said as we reached the door. Our eyes met, an entire conversation passing in a glance before he turned away.

"Goodnight, Arlet." His voice carried a warmth that contradicted the chill night air.

I watched his silhouette merge with the night before closing the door behind me. Alone in my cabin, his absence tugged at me—a phantom limb that had grown essential in such a brief span of time.

The bed was cold when I slipped between the sheets. My mind churned with images of saplings and soil, of Hayze’s eyes gleaming like shards of moonlight. Restlessness claimed me, a whispering tide urging me toward something I couldn’t yet name.

I rose, compelled by longing and something fiercer—need. The door creaked softly as I opened it, peering into the dark where I knew he would stand guard.

“Hayze,” my voice broke the stillness.

He materialized from the shadows, like my call had conjured him. Surprise flickered across his features before settling into quiet resolve.

“Arlet? Is everything okay?”

His concern was genuine; it resonated in his stance, ready to spring into action if needed. But it wasn’t danger that had drawn me from my bed—it was him.

“Come back inside,” I said, my voice steady despite the tremor that danced through my veins.

He hesitated only for a heartbeat before stepping closer. In his eyes shone questions that didn’t need voicing—not now. There would be time for words later; what we needed was beyond speech.

I reached for him, my hands finding the solid reality of his form. His own hands settled on my waist with a tenderness that belied his strength.

We stood there on the threshold—between the safety of walls and the wildness of the world outside. It was more than an invitation; it was an acceptance of all that lay unspoken between us.

Hayze didn’t resist as he crossed into the warm embrace of both my arms and the cabin’s sheltering walls. The door closed behind us with a soft click, sealing away the night and its watching eyes—leaving only us and the truth

we were ready to explore together.

The heat radiated from Hayze's body as I knelt beside him on the bed. His bronze skin glistened in the dim light, and I traced my fingers along the contours of his chest, marveling at the contrast between his hardened muscles and my soft touch.

His cock stood erect, a monument to his desire, and I admired its sheer size. I leaned in, my lips brushing against the tip of his cock. He encouraged me with a groan and I wrapped my hand around the shaft, feeling its weight and warmth. My hand pumped slowly. His cock pulsed with each stroke.

Hayze's breathing grew heavier, and I knew I was doing something right. Emboldened, I brought my mouth to his cock, running my tongue along the length of it before taking the tip between my lips.

He tasted like salt and something primal, a flavor that was both familiar and exotic. I lapped at his cock, savoring the sensation of his skin against my tongue, and the way he shuddered in response.

I took more of him into my mouth, my lips stretching around his girth. The head of his cock hit the back of my throat, and I gagged slightly before adjusting to the sensation. I bobbed my head up and down, taking him deeper with each stroke, and he moaned in pleasure.

His hands found their way into my hair, guiding my movements as I sucked him off. He was close. I redoubled my efforts, my tongue swirling around the tip of his cock as I took him as deep as I could.

"Arlet," he gasped, his voice ragged with desire. "I'm going to come."

I didn't stop, my mouth working furiously as he thrust his hips upward, his cock pulsing in my mouth. He came with a roar, his hot seed filling my mouth and spilling down my chin.

I swallowed greedily, savoring the taste of him as he shuddered through his orgasm. When he finally stilled, I looked up at him, my eyes meeting his in the dim light.

"That was..." he trailed off, his voice thick with emotion.

“Amazing,” I finished for him, smiling as I licked my lips, still tasting him on my tongue.

He pulled me up onto the bed, wrapping his arms around me, and we lay there together, our hearts pounding in unison as we basked in the afterglow of our shared pleasure.

“Your turn,” Hayze whispered, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down my spine. I laid back on my bed, feeling vulnerable yet eager as he crawled between my legs.

His bronze skin glowed in the dim light, his eyes shining with desire as he looked up at me. I ran my fingers through his dark hair, encouraging him to continue.

He leaned in, his lips brushing against my inner thigh. I gasped at the touch, my body already responding to his gentle caress. He traced a line of kisses up my thigh, inching closer to the apex of my legs.

The heat radiate from his body as he moved in between my legs. His breath was warm against my skin, and I shuddered in anticipation.

His lips met my folds, and I cried out in pleasure as he explored me with his tongue. He teased me, running his tongue along my slit before delving deeper, finding my clit with unerring precision.

I bucked my hips against his mouth, desperate for more contact. He chuckled softly; the vibrations sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

“So impatient,” he murmured before redoubling his efforts.

His tongue circled my clit, stroking

Hayze’s face buried between my legs, his tongue working its magic on my sensitive flesh. The pleasure was almost too much to bear, yet I craved more.

As he continued to tease and please me, my body grew tighter, my breath coming in quick gasps. The sensations were overwhelming as I teetered close to the edge.

“Hayze,” I moaned, my hands tangled in his dark hair. “I’m going to come.”

He didn't stop, his tongue moving faster, pressing harder against my clit. My back, my hips bucking against his mouth as the orgasm ripped through me, waves of pleasure crashing over me like a tidal wave.

I cried out, my voice echoing through the cabin as I shuddered through the intense release. Hayze didn't let up, riding out my orgasm with me, his tongue gentle but insistent.

Finally, he pulled away, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. I lay there, boneless and sated, my heart still racing from the intensity of the experience.

"That was..." I trailed off, not sure how to describe the sensations that had just coursed through my body.

A rush of heat surged through my body as Hayze lifted me onto his lap, his bronze cock already standing tall and ready for more.

"My brute lover, you are king cock." I laughed at my joke, I but he just smiled.

"I'm pleasantly surprised too." Hayze looked down at his bronze cock, his brow lifting.

He guided me down onto his shaft, and I gasped as he filled me completely. Overwhelmed, I moaned as his cock, both hard and soft, stretched me with extreme pleasure.

Hayze took it slowly, moving in and out of me with a steady rhythm. He leaned in, his lips brushing against my neck.

"You are so beautiful, my human. I love you everything I have." He whispered in my ear.

"Oh," I moaned in response. "I love you too." My nails clawed over his bronze skin, leaving fiery streaks in their wake. My head rolled back as the heat flooded into my pelvis, aching for release.

He cupped my breasts, his fingers teasing my nipples as he continued to thrust into me. I arched my back, my body responding to his touch as the pleasure built within me.

Hayze's pace quickened, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he pushed

deeper and deeper into me. My orgasm built, the tension coiling tightly within me.

He reached between us, his fingers finding my clit and rubbing it in time with his thrusts. I cried out, my body shuddering as the first waves of pleasure crashed into me like a rogue tidal wave.

“Oh, Hayze! Harder, faster!” I cried as I clung to him, my body shaking as the pleasure coursed through me.

Hayze groaned, his body stiffening more, and plowed into me fast and with a deep thrust, he came. We moaned and rode the waves of pleasure together until it subsided.

As I lay in Hayze’s arms, the warmth of his body pressed against mine, I had a sense of contentment unlike anything I’d ever experienced. The afterglow of our lovemaking lingered, and I couldn’t help but marvel at the depth of feelings that had blossomed between us.

“Hayze,” I whispered, my voice barely audible above the crackling fire.

“Yes, my love?” he replied, his deep voice rumbling in his chest.

“I never thought I’d find someone like you,” I confessed, my fingers tracing the contours of his bronze skin. “You’ve changed my life in ways I never imagined possible.”

He lifted his head, his golden eyes filled with emotion as he looked at me. “Arlet, you’ve given me a reason to live, to fight for something greater than myself. I never knew love could be like this.”

His words sent a shiver through me, and I pulled him closer, my lips finding his in a tender kiss. We lingered in that moment, our bodies intertwined, our hearts beating in unison.

“I love you, Hayze,” I whispered against his lips.

“And I love you, Arlet,” he replied, his voice filled with awe and wonder.

CHAPTER 11



*F*ayze

The morning mist hung low over the cabin as I watched Arlet lace up her boots, determination etched in the lines of her face. I leaned against the porch railing, arms folded. “Ready?” I asked, my voice a low rumble in the quiet woods.

She nodded, her eyes meeting mine. “Let’s do this.”

We walked to a clearing I had scouted earlier, a secluded spot where the forest floor was soft and the trees whispered secrets to one another. She stood at the center, waiting.

“First lesson,” I began, circling her like a hawk eyeing its prey. “Awareness. You need to feel the environment, sense the surrounding movement before you can see it.”

Arlet closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. “Like this?”

“Exactly. Now,” I stepped forward swiftly, reaching out to grab her shoulder.

But she pivoted, ducking away from my grasp with surprising agility. A smile flickered across my lips.

“Good reflexes,” I conceded.

We continued for hours, Arlet's sweat mingling with the earth as she learned to fall and roll, to disarm and strike. I corrected her stance, guided her movements—firm but patient. Every throw I taught her was a promise of safety, every counterattack a shield against the world's cruelty.

She faltered, frustration knitting her brow as she struggled to master a complex maneuver. I held out my hand to help her up from where she had landed among the ferns.

“Gah! I'm such a klutz!” Her head shook as she frowned.

“Don't be so hard on yourself,” I told her gently. “It's not about strength; it's about leverage and timing.”

She grasped my hand and rose, nodding silently before asking for another round.

As the sun climbed higher and the shadows danced around us, we shifted focus on survival skills. I showed her how to read tracks, discerning between predator and prey. Her eyes shone with curiosity as she traced a deer trail with her finger.

“And if you're ever lost,” I said, leading her to a moss-covered rock, “moss grows thickest on the north side in these parts.”

Arlet brushed her hand over the soft green carpet thoughtfully. “You know so much about these woods,” she mused aloud.

I shrugged nonchalantly, but a twinge of pride showed. “They've been my home for longer than you can imagine.”

The day waned as we wrapped up our training session with camouflage techniques—how to blend into nature seamlessly. Arlet smeared mud on her face with an impish grin and disappeared among the foliage like a ghost.

“Where'd you go?” I called out playfully.

A rustle to my left was all the warning I got before she sprang out at me—a wildcat pouncing from its hiding place—stopping inches from my chest with an exhilarated laugh.

“Not bad,” I said, chuckling along with her exuberance.

Our laughter echoed through the forest as we headed back toward the cabin—the lines between protector and protected blurring just slightly with every shared secret of survival.

The dawn crept through the pines, its golden fingers prying open into the night. I stood outside Arlet's cabin, waiting for her to emerge. Today, I would train her in the skills that were second nature to me—those necessary for survival. It wasn't just about keeping her safe anymore; it was about empowering her to stand strong when I couldn't be by her side.

She appeared at the door, hair tied back and eyes bright with a mixture of excitement and resolve. "Morning," she greeted me, a hint of sleep still clinging to her voice.

"Good morning," I replied. "Ready for your first lesson?"

She nodded and followed me into the woods, where the air held whispers of mist and earth.

We started with basic self-defense. "Balance is key," I instructed as we found a level patch of ground softened by fallen needles. "It's not just physical—it's mental, too."

I showed a stance—feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, hands up and ready. She mirrored me, watching closely as I adjusted her posture.

"Now, strike towards my hand." I held out my palm as a target.

She hesitated for a moment before thrusting forward. Her form was unrefined but held potential.

"Not bad for your first go," I said with an encouraging nod. "Again."

We repeated the motion until her strikes became more fluid. When she faltered, I offered gentle corrections. Each movement was an exchange of trust—the trust she placed in me to guide her and my trust in her ability to learn.

Next came survival skills—those essential to living in harmony with the forest that now surrounded her. We moved to an area thick with underbrush and I taught her how to move silently, stepping heel to toe, mindful of every

rustle.

“Always be aware of your surroundings,” I told her as we practiced moving through the undergrowth without a sound. “Every step should be deliberate.”

Arlet nodded intently, absorbing every word.

As the morning sun climbed higher, casting a warm glow through the canopy above us, we moved on to tracking—reading signs left by animals and humans alike. She crouched next to me, tracing the outline of a partial boot print in the mud with her finger.

“This one’s fresh,” she observed, looking up at me for confirmation.

“Exactly,” I confirmed with a hint of pride in my voice. “Now tell me which direction they’re heading.”

She studied the ground for a moment longer before pointing northwest. “That way.”

“Right again.” I couldn’t help but feel impressed by her quick grasp of these new skills.

We continued on with lessons in camouflage and concealment until we stood by a small creek that bubbled with laughter at our efforts.

“Use what nature provides,” I said as we smeared mud and leaves onto our clothes and skin. “Become part of the landscape.”

Arlet did so with surprising enthusiasm, laughing as she transformed into part of the forest floor itself—a playful spirit hidden within nature’s embrace.

As afternoon approached, I watched Arlet practice blending into her surroundings one last time before calling an end to today’s session. She rose from where she had been crouching behind a fern-covered log, leaves sticking to her hair like ornaments chosen by the forest itself.

“Well?” she asked expectantly, brushing dirt from her hands.

I looked at her—this woman who had come so far from who she once was—and admiration stirred within me.

“You’re learning fast,” I said truthfully. “I think you’re ready for whatever

comes next.”

The sun dipped low, painting the sky in shades of orange and crimson as I led Arlet deeper into the forest. A tranquil hush had settled over the land, the usual chatter of wildlife quieting as if in reverence to the approaching twilight. We found a clearing, the air still and expectant, as though it held its breath for what was to come.

“Close your eyes,” I instructed Arlet softly. “Breathe in deep. Can you feel it—the pulse of the earth, the heartbeat of the forest?”

She complied, her chest rising and falling rhythmically. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees, carrying with it the scent of pine and damp earth.

“What am I supposed to feel?” Her voice was a mere thread of sound, barely disturbing the surrounding serenity.

“Patience,” I reminded her with a small smile. “Let your senses expand. Listen not just with your ears but with your skin, your bones.”

I watched her face smooth out as she concentrated, a look of peaceful intent taking over her features. In moments like these, she seemed to shed layers of her past life until only the essence of her being remained—intertwined with the surrounding wildness.

I took a seat on the ground beside her, mirroring her position. The forest was more than just trees and creatures; it was a living entity that breathed much like we did. The subtle language—a whisper here, a rustle there—came easily to me, and now I sought to share this hidden world with Arlet.

“Do you hear that?” I asked after a time had passed in quiet communion with nature.

Her eyes remained closed, but she nodded slightly. “The creek nearby... and something else.”

“Yes,” I encouraged her. “Focus on that ‘something else.’ That’s the voice of the forest speaking.”

The sun had vanished completely now, leaving us in a world lit by silver

moonlight and dotted with shadows. The air was cool against our skin, alive with nocturnal songs—a symphony composed by unseen musicians.

Arlet's awareness spread out like ripples across the water. She reached out tentatively with her mind, seeking connection with the life force around us.

A deer stepped into the clearing then, its movements graceful and silent. It paused, sensing our presence but not threatened by it. Arlet's breath caught in surprise. Yet she remained still—her senses intertwined with those of our visitor.

"It knows we're here," she whispered in awe.

"And yet it stays," I replied quietly. "You've extended an invitation for peace; it's accepted."

She opened her eyes then, meeting mine in wonderment as we watched the deer graze contentedly nearby. There was a profound understanding passing between us—an acknowledgment that we were no longer mere observers, but participants in this ancient dialogue.

Arlet reached out a hand toward me without looking away from our serene companion. I took it gently in mine. An electric connection went beyond touch—an intertwining of spirits amidst the timeless dance of nature.

In this quiet moment in the forest, we had become part of something greater than ourselves—a shared breath between human and wild, protector and protected.

The subtle shift in the forest came long before the trouble found us. It was a faint whisper against the backdrop of the woodland symphony—a dissonance that didn't belong. I glanced at Arlet, who had been carefully examining a cluster of ferns. Her brow furrowed in concentration. Her hand paused mid-air, and she turned her head slightly, her body tensing as she too caught on to the change.

"What is it?" she asked without looking at me, her voice low.

"We're not alone," I murmured back. The rhythm of my heart picked up pace, not in fear, but in readiness. I scanned the surroundings, every muscle coiled like a spring. "Stay close."

Arlet nodded and moved towards me with a quiet grace that spoke of our recent training sessions. She was becoming more attuned to the forest, its language no longer foreign to her.

The source of our unease soon revealed itself—three men, clad in camouflaged gear, stepped into view. They were hunters, by the look of them, but their presence here was off. This part of the forest was a sanctuary with no hunting allowed.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” I called out to them, my voice calm but firm.

The leader, a burly man with a thick beard and an air of arrogance about him, sneered as he sized us up. “We’re just passing through,” he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

His companions chuckled among themselves, their eyes roving over Arlet with an unsettling interest.

I positioned myself subtly between them and Arlet, my senses alert for any sudden moves. “This is a protected area,” I said evenly. “No hunting allowed.”

The burly man took a step forward, his hand resting on the rifle slung over his shoulder—a silent threat. “Who’s gonna stop us? You?”

Arlet stepped to my side then, her stance confident and unyielding. “We will,” she stated clearly, her gaze never wavering from theirs.

There was a moment of tense silence as we faced off in the clearing—the hunters with their entitlement and us with our resolve to protect this land.

It happened quickly then—a rustle in the bushes that drew their attention away from us for just an instant. In that heartbeat of distraction, I gave Arlet a slight nod—an unspoken signal we understood between us.

As one, we sprang into action—Arlet darting towards the nearest tree while I advanced on the hunters with deliberate steps that left no doubt about my intent.

“Leave,” I growled at them, my voice dropping into barely heard registers—a primal warning that spoke directly to their instincts.

The hunters hesitated. Clearly I was a danger they hadn't expected encountering today.

Arlet's voice rang out from her new vantage point above us. "This forest is under our protection," she declared boldly. "And we will defend it."

The standoff stretched on for a few heartbeats more before the burly leader spat on the ground and motioned to his companions. "Let's go," he grunted. "Not worth it."

They retreated slowly at first before picking up pace as they put distance between us and them. Once they were out of sight and their disruptive energy no longer tainted the air, I relaxed slightly.

I turned to Arlet, who had climbed down from her perch and was brushing leaves from her hair with an exhilarated smile on her face.

"We did well," she said as she approached me.

"We did," I agreed with a nod of respect for her courage and quick thinking.

Our eyes met then—a silent conversation passing between us about what had just occurred and what it meant for our partnership. We had faced our first real test together and emerged stronger for it—not just as protector and protected, but as staunch allies bound by a common cause.

As evening approached and shadows grew long around us, we made our way back towards Arlet's cabin in comfortable silence. The forest breathed easier now as we dealt with the disturbance—its peace restored by our intervention.

Once we arrived at the cabin's doorstep, Arlet turned to me with gratitude shining in her eyes. "Thank you," she said simply, but with a depth that encompassed more than just today's events.

"There's no need to thank me," I replied quietly. "This is what I'm here for—to protect you and this place."

She smiled then—a smile that held warmth and something more—a recognition of what we were building together here among these ancient trees.

"Can't you come in and stay tonight?" Her eyes widened like that of a puppy.

“No, love. After those hunters, I need to keep vigil out here. For a few hours anyway.” I smiled, and she nodded with understanding. As her bodyguard, I needed to ensure the area’s safety first.

I watched her enter the cabin before stepping back into the twilight world outside where my vigilance resumed—an ever-present guardian against any threat that might dare approach.

From a distance, hidden by foliage yet close enough to act if needed, I settled down to watch over Arlet through the night—as much a part of this land now as any creature born to it.

And as stars peppered the darkening sky above me, thoughts of our future together wove through my mind like trails through these woods—complex and uncharted but somehow inevitable in their convergence.

Despite all uncertainties looming on horizons yet unseen—all those potential consequences of our growing bond—a conviction dropped deep within my being that our paths crossed, that whatever destiny lay ahead for us from some ancient time when they wrote stories not in words but in constellations etched upon night skies by hands unseen.

CHAPTER 12



Arlet

Leaves rustled underfoot as I paced the length of my cabin's porch, my thoughts as tangled as the underbrush surrounding my new sanctuary. I paused, leaning against the wooden railing, and cast a glance at the stoic figure of Hayze standing just at the forest's edge. The bronze sheen of his skin caught the dying light, and I marveled, not for the first time, at the surreal turn my life had taken.

"Hayze?" I called out softly.

He approached with silent grace, an innate stealth in his every move. "Yes, Arlet?"

"I've been thinking..." I trailed off, watching a sparrow dart through the trees. "It's strange, isn't it? A month ago, I wouldn't have believed my life would do a complete one-eighty. Now here you are, not just real, but... my guardian."

Hayze tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "Life is full of unexpected turns."

I chuckled, a sound more nervous than mirthful. "That's an understatement. But thank you. For stepping out of the shadows. For everything."

He nodded once, a silent acknowledgment of our shared path.

We both knew there was more pressing business at hand. The environmental threat that had brought us together in this unlikely partnership loomed over us like a storm cloud on the horizon.

“We need to stop that corporation,” I said firmly. “The evidence we’ve gathered is compelling, but we need more.”

Hayze crossed his arms over his chest. “We will find it,” he said confidently. “You know this land better than they do. And with my... abilities, we have an advantage.”

“Right.” I took a deep breath, letting the fresh pine scent steady me. “I’ve mapped out where their activity seems most concentrated. Tomorrow we should —”

A rustling in the forest interrupted me. Hayze’s gaze snapped to the source of the noise, his body tensing like a coiled spring ready to release.

“Just a deer,” he murmured after a moment, relaxing slightly.

I nodded but couldn’t help feeling a spike of adrenaline at how quickly danger could present itself.

“We need to be careful,” I continued quietly. “This corporation won’t take kindly to us snooping around.”

“And your past?” Hayze asked softly.

I hesitated. The shadows of my old life as Charlotte Bruno still clung to me like cobwebs—sticky and stubborn.

“It’s a risk,” I admitted. “But one we’ll have to manage.”

Hayze stepped closer until he was beside me on the porch. “We will manage it together,” he said with certainty.

I met his gaze and found reassurance there—an anchor in this sea of chaos that had become my life.

“Tomorrow,” I said with renewed determination, “we start early.”

Hayze nodded once more and then moved back into his position at the forest’s edge—a silent sentinel watching over me as night fell over the cabin.

As I stepped back inside, closing the door behind me against the chill night air, I allowed myself to believe that maybe—just maybe—I wasn't facing these threats alone anymore. With Hayze by my side, strange as it was to have a Talos monster as a protector and partner, there was hope yet for both my mission and whatever remnants of Charlotte Bruno lingered within me.

Dawn painted the sky in strokes of orange and pink as I laced up my boots, the worn leather familiar against my fingers. Our plan for the covert operation deep in the forest to collect water samples and document illegal dumping began. It was a crucial step, one that could sway the tides in our favor. Hayze stood outside, a silent figure against the awakening day.

“Ready?” I asked as I stepped out, adjusting my backpack.

He nodded, his bronze skin shimmering in the morning light. “Lead the way.”

The forest welcomed us with open arms, birdsong filling the air as we made our way through the thick underbrush. Nature's untamed beauty was my home, but now, with Hayze at my side, there was an added sense of purpose to each step.

We reached the first stream silently, the gentle burble of water a soft whisper beneath the rustle of leaves. I knelt by the bank, pulling out vials and labels. Hayze hovered nearby, his gaze sweeping our surroundings for any sign of unwelcome company.

“Keep watch,” I murmured, dipping a vial into the clear water.

Hayze's response was a barely perceptible nod as he melted into the background, blending with the trees as if he were part of them. His presence was both comforting and unnerving; he was here but also everywhere, his senses attuned to dangers I couldn't perceive.

With practiced motions, I sealed and labeled each sample before tucking them away safely. We moved from stream to stream, repeating the process—a silent dance between guardian and scientist.

As we ventured deeper into the forest, signs of human encroachment grew more clear. Torn foliage and trampled ground spoke volumes of carelessness and greed. My heart ached at the sight—it was a wound upon the earth that we were determined to heal.

“We’re close,” I whispered when we approached a site known for its frequent activity.

Hayze’s form materialized beside me, his eyes reflecting a glint of steel. “I’ll scout ahead.”

He vanished like a wisp of smoke among the trees. Alone, but not truly so, I waited with bated breath until he returned moments later with a nod that signaled all was clear.

We found it then—the evidence we sought—a tarnished stream littered with debris that marred its banks and poisoned its waters. Anger flared within me, fierce.

I set to work, meticulously documenting everything with my camera—the discarded barrels with peeling hazard labels, the unnatural sheen on the water’s surface—all while Hayze watched over me like an avenging deity ready to strike at any threat.

The sun climbed higher in the sky as we wrapped up our evidence gathering. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I packed away my gear, my hands steady despite the gravity of our findings.

“We should head back,” I breathed. “We have what we need.”

Hayze nodded in agreement, his eyes never ceasing their vigilant sweep.

As we retraced our steps through the forest’s embrace, there was no conversation. Our partnership had evolved beyond words; it thrived in shared glances and unspoken understandings. Together we had faced down threats, both human and environmental. Together, we would continue to fight for what was right.

The cabin came into view before long—a beacon of safety after hours spent in stealthy tension—and yet there was no sense of conclusion to our morning’s work. We had gathered pieces of a larger puzzle—one that would require patience and persistence to solve.

We were almost clear of the forest when the crunch of heavy boots and the coarse timbre of voices sliced through the underbrush. I froze, a prickle of unease crawling up my spine. Hayze’s hand found my arm, a silent command

to stay still.

Through a veil of leaves, I glimpsed them—three men, calloused and grim, axes slung over their shoulders. Loggers. But their unsanctioned presence here was a brazen theft of timber, as much a violation as the toxic barrels we'd just documented.

Hayze's voice was a low hum in my ear. "Stay behind me."

I nodded, my heart thumping against my ribs like a frantic bird seeking escape. These were the people ravaging the land I protected—the very land that had become part of me.

The men drew closer, their laughter jagged edges in the tranquil forest air. One spotted us and shouted to his companions, their advance, turning purposeful.

"What do we have here?" The largest man sneered as they approached, his gaze lingering on me with ill intent.

"Just hikers," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Far from the trails, aren't you?" another mocked.

Hayze's stature seemed to grow, an imposing barrier between me and them. "We were leaving," he said firmly.

"Not so fast." The first man stepped closer. "You've seen too much."

Adrenaline surged through me—a fierce current that swept away fear and left a clear focus in its wake. Remembering Hayze's training, I shifted my weight onto the balls of my feet, ready to react.

The logger lunged for me, but I was quicker. I sidestepped and drove my elbow into his gut with more force than I thought I possessed. He doubled over with a grunt of pain.

The second man came at Hayze with a wild swing of his axe. In one fluid motion, Hayze disarmed him, the weapon clattering harmlessly to the ground far out of reach.

The third hesitated, his resolve faltering as he witnessed his companions'

swift defeat. But greed or desperation spurred him on, and he charged.

Hayze moved then—a blur of bronze that was there one moment and behind the man the next. With a deft maneuver that barely seemed aggressive, he had the logger pinned against a tree, breathless and wide-eyed with shock.

“Go,” Hayze’s voice was calm but brooked no argument. “And don’t return.”

The loggers scrambled away without their axes, tripping over their own feet in their haste to escape.

I stood there for a moment longer than necessary, trying to slow my racing pulse. Hayze approached me then—no longer just my shadow guard, but an ally in every sense of the word.

“You did well,” he whispered.

A laugh bubbled up from within me—a release of tension that echoed strangely in the quiet forest. “We did well.”

He offered a rare smile—a flash of warmth that belied his stoic nature—and it bolstered my spirits further.

As we made our way back to the cabin with our trove of damning evidence safely secured in my pack, there was an undeniable sense of accomplishment thrumming through me—an electric current fueled by adrenaline and victory. Hayze’s presence at my side was a constant reminder that this fight wasn’t mine alone; it was ours—a shared battle for a world that desperately needed guardians like us.

CHAPTER 13



*H*ayze

The air was sizzling with arousal as I stood before Arlet, basking in the post-dinner stillness of her cozy cabin. After devouring a meal woven with laughter and some half-truths from me, Arlet was now preparing herself for bed.

Uncertainty permeated my being as she slipped into a thin tee that hugged her curves and a pair of shorts that exposed her shapely legs. My eyes followed her every movement, tracing the outline of her slender silhouette against the warm glow of the cabin lights.

Summoning a courage I didn't know I possessed, I took a tentative step toward her, my heart pounding in a rhythm of longing and apprehension. Arlet turned, her gaze meeting mine, and a mischievous smile played upon her lips as if she could sense the storm brewing within me.

"May I?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper, a mix of desire and reverence.

She nodded, her expression a silent invitation. I closed the distance between us, my hands reaching out to cup her face. Our eyes locked, a silent dialogue passing between us, speaking of a connection deeper than words could convey.

Hesitantly, I leaned in, my lips brushing against hers, savoring the softness of

her skin, the warmth of her breath. She responded with a sigh, her lips parting slightly to allow me entry. Our kiss deepened, a dance of passion and surrender, as the tension between us shattered like glass.

Arlet's hands slid around my neck, pulling me closer, as if she wanted to become one with me, to absorb all that I was. I lost myself in the sensation, letting go of my reservations.

In the safety of her arms, I had a sense of belonging I had never known, a hunger I had never dared to acknowledge. As the night wore on, we explored each other, our bodies a testament to the desires we had long suppressed.

My bronze hands trembled as they traced the curves of her body, my fingers lightly dancing along her skin. Arlet's eyes were closed, her breaths shallow, as she savored my touch.

I leaned in, my lips trailing a path down her neck, her chest, her stomach. With each kiss, a surge of longing, a desire to connect with her in a way I had never experienced before arose in me.

My fingers found their way between her legs, and the amazing softness, the warmth that greeted me. Arlet gasped, her body arching towards mine, as I explored her intimately.

Her tension increased, her breaths becoming more rapid. Her hands gripped my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin as she urged me on. I had a primal need to pleasure her, to give her the release she so desperately sought.

My fingers moved with purpose, my touch becoming more insistent, more demanding. Arlet's moans filled the room, her body writhing beneath mine. Her climax approached, and I redoubled my efforts, determined to bring her to the edge.

With a final, shuddering breath, she cried out, her body tensing before releasing into a state of pure bliss. I held her close, my fingers still gently caressing her, as she rode the waves of pleasure.

In that moment, my connection to Arlet that transcended words, a bond that went beyond the physical. I knew then that I would do anything to protect her, to ensure her happiness.

As Arlet pushed me back onto the bed, her eyes blazed with desire, and my heart raced with anticipation. She climbed on top of me, her body pressed against mine, and the heat radiated from her skin.

Her hands moved to unfasten my pants, her fingers deftly working the buttons and zipper. I trembled with anticipation as she freed me from my clothing, my arousal clear in her gaze.

Arlet's lips trailed a path down my chest, her tongue flicking over my nipples, sending shivers through my body. She continued her descent, her mouth closing around me, her tongue swirling around my shaft.

I groaned, my hands gripping the sheets as she pleased me, her mouth and hands working in unison. My release built, but I wanted more, needed more.

I gently pushed her away, rolling her onto her back. I positioned myself between her legs, my hands caressing her thighs, my fingers teasing her entrance.

Arlet's eyes locked with mine, her breaths coming in short, rapid gasps. I leaned in, my lips brushing against hers, as I slowly entered her. She moaned, her body arching towards mine, her hands gripping my shoulders.

I leaned in, my lips brushing against hers as I slowly entered her. She moaned, her body arching towards mine, her hands gripping my shoulders. I savored the sensation of our bodies joining, the connection that went beyond the physical.

I moved, my hips rocking against hers in a slow, steady rhythm. Arlet's eyes fluttered closed, her head thrown back in ecstasy. Her body responded to mine, her muscles tightening around me as I thrust deeper.

My hands roamed her body, exploring every curve and contour. I marveled at the softness of her skin. Her heart raced, her breaths coming in short, rapid gasps.

I leaned down, my lips finding hers in a passionate kiss. Our tongues danced together, our breaths mingling as we lost ourselves at the moment. My release built, but I fought it back, determined to bring Arlet to the brink once more.

“Oh, Hayze.” Her breaths came quickly, her body shuddering.

I shifted my angle, my hips moving in a new rhythm. Arlet gasped, her nails digging into my back as I hit that sweet spot.

“Sweet Arlet. Oh!” I moaned, unable to control myself. Her body trembled, her muscles clenching around me as she neared her climax.

My hips moving faster, harder.

“Please, Hayze. Oh! I’m coming!” Arlet’s moans filled the room, her body writhing beneath mine. Her breaths grew rapidly.

With a final, shuddering breath, she cried out as the pleasure took us by force. We rocked through the waves of pleasure together until we drained of the energy.

Sleep came like a force, both of us spent and still entangled, slipping into our dreams fully satisfied.

The morning sun peeked through the curtains, casting a warm glow over Arlet’s sleeping form. I watched her for a moment, admiring the peace and serenity that enveloped her. She was so different from me, so human and yet so extraordinary.

I carefully extricated myself from her embrace and slipped out of bed. I needed to give her some space, to allow her to process the events of the night before. What we shared was more than just a physical connection, and I wanted to give her the time she needed to come to terms with it.

The coffee pot sputtered the last of the hot, steamy liquid into the pot. Coffee drew me at the moment I tried it back when I first came to Earth. A human concoction that I immensely enjoyed. The day ahead held more training with Arlet. She needed to learn more advanced techniques to harness her environment defensively, and I was eager to get started.

Teaching Arlet these techniques would be a challenge, but I was confident that she was up to it. She was resourceful and had a deep connection to the natural world. With the right guidance, I believed she could become a formidable force in the fight against environmental destruction.

As I sipped my coffee, I planned a plan for the day's training. I would start by teaching Arlet how to sense and manipulate the energy that flowed through all living things. Once she had a basic understanding of this, I would teach her how to use it to create shields and barriers, to heal wounds, and to enhance her physical abilities.

I finished my coffee and returned to the bedroom, where I found Arlet awake and dressed. She smiled when she saw me, and I could see a hint of excitement in her eyes.

"Good morning," I said. "Are you ready to begin?"

She nodded. "I'm eager to learn more. But first coffee. Smells delightful."

We sat at the small table and drank coffee together. The sun glinted from her blonde hair like spun gold, bright and smelling of strawberries. My body tingled in anticipation of taking her again, but we had to get to work.

I took her hand and led her outside. The sun glowed, and birdsong filled the air. It was a perfect day to be in the forest, surrounded by nature.

"The first thing I'm going to teach you is how to sense the energy that flows through all living things," I said. "This energy gives life to the world, and it's also what you'll use to power your defensive techniques."

My eyes closed, and I concentrated, reaching out with my senses. The energy flowed through the trees, the plants, and the animals that surrounded us. I opened my eyes and looked at Arlet.

"Can you feel it?" I asked.

She nodded hesitantly. "I think so."

"Good," I said. "Now, I want you to manipulate the energy. Imagine that you're drawing it towards you, like a magnet."

Arlet closed her eyes and concentrated. I watched as her hands glowed with a faint light. She was doing it! She was manipulating the energy!

"That's it," I said encouragingly. "Keep going."

Arlet continued to manipulate the energy, and the light around her hands

grew brighter. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

“I did it!” she exclaimed. “I can feel it flowing through me!”

I smiled. “You’re a natural,” I said. “Now, let’s try something else.”

I showed Arlet how to create a shield to protect herself from harm. She followed my instructions carefully, and soon she could create a shimmering barrier of energy around her body.

“That’s amazing!” she said. “I feel invincible!”

I nodded. “Good,” I said. “Now, let’s try something more advanced.”

I showed Arlet how to create a barrier to protect others, and how to use her energy to heal wounds. She was a quick learner, and soon she could master these techniques as well.

By the end of the day, Arlet’s eyelids grew heavy as she beamed with exhilaration. She had learned more in one day than she had ever thought possible.

“I can’t believe how much I’ve learned,” she said. “Thank you, Hayze. This is incredible.”

I smiled. “You’re welcome,” I said. “I’m glad I could help.”

We packed up our things and headed back to Arlet’s cabin. As we walked, I thought about how much Arlet had changed in such a short time. She was no longer the timid and insecure woman who had arrived in the Pacific Northwest a few weeks ago. She was now a confident and capable warrior, ready to fight for what she believed in.

I was proud of her, and I knew she was going to make a difference in the world.

“Stay for dinner? I know you need to patrol the area, but even a Talos needs to eat.” She smiled and grabbed my hand, tugging me inside.

“I can’t argue with that. We need food too.” Laughter filled the cabin as Arlet set about making dinner for us.

Within half an hour, a simple meal of pasta and vegetables. We ate at the

small table, and I told her about my life as a Talos monster.

“I grew up on Thion J5, a planet with a harsh landscape and unforgiving weather. The people there are resilient, but life is hard. When war broke out, it forced to flee my home and seek refuge on Earth. Those who didn’t understand me imprisoned me, and it was only through the help of David Maddison that I could escape.”

I paused, my voice wavering with emotion. “David spent years trying to convince the higher-ups to move me to a habitable planet, but there aren’t any we know of.”

Arlet’s eyes filled with compassion as she listened to me. When I finished, she reached out and took my hand.

“Thank you for telling me your story,” she said. “It’s so sad, but it’s also inspiring. You’ve overcome so much in your life, and you’re still fighting for what you believe in. I admire that.”

I smiled. “Thank you,” I said. “It means a lot to me to hear that.”

We finished our meal, and then we sat by the fire, talking and laughing. A sense of peace and contentment that I had never known before blossomed. I was finally feeling like I belonged somewhere.

As the fire crackled and the shadows danced on the walls, I looked at Arlet and smiled. I knew I would do anything to protect her and to help her achieve her goals.

We were a team now, and we were unstoppable.

Later that night, I lay in bed thinking about Arlet. I could still feel the warmth of her hand in mine. I closed my eyes and imagined her lying next to me, her body warm and soft.

I let out a sigh and turned over, trying to sleep. But I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I wanted to be with her, to hold her in my arms.

I got out of bed and went to the window. I looked out at the dark forest, and I thought about how Arlet was out there somewhere, fighting for what she believed in.

I knew I had to be strong for her. I had to be there for her, no matter what.

I closed my eyes and concentrated, reaching out with my senses. Arlet's energy flowed through her, strong and vibrant. She was safe, and she was waiting for me.

I smiled and opened my eyes. Everything was going to be okay.

I turned away from the window and went back to bed. I closed my eyes and let myself drift off to sleep, knowing that Arlet was out there somewhere, fighting for what she believed in.

And I was with her, every step of the way.

CHAPTER 14



A^{rlet}

The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead as I stepped onto the small raised platform at the front of the town hall. A sea of faces, some hopeful, others etched with skepticism, turned toward me. Hayze’s reassuring presence at the back of the room anchored me.

“Good evening,” I began, my voice steady despite the tremor of nerves. “I’m here because I believe in this community—our forests, our wildlife, our health. We’ve uncovered evidence that directly implicates West Corp in illegal logging and water contamination.” Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

A man in a sharp suit stood up from his seat, his slicked-back hair and corporate badge catching the light. “Miss Rune, with all due respect,” he interjected smoothly, “West Corp has always complied with environmental regulations.”

I met his gaze, unwavering. “Compliance doesn’t involve dumping toxins into our river.” I clicked a button and a series of photos flashed on the screen behind me—barrels with West Corp’s logo seeping dark liquid into a stream.

“This is an outrage!” a woman in the front row shouted, her face flushed with anger. Others nodded in agreement.

Another man stood, folding his arms across his chest. “How do we know these photos are real? It’s easy to doctor a photo.”

I gestured for Hayze to join me; he stepped forward silently, holding a folder thick with documents and samples. “We have lab reports corroborating the photos,” I said firmly. “We found toxins above safe levels in these water samples.”

The corporate representative smirked. “Anyone can create fake reports.”

Hayze placed a vial of water on a small projector, magnifying its contents onto the screen—a myriad of particles floated within. “This is from your site,” Hayze’s voice resonated in the room, clear and factual. “Independent labs confirmed the results.”

The room erupted into heated discussion, some voices rising in defense of West Corp out of fear or loyalty, others clamoring for justice and reparation.

A woman near the back stood up, her hands trembling slightly as she held them out for silence. “My daughter’s been sick,” she whispered when the room hushed. “Doctors couldn’t figure it out—now it makes sense.” Her eyes locked onto mine, filled with pain and betrayal.

“I know change is frightening,” I addressed them all. “But doing nothing means more sickness, dying wildlife, destroyed habitats.” I let my words sink in.

“What do you propose we do?” asked a young man near the window.

“We demand accountability from West Corp,” I replied passionately. “We take this evidence to the authorities, to the media—we make them listen.”

Hayze nodded slightly from where he stood beside me; his confidence fueled my own.

The community members exchanged glances; resolve slowly knitting together divided opinions.

The corporate rep attempted to speak again, but the calls for action from the crowd drowned him.

As people stood in solidarity, a surge of hope rippled through me like wind

through leaves—a community awakening to its own power.

As the townsfolk huddled with community leaders behind closed doors, I stepped down from the platform, my hands still trembling slightly from the adrenaline of confrontation. Hayze joined me at the side of the room, his expression unreadable as always.

“They need time,” he murmured, almost to himself.

I nodded, biting my lip. “Time is a luxury we may not have,” I replied, a tinge of frustration seeping into my voice. “Every day we wait, the river suffers more, the wildlife struggles harder.”

Hayze’s gaze met mine, steady and unwavering. “You’ve ignited something tonight,” he mumbled. “That’s a start no one can take away.”

My shoulders slumping slightly as I sighed. “I just hope it’s enough.” I glanced around at the remaining attendees, who were whispering amongst themselves or staring thoughtfully at the evidence still displayed on the screen.

Hayze stepped closer, his presence comforting. “What you’ve done takes courage most people never muster,” he breathed. “You stood up to power with truth on your side.”

I shook my head, the weight of responsibility pressing down on me. “Courage doesn’t guarantee change, Hayze.” I turned to look at him fully now. “You saw them—the doubt in their eyes. The fear of losing jobs, stability.”

He placed a hand gently on my shoulder. “Change is often born from such doubt and fear,” he offered. “It’s a force that disrupts but also transforms.”

A small smile tugged at my lips despite myself. His faith in me—in us—was a beacon in moments like these.

“But what if it’s not enough?” I whispered, allowing myself this moment of vulnerability with him. “What if all this just makes things worse?”

Hayze’s hand squeezed my shoulder reassuringly. “Then we face that together.” His voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. “You’ve

already made an impact, Arlet. You've brought them to this point of decision."

I let out a long breath and leaned into his touch for just a second before straightening up again.

"You're right," I admitted reluctantly. The fight wasn't over; it was just beginning.

Hayze nodded and glanced toward the closed doors, where decisions were being made that could alter our entire course.

The doors creaked open, and a hush fell over the room as everyone turned to look at the community leaders emerging with solemn faces.

Hayze stood behind me like a shield as we waited for them to speak.

Whatever they decided now would either fuel our fight or snuff it out before it truly began—but standing there with Hayze, I knew that no matter what came next, we wouldn't face it alone.

The community leaders approached the front of the room, their expressions grave yet tinged with a new determination that seemed to ripple through the air. The buzz of conversation hushed as they took their places beside me. Every eye in the room turned to me, every ounce of tension as it hung between hope and despair.

The mayor, a woman with steel in her spine and kindness in her eyes, cleared her throat. "We've heard Miss Rune's evidence," she began, her voice carrying the weight of her office. "And we've seen with our eyes the damage being done to our environment."

A murmur of agreement echoed through the hall.

"We can no longer ignore what's happening," she continued. "It's time for action." She turned to me, nodding slightly. "Miss Rune, you have our full support. We will take this fight to West Corp—and beyond, if necessary."

My heart leaped in my chest, a rush of relief flooding through me like a river breaking its banks. I nodded back at her, unable to form words for a moment as gratitude and pride swelled within me.

Another leader, the head of the local fishing union, stepped forward. “Our rivers are our livelihood,” he said gruffly. “We stand with you.”

One by one, representatives from various environmental groups and community organizations voiced their support. They pledged resources, time, and a shared vision for a cleaner future.

As the meeting disbanded, people patted my back, shook my hand, and offered words of encouragement and offers of help. The tide had turned.

When the last person had filed out and the room had emptied except for Hayze and me, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“We did it,” I whispered, turning to face him.

His eyes held mine—a deep well of emotion that he seldom revealed. “You did it,” he corrected gently.

I shook my head. “No, not alone. This is us—this is partnership.”

Hayze stepped closer and in the quiet that enveloped us, his presence was more pronounced—a steadfast guardian whose silent strength had become my cornerstone.

“We’ve only just begun,” he said after a moment. “But yes, this is progress.”

I walked over to the window and gazed out at the forest that bordered our town—my new home—a place I defended with everything I had. Hayze joined me, his gaze following mine into the dark canopy beyond.

The night was still but alive with whispers of wind through leaves and distant calls of nocturnal creatures—nature’s own song of resilience.

“This fight... it’s bigger than us,” I mused aloud.

“It always was,” Hayze replied softly.

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass. The reflection showed us standing side by side—two beings from different worlds united by a cause that transcended both.

A smile touched my lips as Hayze’s warmth consumed me—a comrade-in-arms against whatever lay ahead.

“Yes,” I agreed quietly. “But now we’re not alone.”

Hayze’s hand found mine, his fingers lacing through as naturally as roots finding soil—a silent vow that needed no words.

The night stretched before us—an expanse of unknowns—but for now, this moment was enough: a testament to hard-won battles and shared victories, a sanctuary in each other’s resolve.

Renewed hope kindled within me like dawn breaking on the horizon—a promise of light after darkness—and with Hayze at my side, determination set my heart ablaze anew for whatever tomorrow would bring.

CHAPTER 15



*H*ayze

Under the veil of night, I crept through the dense forest, the sounds of nocturnal creatures my only company. My mission was clear: to secure evidence that would nail the corporation to the wall, evidence that would cement their environmental atrocities in the eyes of the world. Arlet was asleep, her breaths steady and unaware of the cloak and dagger operation I had undertaken to keep her hands unstained by this necessary skullduggery.

I glided between trees, my steps silent, my senses attuned to every rustle of leaves, every snap of a twig. The cool air was a balm on my skin, a contrast to the heat that pulsed within me—a fervor to protect Arlet and the world she held dear.

The corporate facility loomed ahead, its skeletal structures outlined against the starry sky. My heart didn't race; it was steady as a drumbeat. This was familiar territory for me, the edge of danger where I thrived. I paused, surveying the area with eyes that missed nothing. A security camera here, a patrolling guard there—I cataloged them all on my mind's map.

A quick dash got me to the first blind spot I'd identified. From there, it was a matter of timing and precision. Each calculated movement and each decision weighed against potential outcomes. The facility held its secrets tight within its walls, but I knew how to coax them out.

Finally reaching an access point—a vent easily overlooked by those who didn't know better—I pried it open with deft fingers. Inside lay a network of conduits and passageways that whispered of human negligence. They hadn't accounted for someone like me—someone who could navigate these narrow spaces as if born to them.

As I crawled through the metal veins of the building, I reached a junction where I could access their data servers. With tools pulled from my belt, I worked swiftly to download every byte of incriminating data onto a drive secured around my neck.

Then came the faintest sound—so soft it might've been just another secret spoken by the forest if not for its cadence, something distinctly not human or animal. Curiosity pricked at me like thorns as I backtracked toward the source.

I emerged from the facility's underbelly to find myself face-to-face with something... unexpected. Before me stood a creature wrought from another planet and shadow—its form hulking and rough-hewn like a living stone.

“You are not human,” it rumbled, its voice echoing like boulders grinding together.

“Neither are you,” I replied, keeping my stance neutral yet ready for anything.

The creature's eyes gleamed with an inner light that seemed ancient and weary. “I am Grokkem,” it declared with a slow nod.

I assessed him in silence before speaking again. “What brings you here, Grokkem?”

“I seek refuge,” he said, his gaze scanning the dark canopy above us. “A place away from humans.”

His words resonated with me; once upon a time, I had sought much the same thing. “Humans can be... challenging,” I offered diplomatically.

Grokkem huffed, a sound like gravel being tossed aside. “They do not understand what they cannot control.”

“Many fear what is different,” I agreed. “But not all are like that.”

He tilted his massive head slightly, as if considering my words, before nodding once more in acknowledgment.

“Will you allow me passage through your territory?” he asked next.

“It’s not mine to claim,” I said after a moment’s thought. “But tread lightly—there are those here who will not welcome your presence.”

Grokkem gave a rumble that might have been laughter if it didn’t vibrate through the ground itself. “I am adept at going unnoticed.”

“I can see that.” A small smile tugged at my lips despite our serious parley.

We stood there for another heartbeat or two before he turned to leave, melting into shadows as though he were part of them all along.

Watching him go, I couldn’t help but feel a kinship with this golem—another creature far from home, searching for peace in an unfamiliar world. It was yet another reminder of how vast and varied our universe was—and how small our own troubles might seem in comparison.

Yet as vast as it was, we had both found ourselves here on Earth—for me it was because of Arlet and for Grokkem... well, his reasons remained his own.

With Grokkem’s departure blending into the nocturne of nature’s symphony, I refocused on my purpose. Clutching the drive containing damning evidence against those who would pillage this planet for profit, I knew there was no room for error now.

As dawn’s first light touched the horizon with timid fingers, I made my way back to Arlet’s cabin—back to her side—where silent promises hung in balance with each step: protection at all costs and an unspoken vow that together we’d turn tides too long left unchecked by those who claimed stewardship over this Earth.

As I snuggled up to Arlet in bed, her drowsy movements and soft sighs filled me with a sense of contentment I hadn’t known before. Her face stretched into a smile as she turned to me, her eyes still heavy with sleep. I couldn’t help but marvel at her beauty, even in this state of semi-consciousness.

My adventure from the night before lingered in my mind, but I pushed it aside for now. There would be time to share my discoveries with Arlet later. For now, I needed to connect with her on a deeper level—to feel her warmth and the reassurance of her presence.

Arlet's hands explored my body, her fingers tracing the contours of my chest and abs. I shivered at her touch, my skin prickling with anticipation. My own hands roamed over her curves, savoring the feel of her soft skin and the gentle swell of her hips.

As our lips locked, a spark ignited within me, burning brighter than any flame I had ever known. Arlet's tongue danced with mine, each touch sending electric shocks through my body. My cock grew harder, straining against the fabric of my shorts as Arlet's hands found their way to my growing erection.

She teased me with feather-light touches, her fingers dancing along my belly, down to my hard cock.

As our lips locked, a spark ignited within me, burning brighter than any flame I had ever known. Arlet's tongue danced with mine, each touch sending electric shocks through my body. My cock grew harder, straining against the fabric of my shorts as Arlet's hands found their way to my growing erection.

She teased me with feather-light touches, her fingers dancing along my length before finally gripping me firmly. I let out a low groan, unable to contain my pleasure as she stroked me in earnest.

Arlet's eyes locked onto mine, her gaze filled with desire and hunger. I could see the want reflected there, and it only fueled my need for her. With a primal growl, I flipped her onto her back, my hands roaming over her body as I explored every inch of her.

Her breasts were full and round, the nipples hardening beneath my touch. I took one in my mouth, sucking gently before flicking it with my tongue. Arlet moaned, her back arching off the bed as she pressed herself closer to me.

Arlet's sweet cries echoed through the cabin. Our bodies entwined, our hearts beating as one, we journeyed to the very depths of our shared desire.

Her skin was like satin beneath my touch, her curves molding perfectly

against my form. I craved more of her, my hands roaming over her body, exploring every inch of her with a newfound reverence.

Arlet's lips met mine in a passionate kiss, her tongue dancing with mine in a seductive tango. I tasted her desire, her need, and it only fueled my hunger for her.

My hands slid down her back, tracing the delicate curve of her spine before coming to rest on her pert buttocks. I squeezed gently, and she let out a soft moan, arching her back into me.

With one swift motion, I flipped her onto her back, my eyes feasting on the sight of her naked body splayed out before me. She was breathtaking, her skin glowing in the moonlight that filtered through the curtains.

My gaze dropped to her pussy, now slick with desire. I couldn't resist any longer. Leaning in, I gently parted her folds with my fingers, revealing the sweet nectar that awaited me.

Arlet's eyes fluttered open, her gaze locking onto mine. In that moment, I saw a kaleidoscope of emotions reflected at me—desire, vulnerability, and a hint of fear.

I leaned in closer, my lips brushing against the delicate petals of her pussy. I could taste her, smell her, feel her heat radiating against my skin.

With a gentle flick of my tongue, I teased her clit, sending shivers of pleasure coursing through her body. Arlet's hips bucked against my touch. Her moans grew louder as she surrendered to the sensations that were washing over her.

I continued to explore her pussy with my tongue, savoring every nuance, every subtle fold. Arlet's body trembled beneath me, her nails digging into my shoulders as she clung to me for dear life.

As her climax approached, the tension built within her. Her body arched off the bed, her head thrown back as she let out a primal scream of ecstasy.

I watched in awe as her orgasm rippled through her entire being, her body convulsing as waves of pleasure washed over her. I held her close, my arms wrapped tightly around her as she slowly returned to earth.

In the aftermath of her climax, Arlet lay in my arms, her breathing still ragged but her expression one of utter contentment. I kissed her forehead, my heart filled with love and tenderness.

“That was incredible,” she whispered, her voice husky with emotion.

I smiled against her skin. “I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I replied.

We lay together for a long moment, savoring the afterglow of our lovemaking. Arlet’s fingers traced patterns on my chest, her touch light and playful.

“I’m so happy with you, Hayze,” she said eventually, her voice soft and sincere.

I turned to face her, cupping her cheek in my hand. “I’m glad I could be the one to show you,” I said, my voice gruff with emotion.

Arlet leaned in and kissed me, her lips soft and yielding. As our tongues intertwined, a surge of desire coursed through me once more.

Without a word, I reached down and pulled her close, our bodies aligning in perfect harmony. I entered her with one smooth motion, filling her with my heat and my need.

Arlet gasped, her body tensing as she adjusted to the fullness of me. I moved slowly, savoring the feel of her tight pussy wrapped around my cock.

As our lovemaking intensified, Arlet’s moans grew louder, her body moving in sync with mine. I grew closer to the edge, my cock throbbing with the need to release.

With a final thrust, I let go, spilling my seed deep inside Arlet. She cried out in ecstasy, her body convulsing around me as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her.

We lay together, sweat-slick and exhausted, our hearts pounding in unison. Arlet turned to face me, her eyes shining with love and satisfaction.

“That was the best sex I’ve ever had,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

I smiled, my heart overflowing with love for this woman who had shown me a love and passion I never thought I could experience.

“Me too,” I replied, my voice husky with emotion.

And as we lay there, entwined in each other’s arms, I knew that our lovemaking had been more than just a physical act. It was a promise of a future filled with love, passion, and adventure.

CHAPTER 16



Arlet

I stretched languidly, my limbs heavy with a contentment I hadn't known before Hayze's arrival. Light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow across the tangled sheets where he and I lay, entwined in the aftermath of passion. The morning air was cool and crisp, but the heat between us had kept the chill at bay.

Hayze stirred beside me, his eyes reflecting the same fierce embers from last night. He propped himself on one elbow, the muscles in his arm tensing like coiled springs. "Arlet," he began, his voice a deep rumble that resonated through my chest, "there's something I need to tell you about last night."

I sat up, clutching the sheet to my chest, intrigued by the gravity in his tone. "What happened?"

"I broke into West Corp's facility." His words hung between us, charged with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine despite the warmth of our cocoon.

My mind snapped to attention. "You did what?"

He nodded solemnly. "I needed more evidence of their illegal activities. But that's not all—I met someone in the forest, a golem named Grokkem."

A golem? My curiosity piqued. "Tell me everything."

As Hayze spoke, his eyes locked onto mine, unblinking and intense. “There he was, standing like an ancient sentinel, his body composed of the very earth and stones around us,” he began, his voice tinged with a respect that bordered on awe. “Grokkem, he called himself—a guardian of the forest.” He paused, as if the memory of the meeting settled on him like a sacred mantle.

I leaned in, captivated. “What did he look like?”

Hayze’s hand moved through the air, sculpting an invisible form. “Imagine a titan, with limbs as thick as tree trunks, and a gaze that seemed to pierce through the shadows of the woods,” he said, his words painting a majestic being in my mind’s eye. “There was a... a sort of kinship between us, as if he recognized my intent to protect the forest as well.”

My heart raced at the thought of such a meeting. “And what did he say to you?”

“He spoke of balance, of a threat to the natural order that West Corp’s actions might exacerbate,” Hayze continued, his tone solemn. “Grokkem’s wisdom was profound—like he’d watched over these woods for eons, and understood the delicate web of life far better than any human could.”

I rose from the bed, feeling an urgency to move, to act. Hayze followed suit, and together we dressed in expectant silence.

Once clothed and sitting at my modest kitchen table, Hayze laid out the documents he had retrieved from West Corp—a litany of transgressions against nature cataloged with cold precision. My strategic mind whirred into action as I pored over the papers.

“We need a plan,” I stated firmly.

Hayze nodded. “Your expertise in environmental law and my... abilities can ensure this information doesn’t get buried.”

I looked down. My expertise was a joke once upon a time. The great mafia boss father paid my way through the Ivy League college with promises of massive donations if they let me in. Of course, somehow, I passed all the entry exams and attended Yale, majoring in environmental studies. Walking away with my bachelor's degree, I turned down the masters, thinking I wouldn’t need such education, not as a mafia princess. A pang of sadness

shot through my heart as I remembered my family. I'd done well to keep them out of my mind until now.

"Are you okay?" Hayze asked, his golden eyes peering into my soul.

I shrugged and stopped the tears from falling. "Yes, just a moment of weakness. I'm remembering my family from my past life."

Hayze pulled me into his arms. "I imagine it's how I feel thinking about my home many light years away from here. Not really a family to speak of, but I had friends. The opportunity to come to Earth intrigued me."

I smiled into his face. "Perhaps fate drew you here, to me."

"I know it did. I believe it now." He squeezed me to him. The scene of metal and earth filled my senses.

"As I was saying, we need to put your expertise to work here."

His last word hung in the air—buried—echoing back to Gorrek and his earthen form. I glanced up at Hayze. "We could use Gorrek's help too," I suggested.

Hayze considered this for a moment before nodding again. "Grokkem is bound to the land; he wants to protect it as much as we do."

My fingers tapped against the tabletop rhythmically as ideas formed and plans took shape. Together we discussed every angle—how to present our findings effectively and protect ourselves from retaliation.

"West Corp won't know what hit them," I said with a determined smile.

"And neither will anyone who threatens you," Hayze added with quiet intensity.

I looked at him then, really looked at him—not just as my protector or lover, but as my partner in this fight for justice. We were a team now—a force of nature in our own right—and together we would bring about change.

With our morning now dedicated to plotting and scheming rather than lovemaking, I was no less intimate with Hayze than before. If anything, our shared purpose bound us closer than any physical connection could—a bond

forged not just in desire but also in determination to make a difference.

I rose with the dawn, my heart thrumming a rhythm of purpose. Today was the day of the protest—the day we would confront West Corp with the truth of their environmental violations. The chill morning air bit at my skin as I stepped outside, but the fire within me burned hotter than any cold could touch.

Hayze was already awake, a silent sentinel in the dim light. His presence was a comfort, a reminder that I wasn't alone in this fight. "Ready?" he asked, his voice a low rumble that matched the stirring of the surrounding forest.

"More than ever," I replied, my voice steady even as my hands trembled with anticipation.

We made our way to the town square, where members of Wild Trust and local activists had gathered. Signs and banners waved like flags of rebellion, each one a testament to our shared commitment to protect the land we loved.

I found my place at the front, megaphone in hand. The crowd hushed as I raised it to my lips, every eye on me. I drew in a deep breath, letting it fill me with courage before speaking. "Today, we stand united for our forests, for our wildlife, and for our future!"

Cheers erupted around me, a tidal wave of support that bolstered my spirit. We marched forward as one, our steps resounding through the streets like the heartbeat of the earth itself.

As we approached West Corp's headquarters, a line of security guards formed a barrier before us. Their faces were masks of indifference, but I could see the flicker of uncertainty in their eyes. Our numbers overpowered them because of our passion.

"We demand accountability!" I shouted into the megaphone, my voice cutting through the tension. "We have evidence of your company's crimes against nature!"

The crowd echoed my words back in a chorus of righteous anger. The guards shifted uneasily, glancing back at the building that loomed behind them like a fortress of greed.

A man in a suit emerged from West Corp's doors—Mr. Greyson, their PR representative. His smile was all teeth and no warmth as he tried to placate us with empty promises and corporate speech.

But we weren't there for lies or half-measures. We wanted change—actual change—and nothing less would suffice.

“You can't silence us with your platitudes,” I declared, locking eyes with Greyson. “We know what you've done. The damage you've caused is irreversible!”

The crowd surged forward with me as their vanguard, our collective will pressing against the barricade of suits and security like a dam about to burst.

Greyson's smile faltered as he realized he couldn't dismiss us so easily. “Ms. Rune,” he singled me out from the mass of protestors.

I cut him off without hesitation. “It's not just me you have to answer to—it's all of us!”

My heart hammered against my ribs as I stood toe-to-toe with Greyson—the embodiment of everything we were fighting against. But fear had no place here today; only resolve lived within me now.

Hayze stood at my back—a silent guardian whose very presence gave me strength. Together with Wild Trust and every passionate soul that had joined our cause, we were an unstoppable force.

Our unignored voices rose together in a symphony of defiance. We were here to make waves; to shake the foundations of corruption until they crumbled beneath us.

And though confrontation loomed like storm clouds on the horizon, I remained undeterred—my voice strong and passionate—because this was just the beginning.

As I stood before the surging crowd, my voice amplified through the megaphone resulting in a surge of power—the power of unity, of collective action. The faces before me, a mosaic of determination and hope, were mirrors reflecting my conviction. “We demand justice for our forests!” I cried out, the sea of protestors echoing my words.

The security guards, a thin line of resistance against our wave of resolve, exchanged nervous glances. Behind them, Mr. Greyson's facade crumbled piece by piece under the weight of our unified front. He was a man used to boardrooms and tailored suits, not the raw energy of an impassioned populace at his doorstep.

The buzz of cameras and the click of shutters grew as reporters and journalists descended upon us like a flock to bread. Someone thrust a microphone in my direction, red recording lights blinking like eyes in the crowd. The questions came fast, a barrage that mirrored the rapid beat of my heart.

"Ms. Rune, what brought you to lead this movement?"

"How do you respond to West Corp's claims that they comply with all environmental regulations?"

"Do you think this protest will bring about the change you seek?"

I answered each query with a steadfastness that surprised even me. "This movement isn't about one person leading; it's about all of us standing together," I said, my gaze sweeping over the crowd that nodded and shouted in agreement. "West Corp's own records betray their claims—and we will hold them accountable."

And as for a change? I paused before answering, feeling Hayze's presence behind me like a bastion. "Change begins when silence ends," I stated firmly. "Today is just the beginning."

The protest continued with chants, and signs held high. Our message wasn't just heard; every passerby saw it — and across every news channel that covered our stand against West Corp.

As dusk settled and the crowd dispersed with promises to keep the pressure on, I realized we had done more than voice our grievances—we had started a conversation that we couldn't ignore.

Hayze and I walked back to my cabin in silence, our thoughts loud in the quiet forest. Inside, we sat across from each other at my small kitchen table—two souls bound by more than just a mission.

“We did it,” I whispered, almost disbelieving.

“We did,” Hayze agreed, his golden eyes softening in the dim light.

A quiet fell between us—a comfortable hush that allowed space for reflection. Today had been monumental—a pivot point in our fight against environmental injustice. But it had also laid bare the depth of what we were up against.

Hayze reached across the table and took my hand in his—an anchor in a sea that threatened to swallow us whole. “Arlet,” he whispered, “I’ve never... cared for someone as much as I care for you.”

My throat tightened at his words. To be cared for—truly cared for—was something new; something precious. “And I for you,” I admitted, squeezing his hand.

We shared our fears then—the possibility of retribution from West Corp or from shadows linked to my past life as Charlotte Bruno. But with each confession, our resolve deepened like roots into soil.

“And what about dreams?” Hayze asked after a pause. “What do you dream for the future?”

I considered his question—a future free from fear; one where our environment thrived; where maybe... just maybe... there was room for something as fragile and beautiful as love between two unlikely guardians of Earth.

I looked into Hayze’s eyes—those windows to an otherworldly soul—and saw my own dreams reflected there.

“We have much to fight for,” I said finally. “But tonight? Tonight we celebrate this victory and dream of a tomorrow where those fights are just memories.”

Hayze nodded in agreement, and we leaned toward each other—a meeting in the middle—a promise without words that whatever tomorrow brought, we’d face it together.

CHAPTER 17



*H*ayze

The glow of the screen cast a pallid light across my metallic skin as I scrolled through the latest environmental updates. Earth's news had become a part of my routine, a way to stay one step ahead in protecting Arlet. The headline caught my eye like a thorn in a bed of leaves. "Who Is Arlet Rune, Really?" A sense of dread tightened around my chest, a feeling foreign and unwelcome.

I read through the lines, each word steeped in suspicion and curiosity about Arlet's past. The writer had crafted their doubts into a sharp tool, probing for truth where they found none. Credentials questioned, history murky, their insinuations were like shadows creeping closer to the life she'd built.

I couldn't keep this from her. As I approached Arlet with my tablet in hand, she looked up from her desk, her blue eyes reflecting the trust we'd nurtured between us.

"Arlet, there's something you need to see."

She took the tablet with a frown creasing her forehead. As she read, her expression shifted from confusion to anger, then settled into a determined set of her jaw. She handed the device back to me without a word.

"They're digging," she finally said. "Digging for something that doesn't exist

anymore.”

“Your past is yours to keep or share,” I assured her. “But this... it could draw unwanted attention.”

Arlet paced the room, steps measured and full of purpose. “My past shouldn’t matter. It’s what I’m doing now that counts.”

“The human world thrives on history and connection,” I pointed out. “An absence can be as telling as a presence.”

She stopped pacing and faced me, her posture defiant. “Then let them dig! They won’t find anything that can harm us—not anymore. Charlotte Bruno is dead and buried. Let them dig up the grave. They’ll find her there.”

I watched her closely, admiring the fire that burned within her despite the chill this article brought upon us.

“We should prepare,” I suggested. “In case they unearth more than just questions.”

Arlet nodded sharply. “We will.” Her voice was steel wrapped in velvet—a combination that had disarmed many.

As we sat down to strategize our response, I couldn’t help but marvel at her resilience. Here was a woman who had left everything behind to protect herself and was now facing the specter of her old life with unflinching courage.

Our discussion stretched into the night, plans laid out like pieces on a chessboard. We calculated each move with precision—how to address inquiries, how to remain transparent without giving too much away, how to keep fighting for our cause without faltering under scrutiny.

Arlet’s hand brushed against mine; it was warm, alive with the pulse of our shared struggle.

The glow of the screen had faded, and the room settled into silence, save for the sound of Arlet’s breathing. It had grown shallow, each exhale a whispered secret of the fear she tried to bury. She stood by the window, gazing into the darkness that stretched beyond the glass like a void.

“Arlet,” I called softly, not wanting to startle her from her reverie.

She turned to me, and I saw it—the fear that flickered in her eyes like a candle in the wind. It was a rare sight; Arlet, the woman who faced down corporate giants and rallied communities with unwavering resolve, now stood vulnerable before me.

“They’ve never stopped looking for me, you know.” Her voice was a frail thread of sound. “My father’s enemies... they swore revenge. They believe spilling my blood will settle old scores.”

I stepped closer, close enough to see the tremble in her hands. “They declared you dead. They mourned you. Your grave stands as proof.”

Arlet laughed, but it held no humor. “A grave is just a marker for those left behind. It’s an illusion of peace for my family. But my father’s sins... they’re written in blood, and there are those who won’t rest until they’ve balanced the ledger.”

Her vulnerability pulled at something within me, an urge to shield her from the shadows that clawed at her spirit.

“You’re not alone in this,” I said firmly. “I’m here—as your guard, your ally.”

She shook her head slowly. “What if it’s not enough? The witness protection program assured me they covered all trails leading back to Charlotte Bruno. But what if one thread unravels? What if someone connects Arlet Rune to the mafia princess who was supposed to be six feet under?”

I reached out, placing my hand on her shoulder. Her muscles tensed under my touch before relaxing ever so slightly.

“Then we face it together,” I assured her. “We’ve already taken on threats to this forest and this community. We can handle shadows from your past.”

Arlet leaned into my hand, seeking a solace I hoped to provide. “I don’t want to drag you into the darkness of my old world.”

“You won’t be,” I said with conviction. “I stepped into this willingly when I accepted the task of protecting you.”

Her gaze met mine, searching for the certainty I projected. In that moment, our roles reversed—I became her anchor in the storm of doubt that threatened to consume her.

“We’ll continue as we have,” I continued. “Gathering evidence, supporting your cause, strengthening our defenses... If anyone dares come for you, they’ll find more than they bargained for.”

Arlet nodded slowly, a silent acknowledgment of our shared resolve.

“And if it comes to light?” she asked quietly.

I let out a breath that was heavy with unspoken promises. “Then we’ll stand together and face whatever comes our way.”

I leaned back against the rough bark of the pine tree outside Arlet’s window, the cool night air a balm to the tension that had crept into my shoulders. Inside, Arlet rifled through a file thick with the remnants of her former life, her silhouette backlit by the soft lamplight.

“Let’s wait,” I suggested, my voice carrying through the open window. “This article... it might be nothing more than a smear campaign by West Corp.”

She paused, fingers lingering on a faded photograph. “You think it’s just a ploy?”

“It’s possible,” I replied. “They’re desperate to discredit you, to shift the focus from their own sins to fabricate tales about you.”

Arlet let out a dry chuckle, resuming her search through the papers. “Wouldn’t be the first time someone tried to muddy my name.”

She pulled out a diploma from a small university—the name of which had changed twice since her attendance. It was one of many threads carefully woven to create Arlet Rune’s backstory. To anyone digging, it would appear authentic, an unremarkable past leading to an extraordinary present.

“Everything here,” she said, holding up the file, “stands up to scrutiny. My degree, ‘childhood’ photos with parents who worked in Detroit’s automotive industry before it crumbled.”

I crossed my arms, considering every angle as I always did. “They did

thorough work. It should hold up against any casual inquiry.”

She nodded and continued sifting through her fabricated history. The documents told a story of a girl born into a middle-class family—a narrative so meticulously crafted that sometimes I forgot it was all fiction.

Arlet’s hand trembled as she traced the edges of a picture showing her as a child, with people posing as her parents at some nondescript park. The image was convincing—happiness etched into their faces, a moment frozen in time that never truly happened.

“This is all that stands between me and them,” she murmured.

I stepped through the window into the warm glow of her cabin, closing the distance between us. “It’s not just papers and photographs that protect you,” I assured her. “You have allies, people who believe in what you’re doing now.”

Arlet met my gaze, her eyes searching mine for reassurance. “And what about you? What do you believe?”

“I believe in your cause,” I said without hesitation. “And I believe in you—Arlet Rune, not Charlotte Bruno.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “Then we’ll wait and see what this article stirs up—if anything at all.”

We settled into silence, punctuated only by the rustling leaves outside and Arlet’s occasional shuffling of papers. She eventually set aside the file, turning her full attention back to me.

“I won’t let them drag me back into that world,” she stated firmly.

“And I won’t let them get close enough to try,” I promised.

I stepped back into the cabin, the warmth of the room enveloping me. Arlet stood before me, her eyes filled with a mix of desire and apprehension. She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling beneath her shirt.

Without a word, I closed the distance between us, my arms encircling her waist. She melted into my embrace, her body soft and pliant against mine. Our lips met in a passionate kiss, tongues dancing together in a sensual

rhythm.

I ran my hands up her back, feeling the contours of her body beneath my fingertips. She shivered at my touch, her breath catching in her throat. I trailed kisses along her jawline, down her neck, and across her collarbone.

Arlet moaned softly, her hands grasping my shoulders for support. I continued my exploration, my lips and hands roaming over her body, discovering every inch of her skin. She arched her back, pressing herself against me, her desire clear in her movements.

I led her to the bed, our lips never parting as we tumbled onto the soft mattress. Our bodies intertwined, skin against skin, hearts beating in unison. Arlet's hands roamed over my chest, her fingers tracing the lines of my muscles.

As I explored Arlet's body, my touch became more intimate. I caressed her breasts, feeling the softness of her skin beneath my fingers. Her nipples hardened against my palm, and a low moan escaped her lips.

I leaned down and took one of her breasts into my mouth, suckling gently. She arched her back and ran her fingers through my hair, pulling me closer. I teased her other breast with my tongue, swirling the tip around the sensitive nub.

Arlet's breathing quickened, and her body trembled beneath me. Her desire built, matching my own. My lips trailed along her stomach, her hips, until I reached the apex of her thighs.

I parted her legs, exposing her to my eager gaze. She glistened in the soft light of the room. I leaned forward and kissed her there, my tongue swirling around her clit.

Arlet cried out, her body convulsing with pleasure. I continued to stimulate her, my tongue and fingers working in unison to bring her to the brink of ecstasy.

When she was on the verge of coming, I slid two fingers inside her. She gasped and tightened her muscles around me, her body bucking in response. I thrust my fingers in and out, increasing the pressure until she exploded in a shattering orgasm.

Arlet collapsed against the bed, her body still trembling from the intensity of her release. I leaned over and kissed her forehead, my heart filled with love and satisfaction.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and looked at me, her gaze soft and loving.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “That was incredible.”

I smiled and caressed her cheek. “You’re welcome, Arlet. It was my pleasure.”

We lay together for a while, savoring the afterglow of our lovemaking. I traced my fingers along her smooth, satiny skin, memorizing the feel of her body beneath my touch.

Eventually, Arlet stirred and sat up, pulling me up with her. We fell asleep entangled, our bodies eagerly groping for each other all night long. By the time the first burst of light hit the eastern sky, we rolled to each other, experiencing it all over again.

CHAPTER 18



*A*rllet

The drive to Portland was silent, filled with the tension that wraps around your chest and squeezes. Hayze’s gaze remained fixed on the road, but his concern radiated like heat from a fire. I fidgeted with the edge of my sleeve, my mind racing through a million scenarios, each worse than the last.

The library loomed ahead, a fortress of knowledge that held the answers we sought—or perhaps the confirmation of my fears. As we entered, the scent of old books and the hush of sacred silence enveloped us, offering an odd comfort amidst the chaos brewing within me.

“I’ll start with the local newspapers from around the time they would have buried me,” I whispered to Hayze as we split up.

He nodded, his expression solemn. “I’ll check online archives and databases. Anything out of place, we’ll find it.”

The microfilm machines hummed softly as I threaded the film through. The images blurred past, a dizzying array of headlines and stories until I reached the date that marked my supposed demise. My hands shook as I slowed the frames, reading through each obituary until I found it—my own.

Charlotte Bruno, loving daughter and bright light, snuffed out too soon.

The words mocked me from the grainy print. I scanned further, looking for

any follow-up articles, any hint that Charlotte Bruno's death was anything but real to the world.

Minutes turned into hours as I poured over record after record. Hayze checked in periodically, his eyes scanning my face for any sign of what I'd found.

"Anything?" he asked during one of his visits.

I shook my head. "It's like she—like I—never existed beyond that point."

He laid a hand on my shoulder—a brief touch that grounded me. "Keep looking."

And so we continued our search through the labyrinth of records. The librarians cast curious glances our way, but said nothing. We were two people on a mission they couldn't understand.

I searched every part of the library's collection, while Hayze typed rapidly on his laptop. Yet despite our efforts, nothing contradicted the story crafted by those who had sent me into hiding.

As dusk painted the sky outside with strokes of pink and orange, Hayze approached with his laptop in hand. He set it down before me, his finger pointing at an article he'd found—an interview with a grief-stricken Gage Burno lamenting his daughter's untimely passing.

"It's convincing," he admitted quietly.

"It has to be," I replied, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. "My family knows how to sell a lie."

We packed up our things as the library announced its closing time. The weight of our findings—or lack thereof—settled heavily upon us as we stepped back into the night air.

Hayze glanced at me under the streetlights' glow. "Are you alright?"

I managed a tight smile. "Yeah. It seems Charlotte Bruno really died that day."

His hand found mine, squeezing gently in reassurance or perhaps solidarity as

we walked back to our car parked beneath a sprawling oak tree. With each step, a piece of my old life fell away like leaves ready to join the autumn ground.

But even as Charlotte's ghost seemed to rest in peace within those library walls and archived pages, Arlet Rune couldn't shake off the chill of uncertainty that whispered new threats might wait just beyond the horizon.

I held the burner phone in my hand, its weight insignificant compared to the burden of uncertainty that had taken up residence in my chest. Hayze's eyes watched me, a silent question lingering in their depths. We were miles away from the nearest town with the car parked on a dusty turnout. Around us, the country stretched vast and empty, only the sound of wind through grass to keep us company.

I pressed the number that I had memorized when I became Arlet Rune, the one I hoped never to use again. The phone rang, each tone a drumbeat against my nerves.

"Speak?" The voice on the other end was crisp, professional.

I gave the code that let them know who I was. My voice was steady despite the storm inside. "I need to report a threat."

I explained everything—the article, the sense of being watched, the fear that my past was catching up with me. The agent listened without interruption, and when I finished, there was a pause.

"We'll look into it immediately," he assured me. "We'll contact you within an hour."

The line went dead. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding and met Hayze's gaze.

"They're checking into it," I said.

He nodded. "Good. Let's not just stand here waiting."

We found a walking trail nearby, its entrance marked by an old wooden sign that seemed to sway gently with our every movement. Hayze led the way as we stepped onto the path, gravel crunching beneath our boots. We walked

side by side in silence, each lost in our own thoughts but together in our solitude.

The trail wound through fields of wildflowers and clusters of trees whose leaves whispered secrets as we passed. We kept our pace even and our eyes alert for any sign of another soul—though none appeared.

Time stretched on, and with each passing minute, my anxiety ebb away slightly, replaced by an odd sense of tranquility that seemed to emanate from the earth itself.

The phone vibrated against my thigh, startling me back to reality. I stopped in my tracks and glanced at Hayze before answering.

“Arlet Rune,” I said into the phone.

“We’ve completed a preliminary investigation,” the agent began without preamble. “We see no evidence of anyone having discovered who you really are.”

Relief flooded through me for a moment before his next words registered.

“We believe this may be an attempt to rattle you,” he continued. “Your actions against West Corp have made you some powerful enemies.”

Hayze’s hand rested lightly on my back—a silent pillar of support as I processed what I was hearing.

“The question is,” the agent pressed on, “do you want another relocation? A new name?”

I paused, evaluating the significance of starting over once more and weighing it against the life I had created here—the mission Hayze and I shared.

“No,” I finally answered. “Not yet.”

“If you change your mind —”

“I know how to reach you.” My voice was firmer now; there was resolve in my words.

“Stay safe, Arlet.”

The call ended and silence settled around us once more—it was different because it was a choice.

I looked up at Hayze and saw determination mirrored in his expression. We were standing on a precipice together—not just in danger, but of opportunity as well.

“I’m not running,” I told him firmly. “Not this time.”

I turned the burner phone over in my hands, the reality of my decision sinking in. No more safety net, no more looking back. I caught Hayze’s eye, and without a word, he took the phone from me. His fingers worked deftly to remove the battery, and for a moment, we both stared at the now harmless pieces of technology.

“We need to make sure it’s untraceable,” I said, and he nodded in agreement.

We found a secluded burn pit near to where we were. It was an old thing, probably used by campers or locals wanting to keep warm during chilly nights. We tossed the pieces into the pit, and Hayze struck a match. The flame caught quickly, devouring the phone in a dance of orange and blue.

We watched as it turned to ash—a symbolic release of my old life. I imagined each spark that rose into the twilight sky was a fragment of Charlotte Bruno, floating away until nothing remained but Arlet Rune.

When the fire died down to embers, we covered them with dirt, ensuring every ember extinguished. Standing there in the quiet aftermath, I realized this was my rebirth by fire—a phoenix rising scenario without the luxury of mythical wings.

On our way back to my cabin, we stopped at a convenience store. The battery went into an outdoor garbage can alongside discarded coffee cups and fast-food wrappers—a nondescript end for what once was a lifeline.

The store clerk gave us a nod as we entered. We picked up some supplies—water, some snacks for later. Hayze hovered close but gave me space to interact with the clerk as I made small talk and paid for our items. It was mundane—an everyday interaction that belied the turmoil that had brought us here.

Back in the car, Hayze started the engine while I sat there for a moment longer than necessary, gathering myself for whatever lay ahead.

“We should go over our plan again,” Hayze suggested as we pulled onto the road leading home.

“Agreed,” I replied. “We’ve got evidence to go through tonight.”

The drive back was quiet, but not uncomfortable. There was an understanding between us that words weren’t always necessary. We were two beings caught up in something much larger than ourselves—a human and a Talos bound by shared goals and silent oaths of protection.

As we neared my cabin, the lights from within cast a warm glow against the darkening sky. It looked inviting—safe—and for a moment I allowed myself to believe it could be true.

We entered the silence, our footsteps muffled by the wooden floors. The cabin was different now—less like a hideout and more like a command center from which we’d stage our next moves.

Hayze began setting up his equipment on one side of the room while I laid out maps and documents on the other. We worked independently, but were always within sight of each other—a physical representation of our partnership.

“We’ll need to cross-reference these water samples with the dumping sites,” I said as I spread out vials filled with murky liquid.

Hayze nodded as he booted up his laptop. “I’ll start plotting coordinates based on your notes.”

We fell into a peaceful rhythm—him with his tech and me with my papers—each piece coming together to form a clearer picture of what we were up against.

The night deepened around us as we delved further into our work. The task was daunting, but not insurmountable—not with Hayze by my side. And as I looked across at him, lit by the soft glow of his laptop screen, I didn’t need to imagine strength or resolve; it was all there in his steady gaze and unwavering presence.

This was where I needed to be—fighting for something good with someone who believed in me just as fiercely as I believed in our cause.

CHAPTER 19



*H*ayze

The glow from the laptop screen cast a pallid light across Arlet's face, carving deep shadows beneath her eyes. She had been staring at the article for hours, as if by sheer will she could make it disappear from the digital universe. I stood at the edge of the room, watching her fingers hover over the keyboard before they retreated once more.

"Arlet," I broke the silence, my voice a low rumble in the small cabin. "This fear clinging to you—it's like mist on the river at dawn. It's natural, but it doesn't have to define your day."

She glanced up; her gaze flickering with that fire I admired. "I'm not defined by fear, Hayze. But I can't ignore it either." Her hand gestured towards the screen. "This article—it's like a beacon for trouble."

I moved closer; the floorboards creaking softly under my weight. "Then we snuff it out. We do what must be done."

Her laugh was a soft chime in the tense air. "And what? I become someone new again? Find another corner of the world to hide in?"

"You'll never be alone in this," I replied firmly. I leaned against the wall, folding my arms across my chest. "Wherever you go, whatever name you choose, I'm with you."

She closed the laptop with a soft click and turned to face me fully. Her eyes searched mine, as if looking for a sign of hesitation or doubt.

“You’d really do that? Just uproot your life again... for me?”

“There is no ‘uprooting,’ Arlet.” My voice held a quiet conviction as I stepped closer to her. “My life is wherever my duty lies. And right now, that’s with you.”

She rose from her chair, her movements deliberate and slow as she crossed the distance between us. Her hand reached out, fingers tracing the hard lines of my bronze skin.

“I don’t want to run anymore, Hayze.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I thought I could start fresh here... make a real difference between looking over my shoulder every second.”

I took her hand in mine, feeling the warmth of her skin against my cool metallic surface. “Then we stand our ground.”

The determination in her eyes matched mine as she nodded slowly. “But what if this article isn’t just an article? What if they’re already here?”

“Then we face it together,” I assured her, my grip tightening around her fingers in silent promise.

We stood there for a moment longer before she pulled away slightly, taking a deep breath as if drawing strength from the air itself.

“We’ll wait,” she decided at last. “See if this storm passes or if we need to brace ourselves against it.”

“And while we wait?” I asked.

She gave me a small smile, one that didn’t quite reach her eyes but held enough warmth to push back some of the chill in the room.

“While we wait,” she echoed, moving back to sit down at her desk once more, “we keep fighting for what we believe in. We don’t let fear—or some faceless article—stop us.”

I watched her reopen the laptop and start typing with renewed purpose—a

response or perhaps a rallying cry to those who would listen. Whatever it was, I knew one thing for certain: Arlet Rune was no one's prey; she was a force unto herself.

And as her sentinel, her shadow guard, I would follow her into any storm that came our way. In the end, her safety was the priority, but her determined and courageous spirit also played a role.

That was something worth protecting at all costs.

“Let's head out for more training. I think you need it,” I suggested.

I watched her move—fluid and focused, like a river carving its path through stone. Arlet had taken to the training with a ferocity that matched the wildness of the forest surrounding us. We were deep in the woods, a place where I could teach her without prying eyes or the constraints of walls and ceilings. The natural world was my ally, and now it would become hers.

“Again,” I instructed, stepping back to give her room. “But this time, use your environment. The ground beneath you, the surrounding air—they're tools, not just scenery.”

Arlet nodded, a light sheen of sweat on her brow as she reset her stance. Her eyes darted around, taking in the uneven terrain, the branches overhead, the rustle of leaves that whispered secrets only I could fully understand. With a sharp exhale, she lunged forward.

She was learning to predict and to use her opponent's momentum against them—a skill that required as much mental agility as physical. I sidestepped her advance effortlessly, pushing her to adapt on the fly. She stumbled but recovered with grace, using a low-hanging branch to swing her body around and face me again.

“Good,” I praised her. “But don't rely on what's expected. Surprise is your ally.”

Her lips curled into a half-smile that was all determination and fire. “Like this?” In a blink, she kicked up dirt from the ground, clouding my vision momentarily.

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle—it was clever, unexpected as pride

swelled within me at her ingenuity. “Exactly like that.”

We continued for hours until the sun dipped low and painted the sky in hues of burning orange and softening blue. As darkness approached, we settled onto the forest floor; our breathing synchronized with the night’s emerging rhythm.

“You’re holding back,” Arlet said suddenly, turning to me with those piercing eyes that saw too much.

I met her gaze squarely. “In training? Yes.” My admission was as much for myself as for her. “But not out of doubt in your abilities.”

She considered this for a moment before nodding slowly. “I know there’s more you can teach me—about fighting... about everything.”

“There is,” I conceded, plucking a blade of grass and rolling it between my fingers—a human habit I’d picked up. “And you’ll learn it all in time.”

She leaned back on her hands, looking up at the emerging stars with a thoughtful expression that mirrored my own inner turmoil.

“Something’s coming at us,” I confessed softly into the growing darkness between us. It wasn’t fear that laced my voice, but a premonition borne from years of living on edge—a sense honed beyond human understanding.

Arlet turned her head to look at me again; her blonde hair cascaded over one shoulder like liquid gold in the twilight.

“We’ll be ready,” she stated simply.

“Yes,” I agreed, my voice firm with resolve born from our bond—a bond forged in mutual respect and seamless communication. “We will be ready.”

The soft hush of the forest at night enveloped us as we made our way back to the cabin. The cool earth beneath my feet made each step a silent testament to the bond that Arlet and I had formed. She walked beside me, her breaths steady and even, a sign of the peace she found within these woods—a peace I hoped to preserve for her.

Once inside, the warmth of the cabin wrapped around us like a protective shroud. We both needed rest, our bodies and minds pushed to new limits with

each passing day. The bed was a simple affair, but it promised solace from the relentless march of worries that dogged our steps.

As sleep claimed me, I kept one ear attuned to the sounds of the night, an instinct I could never fully silence. My dreams were a jumble of past battles and silent promises made under starlit skies. Yet even there, in the chaos of my subconscious, I remained vigilant.

A soft vibration pulled from my dreams by — a sound out of place in the quiet night. Arlet's phone. Her hand shot out in the darkness to grasp it, and in that moment, as she read the message on its screen, her body tensed beside me.

We warned you.

The words were like ice in my veins. My eyes snapped open to find Arlet's face turned ghostly pale in the glow of her phone screen. Her jaw set in that familiar line of determination, but there was no mistaking the flicker of fear in her eyes.

"Arlet," I whispered, reaching out to place a hand on her arm. "Talk to me."

She blinked rapidly before locking her gaze with mine. "It's another message," she whispered. Her voice was steady, but there was an edge to it that hadn't been there before.

A growl built in my throat—a primal response to the threat lurking unseen beyond our walls. "From who?"

"I don't know." She shook her head slightly, her blonde hair catching stray beams from the moonlight spilling through the window. "But it's clear they're not just empty threats."

I sat up, every muscle coiled and ready for action. My mind raced through scenarios—potential risks and strategies to neutralize them—but my focus remained on Arlet.

"We need to increase security," I stated firmly. "Starting now."

Arlet nodded once before swinging her legs off the bed and standing up with purposeful grace. The phone still clutched in her hand seemed like a beacon

of malice—a reminder that our enemies were always searching for cracks in our armor.

“We’ll trace it,” she said, moving towards her laptop with renewed vigor. “Find out where it came from.”

I rose as well, watching her movements with an admiration that went beyond mere duty or protection. She was fire and steel wrapped in human form—unyielding even when faced with shadows that sought to engulf her light.

“I’ll sweep the perimeter,” I told her as she booted up her computer. “Make sure we’re alone.”

Her eyes met mine again; this time they held an unspoken gratitude mixed with resolve. “Be careful,” she murmured.

A nod was all I gave her before slipping out into the night—a guardian forged from bronze and loyalty, ready to face whatever darkness lay ahead for us both.

The night air carried the scent of pine and damp earth as I slipped out of Arlet’s cabin, my senses instantly alert. I trusted the subtle whispers of the forest to listen for the heartbeat of danger lurking within its depths. The moon hung high, casting silver beams through the canopy above, turning shadows into specters that danced at the edge of my vision.

I moved silently, my feet barely disturbing the underbrush as I made my way toward the source of my unease. The forest spoke to me in its rustling leaves and creaking boughs, but tonight, it held a tension that set my nerves on edge. A distant crack of a branch reached my ears—too deliberate, too heavy for an animal’s passing.

My pace quickened, every muscle primed for action. The cool air filled my lungs as I wove through trees and leaped over fallen logs with supernatural agility. Another sound caught my attention—a muffled voice—and I changed direction, honing in on the intrusion.

I kept to the shadows, a phantom among the ancient trees. As I neared a clearing, two figures emerged from the undergrowth. They moved with purpose but lacked the grace of those native to these woods. Their steps were hasty and uncoordinated as they glanced back over their shoulders with

furtive urgency.

My heart hammered against my bronze chest; a predator's instinct took hold. I gave chase, maintaining a distance that kept me hidden yet close enough to track their escape. They were intruders, their presence a discordant note in the night's symphony.

They seemed oblivious to my pursuit—or perhaps they thought themselves beyond reach—as they pushed through brambles and brush. Their whispers reached me now and then, snippets of conversation laced with anxiety. It was clear they were not here by chance.

The chase led us to an old logging road, its gravel surface betraying their every step with crunching sounds that echoed between the trees. Their panicked breaths materializing in puffs of mist under the moonlight.

Just as I prepared to close in on them, they reached a side-by-side vehicle hidden amongst ferns and moss—a getaway planned with care. They scrambled inside, the engine roaring to life before I could intercept them.

I emerged from the forest's edge just in time to see taillights disappearing down the road—a frustrating conclusion to an unsettling encounter. My breath came out in steely gusts as I clenched my fists, committing every detail to memory—their build, their hurried gait, even the faint scent of oil and sweat they left behind.

Turning back toward Arlet's cabin, I retraced my steps with haste. A sense of dread gnawed at me; something wasn't right. The forest seemed too quiet now—expectant—as if holding its breath for news I dreaded to discover.

I arrived at the cabin in record time, only to find the door slightly ajar—a silent alarm that sent a surge of adrenaline coursing through me. “Arlet?” My voice cut through the stillness as I stepped inside.

Shadows bathed the interior save for a sliver of moonlight that fell across the empty bed where we had lain just hours before. Strewn sheets tossed to the side carelessly; her phone lay abandoned on the nightstand.

“Arlet!” I called again, louder this time—my voice echoing off the walls with a note of desperation that was foreign to me.

But there was no answer—only silence met my ears as realization set in like ice through my veins.

Arlet was gone.

CHAPTER 20



*A*rlet

A dream of Hayze’s silhouette against the moonlit forest faded as a harsh grip wrenched me from sleep. I jolted upright, my heart hammering, only to have rough hands clamp around my arms. The room spun, the shadows of my cabin morphing into the outlines of two figures.

“Quiet,” a gruff voice hissed in my ear. The scent of oil and earth filled my nostrils, the intruders’ breaths heavy and foul.

Instinct kicked in. My leg shot out, aiming for a knee, a shin—anything. A sharp grunt told me I’d connected, but their hold didn’t loosen. Panic surged through my veins, every muscle straining against their unyielding grip.

“Don’t even think about it,” the other one growled, his voice a low threat that rumbled through the dark.

My chest heaved as I writhed and twisted, every bit of training Hayze had drilled into me flaring to life. But these men overwhelmed me with their preparedness and strength.

A scream tore from my throat, raw and desperate. In an instant, fabric stuffed into my mouth stifled the sound, and darkness swallowed me as a hood slipped over my head. Muffled sounds and the racing of my pulse reduced my world.

They bound my hands behind me with zip ties—tight and unrelenting. My skin chafed against the plastic. I tried to plant my feet, to refuse them even an inch, but it was like being rooted in quicksand.

“Pick her up,” one commanded.

Arms slid beneath my shoulders and knees. Air left my lungs as they hoisted me up with ease. They moved in sync as if they’d done this dance before—a twisted ballet of abduction.

I bucked against their hold, every movement futile but necessary—resistance was all I had left. Their pace quickened; boots thudded against the wooden floorboards as they carried me out into the night.

The chill of the outside air bit at any exposed skin, whispering through the fabric covering my face. Sounds of nature—the usual nocturnal chorus—were distant under the drumming of blood in my ears.

The side-by-side engine roared to life as they dumped me inside like cargo—just another object in their sinister plan. My body jostled with every rut and dip in the ground as we sped away from safety, from Hayze.

I tried to summon his face—those eyes that had seen so much pain and yet offered protection—but fear was a veil that clouded even that solace.

Gravel crunched beneath tires; we were moving fast, too fast for anyone to catch up. The side-by-side motion was erratic; it swerved and dipped with each contour of the land it devoured beneath its wheels.

As we raced through the night, a fury kindled within me—a fierce determination not to be a victim of circumstance once again. My mind raced alongside our speed: how to escape, how to survive this latest nightmare.

I clung to one thought above all else: Hayze would come for me—he had to.

The building swallowed us whole, its insides as cold and unwelcoming as the hands that gripped me. I stumbled down a series of steps, each one jarring my shins, my captors indifferent to my fumbling in the dark. The hood robbed me of sight, transforming every step into a precarious dance with gravity.

At the bottom, they flung me onto a metal chair with a harsh clang that

echoed off unseen walls. My feet met cold steel as they were bound to the chair legs with ruthless efficiency. I tested the restraints, but they held fast—another layer of captivity.

Laughter cut through the air as someone positioned a powerful light before me. The hood and gag vanished in unison, and I sucked in a breath, ready to scream for help. But as my mouth opened, their mocking words filled the void.

“Go ahead, scream. No one will hear you down here.”

The laughter intensified, feeding off my vulnerability. The bright light seared into my eyes, blinding me further. I squinted against the assault, trying to discern any details about my captors or surroundings, but found only the glaring white abyss.

With my hands and feet bound and my vision compromised, my other senses sharpened. I listened for footsteps, breathing patterns—anything to give me an edge. The smell of dampness and decay hinted at a place long forgotten by time and care.

I tried to steady my racing heart, drawing upon every ounce of composure I had left. They expected fear; they thrived on it. But I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me crumble.

“Who are you?” I demanded, my voice strong. “What do you want?”

The laughter died down to a sinister chuckle that crawled along my skin.

“Always straight to business,” one said, his voice laced with mockery. “But you're not in charge here.”

I fought against the panic that threatened to rise like a tide within me. Hayze's training surfaced in my mind—remain calm, observe, and survive.

The light blinded me, though I strained to make out who was there, hoping for even a shadow that could offer a clue about who had taken me or why. But their identities remained veiled behind the harsh glare.

As silence settled over us like dust, I considered my options. There was no breaking these ties on brute strength alone; it would take cunning and

patience—two things I had learned in abundance as Charlotte Bruno.

My breaths came slow and even now as I worked to control the situation from within. Whoever these people were, they didn't know who they were dealing with—or what lengths I would go to protect this life I had built from ashes.

So I waited in that blinding light, bound but unbroken—a mafia princess turned environmental crusader—ready for whatever twisted game they sought to play.

I blinked against the harsh light, my eyes watering as they adjusted. The men circled me like vultures, their smug expressions hidden in the brightness. My heart pounded against my ribs, each beat a reminder of the danger I was in.

“Welcome to West Corp’s very own slice of hell,” one sneered. His voice dripped with contempt. “You’ve been a thorn in our side for too long.”

I squinted, trying to make out his features, but it was no use. They knew what they were doing—keeping me disoriented and in the dark about their identities.

West Corp. The name reverberated through my mind like a death knell. They were the corporation responsible for the environmental atrocities Hayze and I had been fighting against. The ones poisoning the land with their illegal dumping.

“You didn’t listen, did you?” another taunted. “We warned you to back off.”

The pieces fell into place with a chilling clarity. The online article probing into my existence, the cryptic threats—they were all from them. But why? Was it simply because I had dared to stand up to them? Or was there something more?

Panic fluttered in my chest like a trapped bird, but I swallowed it down. Fear was a luxury I couldn’t afford—not if I wanted to get out of this alive.

“What do you want from me?” My voice came out steady despite the chaos raging inside me.

Their laughter echoed off the concrete walls—a cacophony of cruelty that set

my teeth on edge.

“We want you to shut up,” one said. “To disappear.”

Disappear. The word hung heavy in the air, a grim echo of a past life I had thought buried deep under layers of lies and new beginnings.

Did they know? Did they have any idea who I was—or rather, who I had been? Charlotte Bruno, a mafia princess, presumed dead and mourned by a family entrenched in crime.

But no hints of recognition crossed their obscured faces, no allusions to my former life slipped from their lips. It seemed they only saw Arlet Rune, an environmental researcher and inconvenient activist.

Relief mingled with resolve within me. If they didn’t know about my past, then maybe Hayze and I still had a chance. Maybe we could still fight back without the specter of the Brunos looming over us.

I took a measured breath and focused on the present threat. These men weren’t mafia hitmen; they were corporate bullies hiding behind West Corp’s shadowy veil.

“You think holding me hostage will stop what’s already in motion?” I challenged them, injecting confidence into my words that I didn’t fully feel.

Silence followed my question—a taut thread stretching between us as they weighed their response.

Then one stepped forward, emerging from behind the veil of light just enough for me to glimpse his bitter smile.

“Oh, we have plans for you,” he said, his voice smooth as silk and just as dangerous. “And trust me when I say—nobody will miss you.”

The threat hung between us like smoke—intangible but suffocating all the same. Yet beneath it all, beneath the fear and uncertainty that churned within me, there was something else: a flicker of defiance that refused to be extinguished.

So I sat there bound but unbroken—my mind racing for an escape, for any advantage—and waited for their next move.

The metal door clanged shut with a finality that echoed off the walls, reverberating through my bones. A silence followed, heavy and oppressive, sucking the air out of the room with the departure of my captors. I was alone in the pitch black, with not a sliver of light to comfort me or orientation.

I remained still for a long while, seated on the cold concrete floor where they had left me, hoping against hope that my eyes would adjust to the darkness. But there was nothing—no shadow or shape to latch onto, just an endless void that seemed to press against my eyelids with tangible weight.

After an eternity of waiting for my vision to adapt, I accepted the futility and cautiously extended my hands. The surface beneath my palms was rough and gritty, tiny granules embedding into my skin as I moved. I inched forward on hands and knees, exploring the confines of what I could only assume was a concrete cell.

My fingers encountered something round and metallic—a chamber pot, cold and unwelcoming in one corner. It was the only object in this barren space. Disappointment surged within me; I had hoped for something, anything, that might aid in an escape.

I retreated from the chamber pot, moving back until my back met the wall. It was cool against my skin through the thin fabric of my shirt, offering a slight comfort in its solid presence. With nothing else to do, I pulled my legs up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

Time stretched out before me—an endless canvas with no markers or signposts. So I counted. One Mississippi... Two Mississippi... Counting became a lifeline—a way to anchor myself in the unyielding darkness.

Three hundred sixty-four Mississippi... Three hundred sixty-five Mississippi...

My mind drifted despite my efforts to stay present. Images of Hayze flickered behind my closed eyelids—his strength, his unwavering gaze. I clung to those images like a raft in turbulent waters.

I wondered if he knew I was missing yet, if he was already searching for me. A pang of worry gnawed at me—what if he couldn't find me? What if West Corp had covered their tracks too well?

Seven hundred twenty-nine Mississippi... Seven hundred thirty Mississippi...

The counting became monotonous—a dull rhythm that merged with the beat of my heart. It kept panic at bay, kept despair from taking root too deeply within me.

One thousand forty-three Mississippi... One thousand forty-four Mississippi...

I shifted against the wall, trying to stave off the stiffness settling into my limbs. The concrete leached away any warmth from my body, but I welcomed the discomfort—it meant I still felt something, that I hadn't succumbed entirely to this darkness.

One thousand three hundred sixty-seven Mississippi... One thousand three hundred sixty-eight Mississippi...

Each count was a promise to myself: I would not break; I would not give in. They wanted me to disappear—to become nothing more than a whisper in the wind—but even here in this lightless prison; I refused to be erased.

One thousand six hundred ninety-two Mississippi... One thousand six hundred ninety-three Mississippi...

As time continued its silent march, each count fell from my lips like a soldier's steady tread—relentless against an unseen foe.

CHAPTER 21



*H*ayze

The night air sliced through the forest with a chill that would have unnerved a lesser creature. I stood still, the scent of pine and earth filling my senses as I focused on the unnatural silence. The forest creatures had gone quiet, a sure sign something was amiss. My gaze cut through the darkness, seeking signs of disturbance, a branch out of place, a shadow where none should be.

That's when it hit me—a void where there should have been life. Arlet's cabin, once warm with light, stood dark and silent. Panic clawed at my insides. I bounded toward the cabin, each step propelled by the weight of my dread.

The door hung open, an ominous invitation. Inside, chaos greeted me: the bed linens overturned, drawers pulled out and emptied, Arlet's belongings strewn across the floor like fallen leaves in a storm. But it was the absence that roared in my ears—the lack of her heartbeat, her breath, her presence.

I dashed outside, scanning for tracks. A faint tread pattern led away from the cabin to where they must have parked their vehicle—a side-by-side, from what I gathered from the impressions on the ground. The trail was fresh; they couldn't have gotten far.

With inhuman speed, I pursued them into the depths of the forest. Every

snapped twig underfoot echoed like a gunshot in my mind. But as I moved deeper into the trees, a creeping realization set in: these tracks were too obvious, too careless for professionals.

They wanted me to follow.

My steps faltered as understanding dawned. It was a diversion—Arlet wasn't with them; they'd taken her elsewhere while luring me away. Fury burned through my veins like molten bronze. They had played me for a fool.

I doubled back toward the cabin at breakneck speed, pushing my abilities to their limit. The wind howled in my ears as I retraced my steps, searching for any sign I might have missed.

Then I saw it—the faintest hint of another set of tracks veiled by brush and shadow, heading in a different direction than the side-by-side's obvious trail. A bitter taste settled on my tongue as I realized they must have carried her out on foot before using the vehicle to draw me away.

I followed these new tracks with lethal precision, every sense alert for signs of Arlet or her captors. The trail led to a road where tire marks showed a struggle or hasty departure—likely where they transferred her to another vehicle.

A thread of hope wove through my anger; they hadn't harmed her yet or there would be signs—evidence of a fight, or worse. They needed her alive for whatever twisted purpose drove them to take her from her bed.

I couldn't waste time lamenting my mistake or cursing their cunning. Arlet needed me now more than ever. With renewed determination fueling each step, I set off along the road—the only clue left to find her.

The kidnappers might believe they'd outsmarted me with their tricks and diversions. They didn't know who—or what—they were dealing with. They didn't know that when you steal something precious from a Talos monster, retribution isn't just promised; it's inevitable.

And I would find Arlet—no matter what it took.

I surveyed the area once more, my bronze skin glinting faintly in the moonlight as I absorbed every detail, every shadow that might offer a clue.

My next move was clear. West Corp had to be my destination; it was the only lead I had. They had been at the heart of our investigations, the source of the environmental havoc Arlet and I had fought against. If anyone wanted to silence her, to break her spirit with fear, it would be them.

As I slipped through the trees, each step silent despite my haste, my phone vibrated against my thigh. The screen lit up with an anonymous number, but I knew better than to hope for good news. The message was terse, its meaning chilling:

“Call off your accusations and charges against West Corp, and Arlet lives. Bring others into this and she dies.”

Ice filled my veins as I read the words. They were playing a dangerous game—one where Arlet’s life hung in the balance. A mix of rage and calculation churned within me. They believed they could manipulate me with threats, not knowing that fear was a weapon I’d long since mastered.

I tucked the phone away, my mind racing with strategies. I couldn’t risk involving law enforcement or her colleagues; Arlet’s life was too precious to gamble with their protocols and questions. This was a monster’s game now, and I would play it on my terms.

My strides grew longer, more purposeful as I neared West Corp’s looming industrial complex. Security lights cast stark shadows across concrete and steel—a fortress in its own right—but not impervious to a Talos with nothing left to lose.

As I approached the perimeter fence, the elements seemed to rally around me—the wind whispered through the chain-links while shadows stretched out like fingers to cloak my movements. My ability to command them was an extension of my will—silent partners in this deadly dance.

Crouching low, I observed the guards making their rounds, their flashlights cutting through darkness in predictable arcs. My gaze narrowed on an entry point: a section of fence hidden from view by a copse of trees.

A plan formed in my mind as clear as the constellations above. Infiltrate quietly, search swiftly, find Arlet before they realized I outmaneuvered their pawns.

But first things first—I needed to get inside without raising an alarm.

Timing was everything. As one guard turned away, his beam of light swinging toward his oblivious partner, I made my move. With a silent leap powered by muscles wrought from Thion J5's gravity, I cleared the fence and landed softly on the other side.

Once within West Corp's walls, every shadow gave me an ally as I moved with a stealth that came from my world. This corporate stronghold might intimidate humans, but not a creature like me.

I ducked beneath windows and skirted security cameras until I reached what looked like a central building—where they'd likely keep her if she were here.

Pressing myself against cool metal siding, I steeled myself for what came next: finding Arlet without alerting her captors—or worse—triggering their threat to end her life.

I had played many roles since arriving on Earth: guardian, sentinel, ally. Now it was time to my destiny as a hunter—and West Corp's predators were about to meet their match.

I melded with the darkness, a whisper among West Corp's steel giants. Each breath, each step, I calculated with the precision of a being crafted for this very hunt. I was a shadow among shadows, invisible to the eyes that scanned the night for threats they could understand.

My phone buzzed again, an intrusion that was both unwelcome and necessary. The screen showed a message from Wild Trust, the non-profit where Arlet had found her calling. My pulse quickened as I read.

“We're moving in. EPA and feds on board for a surprise crackdown at dawn. Keep her safe until then.”

Relief flooded me momentarily; their intervention would create the chaos I needed to find Arlet. Tinged with urgency—the clock ticked, and dawn wasn't far off.

I pressed deeper into the heart of the complex, where concrete behemoths loomed like silent sentinels. The message from Wild Trust had given me an edge—a looming storm I could use to my advantage.

A diversion would come with the first light of day, but until then, I was on my own in enemy territory. And so I crept, silent as a thought, along the walls and beneath windows, ever watchful for a sign of her.

The industrial compound sprawled before me was a maze of buildings and machinery, but I knew that somewhere within this labyrinth, Arlet was waiting—her spirit undimmed even by the darkness that sought to engulf her.

My ears tuned to the hum of generators and the distant murmur of voices—guards likely unaware that their world was about to unravel. My fingers grazed the cool metal siding as I rounded a corner, seeking any sign of where they might keep her.

Time slipped away like sand through my fingers as I searched for an entry—a vent, an unlocked door—anything that might grant me passage without alerting those who prowled these grounds.

A service door beckoned from the shadow of an overhang. It was unremarkable save for its slightly ajar state—a mistake or perhaps carelessness on their part. It mattered little; it was an opening I intended to exploit.

I slid through with an ease that belied my size, finding myself in a dimly lit corridor lined with doors on either side. My heart thundered against my ribcage, not with fear, but with determination.

My senses strained—listening for her voice or any hint of movement beyond these walls. But there was only silence punctuated by the distant sound of footsteps and hushed conversation.

As I advanced down the hallway, my mind raced with plans and contingencies. Wild Trust's allies would soon storm this place; my window to act without interference was closing rapidly.

Each door presented a possibility—a chance that behind it lay Arlet—but also a risk of discovery. Yet hesitation had no place here; each moment wasted was one where Arlet remained in their grasp.

My hand settled on a doorknob, its metal cool under my touch. A decision loomed before me—open this door or move to the next—but I couldn't afford the luxury or time for doubt.

With one fluid motion born from countless such decisions on distant worlds, I turned the knob and stepped into an unknown fate that awaited beyond it.

An explosion thundered above, jarring the silence of the compound and shaking dust from the ceiling. The feds and EPA had made their move, their arrival heralding the chaos that rippled through the structure's veins. It was now or never.

I barreled into the room, my presence alone enough to send the door flying off its hinges. The dim light spilling in from the hall clawed at the shadows, revealing Arlet crumpled against the far wall. Her face, pale and drawn, squinted toward the violent intrusion of light and noise.

"Arlet!" My voice was a growl of relief and urgency as I swept across the room.

She blinked, recognition flaring in her eyes as she registered my form towering over her. "Hayze?" Her voice was weak but tinged with hope—a hope I intended to fulfill.

Without a word, I scooped her into my arms, feeling her slight weight as though she were only a whisper of humanity against my bronze skin. Our reunion was a breath—a heartbeat—in this tempest of danger.

I had to get her out before anyone discovered us together. My mind raced through escape routes as I held her close, Arlet's fingers clutching at my shoulder with a strength that belied her fragile state.

"We need to move," I said, my tone leaving no room for argument.

Arlet nodded against me, her body tensing to prepare for whatever came next. We shared a look—a silent understanding that this was far from over, but that together we were an unstoppable force.

I turned on my heel and dashed back into the hallway, the sounds of chaos growing louder as agents stormed through West Corp's defenses. Their arrival provided the perfect cover for our escape but also added layers of complication to an already perilous situation.

The corridor was a labyrinth designed to disorient and trap, but I had committed its twists and turns to memory during my infiltration. I took each

measured and precise step—calculated to avoid detection while making swift progress toward freedom.

Arlet's breaths came in shallow bursts against my chest as we moved together through the darkened passageways. Her trust in me was absolute; it coursed through me like fire—igniting my resolve and honing my focus.

As we neared an exit point, a sudden burst of light flared down the corridor—a warning sign of approaching agents. Instinct took over; I veered left into a narrow alcove just as a pair of feds rounded the corner.

The adrenaline pounding muffled their voices in my ears as they passed by—unaware of our presence mere feet away. Arlet's grip on me tightened—a silent thank you for evading capture once again.

We waited for the pulse of their footsteps to fade before emerging from our hiding spot. The exit was close now with the night air beckoning just beyond these walls that had held Arlet captive.

I adjusted my hold on her, ensuring she was secure before continuing our flight toward escape. Each step forward was one closer to safety—to the life she had fought so hard to build and that I had sworn to protect.

The sound of boots and shouts echoed behind us, a cacophony that spurred us onward with renewed haste. We were close now; freedom lay within reach if only we could outpace the turmoil erupting within West Corp's once impenetrable fortress.

I glanced down at Arlet, seeing her face set with determination despite her ordeal. Together we moved through shadows and chaos—partners bound by circumstance and forged in fire—a sentinel and his charge against the world.

CHAPTER 22



A^{rlet}
We moved away from West Corp.

“I’m taking you back to your cabin.”

The gall came up in my throat at the thought of going back there. “I’m not sure I feel safe there.”

“I’m with you. Right now, they are all in the building being arrested.”

“They thought they could distract you with that wild goose chase,” I said between breaths, trying to piece together the events that led to my abduction.

Hayze’s eyes, usually so calm and collected, now burned with a fury that made even the shadows retreat. “They underestimated us,” he replied. His voice was low but carried an edge sharp enough to cut through steel.

We navigated back to my cabin under the cloak of night, the only sounds our synchronized footsteps and the occasional call of a nocturnal creature. Once inside, I slumped against the door, relief flooding through me as Hayze secured the windows and entrances.

A ringtone shattered the silence — a call from Wild Trust. They needed us at the police station to testify about what had happened. The gravity of the situation weighed on me; I couldn’t let this exposure drag me back into a

spotlight I had escaped years ago.

On our way to face yet another trial, I voiced my fears to Hayze. “If this gets out... if my face hits the media again...” I trailed off, not needing to finish. The threat hung in the air like a guillotine blade.

Hayze reached out, placing a hand on my shoulder in silent support. We paused outside the police station, taking a moment to collect ourselves before stepping into another world entirely.

“I need a phone,” I snapped. Hayze followed as I veered toward a nearby convenience store, where I purchased a burner phone with hurried fingers.

Stepping out into an alleyway, away from prying eyes and ears, I dialed the number from my memory since entering witness protection. The line clicked, and then there was a voice — one that had promised safety and anonymity.

“This is Arlet Rune,” I spoke firmly into the receiver. “I need immediate help.”

The voice on the other end was calm, but concerned. “What’s happened?”

“I’m compromised,” I explained quickly. “There’s going to be police reports, maybe media attention. You assured me this wouldn’t happen.”

“We’ll handle it,” came the reply after a tense pause. “Stay by your phone and await further instructions.”

Ending the call, I met Hayze’s gaze — his own eyes now reflecting not just fury but concern for what lay ahead.

“We have truths to tell,” he said simply, gesturing toward the station.

With squared shoulders and an unyielding resolve set within me like concrete, we walked together into the police station, ready to face whatever came next, backed by Wild Trust and each other.

As we pulled into the parking lot of the police station, my phone vibrated with an urgency that seemed to match the racing of my heart. The caller ID flashed “Detective Davidson,” and I swiped to answer.

“Ms. Rune, it’s unnecessary for you to come inside,” Davidson’s voice came

through, tight with the day's tension.

I exchanged a glance with Hayze, who nodded for me to continue. "Alright, I'm listening," I said, my voice steady.

"We need your account of the kidnapping," Davidson instructed. "Give me everything you remember."

Leaning back in the seat, I closed my eyes for a moment, collecting the scattered shards of memory. Opening them, I focused on Hayze's reassuring presence beside me.

"It started with a sensation of being moved while asleep," I began, my voice finding strength as I recounted the details. "A hood over my head, hands bound... The gag." A shiver traced my spine as I recalled the feeling of helplessness.

"They spoke about luring Hayze away," I continued, my words deliberate. "It was clear they had orchestrated the entire scenario."

Davidson's voice crackled through the phone speaker. "And the threats? The article?"

A bitter laugh escaped me before I could catch it. "All West Corp." The pieces fell into place as I spoke them aloud. "The texts that came during Hayze's wild chase... They were baiting us to drop charges and accusations."

"And you have evidence of this?" Davidson pressed.

I glanced at Hayze again; his nod was all the confirmation I needed. "Yes," I affirmed. "We have everything documented."

"Stay where you are; an officer will come out to collect any physical evidence you have." There was a pause on the line before Davidson added, "Ms. Rune, you're doing the right thing."

I ended the call and let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. The weight of my past and present seemed to press down all at once, but there was a strange comfort in facing it head-on—with Hayze at my side.

An officer approached our car minutes later. With precise movements, we handed over files and recordings—proof of West Corp's involvement in not

only environmental crimes but also in targeting me.

Hayze remained silent throughout, his gaze never leaving me. It was a silence filled with words unspoken; promises made without sound.

As the officer walked away with our evidence clutched in his hands, Hayze finally spoke, his voice low but filled with an intensity that matched his protective stance.

“We’ve done what we can for now,” he said firmly.

“Yeah,” I replied softly, feeling a sense of finality in the action we had just taken.

But this wasn’t an end—just another beginning in a series of them that defined my life since leaving New York behind. Sitting there in the dim light of the police station parking lot, I had a strange kinship with the night itself—dark and full of unknowns yet somehow comforting in its constancy.

Hayze turned to look at me once more, his eyes reflecting the parking lot lights like twin beacons in a stormy sea—a silent vow that no matter what darkness lay ahead, we would navigate it together.

The cabin seemed different now, no longer just a refuge from my old life, but a battleground where my past and present collided. As we entered, the familiar creak of the wooden floorboards sounded more like a warning than a welcome.

Hayze wasted no time. He moved from window to window, then door to door, replacing locks with a meticulous precision that spoke of his experience in matters of security. His silhouette against the pale moonlight streaming through the windows was both comforting and unsettling.

“It’s useless, you know,” I said, my arms folded as I watched him work. The compromised no longer offered the sanctuary it once was.

He paused, his gaze meeting mine. “It’s not about the locks,” he mumbled. “It’s about doing everything we can, even if it seems futile.”

I let out a weary sigh, understanding his point but feeling the futility of all the same. “We have to leave,” I muttered, more to myself than to him. The words

tasted bitter on my tongue.

The night wore on, and Hayze continued his task long after the stars claimed their dominion in the sky. I hovered nearby, lost in thought, until he finally straightened up and declared the job done.

My hand trembled as I pulled out the burner phone, showing him the message that had sealed our fate. Prepare to relocate. The words glowed ominously on the screen.

Hayze took the phone from me, studying the message with an unreadable expression before handing it back. “Then we’ll prepare,” he said firmly.

“But where?” I asked, frustration seeping into my voice. “How far do we have to run before we’re truly safe?”

“We’ll figure it out together,” Hayze reassured me. His confidence was a stark contrast to the chaos churning inside me.

I nodded, though doubt clawed at my insides. The life of Charlotte Bruno—the mafia princess—was long buried under a headstone in New York City; Arlet Rune’s existence was about to be uprooted once again.

Sleep was elusive that night. Every creak and whisper of wind through the trees were an intruder lurking just beyond sight. I lay there in bed beside Hayze, who had insisted on staying close to protect me, and found an odd comfort in his steady breathing.

The first light of dawn brought no relief—only a reminder that time was running out. We rose with the sun, packing what little we could take with us. Each item was heavier than it should have—a collection of memories that we’d discard.

As we loaded up the car with our essentials, I took one last look at the cabin that had been my haven. It stood quietly amidst the towering pines—a silent witness to everything that had transpired.

Hayze closed the trunk with a soft thud and turned to face me. “Ready?” he asked.

I nodded again—what else could I do? We climbed into the car without

another word and drove away from what had been a chapter of my life that was like a dream—vivid yet vanishing fast in the rearview mirror.

I clutched the fabric of the passenger seat, my knuckles white, as the car rolled down the familiar streets. The town I saw as a safe haven was now a maze of potential threats, each turn reminding me of my vulnerability. Yet, amid the fear and the urge to flee, a desperate need to see familiar faces one last time surged within me.

“Hayze,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion, “before we disappear, I need to see them. The people at Wild Trust, my friends... I can’t just vanish without saying goodbye.”

Hayze’s hands tightened on the steering wheel, his jaw set in that way it did when he was weighing every outcome. His silence stretched out like the road before us until he finally spoke.

“We’ll tell them we’re going on a road trip,” he said carefully. “Back east, maybe Florida.” He glanced at me with a look that was part resolve, part resignation.

The plan sounded plausible enough. Florida was far enough away to discourage anyone from thinking it was a short-term absence. And yet, it was just a story — our true destination remained shrouded in uncertainty.

The car pulled up outside the Wild Trust office, and my heart raced as if I were about to leap from a cliff rather than step onto familiar ground. Hayze’s hand found mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze before we stepped out into the brisk morning air.

The office was abuzz with activity, but everything quieted down when I walked in. Faces turned toward me — expressions of concern mixed with curiosity at our sudden appearance.

“Hey everyone,” I began, my voice steady despite the tremors inside me. “Hayze and I wanted to let you know we’re planning a long road trip.”

A murmur of surprise rippled through the room as I continued. “We’ve been talking about seeing more of the country, and well, now seems like as good a time as any.”

There were nods and smiles, but also frowns of confusion. We hadn't been here long enough for such wanderlust to seem typical of us.

“And Florida's calling our name,” Hayze chimed in with a grin that almost reached his eyes.

Questions bubbled up around us — advice on routes to take, places to visit. We answered each one with practiced ease while avoiding specifics. Every moment was surreal; every word I spoke was another layer in a facade that might crumble at any second.

One by one, my colleagues offered hugs and well-wishes. Each embrace was a lifeline — something real and warm amid the cold mechanics of escape plans and new identities.

As we stepped outside into the gathering crowd from the community who had heard of our leaving, I fought back tears that threatened to betray everything we were trying so hard to hide.

“Take lots of pictures!” someone called out as arms wrapped around me in quick succession — reminders of human connections that were about to be severed.

“We will,” I promised, though I knew any photos we took we wouldn't share with them.

The farewells continued until there was nothing left to say — until every hug and every reassurance stopped. Hayze stayed close by my side through it all — my sentinel against an unseen storm.

We returned to the car under the guise of excitement for our journey ahead. But as we drove away from those who had become dear to me, each mile added weight to the silence between us — a silence filled not with peace but with unspoken goodbyes and roads untraveled.

CHAPTER 23



Arlet

Rain streaked the windshield as we left the town behind, the lush greenery a blur outside the car window. Seattle loomed ahead, its skyline a jagged silhouette against the gray sky. The city's hum and bustle was foreign after the tranquility of the forest, and the tightness in my chest told me I was edging closer to a life I'd left behind.

We parked outside a nondescript office building, its facade as forgettable as any identity they'd hand me. Hayze's hand brushed mine, a silent reassurance as we entered the lobby.

"Arlet Rune?" A voice sliced through the lobby's sterile air. Agent Matthews stood there, his suit too crisp, his smile too practiced. "I'm glad you could make it on such short notice."

We rode up in an elevator filled with the scent of industrial cleaner and an undercurrent of anxiety that I fought to keep at bay. The agent led us down a hallway lined with doors that all looked like barriers to different lives—lives not chosen but assigned.

Inside a room that was all sharp angles and icy surfaces, Matthews gestured to the metal chairs opposite his desk. "Please, sit."

Hayze's gaze locked on mine for a moment before we both took our seats.

“Arlet,” Matthews began, shuffling papers as if they held my fate within their lines and margins. “The situation is precarious. West Corp employees are bound to talk once they’re released.”

“I understand,” I replied, my voice steady despite the tumult inside me.

He leaned forward, hands clasped on the desk. “You’ll need to change your name again. It’s not negotiable.”

A spark ignited within me—a blend of frustration and defiance. “No.” The word came out sharper than I intended.

Matthews raised an eyebrow. “It’s for your safety —”

“My safety?” I cut him off, standing so abruptly my chair screeched against the floor. “I’ve been running and hiding since I can remember. Arlet Rune isn’t just a name; it’s who I’ve become.”

Hayze stood beside me now, his presence a solid reassurance.

“Arlet—” Matthews tried again.

“It matches Charlotte,” I pressed on, voice unwavering as my resolve crystallized into words. “Charlotte Bruno was someone else—a life chosen for me by birthright and bloodshed. Arlet Rune is who I was—the name I made for myself when they stripped everything else away.”

Matthews studied me, his expression unreadable as he tapped a pen against his lips.

“Arlet is who Hayze knows,” I continued, feeling Hayze’s hand find mine—an anchor in this sea of uncertainty. “It’s who my colleagues know; it’s who fought against West Corp and stood up in front of an entire community.”

Matthews sighed, leaning back in his chair with a creak of leather. His eyes flitted between Hayze and me before settling on some point over my shoulder.

I could see him weighing options—the bureaucrat in him against whatever shred of understanding he might possess for what it meant to carve out an identity from the ashes of another life.

The room was thick with tension as we waited for his verdict—my future balanced precariously on the edge of his next words.

The agent's gaze held steady, an unwavering force. "Arlet, at the very least, you must change your last name. It's a compromise you have to consider."

The breath catch in my throat, a familiar sense of being cornered creeping up my spine. The life I'd painstakingly built was slipping through my fingers once again. I clenched my jaw, preparing to argue, but before I could form the words, Hayze's voice cut through the tension.

"What if she didn't have to?"

All eyes turned to him. His bronze skin seemed to catch the sterile light of the office, giving him an otherworldly glow.

Matthews leaned forward with a skeptic's frown. "What do you suggest?"

Hayze's hand tightened around mine, and he spoke with a conviction that sent shivers down my arms. "We marry," he said simply. "She takes my name—Bronze."

Silence followed his bold declaration, and for a moment, the world seemed to pause on its axis. The suggestion was wild and crazy—ludicrous even—but as I turned to look at Hayze, his earnest gaze met mine, and something inside me clicked into place.

I'd spent my life dodging shadows and assuming false identities, never allowing myself the luxury of dreaming about normalcy or permanence. But here was Hayze—a Talos monster, an alien with a skin of bronze—offering me a future that was more human than anything I'd ever known.

Matthews cleared his throat. "That's... unconventional," he said, but I could hear the consideration in his voice.

Unconventional. The word hung in the air between us like a challenge—a chance to break away from the life of running and hiding that had defined me for so long.

I turned back to Hayze, searching his face for any hint of doubt or hesitation. But all I found was an unwavering certainty—a silent promise that whatever

came our way, we would face it together.

My heart raced with a mixture of fear and excitement as I realized this was it—the leap into the unknown that would bind me to Hayze in ways I hadn't dared imagine.

"I..." My voice faltered for a moment before strength surged through me. "I've never loved another like I love Hayze."

Matthews watched us, perhaps seeing the truth of our bond reflected in our intertwined hands or hearing it in the timbre of our voices.

Finally, he nodded slowly. "Very well," he conceded. "If that's your decision."

We decided—a course of action so absurd, yet so fitting for the strange tapestry of my life. We stood together in front of Matthews.

Hayze leaned down slightly, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispered, "Are you ready?"

I nodded, unable to trust my voice as emotions swirled within me—a cocktail of relief and anticipation at what we were about to do.

We left Matthews' office with a purpose that lent strength to our steps. The rain had stopped outside; puddles reflected the cityscape as we made our way toward the courthouse—a symbol of order and bureaucracy that would soon bear witness to our union.

The courthouse loomed ahead—its steps an ascent into a new chapter of my life. As we approached its doors hand in hand, I allowed myself a small smile at the absurdity and beauty of it all—Arlet Rune about to become Arlet Russel.

Stepping into the Seattle Courthouse, I clutched Hayze's hand, feeling the weight of my old life lift with each step. The judge's chambers awaited us, a promise of new beginnings etched into the marble and wood.

The clerk at the front desk gave us a nod, recognizing the solemnity of our visit. "Fourth floor," she said, her voice a low hum against the backdrop of shuffling papers and muted conversations.

The elevator dinged softly, and we ascended. The walls of the car were mirrors, reflecting our images back at us. Hayze's bronze skin glowed even in the fluorescent light, his calm composure a stark contrast to the storm of emotions inside me.

The doors slid open to reveal a hallway leading to the judge's chambers. I smoothed down my dress, a simple blue number that somehow was right for this moment—nothing too grand, nothing that spoke of the life I'd once known as Charlotte Bruno.

Judge Carter was waiting for us, his presence commanding yet kind. "Mr. Bronze and Ms. Rune," he greeted us with a gentle smile that put me at ease. "We're ready for you."

The ceremony itself was brief—a string of words, vows, and promises that somehow seemed to stretch into eternity. Hayze's voice was steady as he spoke his part, his eyes never leaving mine.

"I do," I echoed when it was my turn, my voice stronger than I expected. The ring slid onto my finger—a simple band of metal that was like an anchor in this turbulent sea.

"You may kiss the bride," Judge Carter announced, his words an invitation to seal this new chapter.

Hayze's lips met mine in a kiss that was tender and fierce all at once—a promise in itself.

We left the judge's chambers hand in hand—Arlet and Hayze Russel—our steps echoing through the hallways with a rhythm that matched our beating hearts.

Back at Matthews' office, we presented him with our marriage license—a single piece of paper that held so much significance. His eyes scanned the document before looking up at us with what might have been a flicker of approval.

"Congratulations," he said simply before setting into motion the machinery that would erase Arlet Rune from existence and cement Arlet Russel into reality.

He worked with an efficiency that left no room for error—phone calls made, databases updated, records sealed. And just like that, I was no longer a ghost haunted by my past—I was someone new yet again, but this time on my own terms.

Hayze stood beside me through it all, his presence a silent vow that he'd be there for whatever came next.

When Matthews finished, he handed me an ID card—my new identity staring back at me from its plastic confines. Arlet Russel—the name rolled right on my tongue as I whispered it to myself.

Agent Matthews slid a folder across the desk toward us, the contents inside neatly organized and waiting to be discovered. “Your new destination,” he said, a tone of finality in his voice.

I glanced at Hayze, whose bronze hand rested atop the folder. His touch conveyed a quiet strength that had become my foundation. He flipped it open, and together we peered inside.

“Prince Rupert, British Columbia, Canada,” I read aloud, the name rolling off my tongue with a mix of curiosity and excitement. I looked up at Matthews for confirmation.

“That’s right,” he confirmed with a nod. “It’s a place where you can truly start fresh—a balance between isolation and community.”

Hayze pulled out a photograph from the folder. It depicted a vast expanse of land where the forest met the sea, mountains towering in the distance like ancient guardians. The beauty I discovered was a striking difference from the urban environments I once lived.

“You’ll receive the deed to your land on the mainland,” Matthews continued, pointing to an area on the map included in our packet. “The location is ideal for living semi-off-grid. It offers both ocean and mountain views—a rarity.”

A thrill buzzed through me at the thought of such a place—our place. The concept of owning land, of having a permanent spot on this earth that was ours, was foreign, yet deeply alluring.

“We’ve arranged everything you need to get started,” Matthews said, closing

the folder and leaning back in his chair. “You’ll have solar panels for power, a water catchment system, and enough supplies to last you through the initial settling period.”

Hayze’s eyes met mine, reflecting a shared sense of adventure. This wasn’t just another hideaway—it was an opportunity to build something together.

“When do we leave?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper as I envisioned our new life taking shape in this distant land.

“As soon as you’re ready,” Matthews replied. “You have new transportation to take you to your new home.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of years spent running, lifting from me. This was more than another relocation; it was a promise of stability and perhaps even happiness.

Hayze closed the folder with care and stood up. “We’re ready now,” he said firmly.

Matthews rose as well, extending his hand first to Hayze and then to me. “Good luck, Arlet... Bronze,” he corrected himself with a slight smile. “Take care of each other.”

We shook his hand, gratitude mingling with an eagerness to depart.

Leaving Matthews’ office behind shedded an old skin. We walked through the building with purposeful strides—each step taking us closer to our future.

Outside, the city had taken on a different hue—the grays softened by our newfound hope. We climbed into the waiting car, its engine purring quietly as it pulled away from the curb.

As we drove through Seattle’s streets one last time, buildings and faces passed by fading memories—soon to be replaced by untamed wilderness and quiet solitude.

We journeyed in silent contemplation and whispered dreams of what lay ahead. We crossed borders seamlessly—just two more travelers in search of home.

And then we were there—Prince Rupert’s rugged coastline welcoming us

with open arms. The air was crisp and clean, laced with salt and pine—an intoxicating blend that filled my lungs with each breath.

Amazing land stretched before us as we stepped onto it for the first time—our land. The ocean's roar was a constant hum in our ears; the mountains stood tall in silent majesty.

We stood side by side, hands entwined as we gazed out at our new world—the promise of tomorrow shining brightly on the horizon.

CHAPTER 24



*A*rllet

The car's hum settled into a familiar backdrop as we crossed the invisible line that severed my ties with one country and tethered me to another. Canada's vast landscape stretched before us, a fresh canvas for the life Hayze and I were about to paint together. As we drove, I turned my head to catch glimpses of the serene wilderness, a stark contrast to the chaos we'd left behind.

"We should find a place to rest," Hayze said, breaking the silence. His voice, always a balm to my scattered thoughts, now carried an additional note of care, one that only came with the bonds we had just formed at that courthouse in Seattle.

I nodded, and soon enough, we pulled into the gravel lot of a quaint seaside inn. The sun was on its last descent, casting golden hues over the water. We grabbed our bags from the backseat and headed inside. The innkeeper welcomed us with a warm smile that didn't require any backstory or explanation—just two travelers seeking refuge for the night.

The room was simple but comfortable, with a view of the ocean that promised tranquility. After freshening up, we made our way down to the dining room, where the scent of salt and seafood greeted us.

"Table for two?" the hostess asked.

“Yes, please,” I responded, slipping my hand into Hayze’s as we followed her to a table by the window.

The menu boasted an array of seafood caught fresh from the waters just beyond our view. Hayze raised an eyebrow at me, silently asking for my preference. I pointed at the lobster, and he nodded in agreement before conveying our choice to the server.

While waiting for our meal, Hayze reached across the table and took my hand in his. The contact sparked a current that ran through me—electric yet soothing. This simple act was an anchor in our new reality.

“Arlet Russel,” he said softly, testing out my name paired with his own in this world, where we were now man and wife.

“Hayze Russel,” I echoed back with a smile, allowing myself this moment of peace amidst all that had transpired.

Our dinner arrived, steaming plates full of delicious lobster that filled the air with mouthwatering aromas. We toasted with glasses of crisp white wine to our health and future—a future uncertain but faced together.

As we savored each bite, the surrounding room faded into soft murmurs and clinking cutlery. It was just Hayze and me—no longer just protector and protected, but partners in every sense of the word.

“Here’s to new beginnings,” I said after swallowing a delicious forkful.

“And to us,” Hayze added, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that conveyed more than words ever could.

We finished our meal amidst shared glances and quiet laughter—the kind that bubbles up from deep contentment. For tonight, there were no looming threats or past ghosts to haunt us. There was only this room, this meal, and each other—the first day of our united stand against whatever may come.

We headed upstairs to our room, ready to rest and ready to start our lives as husband and wife.

“How about a bath?” I smiled at Hayze.

“How about a bath!” He grinned, enjoying as I undressed and filled the tub

with hot steamy water.

The warmth of the water enveloped my body, soothing my tired muscles and easing the tension that had been building inside me for weeks. Hayze sat beside me, his bronze skin glistening under the soft light of the bathroom, a testament to his otherworldly origins.

I reached out and traced a finger along his collarbone, marveling at the smooth texture of his skin. “Your skin is like liquid metal,” I whispered, my voice husky with admiration.

He chuckled softly, his warm breath grazing my ear. “It’s a side effect of being a Talos. We don’t rust, so water is more of a friend than a foe.”

I leaned closer, my lips brushing against his. “I like it,” I murmured. “It’s unique.”

“Like you,” he replied, his voice a low rumble against my skin.

We sank deeper into the water, our bodies pressed together in a tangle of limbs. The steam from the bath filled the air, creating a hazy atmosphere that seemed to amplify our every sensation.

Hayze’s hands moved slowly over my back, his touch feather-light yet deliberately sensual. I closed my eyes and immersed myself in the present, in the feel of his hands on my skin, the sound of his breathing mingling with mine.

“Arlet,” he breathed my name, his voice a mere whisper against my ear. “You’re beautiful.”

I opened my eyes to find him gazing at me, his expression a mixture of desire and tenderness. I reached up and cupped his face, pulling him closer.

Our lips met in a searing kiss, full of passion and longing. The water swirled around us, creating a hypnotic rhythm that seemed to match the beat of our hearts.

Time seemed to stand still as we lost ourselves in each other’s embrace. The world outside that bathroom ceased to exist, replaced by a realm of our own making—a realm where only Hayze and I mattered.

As the kiss deepened, a surge of electricity coursed through my body. Hayze's hands moved lower, exploring the curves of my body with a familiarity that both surprised and delighted me.

I arched into his touch, a soft moan escaping my lips. He chuckled against my skin. "You like that, don't you?"

"Yes," I whispered, my voice barely above a breath. "I like it very much."

And with that, he took me to a place of pure ecstasy, where every touch, every kiss, every whispered word sent me spiraling higher and higher until I reached a peak of unimaginable pleasure.

As we sat back in the tub, sated and exhausted, I couldn't help but wonder how I had ever lived without Hayze. He had become my everything—my protector, my lover, my confidant.

Hayze lifted me out of the draining tub, his arms enveloping me like a warm cocoon. Water droplets glistened on my skin, making me shimmer in the dim light of the bathroom.

He carried me to the bed and laid me down gently, his eyes never leaving mine. It was as if I was the most precious treasure in the world, held in the arms of the only man who could make me feel truly alive.

Hayze kissed me all over, his lips tracing a path from my forehead to my neck, down my chest and stomach, and finally to my thighs. A whispered word, "Mine," accompanied each kiss.

His lips were like fire, branding me as his own. I arched my body into his touch, desperate for more.

He reached between my legs, and I opened myself to him, welcoming his touch. His fingers danced across my most sensitive spots, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

"Mine," he whispered again, his voice husky with desire.

He lowered his head and took me into his mouth, his tongue swirling around my clit in a way that made me writhe beneath him. I cried out in pleasure, my body tensing as I reached my peak.

Hayze continued to suck and lick, his touch both gentle and insistent. I spiraled higher and higher until I lost myself in a world of pure ecstasy.

When he finally pulled away, I was trembling with aftershocks of pleasure. He looked at me, his eyes filled with satisfaction.

“You’re mine, Arlet,” he said again, his voice a low growl. “And I’m yours.”

I reached up and caressed his face, my heart overflowing with love. “Yes,” I whispered. “I’m yours.”

WE LAY TOGETHER in the aftermath of my second orgasm, our bodies entwined. I traced my fingers along Hayze’s chest, reveling in the feel of his warm, smooth skin.

“I never thought I could be this happy,” I breathed.

“Me neither,” Hayze replied. “But I’m so glad I found you.”

I turned to face him, our noses almost touching. “I love you, Hayze,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

“I love you too, Arlet,” he replied, his eyes filled with such love and tenderness that I melted into him.

We kissed again, a slow, lingering kiss that sealed our bond even further. As we kissed, a deep sense of peace and contentment wash over me.

Hayze rolled over and pinned me beneath him, his eyes smoldering with desire. His rock-hard length pressing against my thigh, and a shiver of anticipation ran through me.

I arched my back, pressing myself closer to him. I wanted to feel every inch of him against me.

He kissed my neck, his lips trailing a path of fire down to my collarbone. I moaned softly, my body trembling with need.

His hand slid down between my legs, his fingers finding my most sensitive spot. He circled it gently, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

I cried out, clutching at his shoulders. “Hayze,” I whispered, my voice ragged

with desire.

He lowered his head and took me into his mouth, his tongue swirling around my clit in a way that made me writhe beneath him. I spiraled higher and higher until I lost myself in a world of pure ecstasy.

I screamed out in pleasure, my body tensing as I came undone. Hayze continued to suck and lick until the last tremors of my orgasm subsided.

He pulled away, his eyes filled with satisfaction. "You're mine, Arlet," he said again, his voice a low growl. "And I'm yours."

I reached up and caressed his face, my heart overflowing with love. "Yes," I whispered. "I'm yours."

We kissed again, a slow, lingering kiss that sealed our bond even further. As we kissed, a deep sense of peace and contentment washed over me.

Hayze rolled over, taking me with him. We lay together, our bodies entwined. I traced my fingers along his chest, reveling in the feel of his warm, smooth skin.

He kissed my forehead, his lips lingering there for a moment. "I love you, Arlet," he said.

"I love you too, Hayze," I replied.

We closed our eyes and drifted off to sleep, our bodies and souls finally at peace.

CHAPTER 25



Arlet

The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with streaks of orange and purple as our boat approached Prince Rupert. Crisp, salty air filled my lungs, a stark contrast to the acrid fumes of New York City that seemed a lifetime away. The churning waters reflected the dying light, each wave a whisper of new beginnings. Hayze stood beside me, his eyes scanning the horizon with an intensity that mirrored my anticipation.

“Look at that,” he said, gesturing toward the shoreline where the dense forest met the sea. “It’s like stepping into a postcard.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his words. “It’s more than I ever imagined.”

The boat slowed as we neared the dock, and a man in a weathered jacket waved us in. His rugged face broke into a welcoming grin as we stepped onto solid ground.

“Arlet and Hayze Russel, I presume?” he asked, extending a hand.

“That’s us,” I replied, shaking his hand firmly.

“I’m Bill,” he said, “part of the local welcome committee. Got something for you.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope, handing it to me.

Inside was the deed to our land—a tangible symbol of our fresh start. I traced

my fingers over the official seal, the weight of our new reality settling in.

Bill pointed toward a four-wheel-drive pickup truck parked nearby. “Got your ride ready. The house is all set up for you, too.”

We thanked him and climbed into the truck, Hayze taking the wheel with an ease that spoke of his adaptability. As we drove away from the harbor, I couldn’t shake off the surreal feeling that accompanied this leg of our journey.

The road ahead wound through dense woods and along cliffs that offered breathtaking views of the sea below. It was as if nature itself had conspired to welcome us with open arms.

“It’s beautiful here,” I murmured as we turned onto a mountain road that seemed to climb into the clouds.

Hayze glanced at me with a soft smile. “Just like you said—breathtaking.”

The engine growled as we ascended higher, navigating sharp turns and steep inclines. I peered out the window at the sprawling wilderness stretching endlessly before us. It was a stark reminder of how small we were in this vast expanse.

After several miles of driving in companionable silence, punctuated only by the gravel crunching beneath our tires, we finally saw it—a cabin nestled against a backdrop of towering pines and snow-capped peaks.

“We’re here,” Hayze announced, pulling up to our new home.

We stepped out of the truck and took it all in—the isolation, the peace, and the sense of ownership over this little slice of heaven. It was ours—free from past entanglements and filled with possibilities.

As dusk settled around us like a gentle shroud, we began unloading our belongings. Each box and bag held pieces of who we were—and who we would become in this untouched corner of the world.

“Welcome home,” Hayze said as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

I leaned into his embrace, my gaze fixed on our cabin—the symbol of our new life together. “Home,” I echoed with conviction as we made our way

toward it, ready to face whatever lay ahead on this untamed mountain road.

I had never imagined tranquility could be so profound, so tangible. Here in Prince Rupert, anonymity was a given, and the faces that passed by didn't look at me with recognition or suspicion. They saw Arlet Russel and her husband Hayze, newcomers to their community, not the shadow of Charlotte Bruno or even Arlet Rune, the mafia princess who was supposed to be six feet under.

Hayze and I had transformed our cabin into a sanctuary, a testament to our combined efforts and his skill. He'd become adept at crafting furniture from the raw timber abundant in the forest. "Look at this," he would say, presenting a newly finished chair or table with a proud gleam in his eye. Each piece carried the mark of his hands—strong, precise, purposeful. "It's not just woodwork; it's a piece of us," he'd often remark, running his fingers over the smooth grain.

The pantry was a sight to behold, always stocked with jars of preserves and sacks of grain. We'd become part of the barter economy, trading with the locals. "They love your smoked salmon," I told him one evening, noting the abundance we'd received in exchange.

"And your berry preserves are a hit at the market," he replied with a smile that suggested pride in our mutual enterprise.

Speaking of the garden, it became my labor of love. "It's perfect, Hayze," I said as he cleared a patch of land with surprising gentleness for a creature of his stature.

"It's not brute force, but a delicate art." A hint of a smile softened his metallic features. Together, we turned the soil, enriching it with compost and planting seeds that promised bounty—potatoes, carrots, onions, and greens.

Each morning I'd wake to mist clinging to the emerald blades of grass and say, "Good morning, little ones," to the sprouts peeking through the soil, feeling a maternal pride swell in my chest.

We also brought in some livestock. "Chickens for eggs and a couple of goats for milk," he listed, nodding at the thought. Hayze built them sturdy shelters, explaining, "They need to be safe from the elements and any predators."

I learned their individual quirks and preferences, often chuckling. “They’re just like us, trying to find their place.”

Hayze was always there beside me or watching from a distance when he thought I didn’t notice. “I see you, Hayze,” I teased. He was my guardian still, but now he was also my partner—my equal in this venture into self-sufficiency. “

“We make quite the team, don’t we?”

“Indeed, we do, Arlet, indeed we do.”

Preparing for winter became our primary focus as summer waned. We stockpiled firewood, Hayze showing me how to split logs with an efficiency that made the task less daunting. We insulated windows and checked our supplies repeatedly, making lists upon lists to ensure we forgot nothing.

One chilly evening as we sat by the fire pit outside our cabin, I realized how seamlessly our lives had entwined. Hayze passed me a mug of hot tea, his fingers lingering against mine—a touch that still sent warmth flooding through me despite the cold air.

“This feels right,” I whispered, gazing into the flames that danced against the growing darkness.

“It does,” he agreed. His voice held a note of wonder, as if he too were marveling at how far we’d come—not just in the distance but in being.

We spent our days learning—how to read the sky for weather patterns, how to preserve meat without refrigeration, how to live with less and appreciate more. Each night brought us closer together under quilts we’d stitched from scraps—a physical representation of our new life pieced together from remnants of old ones.

The community respected our privacy but offered help when we needed it—an accurate reflection of their generous spirit. They didn’t pry or question; they simply accepted us as two more souls seeking refuge in their slice of paradise.

As autumn painted the leaves with brilliant hues before they took their final bow, I had gratitude for each simple pleasure: the crispness of an apple

straight from our tree, the soft bleating of goats calling us to morning chores, and Hayze's steady presence beside me—a constant in a world that had once been nothing but chaos.

We were building something here—something honest. And as I watched Hayze secure another section of storm shutters against the cabin's side, I knew without a doubt that this life—our life—was worth every effort it took to preserve it against whatever storms might come.

The winter had been a testament to our preparation and resilience. Snow had blanketed our world in thick, silent layers, turning our cabin into a secluded haven. Hayze and I had stocked enough supplies to see us through the months of isolation, our foresight a shield against the biting cold.

When the first hints of spring whispered through the thawing earth, we emerged, blinking at the bright world reborn. The snow receded day by day, revealing the hardy green shoots daring to break through the soil. It was time to make our trip to Prince Rupert along with others who'd weathered the winter in their own pockets of solitude.

Hayze loaded the last of our goods onto the back of the pickup. "Think we'll need all this?" he asked, securing a tarp over our provisions.

I checked off items on my list. "Better safe than sorry," I replied. "Besides, we've got plenty to trade."

The drive down from our mountain abode was a careful descent on roads still slick with patches of ice. Hayze maneuvered with precision, his eyes never leaving the path ahead.

"You always drive like you're one with the truck," I teased, watching him navigate a narrow stretch.

He shot me a grin. "Talos instinct," he said. "We're all about harmony with our surroundings."

The town came into view, its buildings clustered like children around a campfire. People milled about, shaking off winter's hibernation as they greeted each other with enthusiasm that echoed across the thawing landscape.

We parked and unloaded our goods near the market square, where vendors

had already set up their stalls. The air buzzed with conversation and laughter—a symphony of human connection we hadn't realized we'd missed until now.

“Arlet! Hayze!” called a voice from across the square. It was Bill, waving us over with a wide smile. “Survived your first winter, I see!”

“We did indeed,” I responded as we approached. “And we’ve come bearing gifts.”

Bill’s eyes lit up as he saw our offerings—jars of preserves and smoked meats alongside Hayze’s handcrafted woodwork.

“These will sell like hotcakes,” Bill said, clapping Hayze on the back. “You’ve got quite the skill there.”

Hayze nodded modestly. “Thanks to Arlet’s expertise in smoking meats and canning fruits.”

We spent hours at the market, bartering and chatting with folks eager to share their own stories of survival. While we loved the sense of community, with each person contributing something unique to this tapestry of life in Prince Rupert, we kept our distance.

As midday approached, we grabbed a bite at a local eatery that boasted the best seafood chowder in town. The bell above the door jingled as we entered, and a warm aroma enveloped us.

“Table for two?” asked the waitress, her eyes crinkling with kindness.

“That would be great,” I said. She led us to a cozy booth by the window.

Hayze and I settled in, our conversation flowing easily between bites of chowder and fresh bread.

“This is nice,” I said between spoonfuls. “Being among people again.”

He nodded in agreement. “It is. But I have to admit...” He paused for effect, his gaze holding mine with gentle intensity. “I didn’t mind having you all to myself for those months.”

Heat rose to my cheeks at his words—a warmth that had nothing to do with

the chowder or the bustling atmosphere around us.

“You will not get any argument from me about that,” I replied with a smile that reflected my own deep contentment.

We lingered over our meal, savoring each moment as if it were as precious as those first days of spring—full of promise and fresh growth. As we finished up and prepared to head back into the throng of market-goers, Hayze reached across the table and squeezed my hand reassuringly.

“Ready for another round?” he asked with an impish glint in his eye.

I squeezed back, affirming without words that no matter what lay ahead, we were ready—together.

CHAPTER 26



*A*rlet

The cabin quivered with the new life, its wooden bones groaning in harmony with the wind that danced around the eaves. I cradled Charlie, our miracle, to my chest, his tiny fingers curling around mine. The soft rhythm of his breathing was a symphony in the quiet room. His skin shimmered like the last rays of sunset, and when he opened his eyes, Hayze’s gaze stared back at me.

“Look at him, Hayze,” I whispered. “He’s perfect.”

Hayze knelt beside us, his bronze skin somehow softer in the glow of our son’s presence. “Charlie,” he said, testing the name on his tongue like it was a sacred incantation. “Charlie Bronze.”

Our little cabin had become a cocoon, shielding us from the world outside, from past lives and threats long gone. It was just us and the vast Canadian wilderness, our days measured by sunrises and sunsets rather than the hands of a clock.

Hayze took Charlie into his arms, and I watched as a fierce love ignited in his eyes. It was love mixed with wonder—the kind that knew no boundaries or limitations. He pressed a kiss to Charlie’s forehead, a silent promise from father to son.

“He’s got your spirit,” Hayze murmured.

“And your heart,” I replied.

We had built a life here that was both simple and profound—gardens that thrived under our care, wood chopped for winter warmth, and now a new life that blended two worlds into one.

The baby wriggled in Hayze’s arms, a small yawn parting his lips as if he found this world still worthy of exploration, even in sleep. I reached out to trace the contour of Charlie’s cheek, marveling at how seamlessly our lives had intertwined.

“Do you think he’ll have your abilities?” I asked Hayze as we settled back into bed. Charlie nestled between us.

“We’ll see,” Hayze said with a gentle shrug. “He’ll be whoever he wants to be. We’ll make sure of it.”

Nights turned into days and days into weeks. Our son grew stronger and more curious with each passing moment. We watched him discover his hands, his laughter filling the cabin like music.

Hayze taught me to hunt and fish with greater skill than I ever imagined possessing. Together we forged paths through the snow-laden forest, setting traps and tracking game. When we returned home with our bounty, Charlie’s bright eyes would follow our every move as if committing each action to memory.

On days when the sky opened up to shower us with rain or blanket us with snowflakes as big as feathers, we’d stay inside. Hayze would tell stories of Thion J5—tales of metallic forests and electric storms—while I baked bread or stitched together quilts from old clothes.

Life was full here—full of love, full of purpose.

As spring breathed life back into the frozen earth, we planted seeds that would soon blossom into sustenance for our family. Our existence was a dance with nature—a give and take that nourished both soul and soil.

One day as we tended to our garden, Charlie sitting propped against a pillow

on a blanket nearby, Hayze looked at me with an intensity that stopped my breath.

“Arlet,” he said softly but firmly. “You’ve made this place a home.”

I stood up and walked over to him, placing my hand over his heart—a heart that beat for us, for this life we had created together.

“And you,” I said with equal conviction, “have made it complete.”

Be sure to read [Amarok’s Mate](#), Eden Ember’s next book in the Invasion of Monsters series.

ABOUT EDEN EMBER

Eden Ember found her passion in writing sci-fi romance. She spends her days either pounding on the keyboard or dreaming up the next stories. Her active imagination never lets up and the perfect outlet comes through in her books.

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