

Where the Ogrekin Roam

*In a world where ogres are supposed
to be extinct, one walks into a bar...*

Book 2 of
The Witch's Bar Chronicles

Eli Rainwater

Chapter 1

Jessie MacCaverty, owner of a small town bar in north Georgia and one of the world's oldest and most powerful witches, looked up from a spell book she read at the end of the bar as a swirl of late October autumn leaves preceded a chestnut-curved vampire through the door. Nicodemus paused for dramatic effect before he gave the bar staff and patrons a sweeping bow with an overly dramatic flourish of his wide-brimmed brown suede hat topped with a cluster of burnt orange-dyed ostrich feathers.

"What on earth are you wearing?" Jessie snorted as she tucked a long, silver curl behind one ear.

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Nicky demanded, looking down at himself and then back at his snickering friend with a tragically wounded face.

"Nothing if we were at the Met Gala," she giggled.

"Some of us believe in owning more than three types of clothing," he said in his most haughty tone, sitting down next to her and draping his floor-length, faux-fur, orange and brown striped coat on a stool. It matched his Italian leather orange boots, skin-tight brown leather pants, and orange silk shirt.

By contrast, Jessie wore her favorite pair of faded, broken-in jeans, that looked just like the rest of her faded, broken-in jeans, and a t-shirt from some bar in Atlanta that had closed years ago. The logo was almost illegible. Her long curls that, like all witches, had turned silver by the time she was thirty, framed her slightly oval, high-cheekboned face and piercing blue eyes. She was over a thousand years old but looked like she was in her mid-forties.

Jessie leaned closer and sniffed the vampire.

“Why do you smell like a pastry?”

“I do not smell like any such thing. It’s Dior’s Vanilla Diorama Fragrance, and it is an homage to Christian Dior’s favorite dessert, the Diorama Gourmand,” he stuck his nose in the air.

“So... a pastry,” Jessie said. Nicky scowled.

“Hey, Nicky. Why are you dressed like a pimp at a pumpkin king’s ball? I thought Halloween was next week,” Caroline Gregor, Jessie’s bartender and one of her apprentices, greeted him as she came out of the storage room with extra liquor bottles for the night. Her blue eyes sparkled with barely contained laughter, and she tossed her long, blonde, curly ponytail over her shoulder as she unloaded her precious cargo on the bar.

“Wow, Nicky. If I’d known I would see outfits like that around here, then I would have asked to move on instead of hanging around this place,” Charlie, the resident ghost, added as he floated toward them with his succubus girlfriend, Mary Jo Sutton, by his side and trying to hide her smile.

When he was alive, Charlie had a heart attack in the bathroom while taking Mary Jo up on her offer to take him to heaven. She hadn’t meant for the experience to be quite so literal. Now he was stuck in the bar for the foreseeable future and tried to make the most of his afterlife by filling the liquor and beer orders, listening to gossip, and complaining that Jessie didn’t spend enough of her hard-earned money on sports programming for the TV over the bar.

“Haha. You’re all so hilarious,” Nicky glowered.

“You’re going to give yourself wrinkles if you keep frowning like that,” said Jared Daniels, Jessie’s other apprentice and barback as he followed Caroline with cases of beer.

“Vampires don’t get wrinkles, and I don’t have to put up with this,” Nicky drew himself up and tried to reclaim the tattered remnants of his dignity.

“Then don’t dress like a pimp.” Jessie grinned.

“Whatever,” he rolled his eyes.

“How are you doing?” she asked in a softer tone, her blue eyes full of concern.

It had only been a few weeks since Nicky’s lover, a sweet and serious gargoyle named Warsaw, was the first casualty in a plot to overthrow the tenuous Fae, Cryptid, Witch, and Human Alliance (or “ficwah” as Jessie and Nicky liked to call it). The Alliance was still in its infancy, and Nicky’s brother, Mikael, was instrumental in its creation and development. Like other prominent leaders and communities, Mikael believed that the fae, cryptids, humans, and witches needed to learn how to coexist. After all, it wasn’t like the supernatural community could hide its existence anymore now that it was out in the open.

Unfortunately for Nicky and Warsaw, only some agreed that peace was the answer. Most of the shyer and lesser-known fae and cryptids wanted to stay in the shadows, and many humans feared what they didn’t understand. More dangerously, though, was the shadow group of witches who sought power and domination. Warsaw’s assassination was one of the newly formed cabal’s attempts to drive a wedge into the Alliance’s peace talks.

Nicky had fallen for the thoughtful and brilliant gargoyle hard, and Warsaw’s death devastated the flirtatious and mercurial vampire in a way Jessie had only seen a few times in her long life. She still felt that enough people had not paid for his pain.

“I’m okay,” he shrugged and reached for the Manhattan that Caroline set in front of him. “I’ll heal. I promise. It’s just going to take time.”

“I know, honey,” she said with a gentle smile, reaching over to give him a side hug. “But maybe lay off the retail therapy. You really do look like a pimp.”

He rolled his eyes again and changed the subject.

“Have you decided if you’re going to talk to Tug?”

Jessie sighed, watching Jared out of the corner of her eye as he tensed up while pretending not to eavesdrop.

Jared, it turned out, was an air witch, much to their friend Isabel’s delight. He spent a day a week at the Witch Council studying air magic with Isabel, who was the head of the Council.

Jared was a tall, dark-skinned young witch. Running and playing sports kept him in shape, and his impeccable fashion sense and good looks made him the object of interest to quite a few of Jessie’s patrons— human and otherworldly. Sadly for his many admirers, his focus was on his budding career as an RPG game developer.

He had shown up at the bar with an ogre named Tug a few months ago. An ogre who shouldn’t exist because they were supposed to be extinct. Jared had refused to tell Jessie where he got both the deep gash on his arm and the only ogre in the world, and then he informed her that Tug would be her new security guard and tenant in the apartment over the bar.

“I don’t want to breach his or Jared’s trust,” she pitched her voice lower. “But John’s right. We need allies, and we need to make sure that the other side doesn’t get to the ogres first if they do, in fact, still exist somewhere.”

“The first group that attacked us were, for all intents and purposes, just children, but we don’t know how far this thing goes or if it’s even just witches,” Nicky said.

“That’s also true,” she agreed. “Yeah, I’ll talk to Tug and Jared tonight, but I won’t push it if he doesn’t want to open up. We’ll figure out another way.”

“Fair. How’s John doing?”

“Good,” she smiled. “Lucky for him, werewolves heal quickly.”

John Rossford, the local sheriff and leader of the neighborhood wolf pack, had been badly wounded when the cabal almost destroyed Jessie’s bar. Greta, Jessie’s best friend who spent most of her time traveling around the world doing research and development for the Witch Council, had to threaten to use her earth magic to crate him if he didn’t stop trying to fight.

The process of transforming him back to a human shape had been long, arduous, and dangerous after a broken rib punctured his lung. However, it had also been very eye-opening for Jessie; they had always cared about each other, but she had never been willing to let it go beyond flirtation. After all, witches could live for thousands of years, and no one was sure how long werewolves lived– they usually never made it long enough to find out. It was hard to want to be in a long-term relationship when you’ll probably outlive your partner by a few centuries. She decided to take a chance on John, and now they were on their way to becoming the most nauseatingly adorable couple in town according to the regulars at the bar.

Jessie loved her bar. She had designed everything about the building to support the witches who called it home or needed a sanctuary. The fire-cured oak and the jars filled with candles along the bar top helped fire magic flare to life. Window beds of ivy grew in front of the old, stained glass windows behind the bar and cut-glass windows overlooking the front porch so that earth magic could blossom. The herb and flower gardens behind the building flanked a small pond

that was sanctified under a full moon so water magic could flow, and Jessie always kept an assortment of incense and feathers to uplift her air magic witch friends. The bar itself had been a gift to Jessie from Greta, and Jessie frequently drew on it to supplement her own fire magic when she did tasks around the place.

The front door swung open, letting in another swirl of leaves and wind that caused the candles on the golden wood of the bar to gutter.

“Greetings, everyone!” LaSalle, their Nain Rouge friend and ally, belched spectacularly into his matted beard. His red eyes glowed with a mischievous gleam, and Matthias, the more uncertain rat-faced Fir Darrig, was right behind him.

They made quite the pair. LaSalle’s gregarious personality, complete disregard for how much beer he spilled down his jerkin, and frequent cawing laughs were a sharp contrast to Matthias’ shy demeanor, neat appearance, and rare smiles. Still, they had become instant and very close friends.

When LaSalle’s clan sent him to warn the fae about an attempt to sabotage the peace talks, he stayed to help Jessie fight against the cabal. Then he just never left.

Ostensibly, he was only there to observe (and drink as much of the local beer as possible) per the standard Nain Rouge policy of “if it’s not our fight, we don’t get involved.” In reality, his clan did not oppose the idea of him jumping in headfirst if Jessie and her friends needed someone to have their backs. More than one group of fae and cryptids had fallen victim to the original cabal centuries ago, and the Nain Rouge’s memories were not so short-lived that they wanted to remain in the dark— or pass up the chance for a bit of revenge.

“Hi, LaSalle! Hi, Matthias,” Jessie grinned with delight as she hopped off her stool and ran to hug them.

“Jessica, lovely to see you again,” Matthias was still a little formal.

It had taken Jessie and Greta a lot of convincing to make the Fir Darrig believe that their offer to visit them whenever he wanted was sincere. Being one of the “rat people” and shunned by pretty much the whole world made it hard for him to trust. Like the Nain Rouge, the Fir Darrig were a race of fae with a nasty reputation for causing harm and mischief, but in reality, they only treated others the same way they were treated in return. Sadly, in the new cabal’s amateurish attempt to overthrow the Alliance, one of Matthias’ few friends had paid with her life.

The cabal had manipulated Brigitte, a banshee, into becoming a necromancer. Necromancers were fae or cryptid harbingers of death who were transformed into mortal witches and granted the power of the witch who completed the ritual. Necromancy was considered an abomination to the universe. Once the witch completed the ritual, both the witch and the harbinger had to pay a karmic price. Jessie still had no idea how many necromancers were out there with purloined magic working on behalf of the cabal.

In Brigitte’s case, the price was too much to bear. Nicky had been forced to kill her, thus allowing the banshee to finally escape her fate after long years of suffering. Jessie was determined that not only would Matthias see justice brought to Brigitte, but he wouldn’t be left alone in a world that tried to forget that he and others like him— those who weren’t pretty and graceful— existed. Not that Jessie was motivated by pity. Matthias was intelligent and loyal, and his unlikely friendship with LaSalle added a dynamic to their little group that Jessie wouldn’t give up for anything.

The door swung open again to let in more leaves, much to Jared’s annoyance.

“Can everyone just come in at once?” he demanded, grabbing the broom for what seemed like the millionth time that night.

“But you sweep it all up so well!” Caroline teased him with a wink at her girlfriend. Cassie laughed and took a sip from something electric blue.

Caroline’s magical powers grew in leaps and bounds, shocking even Jessie and Greta. She had come into her elemental powers as a water witch, which was appropriate since she had a knack for making the most unlikely drinks. Cassie loved them. Nicky and his older brother, Mikael, were frequently appalled.

Cassandra Rodriguez was a human with a knack for technology that she used to help the local witch, fae, and cryptid communities. Most cryptids couldn’t handle silver, and the fae were allergic to iron; both struggled to adapt to new concepts like cell phones and the internet. Witches had magical electromagnetic fields that shorted out pretty much everything they touched. Cassie’s ability to insulate and protect equipment like cellphones and security system and her willingness to help the local supernatural community learn and grow with the times made her invaluable to many members of their small town.

“When I think about the centuries and effort and sacrifice to perfect distillation, drinks like that hurt my soul,” Mikael shook his head as he took the stool on the other side of Nicky and eyed Cassie’s drink with distaste.

Tonight Mikael wore a slate gray bespoke suit that was probably worth more than Jessie’s bar. The crimson silk shirt underneath, like everything else he owned, brought out his gray eyes and complimented his athletic build. While vampires were known for being materialistic and vain, the brothers took it to a whole new level with wardrobes from the finest houses in Paris, only the best hairstylists out of

New York, and penthouse suites around the world. Jessie had never seen Mikael less than impeccably dressed. She didn't even want to think about what a pair of his or Nicky's shoes cost. She wasn't hurting for money by any means; she just couldn't wrap her head around the logic of paying a small fortune for a pair of footwear.

Rupert, the huge shape-shifting Matagot, accompanied the raven-haired vampire. Rupert had befriended them when his companion, Madame Blanche, Warsaw's employer and the European cryptid ambassador for the peace talks and all-around lovely White Lady, had been kidnapped by the cabal. He stretched before eyeing the bar to see if he should jump on it. After all, Rupert preferred the shape of a cat— including a cat's temperament and personality.

"Don't you dare," Caroline scolded him, tossing her long, blonde ponytail over her shoulder again. "We just got ready for service. It's bad enough that you shed all over the place when we're closed."

"Are you suggesting I do something as banal as 'shed'?" he demanded in his raspy voice.

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm flat out telling you," Caroline glared at him with her hands on her hips.

"Actually, Rupert, do you mind watching the door with LaSalle and Matthias? I need to steal Tug for a little bit," Jessie interrupted their battle of wills. "Jared, I need you too."

Jared hesitated, trying to decide whether or not to argue. She returned his gaze without saying a word until he dropped his eyes.

"Yes, ma'am," he sighed, shoulders drooping in resignation as he headed down the hall toward her office. Jessie tried to fight the feeling that her apprentice was being led to his doom, but considering what they had dealt with

already, it was hard. And if her gut was right, it was about to get harder.

Chapter 2

Tug watched them without changing expression.

“Tug? Can I see you for a minute?” Jessie asked.

“Yes,” he followed her down the hall behind Jared to her tiny office, which quickly became very cramped.

Jessie sat down at her beat-up, ancient desk that was held together by equal parts spellwork and duct tape. In her opinion, if something reached the point of absolute comfort, then why replace it? Shockingly, most of her friends did not share the sentiment.

She gestured to the decrepit-looking but very comfortable sofa opposite her desk. Jared sat down while Tug leaned against the wall. It wasn't that the big, grayish-green ogre didn't trust Jessie when she said the couch was safe. He just preferred not to be the one to prove her wrong.

“Look, I'm not going to beat around the bush here. Tug, you literally saved our lives when the cabal attacked us. They had pushed Greta and me to our limits, John was badly hurt, and Mikael and Nicky were about half an hour away from losing their strength at sunrise. Not to be melodramatic, but we wouldn't have made it in time for Cassie's charge,” she said, smiling briefly at the memory of her IT guru bursting through the front door on the back of a centaur, screaming lines from *Die Hard* while leading a cavalry charge of local cryptids. Her smile faded.

“I never asked how Jared found you, and I don't want to pry. I'll drop it if you don't want to talk about it. But you need to understand something. The cabal knows about you now. Whatever reason you're not supposed to be here, whatever reason the world thinks ogres are extinct, whoever set that up knows by now that their deception failed. If there

are more of you, we need to know, and we need to know where they are because, yes, it would be nice if they came and fought for our side, but more importantly, we need to make sure that they're not captured, tricked, or used to fight for the enemy. You saw what the cabal did to Brigitte. Don't let them do that to the ogres."

Tug looked at the ground, and Jared gave the ogre an encouraging smile.

"It's your call, buddy. But you should know that everything I learned about protecting and helping people, I learned from my parents and her," Jared nodded in Jessie's direction. "If she says she won't make you tell her where you're from, she means it. But she's not lying to you. These people are tricking the fae into doing unspeakable things and trying to capture witches like Caroline and me so they can use us without getting their hands dirty. They want to take over the world. At least let Jessie protect your family."

"I owe you my life. It's the least I can do," Jessie added. "Just think about it. I can take you to the Library where it's safe, and we know no one can hear you."

There was a long pause. Jessie almost gave up when Tug spoke.

"Can we go to the Library now," he finally asked, looking up at her and then nodding to Jared. "Both of us?"

"Of course," she said in surprise, rising from the desk. She had expected more of a fight— or, at the very least, a delay tactic or two.

"This might take a while. We probably should let Caroline and everyone know," Jared suggested.

"Good call. I'll be right back."

Minutes later, they were in front of the oak panel behind her desk as she pressed a knothole and whispered the spell that opened a portal in the wall to the Library she shared

with Greta. She led them through the shimmering barrier and swallowed against the wave of vertigo and nausea witches felt whenever they crossed portals between worlds.

“Do you want me to ask Greta to stay away?” she asked once they were on the other side.

“Yes, please. Nothing personal, it’s just that it’s going to be hard enough telling everything to just you,” Jared said, a pleading look in his dark eyes.

“Of course. I can fill her in on whatever she needs to know later. Make yourselves comfortable. I know the furniture doesn’t look like much, but it’s pretty reinforced. Does anyone want tea or coffee?”

“No, thanks,” they said in unison. Tug’s deep rumble startled the cats who shared the Library.

At some point in every witch’s life, they needed a place of their own to study and store their artifacts, books, and, in Jessie and Greta’s case, their cats: jet-black Aleister Meowley, Lemur, a sweet and shy gray tabby, Spot the lap-hogging tortoiseshell, Lucy, a tiny but very bossy calico, sixteen-pound and perpetually starving to death orange and white Sunny, and now Ace, another elegant black cat with a penchant for tummy rubs.

The cats shared the massive room with its patched and mismatched comfortable furniture, walls of floor-to-ceiling shelves laden with books and artifacts, a cavernous stone fireplace, and windows overlooking a snow-capped mountain range lit by moonlight. Jared was pretty sure the mountains did not exist anywhere in their world.

“Okay,” Jessie got comfortable in an armchair by the fire while Spot jumped into her lap. Tug and Jared sat opposite her on the sofa, and Sunny and Lemur disappeared wherever they hid as soon as strangers showed up.

Lucy jumped on Tug, who, startled, tentatively stroked the tiny cat's head while she purred thunderously. He winced as she started to make biscuits on his lap. His grayish-green skin could become diamond-hard in the heat of battle, but it was just as vulnerable to cat claws as anyone else's when he wasn't on a rampage. Aleister and Ace curled up on either side of Jared like twin jet-black statues, not quite on his lap but in reach of hands should Jared decide to start delegating scratches. Jared obliged them.

"Everyone comfortable? Start whenever you're ready," Jessie said briskly, seeing that they would drag this out all night if they could.

Tug and Jared exchanged a glance.

"Okay, I'll start," Jared sighed. "You've met my parents, and you know my dad adopted me because, you know, male witches can't have kids, and he and my mom have been really supportive about my working with you and about me making games and stuff for a career. Well, I found this old platform, like a disc, in their garage, and it seemed like the perfect thing to use for a portal into a world I want to build."

"Wait, you plan to build a world?" Jessie was startled. She knew her apprentice was talented, but she didn't know he was this ambitious.

"Well, not a real world. Okay, so role-playing games take place in game worlds, right?"

She nodded.

"Well, I want to make a sim world, like a holodeck kind of thing. You know, like in *Star Trek*," he explained. "The idea is that it will have everything a person needs to play a game in real-time: the quests, the NPCs, scenery, animals, raids, drops, everything. And the NPCs are just part of the game. If they're defeated, they disappear and respawn about ten minutes later."

“Jared, you know that’s kickass, right?” Jessie was impressed. He grinned and ducked his head, embarrassed at the praise.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I built out the spell for a test region.”

“Wait, you already did this? Without my knowledge and supervision? Were your parents at least involved?” Jessie demanded, eyebrows raised.

Apprenticeships had strict guidelines and rules about unsupervised experimentation for a reason. When a witch began to come into their powers, it was imperative that they find a teacher or get some type of education. A witch who didn’t know what they were doing could hurt themselves or others or even, as it turned out, show up out of nowhere with an ogre. Jared looked guiltily at the floor.

“No, but I thought it wouldn’t be that big of a deal! It wasn’t supposed to be a real place,” he defended himself.

“I see. We’ll discuss that later, although I’m sure you learned the obvious consequences of experimenting with spellwork of this scope without the approval and supervision of your teacher or a full-fledged witch,” she gestured to Tug, who was too enthralled with Lucy to notice. The little cat was upside down in his lap, purring while he rubbed her tummy with one massive finger.

Jessie turned back to Jared.

“So you built the spell for the region. Then what happened?”

“Well, I got my group together, and we went through the portal I made using the platform I found.”

“Your group?”

“Yeah, William, Dain, and Tabinda. Robin played with us for a while, but he was too busy with Alliance stuff by the time I made the portal.”

“Wait, Robin the Puck? *That* Robin? And Mara’s Dain?”
Jessie was startled.

While it didn’t surprise her that Robin, Oberon’s emissary for the peace talks, was into games, she had no idea that Dain and Jared had become friends. It made sense if she stopped to think about it. The young Tuatha de Danann page who served the local fae Duchess was probably close to Jared’s age. Jessie imagined that standing all day in front of the decrepit cathedral that hid the entrance to the Faery Hill could get pretty dull.

“Yes, and William is a human I hang out with, and Tabinda is a vampire,” he continued, getting irritated with all the interruptions.

“Hold on a second,” Jessie said sharply. “You took a *human* into an untested world?”

“I had already tested it on myself. Jeez, Jess. I wasn’t going to let him be a guinea pig!” Jared sounded downright insulted.

“Oh, that makes it so much better. We will have a serious talk about this later, young man! Now go on,” Jessie crossed her arms and scowled. Jared bit his lip and looked at the floor again.

Tug was oblivious to their discussion. It blew his mind that this tiny, fluffy creature wanted to be his friend.

“Look, I know you’re upset, and I know I fucked up. But I shut it all down once we realized what was going on. I promised not to tell anyone about that world, and I couldn’t break my promise.”

Jessie felt some of her anger dissipate. He had strong convictions and stronger loyalty, and she couldn’t fault him for that.

“All right, just tell me what happened,” she relented. “I’ll try to keep the interruptions to a minimum.”

“Okay, here goes,” Jared took a breath and began the story that had stretched for what seemed like an eternity in Tug’s life.

Chapter 3

“Come on, man, aren’t you ready yet?” I asked William, who just couldn’t get it together.

“I’m coming! Give me a minute,” William’s robes were way too big for him, and he couldn’t get them to hang the right way. He’s this really tall and skinny white guy, and the robes were made for someone a lot bulkier than he is. It didn’t help that his glasses wouldn’t stay up and his hair kept falling into his face. He’s trying to grow it out.

He was always more into books and learning stuff than doing anything active, which is why he was our healer. I don’t know why he decided to go with the most over-the-top and impressive set of robes he could find unless he wanted to impress Tabinda. He’s not a vampire groupie or anything like that, but he’d still had a crush on her forever.

Tabinda waited for us at my dad’s garage with Dain. She’s a pretty cool vampire, probably fifteen when she was turned. She was born in Persia a long time ago. She’s our hunter. Man, that girl is deadly with a crossbow! She had on a sweet set of green leather armor, perfect for camouflage in trees.

Dain had leather armor too, but his was darker green and black, and he had a brace of knives. He’d been practicing throwing them and gotten pretty good. See, he wanted to try out a rogue character. His armor looked more practical than ours, and my guess is that it was the real thing from Mara’s armory. As the group’s champion, I had this badass set of chainmail armor and a one-handed thin blade. I had a really nice, sturdy shield too.

Dain was excited because he got to hang out with people his age. Well, his age as far as how faeries mature anyway.

We had already included him in a couple of tabletop campaigns, and he's surprisingly good at basketball. Don't tell him I said that. I'm tired of him kicking my ass and gloating.

"Took you long enough," Tabinda complained when we got there.

My folks were on vacation, so we knew we could get in some good game time without them finding out what we were up to, and before you say anything, I'm sure they're going to be just as pissed off as you are. You can all yell at me after I finish telling this story.

Anyway, a couple of months ago, I found the portal buried in the garage under what looked like a bunch of ancient junk, like old clothes and papers from when my uncle was still around. I hadn't seen any of that stuff before. I don't know; maybe my folks had it in storage or something. He disappeared right before the witch rebellion, and no one in my family really wanted to talk about him. From the few stories my grandmother and my mom told me, he was pretty much a piece of shit.

I figured it was safe to leave the portal there while I worked on it. Hell, the only time Dad goes in the garage is when he wants to smoke a cigar and have a beer and thinks he can hide it from Mom.

I had configured the spell using one of my dad's old spell books he gave me when I started studying with you. He had written a bunch of notes on porting, and I used some theory you taught us to get it right. I was pretty proud of it. It opened into this cool world with a clearing and some trees, and I plugged in some genetic traits for things like plants, birds, stuff like that. I even made goblins for us to try to fight.

"You're sure this is safe?" William asked again. I mean, I get it. Humans don't understand magic, so it's not like I

expected him to act on faith. He's pretty brilliant too. He likes understanding exactly how things work.

"I tested it on myself," I tried to make him feel better.

"Look, man. We don't have to do this. I just thought playing in a real setting could be fun."

"I think it's cool," Tabinda said. That's all William had to hear, and we were good to go. I activated the portal, and we went through into the sim world. Or so we thought.

At first glance, it was just a clearing in some woods. Our first clue that something wasn't right was Tabinda. See, it was night in the real world, but I had the sim set for daytime. As soon as we got through and came out in the sunlight, she could barely stand up.

"Dude, what did you do?" she yelled at me. "It feels like I'm in the middle of the Sahara or something. Did you have to make the sunlight so real and so strong?"

I was just as confused as she was.

"It's not supposed to be," I told her. "It's supposed to just be light."

Dain looked around, bewildered.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I can feel the energy of the cosmos here more strongly than in our world."

"The cosmos?" William asked.

"Yeah, the fae use the universe's energy to fuel our magic. We don't use cardinal elements like witches," he explained. I know you told us that at one point, but I forgot it. I'm glad William didn't ask me.

"Jared, did you base this off of the real world? Because there are a lot of plants around here, and they need sunlight to grow. Maybe you incorporated more science than you thought," William pointed out.

"Tabinda, do you want to go back?" Dain asked.

Tabinda thought for a minute.

“Yeah. I’ll go back and screw off for a while. Come get me when the sun goes down, okay?”

“No problem,” I opened the portal for her. We figured we only had an hour of sunlight anyway.

She went back through, and we looked around. I hadn’t gone very far the first time I had checked out the world on my own before I told my friends about it. I didn’t want to get too far from the portal if something happened.

See, sometimes I think things through! You don’t have to roll your eyes that hard.

We were in a clearing in the middle of some woods. I didn’t recognize any of the birds who just sat in the trees and watched us. In fact, it didn’t look very much like the world I had made at all. For one thing, it was a lot more... fleshed out. I don’t know how else to describe it. It was actually kind of creepy.

The birds didn’t sing, fly away, or do anything. They just stared at us. We explored the clearing for a while, checking out the plants and insects. I didn’t recognize any of them, but I just chalked it up to plugging in some generic traits and letting the game compile the data to come up with the rest. The sky was brilliantly blue, like, bluer than I ever knew it could be.

“Hey, there’s a path,” Dain pointed at a little break in the trees that snaked away from us. He started to head for it, and William followed. I hesitated. I had a weird feeling in my gut.

“Guys, I didn’t put that there,” I told them. They stopped and looked back.

“Are you sure?” William asked.

“Yeah, man. I’m sure. I have all my notes and a very detailed diagram of exactly what I built into the spell for this

game. I only made this clearing. We're supposed to be ambushed by some goblins, and that's it."

"Well, maybe the goblins left," William said, but there was already doubt in his voice.

"They're not supposed to. They're NPCs. They're only supposed to do what they're programmed to do. I didn't make these plants or the birds or insects either. I don't know, man. Something feels weird. I think we should go back."

Considering that I always pushed them to try new things, that got their attention.

"The sun will be down soon. Let's just look around until we can get Tabinda over here. Then we can all go down the path together," Dain is actually a pretty good voice of reason.

Yes, I'm sure he would have been more careful about building and exploring a sim world too, and you promised you would stop interrupting. Okay, so you promised to keep the interruptions to a minimum. Whatever.

We looked around the clearing. There was no sign of the goblins. Maybe they did wander off, but NPCs are supposed to be restricted to an area of movement. They're not supposed to develop sentient capabilities and go exploring.

"What kinds of plants are these?" Dain asked with a frown. The fae should know all about flora and fauna, so the fact that he didn't recognize them did not make me feel better.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I put in basic plant characteristics but didn't program anything specific. I wanted to see how this trial run went before I did more work on the sim."

Dain looked like he had doubts too.

"If you put in basic characteristics, then why don't they look like any of the plants on Earth?"

“Man, are you sure we’re in a sim?” William asked, looking around.

“I don’t think we are,” Dain sounded even more doubtful than he looked.

“What else could it be?” I asked. I heard where they were coming from, but this was my baby. I wanted to make it work.

“What if we’re on another world?” Dain lit up like that was the most exciting thing that could ever happen to him.

“Imagine, we could be somewhere no one from our world has ever been! We could be real-life explorers!”

“Yeah, except we also don’t know what’s out there. What if something got the goblins? Can we take on anything bigger than we are? What happens if we die here? Do we die for real?” William sounded more nervous about being there.

“Maybe we should go back,” I felt even more strongly like something was wrong.

“The sun’s down enough that Tabinda will be okay if we get her,” Dain said.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m going to do that.”

Technically we should be able to defend ourselves if something attacked us. Even though we all started the game as low-level characters, the programming language I incorporated into the spell made sure that the NPCs were slightly weaker than we were. I planned to increase their difficulty levels if our trial run worked out and we decided to keep developing the game.

If any of us died in combat, we should, in theory, respawn at the portal. The NPCs would respawn about every ten minutes or so. But with that weird feeling in my gut, I didn’t want to risk it. What if we really were on another world, and one of us died? Or worse, what if we killed a real inhabitant? Having a vampire at full power with us was smart.

I opened the portal, and Tabinda looked at us in surprise.

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean? We said we’d come for you when the sun went down,” I knew it had been at least an hour, so I had no idea why she looked so confused.

“How can the sun be down already? You just sent me through the portal.”

We all looked at each other, completely lost.

“No, we sent you back here about an hour ago,” William told her.

“Dude, it’s only been a minute at the most,” she argued.

“Come on,” I grabbed Tabinda by the arm and dragged her through the portal. It was now completely dark in the clearing.

“Jared, look,” Dain pointed at the sky.

Two moons were coming up, you could see more stars than I ever knew could be in the sky, and none of our constellations were there.

“I definitely did not do that,” I told them. “Believe me, I would love to take credit for this because holy hell, that is an amazing view, but it’s not from me.”

“Um, what’s that?” Tabinda sounded... not scared, but she had an uncertain tone in her voice for the first time since I had met her.

I looked where she pointed and froze. Something huge blocked the path. Then it walked into the moonlight, and I recognized it from some of the frescoes at the Hill the few times I had hung out there with Dain. We stood there and looked at a real, not extinct, ogre.

“Please tell me that’s not one of the goblins we have to fight because if you made goblins that look like ogres, then you and I need to have a very serious conversation about

expectations versus reality, my dude,” William said in a remarkably calm voice, considering what we were up against.

“Ogres are extinct,” Dain sounded dazed. “They disappeared over three hundred years ago.”

“Guys, extinct or not, I think that is an actual ogre, and I didn’t make it. We need to get out of here. Now,” I was very proud that my voice stayed steady because I was pretty sure I was one step away from pissing my armor.

“That is a great plan,” Tabinda agreed. We backed slowly toward the portal while I cast the spell to open it.

“Any day now, Jared,” Dain’s voice was tense.

But nothing happened. The portal wouldn’t open.

“Why won’t it open? Get it open!” William started to panic.

“William, calm down! Lower your voice! We can’t show fear,” Tabinda snapped. She had been an assassin in her past life. If anyone could get us out of this mess now, it was her.

“There are two more!” William could barely keep his voice under control.

“Why aren’t they doing anything?” Dain stopped backing up and looked at the ogres, puzzled.

He was right. They just calmly watched us, and that’s when I realized they didn’t have any weapons. In fact, one of them held what looked like a giant guitar.

“Fuck it. It’s not like they can kill me,” Tabinda decided, putting her crossbow on the ground in a universal gesture of peace.

She took a deep breath and marched across the clearing toward the ogres, who watched her come toward them like three giant statues. It’s not like we had a choice. The portal wouldn’t open, and the path was the only way out of the clearing. We couldn’t stand there all night.

Tabinda reached the ogres, and we watched as she bowed. We could see them talking, but we couldn't hear what they said. Finally, the biggest one bowed back to her, and they turned around and headed down the path as she walked back to us.

"They're really nice and very intelligent," she said, astonished. I know I was. Sorry, Tug, but there were some pretty nasty stereotypes about ogres for a long time. Well, there still are, I guess.

"What did they say?" William still sounded nervous.

"They welcomed us, asked where we came from and how we got here, and said that if we can't get the portal open, then we can spend the night in their village."

William and I looked at each other. We'd been best friends since we were kids, so I knew what he was thinking. Now that we knew that we weren't in danger, the scholar part of him wanted to head for that village so badly he could almost taste it. The sensible part wanted to go home and get an adult to come back with us.

"What do you think? Try the portal one more time?" he asked.

"It can't hurt. Then we can go from there," I shrugged, but the portal was already open when we turned around.

"What the hell?" Dain sounded as stunned as I felt. Oh, by the way, it's hilarious to listen to him swear. You know, because he's so proper.

"Come on, before it closes again," Tabinda grabbed her crossbow in one hand and William's sleeve in the other, practically dragging him through the portal and back into my garage with the rest of us right behind her.

I'm glad my friends are who they are because anyone else would have cussed me out and walked out forever, but they just looked at me, waiting for an explanation.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that’s not my sim.”

I was so disappointed. I thought I had made a world that had never existed before, and no, it just turned out that we went somewhere else.

“What do we do with it?” Dain asked.

“I don’t think we should explore it until we have a better understanding of that world’s limitations,” William said.

“Maybe the ogres can give us more information.”

I stared at him.

“Wait, you mean you want to go back and talk to the ogres?” I couldn’t believe it. I mean, it wasn’t all that surprising that he wanted to learn more, but I have to admit that I figured he would want to get someone older and wiser first.

“Of course! Are you kidding me? Dude! You found another *world*! And there are ogres! Think of the possibilities of study!” I hadn’t heard William this excited in years.

“Of course we have to return! There are ogres! I can’t wait to share this with Mara,” Dain squealed. I was surprised he didn’t start jumping up and down and clapping his hands like a little kid.

“Before we do anything, we have to figure out why the portal didn’t work,” Tabinda cut them off.

Something kept nagging at me that I couldn’t put my finger on, and even though we were back in our world, I still had that wrong feeling in my gut.

“I think it was the ogres,” I said.

“What do you mean?” William asked.

“They’re supposed to be extinct, but then we find them on a whole different world. What if they aren’t supposed to

come back here, and the portal closed itself to keep them out?”

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

“I think we need to ask Robin,” Tabinda finally said.

“Ogres are fae. If anyone would know, he would.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Okay, I’ll try to track him down. But no one says anything about this to anyone else, understand? Including Mara, Dain.”

“Yeah, of course. Are you okay?” Dain looked worried.

I led them out of the garage and locked the door behind me.

“I have a bad feeling. Something’s not right. That’s not the world I made, and I don’t know where it came from. And why were there ogres there? I don’t know, man. I just feel like something’s wrong. I’ll let you know what Robin says, okay? Let’s meet back here tomorrow at sundown.”

“Works for me,” Tabinda shrugged and headed toward her motorcycle.

“See you tomorrow, guys,” Dain waved before he opened his portal and disappeared.

“Want me to stick around while you call Robin?” William asked me.

“Yeah, but let’s go back to my place. I don’t know why, but I feel like we shouldn’t do that around the portal,” I said as we got in my car and pulled out. I thought I saw a light in the garage. I should have checked, but when I looked again, it was gone, so I thought it was probably just my headlights on the window. Man, I really wish I had checked, though. Things would have been so different if I had.