



Disciplined By the Orc

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He, tall, green, muscled, and very brute and very orc, swooped in to save me. Only saving me was half the issue. Because I had seen the faces of criminals, they wanted me dead. He wanted to save me and we ran.

Impossibly hot and deliciously alluring ,he dominated me with his strict militant direction and spanked me if I disobeyed.

And I liked it.

A recipe for disaster? Or the making of a fantastic love affair?

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One

Pamela

The humid night air clings to my skin as I hurry through the crowded streets of the French Quarter, the pulsing energy of New Orleans a stark contrast to the gnawing unease in my gut. I've stayed too late at the restaurant again, and now the familiar charm of Bourbon Street feels tinged with menace.

A commotion from a nearby alley freezes me in my tracks. Before I can think better of it, I peek around the corner. What I see makes my blood run cold.

Three men stand over a crumpled figure, weapons glinting in the dim light. One turns, his eyes locking onto mine, and time stands still.

"Witness!" he shouts, and suddenly they're all looking at me.

Panic surges through my body. I run, my heels clattering against cobblestones as I flee. Their heavy footsteps close in, angry shouts growing louder. I dart down an alley, hoping to lose them, only to find myself trapped in a dead end.

I spin around, pressed against the brick wall, as my pursuers round the corner. "Nowhere to run now, bitch."

"We got us a fresh one, boys..."

I close my eyes, bracing for the worst, when a bone-chilling roar fills the alley. My

eyes snap open to see a monstrous figure land between me and my attackers.

He's massive and armored with rippling green muscle.

An orc, my mind supplies helpfully, though the textbook definition does nothing to prepare me for the reality.

His movements are a blur of controlled violence, fists connecting with sickening thuds. In seconds, my pursuers are on the ground, broken and unconscious.

The monster of a man turns, and I press myself harder against the wall. His yellow eyes bore into me, feral and intense. Despite having saved me, everything about him screams danger. "Reckon you best come with me, darlin'. Less you're lookin' for another dance with these boys."

His tone is casual, almost lazy, but there's steel beneath the honey.

It's not a request.

"I-I don't understand," I say, finding my voice. "Who are you? What's happening?"

He cocks his head, a predatory grin spreading across his face. "Name's Koda, sugar. And what's happenin' is you just became the most wanted little morsel in all of New Orleans."

As if on cue, angry shouts echo from a nearby street. Koda's eyes narrow, and before I can blink, his massive hand clamps around my waist like a vise. "Time's up, darlin'," he growls, hoisting me effortlessly over his shoulder. "We're blowin' this popsicle stand."

I yelp in surprise, kicking and flailing against his iron grip. "Put me down, you

brute!" I screech, pummeling his broad back with my fists.

Koda lets out a dark chuckle, completely unfazed by my assault. "Feisty little thing, ain't ya?" His hand comes down hard on my rear, the sharp smack echoing in the alley. "Settle down now, now I'm not above hog tying ya, don't think I won't."

With a grunt, he drops me unceremoniously in front of his massive truck. The moment my feet touch the ground, survival instinct kicks in. I pivot, ready to bolt, but Koda's reflexes are inhumanly fast. His enormous hand clamps down on my arm, yanking me back before I can take a single step.

A low, menacing growl rumbles from his chest, the sound so primal it freezes the blood in my veins. His yellow eyes narrow, boring into mine with predatory intensity. Whatever he sees in my face must not satisfy him, because the growl deepens, reverberating through my entire body.

"Ain't convinced you understand the gravity of your situation, little lady," he snarls, his accent thickening with irritation.

His free hand shoots out, massive fingers wrapping around my chin. He forces my face up, grip firm enough to bruise as he makes me meet his gaze.

"Listen here, and listen good," he rumbles, his face inches from mine. I can smell bourbon and something spicier on his breath. "You're in my world now. Ain't no going back, ain't no calling for help. You breathe when I say breathe, you move when I say move. Clear?"

I try to nod, but his grip is too tight. A whimper escapes my lips, equal parts pain and terror.

"I said, is that clear?" Koda repeats, giving me a little shake for emphasis.

"Y-yes," I manage to squeak out, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes, what?" he presses, a dangerous edge to his tone.

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I swallow hard, realizing what he wants. "Yes... sir."

A grunt of approval rumbles from his chest. "That's better. Now, you're gonna behave and get in the truck like a good little lady, or do I need to teach you some manners first?"

The threat in his voice is unmistakable. I shake my head frantically, as much as his grip allows. "N-no, sir. I'll behave."

"Smart girl," Koda drawls, finally releasing my chin. He keeps a firm hold on my arm as he practically lifts me into the passenger seat of his truck. "Remember, darlin', I wasn't kiddin' about that hogtie'in. You try anything stupid, and you'll find out just how serious I am. And I might even enjoy it."

As he slams the door and rounds the truck, I rub my sore chin, the reality of my situation sinking in. I've escaped one danger only to land in the clutches of something far more terrifying. This orc, this Koda, he may have saved me from those men, but at what cost?

The engine roars to life, and as we peel away from the curb, I can't help but wonder if I've just made the biggest mistake of my life. God help me, what have I gotten myself into?

The engine roars to life, and Koda peels away from the curb with a screech of tires. I clutch at the seat, my heart pounding as he weaves through traffic with reckless abandon.

"Where are we going?" I ask again, hating how small and scared my voice sounds.

Koda doesn't even glance my way. "You'll know when we get there."

I fall silent, too terrified to push further. The streets of New Orleans blur past the window, familiar landmarks disappearing as we head out of the city. With each mile, I feel my old life slipping further away.

After what feels like hours, Koda finally speaks again. "Gonna lay down some ground rules, sugar. You don't speak unless spoken to. You don't ask questions. You do exactly what I say, when I say it. Break any of these, and there'll be consequences. Understood?"

I nod mutely, then remember his earlier command. "Yes," I whisper.

"Can't hear you," he growls.

"Yes!" I say louder, hating the tremor in my voice.

"Yes, what?" he presses, a dangerous edge to his tone.

I swallow hard, realizing what he wants. "Yes... sir."

A grunt of approval is his only response. We lapse back into silence, the only sound the rumble of the engine and my own ragged breathing.

As the city lights fade behind us and we plunge into the darkness of the bayou, I can't help but wonder if I've just traded one death sentence for another.

Two

Koda

I haul her up the stairs to my apartment, my hand clamped over her mouth to keep her quiet. Last thing I need is her squawkin' and wakin' up the whole damn Quarter. I kick the door open and toss her inside like a sack of potatoes, slamming it shut behind us.

"Sit," I growl, pointing at the worn leather couch. It ain't a request.

The little sugar plum— Pamela, was it? —stumbles to the couch, her eyes wide with fear. Good. Fear'll keep her alive.

"I... what's happening?" she whimpers, shrinking back as I loom over her.

I bare my teeth in what might pass for a smile on a human. To me, it's all predator. "What's happenin' is you're in a world of trouble, darlin'. And I'm the only thing standing between you and a shallow grave."

I stalk to the window, peeking through the blinds. No sign of those scumbags. Yet.

"Those men you saw? They own this city's underbelly. And now they own you too, unless you do exactly what I say." I don't wait for her response.

Time's wastin'. I yank open my closet, grabbing my go-bag. Cash, phones, clothes all go in. My hand closes around the cold metal of my gun. No hesitation this time. It goes in the bag.

"Up," I command, snapping my fingers at her. "We're movin' out. Now."

"But... where? I don't understand—"

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I cut her off with a snarl. "You don't need to understand. You need to obey. We're goin' somewhere safe, and that's all you need to know."

I toss a backpack at her, not caring that it nearly knocks her over.

"Pack. You got two minutes. Anything you can't grab in that time, you're leavin' behind forever. Clock's tickin', sugar."

She scrambles to comply, tears in her eyes. Part of me wants to comfort her, but I squash that notion quickly. Ain't no room for soft feelings in this situation.

"Time's up," I announce, grabbing her arm. "We're gone."

"Wait!" she cries, trying to pull away. "I can't just leave everything behind! My life, my job-"

I spin her around, forcing her to meet my gaze. My yellow eyes bore into hers, my voice a low, dangerous rumble. "Listen good, 'cause I'm only sayin' this once. Your old life? It's over. You go back, you die. You call for help, you die. You do anything other than what I tell you, when I tell you? You die. I'm your only chance at stayin' breathin'. So you can come with me now, or I can leave you here for them to find. Your choice, darlin'."

I can see the fight drain out of her. Good girl.

"Okay," she whispers, defeated. "I'll go with you."

"Smart choice," I grunt, already dragging her towards the door. "Now move. We got a long night ahead of us, and I ain't about to let you slow me down."

We slip out the back door, into an alley that smells of stale beer and jazz. My car's parked a few blocks away. It's nothing flashy, just an old Chevy that blends in with the countless others in the Quarter.

As we walk, I keep Pamela close, one hand on her elbow, eyes constantly scanning our surroundings. The usual sounds of Bourbon Street with laughter, music, the occasional drunk tourist now feel ominous. Any of these revelers could work for the gang.

We're almost to the car when I spot them. Two guys in dark jackets, trying too hard to look casual as they scan the crowd. My grip on Pamela tightens.

"Don't look," I mutter. "But we've got company. When I say run, you run. Got it?"

She nods, her face set in determination. I guide her around a corner, picking up our pace. The sound of footsteps behind us grows louder.

"Run!" I shout, pushing her ahead of me. We sprint down the narrow street, dodging startled pedestrians. I can hear shouts behind us now, getting closer.

My car comes into view, a battered sanctuary in the chaos. "Get in!" I yell, fumbling for the keys. Pamela dives into the passenger seat as I slam my door shut. The engine roars to life just as our pursuers round the corner.

I floor it, tires screeching against cobblestones. In the rearview mirror, I see one man raise a gun.

"Get down!" I roar, pushing Pamela's head below the dashboard. The rear window

shatters as we careen around a corner, leaving the French Quarter behind in a squeal of rubber and gunfire.

The truck roars through the streets of New Orleans, engine snarling as I weave through traffic like a man possessed. Beside me, Pamela clings to her seat, knuckles white, hair a wild mess from our earlier scuffle.

“Oh my Lord! They shot at us!”

I take a hard turn, tires screeching, and she yelps. "Quiet," I growl, eyes flicking between her and the road. "Unless you're bleeding, I don't have time for it."

"I-I'm fine, by the way," she stammers, then adds under her breath. "You green brute."

I bare my teeth in what might be a grin or a snarl. "Good. Means I can drive faster."

The speedometer climbs as I floor it as the truck eats up pavement. I fish out a battered pack of cigarettes, lighting one up with practiced ease. The smoke fills the cab, and Pamela coughs, waving her hand in front of her face. "Those things'll kill you," she mutters.

I take a long drag, blowing smoke in her direction. "Sweetheart, there's a long list of things tryin' to kill me. Cigarettes are the least of my worries."

I reach for my flask, taking a swig of bourbon without missing a beat. Pamela's eyes widen in horror.

"You can't drink and drive!" she exclaims, reaching for the flask.

I yank it away, fixing her with a hard stare. "I can do whatever the hell I want, sugar."

You want out? Be my guest." I jerk my thumb towards the door, the truck still hurtling down the road at breakneck speed.

She shrinks back, properly cowed. "N-no, I'll stay."

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"Damn right you will," I mutter, taking another pull from the flask before offering it to her. "Might help with those nerves of yours."

Pamela hesitates, then grabs the flask, taking a hefty swig. She coughs and sputters, eyes watering. "God, what is that? Gasoline?"

I laugh, a rough, bark-like sound. "Close enough. Welcome to the bayou, darlin'."

The glittering lights of New Orleans fade in the rearview, swallowed by the looming darkness of the swamp. Spanish moss drapes over gnarled trees like funeral shrouds, and the air grows thick with moisture and secrets.

Three

Pamela

Cypress trees loom like sentinels as Koda's truck rattles down what barely passes for a road. The first light of dawn seeps through the canopy, casting eerie shadows across the swamp. I've long since lost all sense of direction, the twists and turns of the bayou blending into an endless green labyrinth. My body aches, a constant reminder of the night's surreal events.

For hours, the tinny speakers of Koda's ancient radio have crackled with the mournful twangs of old country music. The music feels fitting, a soundtrack to our escape into this godforsaken swamp.

Koda's thick fingers tap out the beat on the steering wheel. "Now that's real music,"

he grunts, breaking the silence that's hung between us for the past hour. His gruff voice matches the baritone, a duet of world-weary men.

Part of me wants to argue, to point out there's more to music than tales of hard-living and heartbreak. But exhaustion wins out, and I bite my tongue. Besides, as we delve deeper into the bayou's embrace, the music's somber tones seem oddly appropriate.

The truck slows, tires crunching on gravel and fallen branches. Koda cuts the engine, and sudden silence descends, broken only by the swamp's awakening chorus. "We're here," he announces, his voice rough from cigarettes and disuse.

I peer through the misty windshield, wondering what "here" could mean in this wilderness. And more importantly, what it means for me.

I peer through the windshield. Here is a weathered cabin, half-hidden by moss-draped trees and morning mist. It looks like something out of a Southern Gothic novel, beautiful and slightly ominous.

"Come on," Koda says, already out of the car and scanning our surroundings. "Let's get inside before those damn mosquitoes carry us off."

I stumble out, my legs stiff from the long ride. The humidity hits me like a wall, and I can already feel my hair frizzing. Koda grabs our bags from the trunk and heads for the cabin, his massive frame moving with surprising grace.

Inside, the cabin is sparse but clean. A main room serves as both living area and kitchen, with a small hallway leading to what I assume are bedrooms. It's simple, functional, and utterly isolated.

Koda drops the bags and turns to me, his yellow eyes intense. "Alright, listen up. This place is safe, but only if we follow the rules."

I nod, trying to look more composed than I feel. "Okay. What are the rules?"

He paces, ticking off points on his fingers. "One, you don't leave the cabin without me. Period. Two, no phones, no internet, no contact with the outside world. Three, if you hear or see anything suspicious, you tell me immediately."

His tone leaves no room for argument, and I feel a flicker of annoyance. "Anything else?" I ask, unable to keep a hint of sarcasm from my voice.

Koda's eyes narrow. "Yeah. You do what I say, when I say it. No questions, no hesitation. It could mean the difference between life and death out here."

I bite back a retort, reminding myself that this intimidating orc is the only thing standing between me and a gang that wants me dead. Instead, I take a deep breath and nod. "I understand."

His expression softens slightly. "Look, I don't need any sass. I rather liked my downtown apartment, do you know how long it took me to get that thing?"

"I know," I say.

He grunts in acknowledgment, then gestures to the hallway. "Bathroom's down there if you want to freshen up. I'll see what we've got for breakfast."

As I head to the bathroom, I watch Koda move around the small kitchen. His massive frame fills the space, muscles rippling under his t-shirt as he reaches for cabinets. There's a raw, primal energy about him that's both intimidating and... something else I'm not ready to name.

In the bathroom, I splash water on my face and try to tame my hair. The woman in the mirror looks like a stranger with eyes wide, skin pale, hair a wild mess. I take a

deep breath, steeling myself. I've survived Katrina's aftermath; I can survive this.

When I return to the main room, Koda's at the stove, the smell of coffee and something savory filling the air. My stomach growls, reminding me it's been hours since I last ate.

"Hope you like gator sausage," Koda says without turning around. "It's what we've got."

"Gator sausage?" I reply, imagining him wrestling gators with a knife in his teeth. "The coffee, however I can go for."

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He turns, a hint of a smile on his face as he slides a mug towards me. Our fingers brush as I take it, and the jolt I experience has nothing to do with caffeine. Up close, the details of his orcish features are fascinating, the slight jut of his lower canines, the faint ridges on his forehead, the intense yellow of his eyes.

"What?" he asks gruffly, noticing my stare.

I flush, embarrassed at being caught. "Nothing, I've never met an orc before."

He snorts, turning back to the stove. "Yeah, well, we're not exactly common in the French Quarter. Or anywhere else for that matter."

Curiosity overcomes my embarrassment. "How did you end up in New Orleans?"

Koda stiffens slightly. "That's a long story. And not one for right now." He plates the sausages and turns, his expression closed off. "Eat up. Then you should get some rest. We've got a lot to figure out."

As we eat in silence, I can't help but feel the weight of all the questions hanging between us. Who is Koda, really? What am I going to do about the gang that's after me? How long will we have to hide out here?

The bayou buzzes with life outside, reminding me how far we are from the world I know. In this isolated cabin, with this grumpy orc as my company.

Four

Koda

She's been here a week now and every day, she finds new ways to test my patience, questioning my orders, trying to organize my things. The air between us is charged, but not in a good way — more like the tension before I snap and do something I'll regret. This wasn't part of the plan. She was supposed to be a job, nothing more. Protect the witness, keep her safe, end of story. Not whatever the hell this is becoming.

A clatter from the bedroom snaps me out of my thoughts. Pamela's voice drifts out. "Oops! Sorry, I was just looking for an extra blanket and—"

I'm moving before I even realize it, a growl building in my throat. She's in my room, the one place in this cabin I told her was off-limits. As I round the corner, I see her standing there, eyes wide, holding...

Damnit.

"What do you think you're doing?" I snarl, snatching the item from her hands and shoving it back in the drawer. "I told you this room was private."

Pamela takes a step back, her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snoop, I just—"

"You just what?" I loom over her, anger and embarrassment and something else I can't name all churning inside me. "Thought you'd poke around in my personal things?"

She lifts her chin, a spark of defiance in her eyes. "I said I was sorry. I was looking for a blanket, that's all."

I take a deep breath, trying to rein in my temper. "There are spare blankets in the hall closet. Which you'd know if you'd asked instead of going through my things."

Pamela nods, but doesn't move. Her eyes flick to the open drawer, then back to me. There's something in her gaze - curiosity, maybe even... interest? The thought sends a jolt through me.

"Koda," she says, her voice hesitant. "What's... what's all this?" She gestures to the drawer, where the edge of a leather cuff is visible among other items. Her eyes widen as she takes in more details - the sleek handle of a paddle, the delicate chains of a flogger, and what looks like a riding crop.

I feel the heat rise to my face, a rare occurrence for an orc. "That's personal," I growl, moving to shut the drawer. But Pamela's quicker, her small hand darting out to stop me. Her fingers brush against a leather collar, and she pulls back as if burned.

"Is this... are these for...?" She trails off, her cheeks flushing as realization dawns. Her eyes dart between the discipline implements and my face, a mix of shock and something else in her gaze.

I bark out a laugh, more from discomfort than humor. "Not from my mercenary days, if that's what you're thinkin'." I run a hand over my face, suddenly tired. "Look, what a man does in his private time ain't your business."

Pamela's eyes fix on the drawer, particularly on a sleek black paddle with intricate designs etched into its surface. "I've never seen anything like this before," she murmurs, almost to herself.

"Yeah, well, now you have," I grunt, finally closing the drawer. "And that's all you're gonna see. This ain't show and tell, sweetheart."

She looks up at me, her expression a mix of embarrassment and curiosity. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry. It's just unexpected."

I lean in close, my voice a low rumble. "Life's full of surprises, ain't it? Now, how about we forget this little discovery and you remember what I said about respecting boundaries?"

Pamela nods quickly, but I can see the questions burning in her eyes. Questions I'm not ready to answer, not by a long shot.

"Good," I growl, stepping back. "Now scram. And next time you need something, you ask. Got it?"

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She nods again and hurries out of the room. But as she passes, I glimpse her face. There's a new awareness there, a spark of something that wasn't there before.

As she squeezes past me to leave the room, her arm barely grazes mine. It's nothing, shouldn't be nothing, but it's like a damn lightning bolt straight to my core. I suck in a sharp breath, her scent hitting me like a sucker punch - that fancy herbal crap she insists on using and something else, something that's just her.

Fuck.

It clicks into place like the chamber of a loaded gun. The way my body's on high alert whenever she's near, the constant itch to be closer to her, the need to protect her that goes way beyond the job. I've heard the stories, laughed 'em off as fairy tales for lovesick fools. But now...

Fated mates. The words rattle around my skull like shrapnel as I watch her saunter down the hallway, hips swaying.

This bratty little human? This pain-in-my-ass chef who can't follow a simple order to save her life? You've gotta be kidding me.

I slam my fist into the doorframe, the wood splintering under the impact. How in the hell is this happening? She's human, I'm an orc. She's all fancy French Quarter cuisine and big dreams, I'm an ex-mercenary with enough red in my ledger to paint the whole damn bayou. It's impossible. It's insane.

And yet...

I think of her smile, rare as it is, the way it lights up this miserable shack, like the sun breaking through storm clouds. The fire in her eyes when she stands up to me, matching my growls with that sharp tongue of hers. Her stubborn strength in the face of this whole FUBAR situation.

"Dammit," I snarl, running a hand over my face.

I would break her frail little body in a single thrust.

But as I head back to the living room, seeing her curled up on the couch again, I can't help the warmth that spreads through my chest. Whatever this is between us, wherever it leads, I know one thing for certain:

I'll protect her.

Fated mates or not, it's the only thing I know how to do.

Five

Pamela

The bayou's symphony of croaking frogs and buzzing insects grates on my last nerve as I pace the confines of this godforsaken cabin and I'm about ready to claw my way through the moss-covered walls.

I'm used to the vibrant energy of the French Quarter, the constant ebb and flow of life. This? This is purgatory.

And then there's Koda. The green-skinned mountain of muscle and bad attitude who's appointed himself my personal jailer. Every day, it's the same routine:

"Don't go outside, Pamela."

"Stay away from the windows, Pamela."

"For the love of all that's holy, stop touching my things, Pamela."

I swear, if he growls one more order at me, I might just scream.

But the worst part? The absolute worst part is how he insists on walking around shirtless, like some kind of green Adonis. Right now, he's outside splitting wood, and I find myself drawn to the window, watching despite myself.

His muscles ripple with each swing of the ax, sweat glistening on his green skin in the humid air. It's mesmerizing. And infuriating. How dare he look like that while keeping me prisoner?

I press my forehead against the cool glass, torn between admiration and frustration. Part of me wants to run my hands over those broad shoulders, to trace the scars that tell of a life I can barely imagine. The other part wants to chuck one of those logs right at his stubborn head.

A loud crack of wood splitting draws my attention back to the present. Koda's looking right at me, one eyebrow raised in that infuriatingly smug way of his.

"Enjoying the view, princess?" he calls out, his deep voice carrying easily across the yard.

The heat rushes to my cheeks, embarrassment and anger warring for dominance. "You wish," I snap back, but it lacks conviction even to my own ears.

Koda just chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that does things to my insides I'd rather

not examine too closely. "Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart. Now get away from that window before I board it up."

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I step back, sticking my tongue out at him childishly. He can't see it, but it makes me feel better.

As I flop onto the worn couch, I can't help but wonder how long this stalemate can last. Something's got to give, and soon. Whether it's my sanity, my resolve, or the tension between us, I'm not sure.

Sure, I know they're for my safety. I understand the danger we're in. Blah, blah, blah. But after weeks of being cooped up in this swamp shack with Mr. Grumpy Green Giant, I'm ready to lose it.

So, I decide to have some fun. Koda wants to play warden? Fine. I'll be the prisoner from hell.

I start small. Rearranging his precious gun cleaning kit. Hiding his favorite coffee mug. Singing off-key French Quarter jazz at the top of my lungs when he's trying to sleep.

The vein that throbs in his forehead when he's annoyed? It's become my new favorite thing.

But it's not enough. I want to see him really lose it. So, on a bright sunny day, a couple of weeks into our bayou exile, I decide to cross the line. Literally.

Koda's out doing whatever it is grumpy orcs do in the swamp. Probably wrestling alligators or scowling at tadpoles. I eye the invisible boundary he's set around the cabin, the one he's warned me about a million times.

"Don't step foot beyond this line, Pamela."

"You cross this boundary, you're gator bait, sweetheart."

"One toe over this mark, and I'll tan your hide myself."

Well, guess what, big guy? This little chef is about to spice things up.

With a grin that would make a Mardi Gras reveler proud, I saunter right up to that invisible line. I wiggle my toes at the edge, savoring the moment. Then, with all the drama I can muster, I take one big, exaggerated step over.

"Oops," I say to the empty swamp, my voice dripping with false innocence. "Looks like I've been a bad girl."

I half expect Koda to come bursting out of the underbrush, all righteous fury and flexing muscles. But there's nothing. Just the usual swamp sounds and the hammering of my heart.

So, I decide to up the ante. I gather wildflowers, humming loudly as I go. Let him try to miss this when he gets back. As I pluck a vibrant bloom, I hear it. A low, menacing growl that sends shivers down my spine. "What. The. Hell. Do you think you're doing?"

I turn slowly, a bunch of flowers clutched to my chest, to face one very pissed off orc. Koda's standing at the edge of the boundary, his yellow eyes blazing with fury. Every muscle in his massive green body is tense, like he's barely holding himself back from charging at me.

I paste on my sweetest smile. "Just picking some flowers to brighten up our lovely home, dear."

The sound that comes out of Koda's throat is barely human. Or orcish, for that matter.

"Get. Back. Here. Now."

Each of Koda's words cuts through the air, sharp as a knife. But instead of fear, I feel a thrill race down my spine. Finally, some excitement in this godforsaken swamp.

I twirl the flowers in my hand, feigning nonchalance. "Hmm, I don't know. The view's quite nice out here. Maybe I'll explore a bit more-

Before I can finish, Koda's beside me in a blur of movement, his massive hand clamping around my upper arm. The flowers scatter at my feet, forgotten.

"That's enough," he growls, his voice low and dangerous. "We're going back. Now."

I try to tug my arm free, but his grip is like iron. "Let go of me, you big brute!"

Koda's yellow eyes narrow, a storm of emotions swirling in their depths. "Sorry isn't good enough this time, sweetheart. You need to learn."

He looms over me, a wall of green muscle and barely contained fury. I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze, and immediately wish I hadn't. The raw desire I see there is unsettling, stirring up feelings I've never experienced before.

I drop my eyes, staring at the ground, my heart pounding. "What... what do you mean, learn?"

"It means," Koda rumbles, leaning in close enough that I can feel the heat radiating off his body, "that you're going to have to start following instructions, Pamela. I can't always be there to save your pretty little ass. You will obey my rules, or there'll be consequences."

The implication in his words hangs heavy in the air between us. My breath catches in my throat, an intoxicating mix of fear, guilt, and... something else... coursing through me.

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"And if I don't?" The words slip out before I can stop them, a last act of defiance.

Koda's hand moves from my arm to my chin, tilting my face up. His touch is surprisingly gentle, a contrast to the steel in his voice. "Then I'll have to teach you the hard way. Trust me, little one, you don't want that."

But as I meet his intense gaze, feeling the strength in his grip and the heat of his body so close to mine, I'm not so sure. Part of me, a part I'm not ready to examine too closely, wonders what exactly those "consequences" might entail.

"Now get that ass back to the cabin. Now." His tone leaves no room for argument.

"Make me—"

I've hardly finished speaking before he reaches out and grabs me, pulling me over his broad shoulder, much like a caveman claiming his prize. I squeak in shock and outrage, kicking and pounding against his hard back, but it's futile.

He carries me to his whittling chair on the porch, sits, and then drapes me unceremoniously over his thighs and pulls my sundress up and my panties down as my legs kick helplessly in his lap. "Koda, no, stop, you, you pervert!" I gasp as he manhandles me as I struggle against his rock hard body, then his broad palm connects with my behind, the sting of the slap radiating through me.

"This is your punishment," he says, his voice low and sober. But the spankings continue, each one more stinging than the last, igniting a fire deep within me that's both humiliating and arousing all at once. "If you want to act a fool, little lady, then

this is about as far as it'll get ya.”

I cry out again, but the swamp absorbs my naughty noises, leaving only the sounds of the spanking echoing in the stillness. Again and again he beats my petulant little ass, my body betraying me as I'm humiliated and put in my place.

Yet, during this humiliating act, I feel alive. Free. It's a rush that's as overwhelming as it is intoxicating. I shouldn't like this. I'm a strong, independent woman, and I should fight him, resisting. Yet, a part of me enjoys being over his knee. Enjoys being punished by him like a naughty little whore.

Six

Koda

As my stern hand comes down on her round, firm ass, I lose control. A blush creeps over her, starting at her cheeks and spreading down her neck. Her eyes are wide, filled with shock, fear, and what looks like lust. It should make me feel guilt, seeing her like this. But it doesn't. The sight of her over my knee, her body trembling under my touch, is the most arousing thing I've ever seen.

But I don't just want to just punish her, I want to claim her, mate her, own her. The urge to split that body in half is overwhelming, a persistent beat in my chest, an itch under my skin.

She's meant to be mine, and I will take what's mine.

She's stirred an instinct in me that I never knew I had.

The need to protect, to claim, to own.

I land another spank on her ass, and she gasps, her body jerking forward. I feel the heat of her skin through the thin fabric of my pants, and my cock twitches, aching to be inside her. This punishment has turned into something else, something primal, raw. It's not about teaching her a lesson anymore, it's about marking her as mine.

I can't resist it any longer. I don't want to resist it.

"Enough," I growl, pulling her up and into my arms. Her pretty little sundress is still up around her thighs, her ass is a lovely shade of pink, and she's panting, her chest heaving.

She looks up at me, her eyes filled with confusion, fear, and arousal. She's a perfect combination of innocence and sensuality, and she's driving me insane.

I carry her back into my bedroom and throw her on my bed. She doesn't protest or fight, just looks at me with those wide, trusting eyes. I tug the sundress over her head, leaving her standing in just her bra and panties. The sight of her standing there, her body pale and delicate compared to mine, sends a jolt of primal lust through me.

"Take it off," I say, my voice barely more than a growl. I need to see all of her, to touch all of her. I need to claim her as my own.

She doesn't hesitate, her fingers moving quickly to unclasp her bra and slide her panties down her legs. She stands before me, smooth and naked and beautiful and perfect, her body trembling slightly. I don't know if it's from fear, arousal, or both, but it only further awakens my dark instincts. "Koda..." she asks again, her voice barely above a whisper.

I kiss her, penetrating her mouth in a passionate kiss. She responds immediately, her arms wrapping around my neck, her legs wrapping around me.

Her skin soft and sweet, her body small and delicate compared to mine.

And she's mine.

My cock flops out thick and heavy between my legs, and I'm not quite sure she can handle it, but she seems like a fighter and as I position myself between her legs, I see the fear in her eyes, but also the desire.

She may be scared, but she wants this as much as I do.

I press the head of my cock against her entrance, looking into her eyes as I sink it in. The look on her face as she struggles through my orcish girth... delicious. The thought that I am causing her pain should hold me back, but all the sweet and desperate noises she makes... it makes it all too easy.

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She cries out, but she doesn't tell me to stop. Instead, she clings to me, her fingers digging into my skin as she takes my length, her body moving with mine.

I groan as her tight, wet heat wraps around my cock, taking me deep inside her. She's so small, so delicate, but she's taking every inch of my big, orc cock like the perfect little fucktoy.

Her mouth forms an O as she gasps, her shock quickly transforming into pleasure as I fill her up completely. "Koda!" she gasps as I move, staring down at where our bodies join. And she's so fucking beautiful like this, helpless and willing beneath me.

"Mine," I growl, flipping her as if she weighs nothing, pulling her ass into the air, and driving into her from behind. I watch as her cute little body bounces and squeaks with every hard thrust, my hands gripping her hips to hold her in place as I take her, shape her, mark her as mine.

"Yes, sir!" she moans, her body trembling with each powerful stroke. "I'm... I'm yours!"

I can feel Pamela's orgasm building, her pussy tightening around my cock in a way that's driving me wild. I reach up, wrapping my hand around her delicate throat as I continue to fuck her, my control slipping away. She gasps, her eyes wide, but she doesn't struggle. She doesn't fight me. Instead, she takes it, her body shuddering as her orgasm explodes. The feeling of her pussy clenching around my cock sends me over the edge.

With a roar, I let go, my climax tearing through me like a runaway train. I thrust

deeper and harder, ensuring every drop fills her little human womb, letting her know exactly who's property she is, painting her insides and I can feel every pulse of my orgasm, every spurt of my seed and she shatters beneath me, her pussy clenching around me as she lets go.

Finally, we collapse together, a tangle of sweaty, panting flesh. I feel my seed leaking out of her, evidence of our mating, and I know that she truly is mine. The feeling of possession and primal satisfaction is so strong, so fierce, that it's almost overwhelming.

Seven

Pamela

The gentle patter of rain on the cabin roof creates a cozy cocoon around us as I stand at the small stove, stirring a pot of slowly simmering broth. The rich aroma of star anise, cinnamon, and charred ginger fills the air, mingling with the earthy scent of the bayou that seeps through the wooden walls. I glance over my shoulder at Koda, who's sprawled in an armchair that seems comically small for his massive frame. His yellow eyes fix on me, a mix of curiosity and something deeper, something that makes my heart flutter every time I catch him looking.

"You sure you don't want help?" he asks, shifting in his seat.

I smile, shaking my head. "Cooking relaxes me. Besides, I want this to be a surprise."

He grunts in acknowledgment, returning to the football game, but I can see his nostrils flaring. He's still a gruff, intimidating orc, but I think my cooking may be just the thing.

I've seen how he eats.

As I turn back to the stove, my mind wanders to the night he told me about fated mates. The concept still feels surreal, like something out of a fairy tale. And yet, I can't deny the pull I feel towards him, the sense of rightness when we're together. It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

The broth is nearly ready. I add the rice noodles, their pale strands unfurling in the fragrant liquid. Next come thin slices of beef, barely kissing the hot broth before I ladle everything into two large bowls. The final touch: a handful of fresh herbs with Thai basil, cilantro, mint as their bright green adds a stark contrast to the deep, rich brown of the broth.

"Hope you're hungry," I say, carefully carrying the bowls to the small table by the window. "This is ph?, but with a New Orleans twist."

Koda's nostrils flare as he inhales deeply, a look of appreciation crossing his face. "Smells amazing. What's the twist?"

I grin, settling into my chair across from him. "Well, traditionally it's made with beef or chicken. But I've added some andouille sausage and a dash of filé powder. A little Vietnam, a little Louisiana."

He takes a cautious sip of the broth, and I hold my breath. Then his eyes widen, and he looks at me with something like awe. "This is incredible."

Pride and pleasure well up inside me. "Really? You like it?"

Koda nods emphatically, already spooning up more. "It's like comfort and excitement all in one bowl. How did you learn to cook like this?"

I feel a warmth that has nothing to do with the steaming ph?. "It's a long story," I say, stirring my bowl.

"We've got time," he says.

And so, as the rain continues its gentle rhythm outside, I tell him about my past. About growing up in Indianapolis, the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants who wanted a better life for their children. About the struggle to fit in, to balance two cultures that often seemed at odds.

"Food was always my connection to both worlds," I explain, gesturing with my chopsticks. "My mom taught me traditional Vietnamese dishes, but I was fascinated by American cuisine too. I started experimenting, combining flavors, trying to create something that represented both sides of who I was."

Koda listens intently, his bowl empty. "Is that what brought you to New Orleans?"

I nod, serving him another bowl without skipping a beat. "Partly. I came here first with my college's Vietnamese Student Association, to help with the Katrina cleanup. The resilience I saw here, the way the community came together inspired me. And the food culture! It was like nothing I'd ever experienced."

As I talk, I can almost smell the beignets frying at Cafe Du Monde, hear the jazz spilling out of clubs on Frenchmen Street. The ache of homesickness is sudden and sharp.

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Koda must see it in my face, because he reaches across the table, his large green hand engulfing mine. "You miss it," he says. It's not a question.

I nod, blinking back unexpected tears. "I do. It's more than just a city to me, you know? It's where I finally felt like I belonged."

His thumb traces gentle circles on the back of my hand, the tender gesture at odds with his imposing appearance. "Tell me more," he urges.

And so I do. I tell him about the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, how the Vietnamese Catholic community there became my second family. About my dreams of opening a fusion restaurant, blending the flavors of my heritage with the bold tastes of New Orleans cuisine.

As I speak, I realize how much I've been holding inside these past weeks, how much I've needed to share this part of myself. Koda listens with rapt attention, asking questions, genuinely interested in every detail of my life.

When I finally fall silent, my ph? has gone cold, but I feel lighter than I have in days. Koda squeezes my hand gently before releasing it to lean back in his chair. I smile, suddenly shy. "What about you? I've told you my life story, but I still know so little about yours."

Koda's expression darkens slightly, and for a moment I think I've overstepped. But then he sighs, running a hand over his face. "Not much to tell. Grew up in an orc enclave outside of Chicago. Rough neighborhood, rougher family life. Joined the military as soon as I could, figuring it was my ticket out."

He pauses, his gaze distant. I wait, giving him space to continue at his own pace.

"Turned out I had a talent for certain kinds of work. Ended up in special ops, then private military contracting. Mercenary, basically." His mouth twists in a humorless smile. "Did that for years, until, well, until I couldn't anymore."

"What happened?"

Koda shakes his head. "A job went bad. Real bad. I lost people I cared about, did things I'm not proud of. After that, I knew I had to get out. Ended up in New Orleans almost by accident. Figured it was as good a place as any to try and start over."

The pain in his voice touches me as I reach out this time, laying my hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Koda."

He covers my hand with his, his touch gentle despite the strength I know those hands possess. "Don't be. It led me here, didn't it?"

The intensity in his gaze makes my breath catch. There's so much left unsaid between us, so much we're both still figuring out. But at this moment, I feel closer to him than I've ever felt to anyone.

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, the only sounds are the rain outside and the occasional creak of the cabin settling. Finally, I stand, gathering our bowls. "How about some dessert? I think we could both use something sweet."

Koda raises an eyebrow.

I laugh, the sound bright in the cozy cabin. "I did manage to find some condensed milk and coffee. How do you feel about Vietnamese coffee?"

His eyes light up with interest. "Never had it. Show me."

I busy myself with the preparation, explaining as I go. "Traditionally, it's made with a small metal filter called a phin. We don't have one here, so we'll have to improvise."

I layer sweetened condensed milk at the bottom of two glasses, then carefully pour over the strong, dark coffee I've brewed. The contrast is striking, dark coffee hovering over the pale, creamy layer below.

"Now for the fun part," I say, handing Koda a long spoon. "You stir it all together, mixing the coffee and condensed milk. It's like a little ceremony."

We stir our drinks in tandem, the clink of spoons against glass a pleasant counterpoint to the rain. It's amusing, seeing his massive hands taking such care with the tiny-in-comparison glass and as the two layers swirl together, creating a rich, caramel-colored concoction, I think about Koda and me. Two very different beings, slowly blending together, creating something new and unexpected.

Koda takes a sip and his eyes widen in surprise. "This is wow. It's so rich and smooth."

I beam at him, pleased by his reaction. "It's one of my favorite things. A little bit of home, you know?"

He nods, understanding in his eyes. "Thank you, Pamela. All of it, the food, your stories, your past."

"Thank you for listening," I reply. "And for sharing your past with me too. I know it's not easy."

Koda sets down his glass, his expression serious. "There's still a lot you don't know

about me. Things in my past aren't pretty."

I reach out, laying my hand on his arm. "We've all got parts of our past we're not proud of, Koda. What matters is who we choose to be now, in this moment."

He covers my hand with his, his touch sending a frisson of warmth through me. "And who do you choose to be, Pamela?"

The question hangs in the air between us, weighted with possibilities. I take a deep breath, finding courage in the warmth of his gaze.

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"I choose to be here, with you. Wherever this leads us."

Koda's intake of breath is sharp, his fingers tightening slightly on mine. For a moment, I think he might pull me into his arms. Instead, he brings my hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles.

"My perfect angel," he says against my skin.

I shake my head, cupping his cheek with my free hand. "You deserve happiness, Koda. We both do."

As we sit there, the rain tapering off outside, I feel a sense of peace settle over me. There's still danger out there, still so much uncertainty in our future. But here, in this moment, with the lingering scents of ph? and coffee in the air and Koda's hand warm in mine, I feel like I've found a piece of home I never knew I was missing.

Eight

Koda

Frogs croaking, insects buzzing, the occasional splash of something moving through the water fills the bayou at night. I stand by the window, my eyes scanning the darkness beyond the glass. It's been quiet. Too quiet.

Behind me, Pamela sleeps peacefully on the worn couch, a book about New Orleans cuisine fallen open on her chest. The sight of her, so vulnerable and trusting, makes something in my chest tighten. These past weeks have been unexpected. Challenging.

But also filled with a warmth I'd forgotten could exist.

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus. We can't afford to get complacent. The gang hunting Pamela doesn't give up easily.

A flicker of movement in the trees catches my eye. Could be nothing, an owl, maybe, or a raccoon. But instincts honed through years of combat are screaming at me that something's wrong.

I move silently to Pamela's side, my hand gentle but firm on her shoulder. "Wake up," I murmur, keeping my voice low. "We've got trouble."

Her eyes flutter open, confusion quickly replaced by fear as she reads the tension in my posture. "What's happening?" she whispers, sitting up.

"Not sure yet. But we need to be ready to move." I help her to her feet, my mind racing through escape routes. "Remember the plan we talked about?"

Pamela nods, her face pale but determined.

"Stay close to me, and if I tell you to run, you run. No arguments."

She opens her mouth to respond, but a sudden crash from the front of the cabin cuts her off. The door splinters inward, and dark figures pour through the opening.

"Go!" I roar, shoving Pamela towards the back of the cabin. I hear her footsteps retreating as I turn to face our attackers.

Three men, armed and masked, fan out into the room. Behind them, I can see more figures moving in the darkness outside. We're outnumbered, but I've faced worse odds.

The first attacker lunges at me with a knife. I sidestep, grabbing his wrist and using his momentum to slam him into the wall. The second comes in swinging, but I'm already moving. My fist connects with his solar plexus, driving the air from his lungs.

A gun appears in the third man's hand. I dive for cover behind the overturned table as shots ring out, splintering wood and shattering the quiet of the night.

I need to end this fast. Staying low, I scuttle to the kitchen area, grabbing the cast-iron skillet from the stove. As the gunman rounds the corner, I swing with all my strength. The pan connects with a sickening crunch, and he drops like a stone.

More shots from outside. They're trying to pin us down. I grab the fallen man's gun, checking the clip. Half full. It'll have to do.

"Pamela!" I call out, my voice barely audible over the gunfire. "You okay?"

"I'm here!" Her voice comes from the back bedroom, shaky but alive. Relief floods through me, quickly replaced by a surge of protective rage.

I move to the shattered front door, using the frame for cover. Two more attackers are advancing across the small clearing in front of the cabin. I take a deep breath, steadying my aim, then open fire.

The first man goes down with a cry. The second dives for cover behind a tree. I use the moment to sprint to the back of the cabin, my heart pounding in my ears.

Pamela's there, clutching our emergency bags, her eyes wide with fear. "Koda! You're hurt!"

I glance down, noticing for the first time the blood seeping from a gash on my arm. Must've caught some shrapnel from the splintering door. "It's nothing. We need to

move."

I take the bag from her, slinging it over my shoulder. With my free hand, I grab hers, marveling for a split second at how small and delicate it feels in my massive green palm.

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"Stay low, stay close," I growl, leading her towards the hidden back exit.

We slip out into the night, the sounds of shouting and gunfire fading behind us. The path to the boat dock is treacherous with tangled roots and sucking mud, but Pamela doesn't complain, keeping pace beside me.

Finally, the small dock comes into view, our getaway boat bobbing gently in the dark water. I help Pamela in, then quickly untie the mooring line.

Just as I'm about to jump in, a shout rings out from the trees. A figure emerges, gun raised. Without thinking, I lunge forward, tackling him into the murky water.

We grapple in the shallows, his gun lost in the initial impact. He's strong, but I'm stronger. My hands find his throat, squeezing. For a moment, I see the fear in his eyes, feel the life ebbing from him.

"Koda!" Pamela's voice cuts through the red haze of violence. "We need to go!"

I release my grip, leaving the man gasping and sputtering in the water. In one fluid motion, I heave myself into the boat and gun the engine. Only when I'm sure we're not being followed do I slow down, turning to check on Pamela.

She's huddled in the bottom of the boat, shivering despite the warm night air. Without a word, I pull her into my arms, feeling her slim body shaking against my chest.

"It's okay," I murmur, my voice rough with adrenaline and emotion. "You're safe now. I've got you."

Pamela looks up at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I was so scared," she whispers. "When I heard the gunshots I thought..."

"Shh," I soothe, running a hand through her tangled hair. "It'll take more than a few thugs to take me down."

She manages a weak smile, then her gaze falls to my injured arm. "You're still bleeding. Let me look at it."

As Pamela tends to my wound with supplies from the emergency bag, I steer the boat deeper into the bayou. My mind is racing, trying to figure out our next move. They compromised our safe house, and we're back to square one.

But as I look down at Pamela, her brow furrowed in concentration as she wraps a bandage around my arm, I know what I must do. I'll keep her safe, no matter what it takes.

"Where will we go now?" she asks, finishing with the bandage and looking up at me.

I take a deep breath, considering our options. "I've got one more place we can lay low. It's not as comfortable as the cabin, but it's secure. We'll hole up there, figure out our next move."

Pamela nods, trust clear in her eyes. It humbles me, that faith. Makes me want to be worthy of it.

As we speed through the dark waters of the bayou, leaving behind the shattered peace of the past weeks, I make a silent vow. I'll end this threat, whatever it takes. Not just because it's my job, but because Pamela deserves a life free from fear. A life where she can pursue her dreams, share her incredible cooking with the world.

A life, maybe, that includes me.

The thought should scare me, instead it fills me with a fierce determination. We've survived this night. We'll survive whatever comes next.

Nine

Pamela

The dock creaks under our feet as we disembark from the speedboat, the gentle lapping of water against wood the only sound in the pre-dawn stillness. Koda's massive form moves with surprising stealth, his yellow eyes scanning our surroundings for any sign of threat.

"This way," he grunts, leading me towards a tarp-covered shape at the edge of the dock.

With a swift motion, he unveils a sleek, menacing-looking motorcycle. It's all black and chrome, a machine built for speed and power. Just like its owner.

"Hop on," Koda orders, swinging his leg over the seat. "And hold on tight."

I hesitate for a moment, the events of the night still swirling in my mind with the crash of the cabin door giving way, the deafening gunshots, the terror of not knowing if Koda was alive or dead. But there's no time for fear now. I climb onto the bike behind Koda, wrapping my arms around his waist.

The engine roars to life, and we're off, tearing down empty roads as the world slowly wakes around us. The wind whips at my hair, carrying away the last traces of smoke and gunpowder. I press my face against Koda's broad back, seeking warmth and comfort in his solid presence.

After what feels like hours, Koda slows the bike, pulling into a deserted rest stop. The fluorescent lights of the empty parking lot cast an eerie glow in the early morning light.

"I need to make some calls," he says, pulling out a burner phone I didn't know he had. "Stay with the bike, keep your eyes open. If anyone approaches?—"

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"I know," I interrupt, managing a small smile. "I'll be ready to leave in a hurry."

He nods, the ghost of a smile flickering across his face before he steps away to make his calls.

I watch him pace as he talks, his large frame taut with tension. In the harsh lighting, the differences between us are stark. His green skin, his impressive bulk, the fierce set of his features are all a reminder of how different our worlds are. Or were, before fate and danger threw us together.

Koda's voice rises suddenly, a string of words in a language I don't recognize spilling from him. His face is thunderous, and for a moment, I see the warrior he must have been. It's terrifying and awe-inspiring all at once.

Finally, he snaps the phone shut and returns to the bike. "We've got a place to stay," he grunts. "Old associate of mine. Ex-military, runs a garage now. It's not much, but it'll be secure."

I nod, relieved to have a destination but apprehensive about what awaits us. "Koda," I say, reaching out to touch his arm. "Thank you. For everything you're doing to keep me safe."

He glances at me, his yellow eyes softening slightly. "Don't thank me yet, little chef. We're not out of the woods."

The use of the nickname he gave me back at the cabin sends a warm flutter through my chest, a reminder of the connection we've forged amidst all this chaos.

We ride for another hour before Koda slows the bike to a stop. We're in front of a nondescript building, Lou's Auto Repair written in faded letters above the garage doors. The sky is just beginning to lighten with the first hints of dawn.

"We're here," Koda says, his voice low. "Stay close to me, and let me do the talking."

I nod, suddenly wide awake and alert. As we approach the side door of the garage, it swings open before Koda can knock. A man steps out, human, middle-aged, with the kind of build that speaks of military training gone slightly to seed.

"Grukk," he says by way of greeting, his eyes flickering to me before settling back on Koda. "Been a long time."

"Lou," Koda replies, tension evident in every line of his body. "Thanks for this."

Lou grunts, stepping aside to let us in. "Don't thank me yet. You still owe me an explanation."

The interior of the garage is cluttered but clean, with a small living area tucked into one corner. Lou leads us there, gesturing to a worn couch.

"Sit," he commands. "Coffee?"

I nod gratefully, sinking onto the couch. Koda remains standing, his posture rigid as he gives Lou a condensed version of our situation. I watch Lou's face as he listens, trying to gauge his reaction. His expression remains impassive, but I catch a flicker of something – respect? concern? – in his eyes as Koda finishes.

"Damn, Grukk," Lou says finally, shaking his head. "You never could stay out of trouble, could you?"

Koda's laugh is short and harsh. "Trouble has a way of finding me."

Lou's gaze shifts to me, and I resist the urge to shrink back. "And you, little lady? How'd you get mixed up with this green bastard?"

Before I can answer, Koda steps between us, his voice a low growl. "She's off-limits, Lou. We clear?"

The tension in the room ratchets up several notches. I hold my breath, waiting for Lou's response. To my surprise, he throws back his head and laughs.

"Still the same old Gruk," he chuckles. "Alright, your girl's safe here. But you know I can't keep you long. Day or two, max."

Koda nods, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "It'll do. Thanks, Lou."

As Lou shows us to a small back room with a couple of cots, the reality of our situation hits me anew. We're fugitives, relying on the questionable goodwill of Koda's old associates. The life I knew – my apartment in the French Quarter, my dreams of opening a restaurant – seems impossibly far away.

Once we're alone, Koda turns to me, his expression softening. "You okay?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. Koda steps closer, his large hand cupping my cheek gently.

"I know this is a lot," he says softly. "But I promise you, Pamela, I'll figure this out. I'll keep you safe."

I lean into his touch, drawing strength from his presence. "I know you will," I whisper. "I trust you, Koda."

He pulls me into his arms then, and I go willingly, burying my face in his broad chest. In the safety of his embrace, I finally let the tears come as tears of fear, of exhaustion, of grief for the life I've left behind.

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Koda holds me through it all, his strong arms a shelter from the storm raging both outside and within me. And as the first rays of sunlight begin to filter through the grimy garage windows, I feel a glimmer of hope.

Ten

Koda

The soft murmur of Pamela's voice fills the small room, her words in a language I don't understand but find strangely soothing. I watch her from my position by the door, marveling at the peace that seems to settle over her as she prays.

We've been at Lou's garage for two days now, lying low and trying to plan our next move. The constant vigilance, the knowledge that danger could find us at any moment. It's wearing on both of us. But Pamela? She's holding up better than I ever could have expected.

Her eyes are closed, a small wooden cross clutched in her hands. I recognize it as the one she always wears around her neck. When she finishes her prayer, she opens her eyes and gives me a small smile. "Sorry," she says. "I hope I wasn't disturbing you."

I shake my head, moving closer to sit on the edge of the cot next to her. "Not at all. It seemed important to you."

Pamela nods, her fingers tracing the outline of the cross. "It is. My faith. It's always been a source of strength for me. Especially now."

I grunt in acknowledgment, unsure what to say. Religion has never been a big part of my life. The orc clans I grew up with had their own beliefs, sure, but nothing like this.

"What were you saying?" I ask, genuinely curious. "It didn't sound like any language I know."

A soft laugh escapes her. "It was Vietnamese. A prayer my grandmother taught me." She hesitates for a moment, then asks, "Would you like me to teach you?"

The offer catches me off guard. Me, praying? The thought is almost laughable. But the hopeful look in Pamela's eyes makes me reconsider.

"Sure," I say gruffly. "Why not?"

Her face lights up, and something in my chest tightens at the sight. She scoots closer to me on the cot, her small frame dwarfed by my bulk.

"Okay," she begins, her voice taking on a teacherly tone that I find oddly endearing. "Repeat after me: L?y Cha chúng con ? trên tr?i."

I stumble through the unfamiliar words, my gruff voice mangling the delicate sounds. Pamela giggles, the sound like music in this dingy room.

"Not bad for a first try," she encourages. "It means Our Father, who art in heaven. It's the beginning of the Lord's Prayer."

We continue like this for a while, Pamela patiently teaching me the words, explaining their meaning. I'm not sure I believe in any of it, but I can see how much it means to her. How it grounds her, gives her strength.

As we finish the prayer, Pamela looks up at me, her eyes shining. "Thank you, Koda," she whispers. "For indulging me in this. I know it's probably not your thing."

I shrug, suddenly uncomfortable with the gratitude in her gaze. "If it helps you, it's worth doing."

She reaches out, her small hand resting on my much larger one. The touch sends a jolt through me, a reminder of the growing connection between us.

"It does help," she says. "But you know what helps even more? Knowing you're here. Knowing you'll protect me."

The faith in her voice humbles me. I turn my hand over, engulfing hers in my grip. "Always," I promise gruffly. "No matter what."

Pamela leans into me then, her head resting against my chest. Without thinking, I wrap my arm around her, marveling at how perfectly she fits against me.

We sit like that for a long moment, the silence comfortable between us. I can feel Pamela's heartbeat, her warmth seeping into me. It's a moment of peace in the chaos our lives have become, and I find myself wishing it could last forever.

"Koda?" Pamela's voice is soft, almost hesitant.

"Hmm?"

She pulls back slightly, looking up at me. There's something in her eyes, something that makes my breath catch.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," she whispers.

The words hit me like a physical blow. Love? Me? I'm a mercenary, an orc, a creature of violence. How could someone like Pamela, so full of light and faith, love someone like me?

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But as I look into her eyes, I see the truth of it. And I realize, with a mixture of terror and exhilaration, that I feel the same way.

"Pamela," I start, my voice rougher than usual. "I'm not good at this. At feelings. But, dammit, I think I love you too."

Her smile is radiant, brighter than any sunlight filtering through the grimy garage windows. She reaches up, her hand cupping my cheek, and I lean into her touch.

"We'll figure this out," she says, echoing my own words from days ago.

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. Instead, I pull her closer, wrapping her in my arms. She comes willingly, nestling against my chest.

As I hold her, I'm struck by the strangeness of it all. Me, an orc ex-mercenary, falling in love with a Vietnamese-American chef with an unshakeable faith. It's not a pairing anyone would have predicted. But somehow, against all odds, it feels right.

I press a gentle kiss to the top of Pamela's head, breathing in the scent of her hair. I don't know what the future holds for us. The danger is still out there, waiting. But in this moment, with Pamela in my arms, I feel a peace I've never known before.

Whatever comes next, we'll face it together. My little chef and me. And maybe, just maybe, her faith will be enough for both of us.

Pamela

After days of being cooped up in Lou's garage, the last thing I expect is an outing. But Koda, in his typical gruff manner, surprises me once again. "Get your things," he says, tossing me a light jacket. "We're going out."

Before I can pepper him with questions, he's already striding towards the door, leaving me to scramble after him.

The ride to the marina is silent, tension thrumming beneath Koda's stoic exterior. It's only when I see the small boat bobbing gently in the water that I realize where we're headed.

Now, as we glide across the water, I marvel at the perfection of the day. The late afternoon sun bathes everything in a golden glow, its warmth a pleasant contrast to the cool breeze coming off the water. The gentle lapping of waves against the boat's hull creates a soothing rhythm, almost but not quite calming the rapid beating of my heart.

Koda's massive frame dominates the small vessel, his green skin gleaming in the sunlight. He handles the boat with surprising grace, those powerful muscles that I've seen in action now being used for something so peaceful. It's a side of him I haven't seen before, and it's oddly captivating.

I've lost count of how many times I've asked where we're going. Each time, Koda's response is the same: a slight quirk of his lips, a secretive glimmer in those intense yellow eyes. It's maddening and intriguing all at once.

"You know," I say, breaking the comfortable silence that's fallen between us, "for someone trying to keep me safe, you sure do like your mysterious outings."

Koda's low chuckle sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. "Maybe I just like keeping you on your toes, little chef."

There's a playful note in his voice that I've rarely heard, and it makes me wonder what other surprises this enigmatic orc has in store. As we continue our journey to who-knows-where, I find myself looking forward to finding out. Then, suddenly, as we round another corner, I gasp. There, on a small, secluded island, is a picnic set up. A checkered blanket is spread on a dry patch of ground, surrounded by lanterns that flicker softly in the fading light. The smell of something delicious wafts towards us.

"Koda," I breathe. "What is all this?"

He helps me out of the boat, his touch gentle despite his enormous strength. "Thought we could use a break from all the running and hiding," he says gruffly, but I can see the uncertainty in his eyes. "Do you like it?"

I take in the scene before me with the carefully arranged picnic, the beautiful setting, the obvious effort Koda has put into this. Tears prick at my eyes. "It's perfect," I whisper.

Koda's shoulders relax slightly, and he leads me to the blanket. As we settle down, he begins unpacking a basket I hadn't noticed before. My eyes widen as I recognize the dishes he's laying out.

"Is that ph? gà?" I ask incredulously, the scent of star anise and cinnamon filling the air.

Koda nods, a hint of pride in his voice. "And bánh mì with a New Orleans twist. Andouille sausage instead of the usual pork."

I'm speechless. These are my favorite dishes, the ones I'd told him about during our

long talks in the safehouse. The fact that he remembered, that he went to the trouble of preparing them.

"How did you do all this?" I ask, my voice thick with emotion.

Koda shrugs, but I can see the pleasure in his eyes at my reaction. "Had some help from Lou. Turns out the old bastard knows his way around a kitchen. And, well, I might have made a few calls to some Vietnamese restaurants in the area."

The image of Koda, this fierce orc warrior, calling around to find authentic Vietnamese recipes makes me laugh and tear up at the same time. "Thank you," I say, reaching out to touch his hand. "This means more than I can say."

We eat in comfortable silence for a while, enjoying the food and the peaceful surroundings. As the sun begins to set, painting the sky in vibrant oranges and pinks, I notice Koda growing tense again.

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"Pamela," he says finally, his voice rougher than usual. "There's something I need to say."

I set down my bánh mì, giving him my full attention. "What is it?"

Koda takes a deep breath, his yellow eyes meeting mine with an intensity that takes my breath away. "I love you," he says simply. "I think I have for a while now. But I wasn't sure if you could ever truly accept me. As I am."

My heart swells at his words, even as I ache at the uncertainty I hear in his voice. "Koda," I start, but he holds up a hand.

"Please, let me finish," he says. "I'm an orc. An ex-mercenary. I've done things I'm not proud of. I'm rough, I'm dangerous, and I'm probably not the kind of man your parents ever imagined for you."

I smile at that, a mix of emotions swirling in my chest. "I think we left what my parents imagined behind a long time ago," I say.

Koda's lips quirk in a brief smile, a rare softness in his yellow eyes. But then his expression turns serious, almost vulnerable. "The thing is, Pamela," he continues, his deep voice rough with emotion. "You make me want to be better. You make me believe that maybe I can be more than just a weapon, more than my past. And I want to be like that, for you."

My heart thunders in my chest, overwhelmed by the raw honesty in his words. Before I can respond, Koda reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small, intricately carved

wooden box. My breath catches as he opens it, revealing a ring unlike any I've ever seen. It's a band of what looks like a meteorite, inlaid with tiny green gems that match the color of Koda's skin perfectly.

"This is an orc mating ring," Koda explains, his voice low and intense. His eyes, usually so fierce, now shine with a mix of hope and fear that takes my breath away. "In my culture, when we find our fated mate, we offer this as a symbol of our commitment."

He takes a deep breath, and I realize I'm holding mine. "Pamela Nguyen," he says, my name a reverent whisper on his lips. "Will you be my mate? Will you accept all of me, past and present, and build a future with me?"

For a moment, I'm speechless. The enormity of what he's asking, what he's offering, crashes over me like a wave. But it makes sense, the fated mates, I've never felt anything like this.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I see a flicker of uncertainty cross Koda's face. I reach out, my hand trembling slightly as I cup his cheek. "Koda," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "Yes. Yes, I'll be your mate."

His eyes widen, as if he can't quite believe what he's hearing. I laugh softly, tears of joy now streaming down my face.

"Of course I will," I continue, my voice growing stronger. "I accept all of you - your past, your present, and whatever the future holds. I love you, Koda. My orc. My mate."

Twelve

Koda

Two weeks have passed since I proposed to Pamela on that small bayou island. Two weeks of stolen moments between vigilant watches, of whispered plans for the future, of learning to navigate our growing bond. "I can't stand another minute unmarried to you," I growl, turning to face Pamela. My yellow eyes lock onto hers, intense and unwavering. "Let's do it. Now."

Pamela's eyes widen, a mix of surprise and excitement dancing in their depths. "Now? But how?"

I silence her with a kiss, rough and passionate. When I pull back, I can see the flush on her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes. "Leave it to me. You in?"

Her surprise melts into a brilliant smile, one that never fails to make my heart skip a beat. "Absolutely."

What follows is a whirlwind of activity. I make calls, pulling in every favor I've accumulated over the years. My voice, usually a low growl, takes on an urgent edge that surprises even me. This has to be perfect. For her.

Lou, bless his gruff heart, comes through with not just a suit for me, but also a priest willing to perform the ceremony on short notice. When he shows up with the garment bag, there's a softness in his eyes I've never seen before.

"You clean up nice, Gruk," he says, helping me with the cufflinks. His calloused hands, usually so sure with engine parts, fumble a bit with the delicate fastenings. "Never thought I'd see the day."

I grunt in response, but warmth spreads through my chest. Lou's been more than just an ally these past few weeks. He's been a friend. Family, even.

As the last rays of sunlight filter through the cypress trees, painting the bayou in hues

of gold and amber, I watch the priest arrive. Father Michael, a small, wiry man with kind eyes and a nervous demeanor, steps into the clearing. His eyes widen as he takes in my imposing green form.

The weight of the moment hits me. This man of God is about to join me, an orc, a creature many humans still view with fear and suspicion, to the love of my life. The absurdity of it all nearly makes me laugh.

"You must be Koda," he says, his voice only wavering slightly. I have to give him credit because he's braver than most.

I nod, extending my hand. He takes it, and I'm careful not to squeeze too hard. My strength, usually an asset, feels like a liability at this moment. "Thank you for coming, Father. I know this isn't... conventional."

He manages a small smile. "Love rarely is, my son. Especially in times like these."

As Father Michael begins to set up for the ceremony, I take in our surroundings. The clearing we've chosen is small, intimate. Cypress trees form a natural cathedral around us, their branches draped with Spanish moss that sways gently in the evening breeze. The air is thick with the scent of wildflowers and the earthy aroma of the swamp.

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Lou and I spent hours stringing up lanterns, their soft glow now casting a warm, ethereal light over the scene. It's not the grand wedding Pamela deserves, but there's a wild beauty to it that feels right. This is us, unconventional, unexpected, but undeniably real.

My hands, usually so steady, tremble slightly as I adjust my tie. The suit feels foreign on my bulky frame, a reminder of how far I am from my mercenary days. But when I see my reflection in the still water of a nearby pool, I barely recognize myself. The orc staring back at me looks hopeful. Happy, even.

Father Michael's voice breaks through my reverie. "Are you ready, my son?"

Am I ready? To bind myself to Pamela, to promise her my heart, my protection, my very life? The answer comes without hesitation. "Yes, Father. I've never been more ready for anything."

As I take my place at our makeshift altar of a gnarled old cypress stump adorned with candles and flowers, a sense of peace settles over me. Whatever challenges lie ahead, we'll face them together.

I catch movement from the corner of my eye. My breath catches in my throat as Pamela emerges from between the trees.

She's a vision in white, her dress simple yet elegant, flowing around her like water. She wove wildflowers into her dark hair, creating a crown of blooms that seems to glow in the soft light of the lanterns we've strung up. But it's the love shining in her eyes that truly takes my breath away.

Time seems to slow as she walks towards me. Each step brings her closer to our future, leaving behind the danger and uncertainty of the past weeks. I drink in every detail with the way the fabric of her dress rustles against the grass, the slight tremor in her hands as she clutches her bouquet, the radiant smile that lights up her entire face.

At this moment, I see flashes of our life together. Lazy Sunday mornings in bed, her laughter echoing through our home. Heated arguments that end in passionate reconciliations. Quiet nights spent planning our dreams. A future filled with love, adventure, and the family we'll build together.

As Pamela reaches me I extend my hand. Her fingers, so small and delicate compared to mine, intertwine with my own. The contrast of her soft skin against my calloused green palm is a stark reminder of our differences. But as I look into her eyes, I see only acceptance, only love.

"Hi," she whispers, her voice thick with emotion.

"Hi yourself," I reply, my voice gruff with unshed tears.

Father Michael clears his throat gently. "Shall we begin?"

Pamela and I turn to face him, our hands still clasped tightly together. The weight of the moment settles over us as two souls from different worlds, choosing to forge a life together against all odds.

As Father Michael begins the ceremony, his words fading into the background hum of the bayou, I'm struck by the enormity of what we're doing. This isn't just a wedding. It's a declaration, to ourselves, to the world, that love can bridge any gap, overcome any obstacle.

Father Michael clears his throat, drawing our attention. He looks nervous but

determined as he begins the ceremony. "Dearly beloved," he starts, his voice growing stronger with each word. "We are gathered here today in the sight of God and nature to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

As he speaks, I tune out the words, lost in Pamela's eyes. I see our journey reflected there, the danger, the fear, but also the love and the strength we've found in each other.

Then it's time for our vows. We speak from the heart, no rehearsed words. Father Michael nods encouragingly, a warm smile on his face.

I take a deep breath, my voice rough with emotion as I begin. "Pamela," I say, squeezing her hands gently, "I never believed in fate until I met you. You've seen me at my worst, at my most dangerous, and you're still here. You make me want to be better, to be worthy of your love. I vow to protect you, to cherish you, to stand by your side no matter what comes. You're my mate, my heart, my home. And I will love you fiercely, completely, for all of my days."

Tears glisten in Pamela's eyes as she speaks, her voice clear and strong despite the emotion I can see on her face. "Koda, my fierce protector, my unexpected love. You crashed into my life like a storm, turning everything upside down. But in the chaos, I found myself. I found strength I never knew I had, and a love I never dreamed possible. I vow to support you, to challenge you, to love every part of you – the warrior and the gentle soul beneath. Whatever battles we face, we'll face them together. You're my safe harbor, my adventure, my forever. I love you, all of you, always."

Father Michael looks between us, a mix of awe and understanding on his face. I can see he's beginning to grasp the depth of our bond, the uniqueness of our union.

We exchange rings of simple bands carved from cypress wood, engraved with

symbols meaningful to us both. As I slide the ring onto Pamela's finger, I feel the mating bond between us pulse and strengthen. It's like an electric current running through my body, binding us together in ways that go beyond the physical.

"By the power vested in me by the Holy Church and the state of Louisiana," Father Michael says, his voice ringing out clear and strong, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." He pauses, a twinkle in his eye as he adds, "You may kiss your bride."

I don't need to be told twice. I pull Pamela close, one hand cupping her face as I kiss her with all the passion and love I possess. She's mine now, in every way that matters. And I'm hers.

As we break apart, breathless and grinning, I see Father Michael dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief. "In all my years," he says, "I've never seen a love quite like this. May God bless and keep you both."

Lou, standing off to the side as our witness, clears his throat gruffly. "About damn time," he grumbles, but there's no hiding the smile on his face or the suspiciously wet gleam in his eyes.

The world outside our little clearing still exists. Dangers still lurk in the shadows, waiting for a moment of weakness. But at this moment, with my mate in my arms and our bond humming between us, none of that matters.

We've faced death and came out stronger. We've bridged the gap between two worlds as human and orc, and found something beautiful in the middle. Whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

As the night deepens around us, stars twinkling through the canopy of trees, I hold Pamela close. The sounds of the bayou with the chorus of frogs, the rustle of wind through the cypress create a symphony around us. It's not a traditional wedding

march, but it's perfect for us.

Let them try to tear us apart now. We're bound by love, by choice, and by a power older than time itself. Pamela and Koda, human and orc, two halves of a whole.

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Thirteen

Pamela

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" Koda's yellow eyes bore into mine, a mixture of concern and determination etched on his face. We're huddled in the back of Lou's garage, going over the plan one last time, and I've never loved the woman more.

I take a deep breath, steadying my nerves. "Yes, I'm sure. We can't keep running forever, Koda. This is our chance to end it."

He nods, though the worry doesn't leave his eyes. "Alright. Let's go over it again. You'll enter the warehouse alone."

"Acting as bait to draw out Viper," I interject, showing him I've memorized every detail.

"Right," Koda continues, his large hand engulfing mine. "You'll be wearing a wire so we can hear everything. The moment things go south... "

"You and your team burst through the skylights," I finish for him. "Creating chaos and giving me a chance to take cover."

Koda's lips quirk in a half-smile. "You've been paying attention, little chef."

"I learned from the best," I say while squeezing his hand.

Lou, who's been silent until now, clears his throat. "Not to interrupt this touching moment, but we've got a schedule to keep. Pamela, you ready to get wired up?"

I nod, trying to ignore the flutter of nervousness in my stomach. As Lou helps me with the wire, Koda kneels in front of me, his massive frame somehow making me feel safer rather than intimidated.

"Pamela," he says. "If at any point you want to call this off, just say the word. Your safety is what matters most."

I cup his cheek, touched by his concern. "I know. But this isn't just about me anymore. It's about us, about our future. I'm ready to fight for that."

Koda leans into my touch, his eyes closing briefly. When he opens them, there's a fierce pride shining there. "You're the bravest person I know, you know that?"

I laugh, the sound tinged with nervousness. "I learned that from you too."

With a final check of our equipment and a lingering kiss that holds all the words we're too anxious to say, we set our plan in motion. As I step out into the cool night air, ready to face whatever comes, I hold one thought:

After tonight, everything changes.

The warehouse looms before me, a hulking shadow against the night sky. My heart pounds a frantic rhythm as I approach, each step feeling like a mile. The weight of the wire I'm wearing presses against my skin, a constant reminder of what's at stake.

"Remember, little chef," Koda's gruff voice comes through my earpiece, a lifeline in the darkness. "You don't have to go through with this. Say the word, and we abort."

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. The old Pamela, the one who lived a lifetime ago in the French Quarter, would have taken that offer in a heartbeat. But I'm not her anymore.

"No," I reply, my voice stronger than I feel. "We've come too far to back down now. I'm ready."

And I am. Months on the run have changed me, hardened me in ways I never expected. The woman who once froze in terror at the first sign of danger feels like a distant memory. I'm stronger now, tempered by hardship and love in equal measure.

As I push open the rusty door, the hinges groaning in protest, I can't help but think of how I got here. From that fateful night in the French Quarter to the bayou safe house, from Koda's proposal to our mating ceremony, it all leads to this moment.

The warehouse interior is dimly lit, shadows clinging to every corner. The air is thick with the scent of rust and stagnant water. I move further in, my footsteps echoing in the cavernous space.

"Well, well," a voice drawls from the darkness, sending chills down my spine. "The little witness finally decided to come out of hiding."

Viper, the gang leader, saunters into view. His eyes, cold and calculating, rake over me. I fight the urge to shrink back, instead lifting my chin defiantly.

"I want to make a deal," I say, proud of how even my voice sounds. "My silence for my freedom. I'm tired of running."

Viper laughs, the sound echoing ominously. "Oh sweetheart, you should know by now that's not how this works."

He gestures, and suddenly I'm surrounded by his men, their weapons trained on me. My pulse quickens, but I force myself to remain calm. Everything is going according to plan. I just have to keep them talking long enough.

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"You're making a mistake," I say, injecting a note of desperation into my voice. "I have information, things you'd want to know."

Viper steps closer, his interest piqued. "Oh? And what might that be?"

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, all hell breaks loose.

There's a deafening crash as Koda and his team burst through the skylights, raining glass and chaos down on the unsuspecting gang. In the confusion, I drop to the ground, rolling behind a stack of crates for cover.

The warehouse erupts into a war zone. Gunshots and shouts fill the air, punctuated by the distinctive sound of Koda's roar. I peer around the edge of the crates, my breath catching as I see him in action.

Koda is a force of nature, his massive green form moving with a deadly grace I've never seen before. He takes on three men at once, his fists and feet flying in a brutal dance. For a moment, I'm mesmerized by the raw power of him, understanding for the first time the true extent of his capabilities.

A bullet whizzes past my head, snapping me back to reality. I duck down, my hand reaching for the small pistol Koda insisted I carry. The weight of it is unfamiliar and terrifying, but I grip it tightly, ready to defend myself if necessary.

Through the chaos, I spot Viper making a break for the exit. Without thinking, I spring into action. "Koda!" I shout, pointing. "He's getting away!"

Koda's head snaps up, his yellow eyes locking onto Viper's retreating form. With a growl that sends shivers down my spine, he gives chase.

I follow, my heart in my throat. This isn't part of the plan, but I can't let Koda face him alone. As I round the corner of the warehouse, I see them locked in combat.

Viper is more skilled than I expected, holding his own against Koda's superior strength. They trade blows, each impact resonating in the air. But then Viper pulls a knife, the blade glinting wickedly in the dim light.

"Koda, watch out!" I cry, raising my gun instinctively.

Everything seems to slow down. Viper lunges, the knife arcing towards Koda's throat. Koda twists, but not quite fast enough. The blade slices across his arm, drawing a line of dark blood.

The sight of Koda's blood ignites something primal within me. Without conscious thought, I squeeze the trigger. The gun kicks in my hand, the sound deafening in the enclosed space.

Viper staggers, clutching his shoulder where my bullet struck him. The momentary distraction is all Koda needs. With a roar of triumph, he tackles Viper to the ground, subduing him with a few well-placed blows.

As quickly as it began, it's over. The warehouse falls silent save for the sound of our heavy breathing. Koda looks up at me, a mix of pride and concern in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice rough with exertion.

I nod, lowering the gun with shaking hands. "I'm fine. You're hurt."

Koda glances at his arm, shrugging off the injury. "It's nothing. You did good, little chef. Real good."

Using his pet name for me, here in this place of violence, nearly undoes me. I rush to him, uncaring of the unconscious gang leader at our feet. Koda enfolds me in his arms, and I breathe in his scent, letting it calm my racing heart.

"It's over," he murmurs into my hair. "You're safe now. For good."

As the adrenaline fades, the reality of what we've accomplished sinks in. No more running. No more hiding. We're free.

I look up at Koda, seeing the same realization dawning in his eyes. "We did it," I whisper, a smile breaking across my face.

Koda's answering grin is fierce and joyful. He leans down, capturing my lips in a kiss that's equal parts relief and triumph. When we part, he rests his forehead against mine.

"What do you say we get out of here?" he rumbles. "I think it's time we started planning that future of ours."

As we walk out of the warehouse, Koda's arm protectively around my shoulders, I feel a sense of lightness I haven't experienced in months. The cool night air hits my face, and I take a deep breath, savoring the feeling of freedom.

Sirens wail in the distance, growing closer. Koda's mercenary contacts have already alerted the authorities, ensuring that Viper and his gang will face justice through legal channels. It's a clean end to a messy chapter of our lives.

We make our way to Koda's truck, parked a safe distance away. As he helps me in,

his touch gentle despite the violence he's capable of, I'm struck by the duality of him. Fierce protector and tender lover, ex-mercenary and future restaurateur. He's a study in contrasts, and I love every facet of him.

As we drive away from the scene, the city lights blurring past us, I feel the events of the night catching up with me. My hands shake, delayed shock setting in.

Koda notices immediately, reaching over to take one of my trembling hands in his. "Hey," he says. "You're okay. We're okay."

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I nod, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. "I know. It's really over, isn't it? We don't have to run anymore."

"No more running," Koda confirms, his voice a comforting rumble. "Unless it's towards something instead of away from it."

The simplicity of his statement breaks through the last of my defenses. Tears fall, months of fear and tension releasing in a cathartic flood. Koda pulls over to the side of the road, unbuckling his seatbelt to gather me into his arms.

I cry into his chest, his shirt growing damp with my tears. He holds me through it all, one large hand stroking my back soothingly. When the sobs finally subside, I look up at him, seeing nothing but love and understanding in his yellow eyes.

"Sorry," I hiccup, feeling a bit embarrassed by my breakdown.

Koda shakes his head, brushing a strand of hair from my face. "Never apologize for feeling, little chef. You've been so strong through all of this. You're allowed to let it out."

His words, so at odds with the gruff exterior he shows the world, warm me from the inside out. I stretch up to kiss him, pouring all my love and gratitude into the gesture.

When we part, Koda's eyes are glowing with an intensity that takes my breath away. "I love you," he says simply. "More than I ever thought possible."

"I love you too," I reply, the words feeling inadequate for the depth of my feelings.

We sit there for a moment longer, just holding each other, before Koda reluctantly pulls away. "We should get going," he says. "Lou's expecting us."

I nod, settling back into my seat as Koda starts the truck again. As we drive through the quiet streets of New Orleans, a city I once thought I'd never see again, I let my mind wander to the future.

The dream of our restaurant feels more real now than ever before. I can almost smell the blend of Vietnamese spices and hearty orc fare, and can almost hear the laughter of satisfied customers. It's a future I never could have imagined for myself, but now I can't picture any other.

"What are you thinking about?" Koda asks, glancing over at me.

I smile, reaching out to place my hand on his thigh. "Our future. The restaurant. Everything we're going to build together."

Koda's answering smile is soft, a rare expression on his usually stern face. "Sounds perfect to me, little chef."

As we drive into the dawn of a new day, I feel a sense of peace settle over me. The road ahead is uncertain, but for the first time, it's ours to choose. Whatever challenges come our way, I know we'll face them together.

My orc and I, bound by love, tested by fire, and stronger for it all. Our story is just beginning, and I can't wait to see where it leads.

Fourteen

Koda

As we pull up to my apartment building, reality sets in. I haven't been here in months, and I left in a hurry. I can only imagine what state the place is in. "Home sweet home," I say, killing the engine. Pamela's still grinning as she hops out of the truck, practically bouncing on her toes as she waits for me to unlock the front door.

The moment I swing the door open, I'm hit with a wall of stale air and the faint smell of something that probably used to be food. Pamela peeks around me, her eyes widening as she takes in the scene.

To say the place is a mess would be an understatement. There are clothes strewn across every surface, empty takeout containers piled on the coffee table, and a fine layer of dust covering everything. A stack of unopened mail has cascaded across the floor, and I'm pretty sure that plant in the corner is more dead than alive.

"Well," Pamela says, her voice trembling with barely contained laughter. "I guess we know what I'm doing first."

I turn to her, ready to apologize, but the look on her face stops me. Her eyes are dancing with mirth, and suddenly, I can't help but see the humor in the situation.

A chuckle escapes me, deep and rumbling. "Guess I should've hired a cleaning service before we went on the run, huh?"

That does it. Pamela bursts into laughter, the sound filling the stale apartment with life and joy. I join in, and soon we're both doubled over, tears streaming down our faces as we laugh harder than we have in months.

"Oh God," Pamela gasps between giggles. "Is that... is that a pizza box growing fur?"

I peer at the offending item. "Might be. Or it could be my new pet. I'm thinking of naming it Fluffy."

This sets us off again, and we collapse onto the dusty couch, sending up a cloud that only makes us laugh harder.

As our laughter finally subsides, Pamela wipes her eyes and looks around the apartment again. "You know," she says, still grinning. "In a weird way, this is perfect."

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I raise an eyebrow. "Perfect? Little chef, I think the fumes from that science experiment in the kitchen have gone to your head."

She shakes her head, her expression softening. "No, really. Think about it. We're starting fresh, right? New life, new us. So why not start with a clean slate?" She gestures around the messy apartment. "Or in this case, a not-so-clean slate that we can make our own."

I pull her close, marveling at her ability to find the silver lining in any situation. "You're something else, you know that?"

Pamela snuggles into my side, seemingly unbothered by the dust. "I know. But admit it, you wouldn't have me any other way."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I murmur, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

We sit there for a moment, surrounded by chaos, but feeling more at peace than I have in years. Then Pamela sits up, a determined glint in her eye.

"Alright, big guy. Time to roll up our sleeves. This place isn't going to clean itself."

I groan dramatically, but there's no real resistance in it. "Yes, ma'am. Where do we start?"

Pamela jumps up, already sizing up the challenge before us. "First, we open every window in this place. Then, we tackle that science lab you call a kitchen. After that..." She trails off, surveying the mess with a mixture of determination and amusement.

"Well, after that, we might need to call in reinforcements. Think Lou knows how to wield a mop?"

As I follow her lead, opening windows and letting in the warm New Orleans air, I can't help but smile. This wasn't the homecoming I'd imagined, but somehow, it's perfect. It's us – messy, unexpected, and full of laughter.

We've got a lot of work ahead of us, both in this apartment and in our new life together. But as I watch Pamela attack a pile of dishes with gusto, singing along to the radio we've cranked up to drown out the noise of cleaning, I know we're up for the challenge.

This is home. It's not perfect, but it's ours. And together, we'll make it shine.

Fifteen

Pamela

I stand at the kitchen counter, my hands working automatically as I knead a batch of bao dough. The familiar motions are soothing, a meditation that allows my mind to wander. Outside, the early morning sun filters through the lace curtains of our French Quarter apartment, casting intricate patterns across the worn hardwood floor.

Five years. It's been five years since Koda and I returned to New Orleans, five years of building a life I never could have imagined. I glance down at my swollen belly, a smile tugging at my lips.

And now, we're on the brink of our greatest adventure yet.

The sound of Koda's heavy footsteps pulls me from my reverie. He enters the kitchen, ducking slightly to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe. Even after all this time,

the sight of him takes my breath away as my warrior, my protector, my love.

"Morning, little chef," he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. His large hand comes to rest on my belly, and I feel our son kick in response. "How are my two favorite people this morning?"

I lean into him, savoring his warmth. "We're good. Your son seems to be practicing his martial arts in there."

Koda's laugh is a deep, rich sound that never fails to make me smile. "That's my boy. Strong like his dad, smart like his mom."

As Koda moves to start the coffee, a rich chicory blend that's become our morning ritual, I return to my bao. Today's filling is a fusion of traditional char siu pork and New Orleans-style debris, a combination that's become one of the most popular items at our restaurant, "Gumbo & Ph?".

The restaurant. Sometimes I still can't believe we did it. What started as a dream has become a thriving reality, a testament to the power of love, determination, and good food.

Located in a converted townhouse just off Bourbon Street, Gumbo & Ph? has become a culinary destination in its own right. The ground floor houses our main dining room, a warm, inviting space that blends Vietnamese décor with classic New Orleans charm. Dark wood tables set with delicate porcelain bowls, while a mix of traditional Vietnamese art and vibrant jazz posters adorn the walls.

Upstairs, we have a more intimate dining area that we call The Bayou Room. It's here that we serve our chef's tasting menu, a culinary journey that tells the story of our lives through food.

The menu changes seasonally, but some dishes have become such favorites that we dare not remove them. There's the "Saigon Sunrise" cocktail that opens the meal, a heady blend of Bourbon whiskey, Vietnamese coffee, and chicory bitters that perfectly encapsulates the marriage of our cultures.

Then comes the Bayou Bánh Xèo as a crispy Vietnamese crepe filled with juicy, blackened alligator and topped with a spicy remoulade. It's a dish that always makes me think of our time hiding out in the swamp, finding moments of joy amid the danger.

The Phở-layais our take on both phở and jambalaya, a rich, complex soup that combines slow-simmered oxtail bone broth with andouille sausage, shrimp, and all the traditional phở fixings. It's a dish that took months to perfect, but now draws people from all over the country.

But perhaps the dish I'm most proud of is our Bún Bò Bourbon Street which is a play on the traditional Bún Bò Huế that incorporates tender bourbon-braised beef brisket, spicy andouille sausage, and a broth that sings with lemongrass, shrimp paste, and a hint of filé powder. It's a dish that tells the story of our journey with the complex, a little dangerous, but ultimately deeply satisfying.

As I shape the bao dough into perfect little pouches, I can't help but marvel at how far we've come. The early days were tough with long hours, tight budgets, and the constant fear that we were in over our heads. But Koda was my rock through it all, his quiet strength and unwavering belief in us keeping me going when things got tough.

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I remember the night of our soft opening, how nervous I was. The tiny kitchen was sweltering, my hands shaking as I plated dish after dish. But then Koda was there, his massive frame somehow fitting perfectly in the cramped space, his presence instantly calming me.

"You've got this, little chef," he'd said, his yellow eyes filled with pride. "Show them what you can do."

And I did. That night, as the sounds of satisfaction and surprise filled the dining room, I knew we'd created something special.

Now, five years later, we've expanded twice, earned critical acclaim, and even garnered a James Beard nomination. But more than any accolade, what fills me with pride is the community we've built.

Our staff is a motley crew that reflects the diversity of New Orleans itself. There's Luis, our sous chef, a Cuban-American with a flair for spice and a laugh that fills the kitchen. Mai, our host, is a Vietnamese-American student who reminds me so much of myself when I first came to the city. And then there's Big John, our towering African-American bartender whose cocktail creations are the stuff of local legend.

But the heart of our restaurant, the thing that truly makes it special, is Koda. My orc, my mate, my partner in all things. He may have started out feeling out of place in the kitchen, more comfortable breaking bones than braising them, but he's become an integral part of our culinary team.

His palate, honed by years of military rations and orc cuisine, brings a unique

perspective to our dishes. He has an uncanny ability to balance flavors, to find that perfect note that ties a dish together. And his strength comes in handy more often than you'd think – I've yet to see a jar he can't open or a heavy pot he can't lift with ease.

More than that, though, Koda has become the face of our restaurant. His imposing presence and gruff charm have made him a favorite among our regulars. He moves through the dining room each night, checking on tables, sharing stories, making every guest feel like they're part of our family.

And family, I've learned, is at the heart of New Orleans cuisine. It's not just about the ingredients or the techniques. It's about the stories, the traditions, the love that goes into every dish.

I feel a strong kick from within, and I laugh, rubbing my belly soothingly. "Alright, little one. I hear you. Time for breakfast."

Koda appears at my side, a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and a plate of fresh fruit in the other. "You two hungry?" he asks, his voice tender in a way only I get to hear.

I nod, allowing him to guide me to the small table on our balcony. As I sit, taking in the view of the French Quarter coming to life below us, I'm struck again by how blessed I am.

"What's on your mind, little chef?" Koda asks, his keen eyes missing nothing.

I smile, reaching out to take his hand. "Just thinking about how lucky I am. How amazing our life is."

Koda's grip tightens on mine, his thumb tracing the mating mark on my wrist. "We've come a long way," he says.

And we have. From that terrifying night when he saved me from the gang, through our time on the run, to building this life together. Every step has brought us closer, and makes our bond stronger.

"Do you ever miss it?" I ask suddenly. "The excitement, the danger?"

Koda is quiet for a moment, considering. "Sometimes," he admits finally. "Old habits die hard. But then I look at you, at our home, our restaurant, our baby on the way... and I wouldn't trade this for all the excitement in the world."

I feel tears prick at my eyes. Damned pregnancy hormones. "I love you, you big green softie."

Koda's laugh rumbles through me. "I love you too, little chef. More than I ever thought possible."

As we sit there, enjoying our breakfast and each other's company, I can't help but think about the future. About the son we'll soon welcome into the world, a perfect blend of human and orc, a living embodiment of our love.

I think about our restaurant, about the new dishes we'll create, the stories we'll tell through our food. I think about this city that's become our home, with all its magic and music and endless inspiration.

The road that brought us here was long and often dangerous. There were moments when I thought we wouldn't make it, when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. But we persevered, driven by a love that defied all odds.

Now, as I sit here with my mate, our child growing within me and the scents of our culinary creations wafting up from the restaurant below, I know that every hardship was worth it. Every danger we faced, every tear we shed, led us to this moment.

We are Pamela and Koda, human and orc, chef and warrior. We are a fusion of cultures, of experiences, of flavors. And together, we've created something beautiful with a life, a family, a legacy as rich and complex as the city we call home.

As the sounds of jazz float up from the street below, a signal that New Orleans is fully awake and ready for another day of magic, I close my eyes and offer a silent prayer of gratitude.

For my mate, for our child, for our restaurant. For second chances and unexpected love. For the beautiful, messy, delicious journey that brought us here.

And for the knowledge that the best is yet to come.