



Unruly Hearts (Orcs of Red Mountain #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When fate deals you an orc, sometimes you fold sometimes you kiss him

Serenity

After losing my parents, I focused on one thing: keeping their wildlife sanctuary alive. Then Agis, a towering orc with gentle hands and fierce eyes, stumbles into my life one winter night. Something about him calls to my soul, awakening feelings I'd sealed away after my ex-boyfriends betrayal. But as I fall deeper for this mysterious stranger, I discover he carries secrets that could shatter everything I've fought to protect.

Agis

I never meant to find my true mate in a determined human with sunlight for hair and steel in her spine. Serenity makes me want to be better than the gambler I've been, but my past haunts every step forward. When her world starts crumbling around her, I'll have to decide if I'm brave enough to be the protector she needs even if it means facing down both our demons to build something beautiful together.

Dive into this steamy, monster paranormal romance for lovers of fated mates, opposites attract, and secret past love stories.

As their clan faces dwindling numbers, The Orcs of Red Mountain embark on a journey to discover the world of humans and find love in unexpected places. Indulge in a series of fast paced short romance stories where the heroes are big, green, and irresistibly sexy. The stories are a perfect blend of steam and sweetness, sure to captivate your heart and imagination.

Total Pages (Source): 10

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Serenity

“I ’m coming for you, Serenity,” Ethan murmurs through the phone.

“You sound like a cartoon villain,” I force out, aiming for mockery but hearing the tremor in my voice betray me. The jeep's parked, but my fingers are locked around the steering wheel so tight I can feel my pulse throbbing in my whitened knuckles. “Why are you doing this?”

His chuckle is deep. “Because I can.”

The simple brutality of his answer steals my breath. Of course. Power was always what Ethan craved most.

I try to swallow but my throat feels like sandpaper.

The bastard knows exactly what he's doing. He watched me struggle to keep Red Top afloat after inheriting it, watched me sink deeper into desperation until I had no choice but to turn to his "alternative financing." The wildlife center has been bleeding money faster than I can patch the wounds, and some of those emergency transfusions came with interest rates that would make a mob boss blush. Ethan's legitimate casino business is just gift wrapping on his real enterprise—breaking people who have nowhere else to turn.

The image of my parents flashes unbidden through my mind—their bright faces the morning they left for that fatal climb two years ago. The memory twists something in my chest. They were veterans of the mountain, and had scaled peaks that would make

most climbers quit in terror. The official report blamed equipment failure, but that never added up. Mom checked her gear obsessively, and Dad could spot a frayed rope from twenty feet away.

But I can't let myself spiral down that rabbit hole. Not now. Not when Ethan's breathing on the other end of the line, waiting to hear me break.

"You have three weeks," he says, his voice full of venom.

My head falls back against the headrest as reality crushes down. The Wildlife Center—my parents' dream made real—sprawls across acres of pristine land backing up to the National Forest. Prime real estate that developers would kill for. And now Ethan holds every loan, every debt, every noose around my neck. One default and it all crumbles. The thought of him destroying everything my parents built makes bile rise in my throat.

"Why do you hate me?" The question escapes before I can stop it, raw and desperate.

His breathing turns ragged, predatory. "No one says no to me." The line goes dead with the finality of a coffin lid slamming shut.

"Hello? Hello?" My voice echoes in the empty car. Nothing but silence and that merciless deadline hanging over me.

"You absolute bastard." The words taste like dirt in my mouth. All because I had the audacity to end things, to tell the great Ethan Morrison that I didn't want him anymore. Now he's orchestrated my financial ruin like some twisted revenge fantasy.

A scream of frustration builds in my chest but I swallow it down, my hands shaking with rage. What cosmic crime did I commit to deserve this nightmare? Some men's egos are like glass—shatter them and they turn the shards into weapons.

The winter-bare trees beyond the parking lot blur as tears threaten. I bite my lip until I taste copper, refusing to let them fall. At twenty-five, my parents' deaths thrust the weight of the entire Center onto my shoulders—every staff member's livelihood, every animal's wellbeing, every single responsibility they once carried. The burden threatens to crush me some days.

I glare at the phone still clenched in my trembling hand. God, I was such a fool. I really thought Ethan would help me navigate this mess when I had nowhere else to turn. Instead, he's engineered my downfall so completely I might not even make payroll this month.

The bite of winter wind cuts through my coat as I force myself out of the jeep, a shiver running deep into my bones. There's no snow yet, but it's coming—I can smell it in the air, feel it in the savage chill that whips across the empty parking lot. Like nature itself is warning me of the storm about to break.

I open the back to unload the pastries. Red Top Bakery, and my friend Julie, do amazing work and she's been kind enough to let me have them at a discount. The scent of cinnamon wafts past my nose and I have to hold myself back from eating them all now.

After that frustrating call with Ethan, that's exactly what I need—a sugar coma. Still, I hold myself back, because these are for my staff, and I owe them more than I could ever say.

But I feel someone's eyes on me, so I turn toward the end of the parking lot, my hand half-raised to wave. I blink at the man... er, creature at the edge of the parking lot.

The sun is sinking behind the form of a massive orc—even in the months Talon's been here, I haven't gotten used to saying that word. But I don't know this orc.

He's over seven feet tall and broad-shouldered, with a deep green complexion and two tusks jut out from between his lips. He wears a blue baseball cap and gray sweatpants, but no shirt across his broad muscled chest. Despite the weather, his large feet are bare on the rough concrete.

"How can I help you?" I ask. It's best to be direct, I expect. The only other orc I've ever met is my employee, Talon, and he seems to appreciate forthrightness.

The orc answers without hesitation. "I am Agis. I am here to visit my brother."

Agis has more facial hair than Talon, a beard, and a mustache, trimmed rough, and are those tattoos along his arms?

I swallow, feeling warm in places I have no business feeling warm in. I do love a man with tattoos. Ethan had gotten those right, even if he'd been a nightmare of a boyfriend. I shake myself. Definitely not thinking about Ethan right now. I slide my sweaty palms along my jeans and offer Agis my hand.

"I'm Serenity, the owner of the Wildlife Center," I say.

Agis crosses the asphalt, moving closer to me, and he drags his right leg a little behind. He looks at my hand in confusion as if he isn't sure what to do with it.

Still, I stay where I am and keep a smile on my face, even though I have to crane my neck back farther and farther to look up at his face.

Orcs are so huge.

He could crush me with a swipe of his arm, and somehow that turns me on.

Pull yourself together, Serenity.

I drop my hand. He's obviously not aware of that human custom. "Are you okay?" I ask, gesturing to his foot which is crisscrossed with ugly red cuts.

"A trap in the forest," he mutters. "It is noth—" he eyes me and sighs. "It hurts a little."

"Oh no." I scowl toward the woods. I thought that Talon had taken care of the last of the poachers a few months ago, but they seem to sprout up like weeds.

"I'm sorry that happened. I thought the last of the poachers had cleared out... You should come inside and get checked on." I start to pile the boxes from my trunk into my arms.

I chew on my lip as I do. Orcs are scary big, but Talon has never threatened anyone here, and I hope that his brother will have a similar temperament. I certainly don't need more trouble on top of Ethan's threats.

"I help you with boxes," he says, limping over.

"I don't want to hurt you any further."

"I am orc," he says as he hits his chest. "We are tough."

I can't help the smile that crosses my face. I consider what it would feel like to be pressed against that muscular chest, and the way my nipples pucker has nothing to do with the cooling air. There's something wild and fierce about him even in sweatpants and a ballcap.

He takes all of the boxes in one towering pile. "These smell good."

I nod. "Cinnamon rolls for breakfast tomorrow. They're delicious."

He pops open the top box and scoops a roll into his mouth. His face puckers and then a wide grin settles across it. "I like these."

Then he grabs a second one. "Tasty," he says as if he's trying out the word.

"We like them too," I say as I reach up and close the box. "So don't eat them all."

His lips twist, and I'm not quite sure if it's amusement or annoyance.

Closing the jeep's back door, I start toward the center. Agis walks along next to me, still dragging his leg. I hope he's not injured too badly. We have medics and vets on staff, but they aren't used to working on orc bodies.

Once we're inside, I lead him down the hall to the cafeteria and we stack the boxes on a table near the kitchen.

I point to one of the benches. "You sit here," I say, "I'll get Talon."

He reaches for one of the pastry boxes, and I swat his hand. "I said no."

Agis stares at me in surprise. "Yes, Ser-en-ity," he says, feeling out how to say my name.

I swallow and force myself to turn away.

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Agis

I watch the human woman Serenity as she walks away. I can't help but admire the way her hips sway when she moves, and my cock stirs restlessly. Females have become scarce in our mountains, and an orc has needs.

Turning over my hand, I stare at it then chuckle. The little human female had hit me. I could crush her with one hand, but she swatted me without a thought.

I'd been wondering why my brother Talon decided to stay among the humans, and I couldn't see anything overly exciting about any of it... but then there was this woman.

“Ser-en-ity,” I say, practicing her name. “Serenity.”

I snort. She's not like any of the females I've encountered before. She certainly doesn't have the brutish strength of an orc, and yet she is fierce in defending her food. I rub my head.

The humans I met before were so fragile and easy to break. Even the bouncers at the casinos I visited. Somehow, I don't think Serenity would be weak like them.

I drop down on the bench and it tilts, lifting one end into the air. I adjust until I am balanced in the middle. This furniture isn't made for orcs.

Everything is strange here: the harsh unnatural lights, the white floors and walls, the benches, even the food looks different than what I'm used to.

Although, those things she called cinnamon rolls are delicious. I could eat them all. I eye the boxes. Surely she wouldn't notice if I took a few more?

No one else knows, but I, too, have spent some time among the humans. But those places are dim and crowded and full of games, not this bright and clean. I wonder if they play poker here? I pull the chip from my pocket and turn it over in my hand. Or maybe blackjack? Those are the games I like at the casino.

A few minutes later, Talon arrives with Serenity, his brow furrowed in concern. My brother is always too serious for his own good. I slide the plastic chip back into my pocket.

He leans down to inspect my foot and the scratches there. A smile tugs at my lips because they're hardly worth bothering over. I destroyed the bear trap that tried to hold me, crushing the metal. It won't be hurting anything else, animal or human or orc.

But then Serenity's anxious gaze makes me pause. She's setting up some supplies to clean and bandage the wounds, and she smells so good—like the forest after a hard rain. Again my instincts stir, and I shove them down. She's human. There's no way she can handle my monstrous side.

"Agis," Talon says, his voice holding a bit of humor. He knows I'm not really injured. "What have you gotten yourself into now?"

Serenity takes off her coat, and lays it across the bench. Then she kneels down in front of me and starts cleaning my wounds.

"Just a little scrape," I say, but my eyes are on Serenity's bright yellow hair. It looks like the first golden rays of the sun in the morning. I want to lean forward and touch it.

I shake myself.

What am I doing?

I try to turn my gaze to Talon. “Good to see you, brother.”

“Been too long,” Talon says and grasps my arm in the traditional orc greeting.

“I’m going to apply some antiseptic,” Serenity says, and looks up, meeting my eyes.

“Might sting a bit.”

I smirk. I am an orc. Nothing short of losing an arm ‘stings.’

“What brings you here?” Talon asks.

“I came to check on my little brother,” I murmur, lost in the golden strands of Serenity’s hair again. “How are you?”

He laughs heartily and smacks my shoulder. “I’m fine. Better than fine,” he says.

“You’ll have to come and meet my mate, Jenna.”

“You found a true mate?” I ask and my jaw drops. “Here, among the humans?”

Talon nods. “And she’s pregnant.”

Serenity spins around and gapes at Talon. “She’s pregnant?”

He laughs. “We just found out ourselves.”

I find myself speechless.

Our family had started to think that we would be the last of the orcs, as our tribe dwindled, and there were fewer and fewer true mates among us.

But my brother found the answer among the humans?

Can we mate with them?

My gaze slides back over to Serenity. She is bandaging up my foot as if I'd cut it off all together, not just got a few scratches.

"That's wonderful," I say, falling back into our orc language. "Our clan can survive?"

"Yes," he answers me in the same way, with a wide grin.

I blink. I'd thought my brother had lost his mind when he'd come down to live among the humans, but perhaps there was something to it.

Could I find a true mate here too?

"So, he can stay in your cabin right?" Serenity asks as she stands and cleans up the medical supplies.

My stomach clenches at the very idea. Talon and I both stare at her.

"No," Talon says, getting a hold of himself first. "Unmated males cannot stay in the same space as a mated pair."

I nod. "This is known."

A furrow of confusion crosses Serenity's brow. "But I don't have any extra cabins right now."

“It’s okay,” I say gruffly. “I’m used to sleeping rough.”

“Absolutely not,” she insists. “You’re injured and it’s getting cold at night.”

She pulls on her ear, and I find myself looking at the long line of her neck. Her skin looks so soft that I just want to run my finger along it. Would it be soft like a doe’s?

Looking back and forth between us, she sighs then says. “You can stay in my cabin.”

My body has all sorts of reactions to that, and none that I should act on. I look down at her chest, where her shapely breasts push against her worn shirt, and I just refrain from smacking my knee. I feel like I’ve just won the jackpot, and there are no cards in sight.

“I’ll sleep in my office,” she says.

“Gruktak,” I mutter in disappointment. It’s been a while since my body has reacted to a female like this. I want to toss her over my shoulder and run for her cabin, but I don’t want to scare her.

Talon is watching me suspiciously, so I don’t say anything.

She sighs again, then nods. “Well, come on then. I’ll show you the way.”

I stand, and the bench creaks.

Serenity bites her lip and a furrow trails across her brow. “I’m going to need sturdier benches if any more relatives show up.”

“We could make some,” I say. All of our furniture at home was made by our clan. We all know how.

“The basic tools are in the shed,” Talon agrees. “And we could use some of the downed branches that we cleared last week.”

“That would work,” she says, then she looks at both of us. “Should I be expecting any more visitors?”

“Not that I know of,” I answer. Although if our siblings heard that Talon found a true mate, they’ll all be coming down here before long.

Serenity leads us out of the building and along a path that passes several log cabins.

Talon stops at one, and promises to introduce me to his mate in the morning. I can tell he’s already feeling protective because of the pregnancy.

Not looking where I’m going, I stumble a bit on an exposed root, and Serenity takes my hand. I blink in surprise. This tiny human thinks she’s going to help an orc? That her fingers interlaced with mine will keep me safe? A chuckle rumbles up in my chest, but I hold it back, not wanting her to let go.

Serenity leads me down the path to a cabin at the end of the row. The weathered structure stands apart from the others, its age showing in the rough-hewn logs and time-worn porch. A handmade blanket is draped over a well-used rocking chair and lends the place a haunting comfort.

Serenity leads me inside, and the scent of pine and leather wraps around me. A massive bed, its quilted covers thick and inviting, takes up most of the room. It's surprisingly large—almost big enough for an orc. My eyes linger on it longer than they should.

Then they move to the climbing gear that hangs on the walls like ghosts—ropes, carabiners, harnesses. My eyes catch on a frayed rope near the door, its fibers oddly

discolored. Something about the damage pattern seems wrong, but I push the thought away.

"This is yours?" I ask, taking in every detail through an orc's keen eyes.

"Well, it was my parents'," she says, and lifts a framed photograph from a shelf. Two adult humans wearing climbing gear smile at the camera, ropes slung confidently over their shoulders.

"They were experienced climbers. They used to lead guided tours up the mountain." Her voice catches as her eyes drift to the damaged rope. "I can't bring myself to throw their things away. Even that rope from their last climb."

Her voice catches. "Their accident... it never should have happened."

I frown. My instinct is to offer comfort, but I hold back. The pain in her voice is still raw. Her parents' death clearly haunts her, and something about the way she describes the 'accident' sets off warning bells. I've spent enough time reading people at poker tables to recognize when someone's holding back crucial information.

But it's not my place to push. Not yet. For now, I simply nod to let her know I'm listening if she wants to share more.

Serenity moves to kindle a fire in the stone fireplace that anchors one wall, her practiced movements speaking of years spent in this space. When I try to help, she waves me off with a gentle smile.

I continue to wander around the cabin. The sitting area near the entrance holds two overstuffed chairs that look far too small for my frame. Bookshelves line the walls, packed with well-worn volumes about wildlife and mountain trails. Family photos dot the shelves - a young Serenity growing up alongside her smiling blond-haired

parents.

A sturdy dresser stands against one wall, and a door at the back presumably leads to what humans call a bathroom. I learned about that one the hard way when the casino managers got angry with me for relieving myself in a parking lot.

The whole space feels lived-in, comfortable, yet tinged with memory. It smells of Serenity - that intoxicating mix of forest and wildflowers that makes my blood run hot.

The fire is soon warming the room, and Serenity urges me to sit in one of the small chairs. I shake my head, and settle on the bed, which is at least sturdy enough not to break under me.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asks.

I shake my head. The bitter beverage never appealed to me. “Whiskey?” I ask hopefully.

Her eyes widen, but then a slow smile spreads across her face. “I guess it has been that kind of night.”

She leans forward to open a lower cabinet, and the sight of her curves sends a jolt of need through me. My body responds instantly, cock hardening with an intensity that terrifies me. I quickly adjust and pull the blanket folded at the end of the bed over my lap, trying to deny what my instincts are screaming.

The scent of her fills my head with a clarity I've never known. Each movement draws my eye like a starving wolf watching prey. That's when I know - this tiny human is meant for me. My true mate.

I want to roar in frustration.

She's so small, so delicate compared to my monstrous form.

Her soul is pure light while mine is stained with debts and lies. She deserves better than a gambling orc who could crush her with one careless move.

She retrieves whiskey and glasses and closes the cabinet with a swing of her hip that makes my tusks ache. I exhale slowly and fight the urge to claim what can never be mine.

The feeling that she's my destined mate - and that I'm not worthy of her - burns worse than any loss I've ever known.

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Serenity

I turn back toward Agis with the whiskey glasses, trying not to stare at his massive form on my bed. The sight of those rippling muscles and tattoos makes my mouth go dry, so I focus on Mom's writing desk instead.

My fingers trace the familiar lemon-polished surface as I set down the glasses. "My parents were amazing people," I say as I pick up a photo to distract myself from how his massive size dominates the small cabin. "Mom could name every bird by its call. Dad knew these mountains better than anyone."

Remembering my task, I set down the photo and pick up the whiskey bottle and pour the alcohol with slightly trembling hands, very aware of how his gaze feels like a physical touch on my skin. "They met on a rescue mission—Mom got stuck on a ledge trying to save an injured eagle. Dad climbed up to help." The familiar story helps steady my racing pulse, though I can't help noticing how the firelight plays across his green skin.

"They built this place from nothing." I take a steadying breath and try not to think about those tusks and what they might feel like against my neck. "Spent every penny they had. People thought they were crazy, protecting wildlife out here."

A shift of movement draws my eyes back to Agis. He's very carefully not looking at me, but the blanket in his lap does nothing to hide his arousal. My words trail off as heat floods my cheeks. Dear god, is that all him? He's proportional everywhere, apparently. I quickly take a large swallow of whiskey, trying to cool the fire building under my skin.

My hands grow sweaty on the glasses, but I hand one to him and say, "Sorry, I'm rambling. It's just... the accident report never made sense. They were obsessive about safety. Mom checked every piece of equipment herself. Dad triple-checked her work."

I wipe my damp palms on my jeans, the fire suddenly too warm. "The investigator said the rope showed signs of chemical degradation, but that's impossible. They'd just bought new gear that week. I found the receipt."

After taking a sip of my whiskey, I set it down and pick up Mom's notebook. "She documented everything. The week before they died, she wrote about someone tampering with the equipment shed. The locks were broken. Dad said it was probably kids, but..."

I swallow hard. "It was right after they refused to sell to Ethan. Mom never trusted him. She said he had hungry eyes."

Our gazes finally meet and everything else falls away. I can't breathe. There's something so right about him that I find myself moving closer without conscious thought.

The size of him, barely hidden by the blanket, should send me running. There's no way something that large could fit in a human body—in my body. But instead of fear, I feel a deep, primal hunger.

I down my whiskey and let it burn away my grief and hesitation. "I'm sorry I've been babbling on about my parents and myself."

He smiles, and somehow it makes me feel more relaxed. "It's okay, Ser-en-ity," he says carefully. "Family is important, and yours meant a lot to you."

I nod. "But enough about that. Tell me something about you."

He looks flustered and doesn't answer, taking a swallow of whiskey instead.

So I blurt out the first thing I can think of, "What is a mate?" He and Talon had talked about it in the Center like it was something amazing.

"What does it mean to an orc?" I clarify when he stays silent.

Talon and Jenna got together so fast, and now she's pregnant. Part of me envies their certainty. Is it because of this mate bond?

He drinks deeply from the glass of whiskey and then pauses. "A mate is what humans call a soulmate. Someone the universe means you to be with, who you're completely devoted to."

The intensity in his voice makes me shiver. I perch on the bed beside him, hyper-aware of the heat of his skin. "How do you know? How do you know someone is your mate?"

"I just do." His voice has dropped an octave.

"And if you're mated, you just love them?"

"Not just love." His breathing grows heavy. "Our bodies crave each other. We go into a frenzy... until we can claim them."

Wetness pools between my legs and the air feels charged with electricity. "And it's like that always?"

"Yes." He throws back his drink. "Another."

Instead of refilling his glass, I lay my hand on his thigh. Hard muscle jumps under my touch. "Do orcs ever just have sex? With someone not their mate?"

"Yes," he says roughly, "but only before finding their mate. Afterward, they exist only for each other."

Heat and whiskey make me bold. "Would you like to have sex with me?"

"No." The growl reverberates through me.

I blink, stung. "What?" His obvious arousal contradicts his words.

"No, Ser-en-ity." He surges to his feet and grabs the whiskey bottle. Before I can process what's happening, he's out the door.

I chase after him, but he vanishes into the darkness. How can someone so massive move so quietly?

I sag against the doorframe, confusion warring with desire. The night air cools my heated skin, but does nothing for the ache between my legs.

Mom's notebook lies forgotten on the floor where I dropped it. I pick it up gently, smoothing the pages. They would have liked Agis, I think. They always said I needed someone strong enough to match my stubbornness.

But was it something I said? Or did he feel it too—that overwhelming rightness that terrifies as much as it thrills?

The mate bond that Talon and Jenna share suddenly makes more sense. That pull, that certainty...

I press my forehead against the cool door frame and close my eyes. Mom always said to trust my instincts.

Right now, every instinct I have is screaming that Agis is mine.

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Agis

I stumble through the woods, whiskey bottle in hand. The trees blur together in the darkness, but I don't need to see where I'm going. My orc instincts help me avoid most obstacles, though I occasionally bump into a branch.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I mutter to myself in Orcish.

The whiskey burns going down, but not as much as the need burning in my veins. Serenity offered herself to me, and I ran like a coward. But what else can I do? The moment she touched me, I knew – she's my true mate. The one female in all the world meant for me.

And I am the worst possible match for her.

I take another long pull from the bottle. How can the universe be so cruel? To give me a mate who is not only human but also good and pure?

I'm a gambler.

I nearly got myself killed more times than I can count trying to win big at cards. She deserves better, but there would never be anyone else for me.

The sound of voices makes me pause. This deep in the woods, there shouldn't be anyone else around. I creep closer, my bare feet silent on the forest floor despite my size.

Through the trees, I see lights – not the harsh fluorescents of the wildlife center, but the warm glow of lanterns. A cabin I didn't know existed sits in a small clearing. Cards and chips clatter on a table visible through the window. My fingers itch at the familiar sound.

"Double or nothing," a gruff voice says from inside.

I edge closer, careful to stay in the shadows, and peer inside. Five men sit around a poker table, cigarette smoke clouding the air. Stacks of cash pile high between them. This is no friendly game – the stakes are serious.

"Ethan's gonna be pissed if he finds out you're running games without him," one man says.

"He's too busy chasing what's-her-name up at the Wildlife Center," another responds. "Serenity, was it?"

"Yeah, twit owes him a lot of money."

The cards smack against the table. "The boss'll get her good," the first man says. "She won't know what hit her, just like her parents."

I nearly drop the whiskey bottle. This Ethan is threatening Serenity? My mate? A growl builds in my chest.

"Shut up about Ethan," another man snaps. "He's going to own the Wildlife Center soon. The land's worth millions to developers."

The growl escapes before I can stop it. One of the men looks toward the window, and I duck back into the shadows.

"What was that?"

"Probably just a bear," his buddy answered. "Deal the damn cards."

I should leave. I should go back and tell Serenity what I learned. But the familiar click of poker chips draws me in like a siren's song. I can win enough to help her save the center. One last game...

"Agis?" A whispered voice makes me spin around.

Serenity stands a few feet away, wrapped in a thick coat. Her blonde hair glows in the darkness.

"What are you doing out here?" I hiss, moving closer to block her view of the cabin.

"Looking for you, you big idiot," she says. "You're injured and it's freezing."

"You shouldn't be here." I try to guide her away, but she plants her feet.

"Neither should you. What's going on?" She peers around me at the cabin. "Why are there lights in there?"

Before I can stop her, she steps forward and a twig snaps under her foot. The voices in the cabin go quiet.

"Someone's out there," a man says. "Check it out."

I don't think – I just act. Scooping Serenity into my arms, I dash behind a massive old oak tree just as the cabin door creaks open. She starts to protest but I press her against the rough bark and cover her body with mine. Her breath catches.

"I don't see nothing," a voice calls from near the cabin.

"Keep looking. Can't risk anyone finding this place."

Serenity grips my shoulders as footsteps crunch through the underbrush. Her body is soft and warm against mine, fitting perfectly despite our size difference. The mate bond thrums between us, demanding I claim her, protect her, and never let her go. The whiskey and adrenaline make my head spin.

"Please," she whispers, though I'm not sure what she's asking for.

I lean down until my lips brush her ear. "Don't move," I breathe.

She shivers, but not from fear. Her scent changes and becomes rich with arousal. My cock hardens instantly, pressing against her stomach through my thin sweatpants. Her fingers dig into my bare shoulders.

The footsteps move closer. I should be focusing on the danger, but all I can think about is how perfectly she fits against me. How right it feels to hold her. How much I want to tear off her clothes and take her right here against this tree.

"Nothin' out here," the man finally calls out. "Probably just animals."

We stay frozen until the cabin door slams shut. Only then do I let myself look down at Serenity's flushed face.

"What is this place?" she whispers.

"Illegal gambling den," I say roughly. "Run by Ethan."

Her eyes widen. "Ethan? But..."

“Serenity...” My voice is hoarse. Her body is still tight against me, and her wildflower scent wraps around me. A red haze descends over me and my words are gone.

I press my lips to hers, wanting to taste her, wanting her.

She opens to me instantly but then stops, pulling back. “Agis, those men... the cabin.”

I growl and scoop her into my arms. The forest goes by in a blur, until we are deep in the thicket. I know I should take her somewhere warm, somewhere human, but I don’t know if I can wait that long.

The ground is cold and frozen, waiting for the coming blanket of snow. I can taste it in the air.

My gaze darts around until I find a small covered area, barely a lean to, just a rest stop for hikers. I carry her in and seat her against the back wall, out of the wind.

My hands tear at her clothes, barely registering the buttons flying or fabric ripping. My blood roars in my ears as I expose her pale skin to the night air. Her breasts fill my massive hands, nipples hardening under my rough touch. The mate bond pulses between us like a living thing, demanding I claim her.

The frenzy builds in my chest, a primal urge to mark, to possess, to make her irrevocably mine. Need slams through me, but I force myself to hold back. She doesn’t know what this means, what being an orc mate means. And I’ll hurt her.

"I'll go." The words rip from my throat as I force myself back. One step. Two. My body screams in protest at each inch of distance.

Her eyes, dark with desire, rake over me. "No."

"Ser-en-ity." Her name is a growl, a prayer, a warning. "I won't be able to stop." The frenzy clouds my vision with red need. Every muscle strains toward her, my mate, my destiny. I want to throw her down, to cover her body with mine, and rut until she carries my scent, my mark, my babies...

"I don't want you to stop." Her voice trembles.

"We'll be mated."

One last warning, though my control hangs by a thread.

When her small fingers wrap around my hard cock, the last barrier breaks. The frenzy takes me, and I surrender to the ancient orc instincts singing in my blood.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Serenity

S omehow his cock grows impossibly longer and thicker in my hand. His eyes are dark and feral, and I don't care. I want him.

Agis yanks off his sweatpants and stands, huge and green, in the fallen leaves.

Then he lifts me over his shoulder, and my jeans are peeled down my legs. He radiates so much heat that I don't even feel the cold.

He lays me down on the wooden bench, my coat cushioning my back, and he is between my legs, tasting me. I buck at the feel of him, mouth and tusks, on my most sensitive parts.

Warmth pools in my gut and I moan. I grip his hair as he devours me. Even in the cold, I'm soon a sweaty, moaning mass of jelly.

"I need you," I gasp.

Agis lifts his head, eyes searching mine. He stands, and raises my legs, pressing the tip of his giant cock against my entrance.

I can't help but tense.

Will he fit? Will it hurt?

But I want this, I want him.

No words pass his lips as he begins to move inside. The strain on him is evident in every tight muscle of his face and chest. He's barely holding himself back.

My body opens to welcome his girth, and the feel of him stretching my inside walls makes me tremble. Slowly, he fills me, deeper and fuller than I've ever felt. When he hits the very end of me, my mouth drops open and a feral sound escapes me.

Agis growls, a sound full of need.

"I'm ready," I gasp. "You won't hurt me."

He pulls out, and plunges into me again, all the way up to that very end. I cry out. But he is moving, speeding me toward the cliff of orgasm. He lifts my hips, holding me for greater access.

The strain on his face disappears as he gives into his need. I let go, losing myself to his body and mine, as we become one great beast together. When I come, I scream, and a flock of birds takes flight from the trees.

Agis follows me with a great roar.

Afterward, Agis wraps my coat around my naked body and cradles me in his lap on the wooden bench. The small hikers' shelter offers just enough protection from the crisp mountain air, though his body radiates enough heat for both of us.

"Are you okay, Serenity?" His massive hand strokes my back, gentler than anyone would expect from an orc.

"I'm fine." My voice comes out breathless, my body still humming with aftershocks. Every muscle feels deliciously loose. "That was amazing."

"I am no good for you." His expression darkens.

A laugh bubbles up from my chest. "After what we just shared?" I shift in his lap, wincing pleasantly at the lingering ache between my legs. "You are great for me. Fantastic even."

When his worried frown doesn't fade, I press a soft kiss to his chest, tasting the salt on his dark green skin. "It'll be okay."

"No, you don't understand who I am." His arms tighten around me protectively. "What I've done."

"We have all the time in the world to get to know each other." A bond pulses between us, warm and sure as the morning sun that filters through the shelter's roof.

His expression grows more troubled. "Those guys at the cabin, this Ethan?"

The name sends a chill through me that has nothing to do with the autumn air. "Ethan is my ex."

Agis's growl reverberates through his chest and into mine, primal and possessive.

"Long over, I assure you." I trace one of his tattoos with my fingertips, trying to soothe him. "But the Wildlife Center is in a lot of debt, and Ethan holds the loans."

"The gambling man?"

"I nod, pulling my coat tighter against the autumn chill. "If I don't pay him back soon..."

"You need to make money?" Agis shifts beneath me, tension radiating through his

massive frame. "You make it at the casino?"

"No." The word comes out sharp as broken glass. "I'm not giving Ethan another inch. Gambling my parents' center, when that's all I have left of them..." My voice catches. "I could never."

"You don't like gamblers?" Something changes in his voice, a new tension I can't quite read.

"Definitely not." My fingers trace unconscious patterns on his chest. "That's where it all went wrong with Ethan and me. Gambling brings out the worst in people. Turns them into someone you don't recognize anymore."

His face shutters like storm clouds blocking the sun. Our bond pulses with something dark and painful that makes my brow furrow with concern.

My skin feels sticky with dried sweat, and the autumn air is growing teeth. "Where are my pants, Agis?"

He gathers my scattered clothing with mechanical movements. I can't help but laugh at my mangled bra and blouse - casualties of orc passion. My legs wobble as I stand, still weak from our mating. I don't even remember losing my shoes, but somehow they're there with my socks, waiting to be put back on.

"I need to get home."

"I carry you," Agis says, scooping me up like I weigh nothing. "It's faster."

The forest blurs past as he moves through it with surprising grace despite his size. His skin radiates warmth against the cooling air, and I tuck my face into his neck to breathe in his wild scent.

Back in the cabin, I focus on rebuilding the fire, letting the familiar task help organize my scattered thoughts. The embers glow orange as I add kindling and watch the flames catch.

"Ethan's running an illegal gambling operation." Speaking the words makes them more real somehow. "And he's connected to the poachers."

"Yes." Agis's heavy footsteps pace behind me, uneven and pained.

I turn from the growing fire. "Your leg is bothering you. You shouldn't have carried me."

"I'm fine." His stubborn growl might be more convincing if he wasn't favoring his injured leg so obviously.

"Sit down and let me look at it." When he doesn't move, I point to the bed with my best no-nonsense expression. "Now."

His tusked mouth twitches. "Demanding little human."

"Stubborn big orc," I counter as I gather my medical supplies.

The bed creaks under his weight as he settles. I kneel before him, just as I did a few hours ago, but now everything has changed. The mate bond thrums between us as I carefully unwrap his bandages with trembling fingers. The intimacy of this simple act feels almost as profound as our mating.

"The cuts have reopened," I say, cleaning away fresh blood. "You shouldn't have been running on this."

"Had to keep you safe," he growls.

I look up and find his gray eyes blazing with intensity. "Why?"

"You know why."

My heart pounds. "Tell me anyway."

He catches my hands in his massive ones. "Because you're my mate, Serenity. My true mate."

"Is that why you ran earlier?"

"Yes." His thumbs stroke over my palms. "I'm not worthy of you. I'm not good like Talon."

"Let me decide that," I whisper, rising up on my knees between his legs.

This time when I kiss him, he doesn't run. His lips capture mine with desperate hunger, and his tusks press against my cheeks. I gasp as he lifts me effortlessly and settles me across his lap.

"I'll hurt you," he mutters against my mouth.

"You didn't, you won't." I grip his shoulders, feeling the powerful muscles under my fingers. "I trust you."

He groans and buries his face in my neck, breathing deeply. "Mine," he growls, and the word sends shivers down my spine.

His hands span my waist as I rock against him. Even through our clothes, I can feel how huge he is, and arousal floods me. There's no stopping this now – the mate bond is alight like a scorching flame.

"Need you," he pants, tugging at my shirt. "Need my mate." I help him strip away our clothes until there's nothing between us but skin. His massive body is all hard muscle.

Dark tattoos swirl across his chest and arms. I trace them with my fingers, learning the shape of him.

He explores me just as thoroughly, his huge hands surprisingly gentle as they map my curves. In the forest, our coupling had been based on pure need, this is slower, more careful as we get to know each other. His touch on my skin feels like fire and it ignites every nerve in my body.

When he takes my breast in his mouth, I cry out and arch against him. His tusks scrape deliciously against my sensitive skin, making my skin prickle. He sucks and bites at one nipple while his hand plays with the other, sending jolts of pleasure through me.

He whispers breathlessly against my skin, his voice rough with desire. "You're so tiny, so perfect."

With a burning need, he traces his fingers over my body, igniting sparks of pleasure wherever they touch. Sliding his large hands between my legs, he begins to tap out a tantalizing rhythm against my sensitive parts. I arch into him, overcome by the sensations coursing through me as one finger slides inside me, quickly followed by another.

His dark eyes bore into mine with a primal intensity that makes every part of me fill with longing and anticipation.

"Please," I whimper, not even sure what I'm begging for but knowing that only he can quench this fire within me.

He knows exactly what I need. Laying back, he positions me over him. With a low growl, he urges me on. "Take what you need, my mate. Show me how to please you."

I lower myself onto him slowly, savoring every inch of his thick cock as it stretches and fills me up inside. My body strains to accommodate his size, but I relish in the feeling of fullness and the pulse of pleasure radiating from where we are joined. Every ridge and vein of his cock stimulates the nerve endings within me as he slides deeper and deeper into my core.

His hands grip my hips tightly, guiding and controlling our movements, but allowing me to set the pace. And I do, moving my body in sync with his and finding a rhythm that takes us both to the brink of ecstasy

When I finally take him fully inside of me, we both groan in pleasure.

"My mate," he growls deep in his throat as our bodies move together in perfect rhythm. "My Serenity."

I start to move, and the world narrows to just this – the feel of him inside me, his hands on my skin, the mate bond singing between us. He watches me with such intensity, such devotion, that tears spring to my eyes.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Agis

Dawn light filters through the cabin windows, painting stripes across Serenity's body. She's curled against my chest, golden hair spilling across my green skin like rays of sunlight. The mate bond thrums contentedly between us, but guilt gnaws at my gut. Each quiet breath she takes feels like a gift I don't deserve.

I memorize every detail: the curve of her shoulder, the way her lashes fan against her cheeks, the small smile playing at her lips even in sleep. A lock of hair falls across her face, and I gently brush it back.

"You're staring again," she mumbles, eyes still closed.

"Can't stop." I touch her face with one finger. Her skin feels so soft compared to orc skin. "It's what orcs do."

"Tell me about what orcs do." She looks up at me. Makes my chest feel tight. Even messy from sleep, she looks better than anything I've seen.

"We guard our mates. New ones especially." I pull her closer, breathe in her smell. "Bond is strongest at first. Makes us... want to keep others away."

She trails her fingers over the tattoos on my chest. "Is that why you growled at that ranger we passed yesterday?"

I feel my ears heat. "You noticed that?"

"Hard to miss." She grins. "Though I thought it was kind of sweet."

"Sweet isn't a word used to talk about orcs."

"Well, get used to it." She pokes my chest. "Now tell me more about orc customs. What else should I know about being mated to you?"

I don't answer right away. "Old times, male orcs showed they were good by hunting big things or fighting. We built houses ourselves. Got the best meat. Fought anyone who insulted our mates."

"What about now?"

"That's the hard part. Our ways don't work here." I look around the cabin. Too small for an orc. "Can't hunt in a place that protects animals."

She props herself up on an elbow, looking thoughtful. "So make new traditions. You could help build the new animal enclosures - that's creating a home. Take me hiking - that's like hunting, just without killing anything." Her eyes sparkle. "Though maybe leave out the fighting part. We have enough trouble with poachers."

Something wakes up inside me when she talks about keeping orc ways. "You want that? To do orc things?"

"Of course." She kisses my chest. "It's part of who you are. And I want to know all of you."

All of me.

The words twist in my gut. The poker chips hidden in my belongings feel like they're burning a hole through the floor. How can I build anything real while keeping such

secrets?

"What else?" she asks, oblivious to my inner turmoil. "Tell me about your people. Your family."

I tell her about growing up in the mountains with my siblings, about our dwindling clan and the desperate search for true mates. "We were strong fighters once, but fighting humans hurt us bad. Then sickness came. Worst was when mate bonds got rare. Without true mates, not many baby orcs."

"That's why Talon's mate and her pregnancy are such a miracle," she says softly.

"Yes. We thought we were dying out. Some still think we are." I stroke her hair. "That's why finding you... it means more than you know."

"Even though I'm human?"

"Because you're human." I kiss her head. "Shows orcs can change. Make new things."

She's quiet for a moment. "Did you come down from the mountains looking for a mate?"

"No," I say. Shame makes my skin hot. "I came for... other reasons."

She waits, but I can't tell her about the gambling, the people who want money, why I ran. Not when she looks at me like that, all trust.

"Want food?" I ask instead, like a coward.

"Starving." She stretches luxuriously, and the sheet slips lower. "Though food can wait."

As I lose myself in her again, I vow to find a way to save her center without gambling. Need to be a good mate. Make new orc ways that work for both of us.

If only the cards didn't call so loud from the forest. If only I could be the orc she thinks I am.

Her lips find mine, and for a bit, I think I can be better.

"Teach me how to say 'I love you' in Orcish," she whispers against my mouth.

My chest gets tight. "Kral zur matha," I say, words rough in my throat.

"Kral zur matha," she repeats. Human voice makes it sound pretty.

And right then, I know I'll do anything—anything—to be worthy of those words.

Axes hit wood while Talon and I cut trees by the bear place. Every swing doesn't stop me thinking about the sounds in that forest cabin—chips clicking, cards moving, people betting. My hands shake on the axe, I want to hold cards instead.

The thoughts take me back to that night in the casino, six months ago. The night I lost everything.

The special room is red and gold, full of smoke. I have won big money —enough to pay bad people, enough to start new. My pile of chips is the biggest at the table.

"One more hand," Romano, the casino owner, keeps saying, pushing another whiskey my way. His eyes gleam like a predator's. "All or nothing. Double your money or walk away broke."

Should see the trap. Should know why he gives drinks, why he lets me win. But orcs are proud, and I am very proud that night.

"Deal," I growl, teeth bared in what I think is triumph.

One game later, I owe money to people worse than any I know. Romano smiles mean while his men grab me. "Pay in one day, Orc. Or we start taking pieces."

I leave everything in my hotel room—clothes, weapons, the few family heirlooms I haven't gambled away yet. I run with just the clothes on my back and shame burning in my gut.

"Brother?" Talon's voice cuts through the memory. "You're not here with me."

I blink. "Just thinking about Serenity," I lie, but the words taste like ash.

"No." Talon drives his axe into a stump with a thunk and turns to face me. His eyes, so like our father's, see right through me. "You're thinking about gambling. I know that haunted look."

The axe slips in my sweaty grip. "How did you—"

"Because I'm your brother." He grabs my shoulder. Makes me feel steady. "And you watch those woods like a hungry wolf. Tell me."

The words pour out like blood from a wound—the debts, the threats, the shameful running. My voice breaks when I speak of Serenity, so pure and good, trusting me without knowing the monster I truly am.

"I want to change," I say quietly, words harder than any bet. "For her. But the casino calls me. My hands want cards..."

"They say wanting never goes away," Talon says softly. "But it gets easier with help." He meets my gaze. "Let me help, brother."

"How?" My voice sounds small, like a baby. "How do I silence the call?"

"First, by telling Serenity the truth. She's your mate—she'll understand. The bond demands honesty."

I hit a log hard. It breaks like bones. "What if she doesn't? What if she looks at me like our people did? When they made me leave?"

"She will understand," Talon insists. "But she needs to hear it from you, not discover it on her own. That betrayal would be far worse."

He's right. I have to tell her. Soon. Before she finds out some other way. But first, I need to figure out how to save her center without gambling. There has to be another way.

"There is," Talon says, seeing how worried I am. "We'll find it together. Family helps family get better."

"Can't lose her," I say quietly. "Can't."

"Then fight for her," Talon says. "Not with cards. With truth. Be good mate."

I nod. For her, I can do this. For her, I must.

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Serenity

I just had my first sip of coffee when Ethan's Mercedes pulls into the parking lot in front of my office. My stomach clenches as he strides toward the building, predatory grace wrapped in a designer suit.

"Looking lovely as ever, Serenity." Ethan doesn't wait for an invitation before he settles into the chair across from my desk. His cologne is too strong, and it smells artificial compared to the freshness of Agis's forest scent.

"What do you want?"

"Just checking on my investment." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Heard you've been spending time with an orc. Quite a step down from me, don't you think?"

I keep my voice steady. "My personal life isn't your business anymore."

"Everything about you is my business." He leans forward, dropping the fake charm. "You really think some monster can protect you? Your parents thought they were untouchable too. Look how that worked out."

Ice spreads through my veins. "Get out."

"Only two weeks left on the loan, sweetheart." He stands and adjusts his cuffs. "Tick tock."

Through the window, I watch him leave, his words echoing in my head. Your parents

thought they were untouchable too.

When Agis bursts in moments later, I'm still staring at the spot where Ethan's car had been.

"Did he threaten you?" Agis growls, checking me for harm.

I swallow hard. "Something he said about my parents. I think... I think he knows more about their accident than he's letting on."

Agis pulls me close and his massive frame vibrates with protective fury.

Something needed to be done about Ethan, but I wasn't yet sure what.

Sending Agis back out to work, I stare at my desk. Ethan threatened my parents, I'm sure of it. But could he have something to do with their deaths? I dig through the desk drawers, something nagging at me - a memory of Mom being worried those last few weeks.

The bottom drawer sticks, like always, but yields to a firm tug. Inside, her logbooks line up by date, spines labeled in her precise handwriting.

I pull out the last one, dated just before their death. My breath catches at her familiar script: March 15 - Equipment shed locks broken again. J says kids, but doesn't feel right. Found strange residue on backup gear. Taking samples to lab tomorrow.

March 16 - E stopped by. Aggressive about selling. Threatened to "make things difficult." Checking all gear triple time now.

March 17 - Lab results inconclusive. Substance appears industrial, highly corrosive. Ordering all new equipment.

March 18 - New ropes and carabiners arrived. Old ones quarantined in shed.

My hands shake as I turn to the final entry, dated the day before their last climb:
March 20 - Something's wrong. Shed broken into again. J checking primary gear but worried about backup. E watching property. Don't trust him. If anything happens...

The sentence trails off. I glance at the date again.

They died the next day.

I slam the drawer shut as nausea rises in my throat. All this time, the evidence was here. Mom knew something was wrong. She was trying to tell us.

Through our mate bond, I feel Agis's concern pulse. But beneath my grief rises something stronger.

Ethan won't get away with this. Not anymore.

Later on, I watch Agis repair the wolf enclosure fence. His massive hands, so filled with deadly potential, handle the tools with surprising gentleness. Just like he handles me.

Two weeks since that first night together, and already I can't imagine life without him.

"Watch your back, big guy," I call out as one of the wolves approaches. The wolf sniffs his leg, then flops down to watch him work.

I hide my smile. Even the animals trust him.

"Need any help?" I ask, though I know what he'll say.

"No mate of mine carries lumber," he rumbles, but his eyes crinkle with affection.

That's another thing I'm getting used to - his protective instincts. Where Ethan's possessiveness had felt suffocating, Agis's care feels like being wrapped in a warm blanket. He doesn't try to control me, he just... cherishes me.

I check my phone, and grimace at another text from the bank. The center's accounts are still in the red, and Ethan's deadline looms closer.

Agis senses my worry because he sets down his tools and crosses to me. One huge finger tips my chin up.

"We'll fix it together," he says.

I lean into his touch. "I know. It's just... this place was my parents' dream. Their legacy. I can't lose it."

"Won't lose." He pulls me close, and I breathe in his forest scent. "I protect what's precious to my mate."

I can feel his absolute conviction, his unwavering devotion. For the first time since my parents died, I feel truly safe. Protected. Loved.

If only they could have met him. Dad would have loved his quiet strength. Mom would have appreciated his gentle way with the animals.

A wolf pup tumbles over to investigate us, and Agis scoops it up with one hand. The pup licks his face and makes him laugh - a deep sound that vibrates through me.

"See?" he says, letting the pup gnaw harmlessly on his finger. "Even little ones know friends from foe."

I watch him with the pup and my heart is full. How could I have gotten so lucky? After Ethan's betrayal, I'd thought I'd never trust again. But Agis... he's different. No more looking over my shoulder. No more waiting for the other shoe to drop.

We spend the rest of the afternoon checking on the animals. Agis finishes the fence while I update medical records and feed schedules. The easy rhythm of working together, punctuated by shared glances and brushing touches, feels like a dream.

As evening falls, we head back to my cabin. He builds a fire while I make dinner, and we move around each other like we've done this forever.

Later, I lay in his arms, tracing the bold tattoos that wind across his chest. The fire has burned low and casts dancing shadows across his green skin.

"I'll fix this," he promises, his deep voice vibrating through me. His massive hand spans my entire back, warm and somehow gentle despite its strength. "I'll save your center."

"We'll fix it together." I press a kiss to his chest, still amazed at how this fierce creature can be so tender. "But first, I need tea. Want some?"

He shakes his head. I slip from bed, pull on his discarded shirt, and breathe in his wild forest scent. The shirt falls nearly to my knees—everything about him is massive.

In the kitchen area, I fill the kettle and reach for the tea tin. Dad always said tea could fix anything. Even when Ethan first approached us about selling the land, Dad would make tea and we'd talk through solutions.

The memory makes my hands shake. If Dad were here, he'd know what to do about Ethan's threats.

The tin catches on something as I pull it forward. A small cloth bag tumbles out, spilling its contents across the counter and floor. Casino chips scatter like drops of blood—red, blue, green. Paper markers flutter down, bearing names like The Royal Flush and Fortune's Gate.

My stomach lurches as I pick up one of the IOUs. The amount... It's staggering. More than enough to save the center.

Memories flash through my mind - Ethan at the poker tables, that predatory gleam in his eyes. The way gambling had changed him and made him cruel. How it had made him see people as things to be used and discarded.

"It's just a game, baby," he used to say. "Until it isn't."

"Agis?" My voice cracks. "What is this?"

He sits up in bed, instantly alert. When he sees what I'm holding, his face falls. In that moment, he looks exactly like Ethan did when I caught him cheating—at cards, and on me.

"I didn't want you to find out like this," he says, "I can explain."

But I'm already backing away, clutching his shirt around me like armor. The mate bond screams in protest, but I can't listen.

Not again.

Not another gambler.

Not another liar.

"Have you been playing me this whole time?" The words taste like ash. "Was any of it real?"

"Serenity, no—"

"Get out." Tears spill down my cheeks. All that talk of mate bonds and traditions—was it just another con? "Just get out!"

He stands and pulls on his sweatpants. "Please let me explain."

"GET OUT!"

The door closes behind him with terrible finality and I slide down the cabinet to sit among the scattered chips and markers, each one a broken promise.

What have I done? How could I have been so stupid? But better this pain now than watching another man I love be twisted by cards and chips.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Agis

I stagger away from Serenity's cabin into the darkness. The mate bond pulls at me like an angry beast, making each step harder than the last. Pain rips through me, worse than any I've felt before. And I've felt plenty—bear traps, fists, the shame of losing my ancestor's blade to a card shark.

The bond screams at me to return, to explain, to beg. My tusks ache. The whiskey bottle I'd grabbed on my way out, dangles forgotten in my hand, and my bare chest is cold in the night air. But nothing compares to the cold emptiness where Serenity's warmth should be.

What could I even tell her? The truth is ugly. I'm just a gambler who lost too much money. A coward hiding from people I owe. Even in my thoughts it sounds weak.

My fingers twitch, and I know what's coming. The familiar hunger rises—for cards in my hands, for reading faces across the table, for losing myself in the game. One good hand could fix everything. Just one perfect game...

I hurl the whiskey bottle against a tree. It shatters like my promises, like my hopes. That thinking is what drove me here—betting heirlooms, owing money to dangerous men, and then disappointing everyone who had ever trusted me.

But maybe there's another path. Maybe I can turn this curse around, make it work for me instead.

One last game, but this time for something real.

Something pure.

A twig snaps behind me and I whirl, fists raised, welcoming the chance for violence. But it's Talon who melts from the shadows, his expression knowing.

"Brother," he says quietly, taking in my wild eyes and the mate-pain etched on my face. "The bond?"

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

"Serenity?"

Another nod. Her name is a knife in my gut.

He sighs, heavy with understanding. "You're out here instead of with her because...?"

Talon sits next to me on a fallen tree. It creaks under our weight.

"She found my gambling papers," I tell him, rubbing my face. "I owe money. Big money."

"How much?" Talon asks. He's too calm about this. I eye him suspiciously.

"Enough to save the center." I snort at how stupid it all is. Here I am with nothing but debts, when the money I owe could help her.

"You could win it back."

I stare at my brother, searching his face for judgment, but I find none. "You think I should play?"

"You should use your skills to help your mate." His eyes, so like our father's, hold mine. "I know why you gamble, brother. It's not the money — it's the challenge, the strategy. You're actually brilliant at it when you're not being stupid."

"Thanks. I think."

"So be brilliant. But this time, do it for her. For something larger than yourself."

An idea forms in my head. I pull out my lucky casino chip and turn it over. "I'd need money to start."

"I have savings." His hand grips my shoulder, warm and sure. "I trust you."

Words I haven't heard in years. "You'd let me?"

He nods without hesitation.

"Fine." My head feels clearer now. "But first, I need to talk to Serenity."

Talon laughs. "Good luck. Human females hit hard when they're angry."

I rub my head, remembering her swat from earlier. My brother doesn't know how right he is.

I track her scent to her office, and my heart clenches at the smell of salt — tears. She sits surrounded by paperwork, her eyes red and swollen, her golden hair a mess from running her hands through it. The sight breaks something in my chest.

"Get out," she says. Her voice shakes. I watch her hands grip the desk hard.

"Not until we talk." I block the door with my body. The room feels too small for an

orc my size. "Please."

She looks up finally. The hurt in her eyes makes my stomach twist. "Why? To tell more lies?"

"No more lies." I move closer, but carefully. Humans spook easy sometimes. "I gamble. I lose money. I do bad things. But everything about you and me is real."

"How do I know?"

"Because you feel the mate bond too." I kneel beside her chair and make myself smaller, vulnerable. "You feel it inside, like I do."

Her lip trembles. "That's not fair."

"I know." I take her small hand in mine, but I half-expect her to pull away. She doesn't. "I want to be better. For you. Let me show you."

"How?"

I tell her about the games, the cards, what I'm good at. What I plan to do. Her eyes get big.

"That's insane," she whispers. "And dangerous."

"Yes."

"You could get killed."

"Yes."

She stares at me. The bond pulses warm between us, like a heartbeat. "Teach me poker."

The words hit me like a punch. After everything—the papers she found, all my secrets, her tears—I didn't expect this. But there's fire in her eyes now.

"If we're doing this, we're doing it together," she says, hands clenched at her sides. "He killed my parents. He's trying to steal their legacy. I want to be part of taking him down."

"No." The word comes out like a growl. My chest rumbles with it. "These games are dangerous. These men kill people."

"So does Ethan." Her voice is steel. "And I'm your mate, remember? That means we're partners. In everything."

I want to refuse, to protect her, but the bond tells me what she needs most is to fight back.

For two days, I show her the cards. How to read faces. When to bet. She learns fast, like she does everything.

"We need insurance," she says on the third morning, pushing a thick folder across the table. "Mom kept records of everything. The equipment tampering, strange bank transfers, threats Ethan made. Enough to interest the police."

One hour later, we sit in the police station. It smells strange. Like humans and paper and coffee. Detective Morris has a shiny head and wears a gray suit. We put all our proof on his desk—the writing, the pictures, the money papers.

"Let me get this straight," Morris says, studying the documents. "You think he killed

your parents over the land?"

"The chemical residue on their equipment matches industrial compounds used in his other developments," Serenity explains. "And now he's running illegal games and using them to pressure people into selling property."

"We can catch him saying it," I add. My voice sounds too loud in the small office. "If you let us wear the recording things."

Morris's eyes narrow. "You want to wear a wire?"

"He'll confess," Serenity insists. "He's cocky when he's winning. And with the evidence we have..."

"It's too dangerous." I grip her hand. "Let me do it alone."

"We're partners," she reminds me. Then to Morris: "We know his operation. The games, the schedule, everything. One night is all we need."

Morris studies us for a long moment. "You'll both wear wires. And we'll have teams in place." He fixes me with a stern look. "No heroics. Get the confession and get out."

On the drive home, Serenity grips the steering wheel. "Will it work?"

I feel her fear, but also her strength. "Has to."

The night comes too fast. She emerges from the bedroom in a black dress that makes my mouth go dry. I am filled with a possessive need—to protect her, to run her far from here, to keep her safe.

But her chin is set, her eyes determined. "Ready?" she asks.

"No." The word tastes bad. "But we go anyway."

We head to one of Ethan's casinos, the Starlight Palace. The lights hurt my eyes—blue and purple everywhere. Gold on the doors. Lots of humans are going inside, hoping to win.

My friends who gamble told me about a special game tonight. Big money. Ethan always plays these games. He owns the place but can't stay away when the bets get high. My friend says he's playing tonight.

I show them the money and they let us in fast. Easy to get in the special card game.

The room hits my nose hard—smoke, whiskey, humans who lost too much. Everyone stares when we walk in. Can't blame them—I'm a big orc squeezed into human clothes. Serenity looks perfect next to me, with her pretty blonde hair and tight black dress.

"Well, well." That voice makes me want to fight. "Look who's here."

Ethan walks up. His eyes crawl over Serenity like something dirty. My hands want to crush him. But Serenity touches my arm, so I stay still.

"Heard about a game." I try to sound calm. "Unless you're scared to play cards with an orc."

His eyes get small. "Costs fifty thousand to play."

I toss Talon's savings on the table—my brother's trust made tangible. "Deal me in."

The first hours are a dance. I lose small, win smaller, all while watching Ethan get looser with each drink. His tells become more obvious — the way he taps his fingers when bluffing, how he leans back with strong hands.

Serenity brings drinks around. I watch Ethan watch her. His eyes get angry when he looks at her.

"Remember that last hike with your folks?" Ethan says during a shuffle. The whiskey makes his words sloppy. "Good climbing stuff matters. One bad rope..." He waves his hand down, like something falling.

Serenity's hand trembles slightly as she sets down his whiskey. "Mom always checked everything three times."

"Didn't help much in the end, did it?" He laughs, too loud. "Sometimes things just... fail."

Ethan motions to his staff, and they bring him a yellow envelope. He tosses it on the table. "Deed to the wildlife center." His smile is pure poison. "Worth millions to developers."

My body goes cold. I look at Serenity. Her face is white.

"That's not yours," she says with steel in her voice.

"Actually, it is. Your daddy signed it over right before he died."

She goes pale. I grip her hand under the table, pouring strength through our bond.

"Fine." I match his smile with my own predatory grin. "All in."

Serenity trembles next to me.

Ethan doesn't look at me anymore. His eyes stay on my mate. Bad eyes, like a snake's.

Glancing around the room, verifying no one else is in listening distance, he leans forward, "You know, your parents were stubborn too, Serenity. Wouldn't sell, wouldn't take my offers."

More chips slide into the pot. "Amazing how equipment can fail, even for experienced climbers."

Serenity asks, "What did you do?"

"Just a little acid on the rope. A frayed carabiner." His smile widens. "Shame they didn't sign the papers before their... accident. Had to get creative with the signatures."

I feel Serenity's fear through our bond. Makes my tusks ache. But I look at my cards. All my years playing poker help now. The cards feel good in my hands. Normal.

Then I get the perfect hand - straight flush. Like the cards want me to win. But when I show them, Ethan's face turns purple with anger.

"You cheated!" The words barely register before I see the gun.

Everything gets clear and slow. My orc body moves fast—I flip the big wood table with one hand, grab Serenity with the other. BANG! Pain hits my shoulder, but I don't care. Must protect mate.

"Get the papers," I say. Use my big body to hide her. Smell her fear and blood and gun smoke. Makes me want to kill.

She moves like a shadow beneath me while I keep Ethan distracted, hurling poker chips at him. Each shot that rings out makes my heart stop until I confirm it hasn't found her.

Air smells like blood and fear. Humans scream. Things crash.

Blue and red lights flash through windows. "Police! Don't move!"

Still keep Serenity behind me when police come in. My shoulder burns bad, blood on my shirt. Show my tusks at healers who come close. Only let them near when I feel through our bond that Serenity is safe.

Relief floods through me. We're alive. We won.

And Ethan will never threaten her again.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Serenity

I drive us home, my fingers tight on the wheel. Two years of questions, of guilt, of wondering what went wrong - all answered in one horrible moment.

"I'll kill him," Agis growls softly.

"No." My voice sounds strange in my ears. "I want him to rot in prison, thinking about what he did. Death's too good for him."

"We won the money," he says, the paper receipt clutched between his massive fingers. "And the recording will make sure Ethan is punished."

I nod. Detective Morris said that between the recording and the receipt, the Red Top Wildlife Center is free and clear. The relief should make me feel better.

But the avalanche of news that I've received tonight keeps anger simmering in my gut. I hold it together until we reach the cabin. Then the walls I've built over two years crumble all at once.

Agis catches me as my legs give out, gathering me against his massive chest.

"I knew something was wrong," I choke out between sobs. "The equipment, the records... God, I should have seen it."

"Not your fault."

"They trusted him. We all did." My fingers dig into his chest, anchoring myself. "He killed them over land. Over money."

Like gambling debts. Like the addiction that nearly tore us apart. The parallel hits hard, and fresh tears come.

"Promise me," I beg, looking up at my mate. "Promise me you're done with gambling. I can't... I can't lose anyone else. Not like this. Not to greed."

"I swear it." He kisses away my tears with infinite gentleness. "No more games. No more lies."

The next few weeks blur together. Detective Morris calls each day with updates on the investigation. They uncover damning evidence in Ethan's office—photographs documenting tampered equipment, forged paperwork, detailed strategies to pressure my parents into selling.

Word spreads quickly through our tight-knit town. The Wildlife Center's parking lot fills with familiar faces bringing comfort and support. Julie arrives from her bakery with fresh coffee and tearful hugs. The McKinnons leave their hardware store to deliver homemade casseroles. Even Mr. Peterson, our usually gruff postmaster, shows up with his cap clutched respectfully in his weathered hands. We gather together, sharing stories and memories, honoring my parents' legacy.

Through it all, Agis remains my foundation.

Day by day, we find our rhythm in this new reality. Agis puts his mountain-learned skills to use, reinforcing and improving the animal enclosures. I begin teaching wilderness safety courses, carrying forward the work my parents loved so deeply.

One evening on the porch, as the sun paints the sky in amber and rose, I watch Agis settle in an enlarged rocking chair he built.

"I want to expand the rescue program," I tell him. "It was Mom's dream to help more animals."

He draws me into his lap, his arms encircling me. "Then that's what we'll do."

The center flourishes under our care. Ethan awaits trial, and soon my parents' killer will face justice. Yet something nags at me.

"Do you think they'd approve?" I whisper. "Of everything we're doing? Of us?"

"They'd be proud," he says softly. "How strong you are, how you care, how you keep going."

My fingers trace the fresh scar on his shoulder, still pink from the shooting. It feels like ages ago, though barely any time has passed. "No more gambling?"

"Never again," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. "I already have everything I need."

The wolves begin their evening song, their howls echoing through the valley. Our newly planted oak saplings reach skyward, promising future shade and shelter. Here in my mate's arms, I've found where I belong.

Perhaps this isn't the future my parents imagined for me. But somehow, it's exactly right.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Summer sunlight streams through the cabin windows as I sort through the last box of my parents' things. The trial ended yesterday—Ethan pled guilty to everything. Murder. Forgery. Money laundering. The works.

"You don't have to do this today," Agis says from the doorway. His massive frame casts a familiar shadow over the floor and I smile.

"I do." I lift out Dad's climbing logbook and run my fingers over his precise handwriting. "Now that I know the truth, I can finally honor them properly."

The last entry still hurts—the green trail, the day Ethan sabotaged their equipment. But the pain has dulled, replaced by something like peace.

On the wall in the lobby of the Red Top Wildlife Center, we've created a memorial—their harnesses, pristine new ropes, and the photos from the evidence locker showing what really happened. Below sits the plaque for the Patricia and James Jones Safety Program.

"First safety course starts next week," I say, leaning back against Agis's chest.

"Your parents would be proud of how you brought their killer to justice," he says. "How you've protected their legacy."

The center is thriving now. Between the reward money from breaking up Ethan's operation and the restitution the court ordered, we've expanded in ways Mom and Dad only dreamed of.

"Speaking of legacies..." I guide Agis's hand to my slightly rounded belly. "The doctor confirmed it this morning. Twins."

His delighted roar probably startles every animal in the sanctuary. Through our bond, his joy blazes like sunlight.

"Two cubs," he breathes, nuzzling my neck. "Like Talon's."

"The second orc-human twins ever recorded." I turn in his arms, grinning. "Your brother says the new nursery is almost ready."

"About that..." He looks sheepish. "My other brothers want to come help."

"How many brothers?"

"Just three. Maybe four. Five at most."

I laugh and kiss him. "Good thing we're expanding the staff housing. This place was meant for family." I gesture to my parents' photo. "All kinds of families."

My parents built this place to protect wildlife. But somehow it's become more - a sanctuary for all lost souls, a place where love crosses every boundary.

"I love you," I tell Agis, and I smile as our bond pulses with shared joy.

His answering smile is brighter than the summer sun. "I love you too, mate."

My parents died protecting what they loved. Now it's my turn to protect this place, these people, our growing family.

"Ready?" Agis asks.

I squeeze his hand. "All in."

"All in," he agrees, and I know it's no gamble this time—just truth.

This is what winning really means.

Thank you for reading Unruly Hearts.