

“Ringle’s novel is fast-paced and sparkling with dangerous spells and unexpected delights. The goblins aren’t ethereal and magical; they don’t sparkle, shimmer, or shine. They repulse and draw you in — all at the same time.”

—Kate Ristau, author of *Shadow Girl* and *Clockbreakers*

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“Once I entered Molly’s beautifully crafted world where magic and reality mingled, I didn’t want to leave! Throughout the tale, magic and nature are woven together in a clever and believable way. It’s wild and rich and dangerous and beautiful..”

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“Highly rated for its creativity and charm, I strongly recommend that you get lost in this magical world as fast as possible.”

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“This was a beautiful story, and I’m really excited to see how it unfolds in future installments of the series.”

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“This novel jumps right into the action and doesn’t look back! Readers of all kinds, and especially those that enjoy paranormal fiction, will be instantly intrigued by the spirit world and the reincarnations of ancient Greek gods who are able to travel there.”

—San Diego Book Review (*Persephone’s Orchard*)



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THE  
GOBLINS  
OF  
BELLWATER

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### **THE GOBLINS OF BELLWATER**

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Dedicated to my sisters,  
both the biological and the honorary.

“Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me;  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men.”

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI, “GOBLIN MARKET”

## CHAPTER ONE

WITH NOT QUITE ENOUGH GOLD IN HIS POCKET, KIT SYLVAIN TRUDGED THROUGH THE UNDERBRUSH, TRAMPLING SALAL and fern under his hiking boots. The sun had set, and the light was fading. Not that there had been much light to begin with. It was a Wednesday in early December, and here on the western side of Puget Sound, clouds generally socked everything in for the whole winter, and a good deal of fall and spring too. Tonight the sky hung pewter gray between the swaying fir branches high above, and on the forest floor the colors were washed out to a greenish black.

Kit couldn't see the rising full moon what with the thick forest and all the clouds, but he knew it was there.

By now he didn't even bother with a flashlight. He knew where to go. He wouldn't recommend anyone else wander out here alone after dark, though.

He weaseled between close-growing trunks and stopped in a tiny clearing wedged in by six thick trees. Only dead fir needles lay under his feet here; no other plants could take the constant lack of sunlight. Except mushrooms, of course. Never any shortage of mushrooms.

Kit ran his hand through his hair and pulled the slim gold necklace from the pocket of his leather jacket. Another full moon, another offering.

He lifted his face toward the treetops and whistled a few notes of one of the the tribe's songs. None were tunes you'd hear on the radio, though

Kit would have sworn one of them had stolen riffs from a Bowie song. No surprise. Goblins stole stuff every chance they got.

In answer to his whistle, a few notes on a pipe floated down from the trees. Then someone blew a raspberry from a hundred feet up, and someone else cackled.

*Immature buttheads. God.*

“Guys.” Kit held up the chain. Three little gold hearts dangled from it. “It’s me.”

“Kiiiiit. Daaaarling.” The cooing voice sank closer to the ground.

At the base of the trees, something light caught his eye. Several puffy white mushrooms had arranged themselves into a row. The line trailed out between two of the trees, through a space that hadn’t been there a minute earlier.

He gritted his teeth and walked forward, following the mushroom trail. The goblins wouldn’t show their faces unless you accepted their invitation and followed their path. But he hated doing it, every time.

Soon he reached a spot where the mushrooms formed a circle. They glowed, casting a bluish-white light on the ferns and roots. Kit stood in the ring and waited. Within seconds, an arm shot out of the darkness, brown and gnarled like a twig, and grabbed the necklace away from him. In the same moment someone else tweaked a fingerful of his hair from behind and tugged it, then let go.

He grunted in pain, though not in surprise. “You’re welcome,” he muttered.

The creature who had taken the necklace coalesced into view, shifting into a larger shape as if borrowing material from the shadows and soil. Kit always found it fascinating, and somewhat wished he could see it in broad daylight so he could see how the transformation worked. But then, you weren’t ever going to meet these guys in broad daylight.

Redring stood in front of him, a few inches taller than Kit. Always had to make herself bigger than whoever she was menacing. In the

glimpses he'd caught, she and the other goblins ordinarily looked like porcupine-sized gargoyles carved out of driftwood and decorated with shells and ugly jewelry. When they interacted with humans, though, they took on a human-ish form. Kit attached the "ish" in his mind because any human would see they weren't quite right.

Redring, for example, looked like a chubby woman around fifty, with big fluffy hair in a bottled shade of orange. Every time he saw her take this form, she wore the same thing: a knee-length brown sweater or maybe bathrobe that tied around the waist, over what looked like pale pink pajamas and alligator-skin slippers. You'd glance twice at anyone standing around in the woods like that at night, and when you did glance again, you'd notice the weird smoothness to her skin and the sharp points on every one of her teeth.

The goblins rarely told him what he wanted to know, at least not in a straightforward fashion. Since inheriting this job seven years ago, at age seventeen, he had worked out a lot about them, like how they were named after the first item they'd stolen.

This tradition did mean that a lot of goblins these days should rightly be named "iPhone" or "Honda key." But they generally found ways to make unique nicknames out of those, such as the goblin called "Slide," named after the "slide to unlock" injunction on old iPhone screens.

On a filthy string around her neck, Redring wore a silver ring with a large, opaque red stone. She'd said it had belonged to a traveler a long time ago. From his ancestors' records Kit knew Redring had been around for hundreds of years, and had worn the ring the whole time, so that theft had taken place before he was born; the victim was no one he knew. This didn't make him feel better.

If the ring had been gold instead of silver, Kit knew she wouldn't be wearing it as a keepsake. They'd have used it immediately, turned the gold into whatever new thing they coveted. Redring was already holding the new gold chain up to her eye and running it through her fingers to

calculate its weight. Kit shifted uneasily.

“This is all?” Redring’s voice didn’t go with her matronly look. She sounded more like someone who had inhaled helium.

“For now. I’ll bring more later. I ordered some gold forks and stuff two weeks ago, but they’re not here yet. Give it a couple days, all right?”

“*This* won’t get us our milk steamer.” Lately they were into making espresso drinks, partly to lure people in with the scent, but also because they constantly lusted after new tastes and possessions for themselves.

“Or even our milk,” chimed in a voice from the darkness, behind Kit’s shoulder.

He glanced back, but saw no one. Still, someone licked his ear, then cackled. He shuddered and scrubbed at it with his palm.

“Get your own milk,” he said.

He got another hair-tweak for his attitude, but hell, they lived for stealing, so they ought to enjoy it. Then again, there were weird magical rules they had to follow, and if they broke those rules, they got some kind of smackdown from “the locals.” As far as Kit could tell, the locals were other fae. Kit, like his ancestors, never saw these locals, probably because the goblins’ taint on him kept the rest away.

The goblins stole stuff off hikers and other people in the woods by inviting them in. If you followed paths that mysteriously appeared while you were alone in the forest between dusk and dawn, then you were accepting their invitation. They’d appear, mug you, and jumble your memory so you couldn’t recall what happened.

If you were lucky, they’d leave it at that.

Kit, at least, had immunity from those antics. To a degree. Kind of.

“I’ll try to get you the milk steamer,” he said. “But listen. Tonight I also want to invoke protection for someone.”

“Ooooh,” chorused the voices.

“Is Kit in love?” one said.

“No. It’s family.” He glared past the grinning Redring into the dark-

ness, then returned his attention to her. “My cousin’s coming to live with me a while. His name’s Grady. Last name Sylvain, like mine.” He took out his phone and brought up the photo of Grady from a social network profile: messy dark hair, goofball grin, jug-handle ears and all. He showed it to Redring. “He’s twenty-one. About five foot eleven...”

Redring waved away the phone, though her long pink nails scraped it as if she was tempted to snatch it. “We don’t need pictures. If he’s cousin to you, we will smell him.”

It sounded like an insult, but it wasn’t actually. They could smell all kinds of information off people.

“Then you’ll leave him alone?” he said. “Don’t care if he’s by himself out here, don’t care what kind of glowing paths or trails of cookies he follows into the woods, you’ll still leave him alone. I invoke protection.” He used the formal phrase, hoping it might carry extra magical weight.

Redring scowled, while the others in the shadows continued cackling and improvising crude love songs. “Fine, he is protected.” She flapped the gold necklace in his face. “But you must bring us more than this. Tomorrow. You’ve come up short this month.”

“I can’t just conjure up gold. You know that. It’s expensive, and it generally belongs to other people, and—”

“You have our magical sanction to steal.” Redring used what she probably supposed to be a sweetly coaxing voice. It was about as appealing as a blob of congealed jam stuck to the underside of a table.

Yes, his arrangement made it so he could steal for them and not get caught. Sounded like a dream come true, on paper. But in reality...

He looked down and ground a mushroom into obliteration under the heel of his boot. “I hate doing that to people.”

“But if you don’t, we get hungry, and...” She spread her fat faux-human hands in a *What you gonna do?* gesture.

“Hungry,” with them, could mean all kinds of things beyond merely hungry. Could mean bored. Lustful. Violent. And it often meant willing

to take their knocks from “the locals” and lash out anyway just to wreak havoc.

The frustration strangled Kit. “Don’t. Just...wait, all right? Please.”

“More gold tomorrow?”

“I can’t promise tomorrow! How about a week. Give me a week.” Maybe he could drive to Tacoma or Seattle, drop in on some chain store he didn’t feel *quite* as terrible swiping stuff from, or at least it was better than lifting things from the small-town folks who lived around here...

Redring folded her arms. “Four days.”

“Okay, all *right*. Four days. Goodbye.”

He spun and stomped off, his shoulders knocking tree trunks. Wet boughs swiped his forehead, and goblin cackles blended into the whisper of the wind behind him and then washed out into silence.

They could wait a full fucking week for their loot, and if he heard of them acting out in any way because of the delay, he’d... Well, there wasn’t a lot he could do, was there. That was the trouble.

## CHAPTER TWO

SKYE DARWEN STEPPED OUT OF GREEN FOX ESPRESSO AND BREATHED IN THE FRESH AIR. AFTER BEING ENCASED IN coffee steam for six hours, she found the crisp chill a relief. Though it was only a little after five p.m., the daylight had vanished, since this was Bellwater, Washington, in December. But tonight wasn't as gloomy as most evenings had been during the past month. The low blanket of clouds had blown away, stars twinkled, and the air was calm.

Skye smelled salt water: the shore of Puget Sound was only a matter of yards away, on the other side of the cafe. A walk along the quiet beach before returning home tempted her.

Then a breeze arose, sweeping over her from inland, carrying the smell of the forest: wet mossy ground, logs, mushrooms, dirt, the Christmas-tree aroma of firs. The evergreen scent hardly changed all year, and the forest was always there for you, cool on hot summer days, calm in blustery winter.

If there was anything Skye loved more than art, it was the forest. She smiled, jogged across the street, and hiked up the sloping road toward the trees.

Skye was twenty-three, and still lived with her sister Livy in the house they'd grown up in. She had earned a bachelor's degree in art at University of Puget Sound last year, and had been gainfully employed as a barista here in her tiny hometown ever since. The cafe used her art

skills when they could—she decorated the menu chalkboards every day, and vacationers and local regulars complimented her designs. Some of her drawings and paintings hung on the walls for sale, and occasionally someone even bought one. She also sold prints and T-shirts from her Etsy store, though not at a rate that would let her quit her day job.

Meanwhile she kept scouting ads for graphic-design jobs in the Puget Sound area, and her email inquiries had gotten a few promising responses lately. So life might be about to change.

Entering the forest, Skye released her dark hair from its chopstick-held bun, shook it behind her shoulders, and smiled up at the looming trees. “I’d miss you guys if I moved to the city,” she told them. “But I’d still come visit, don’t worry.”

Branches swayed in a breeze, whispering in response. At least, she liked to think of it as response.

She had always felt the aliveness of the woods. Not just the nature: the ferns and vine maples and huckleberries, the tree frogs and deer and coyotes. She appreciated all that, with an instinctual comfort that came from having lived under these branches all her life. But she had also always felt there was something else alive in here, something more on the...imaginary side.

She’d have sworn it wasn’t always her imagination, though. She wasn’t sure what to call it. Spirits maybe, or Teeny-tinies, the name she and her older sister, Livy, had given them when they were kids. This being the Northwest, some would suggest calling it Sasquatch. But it didn’t strike her as a Sasquatch type of presence. This was less like a big animal, and more like...well, she’d never admit this out loud, but if this were Scotland or Ireland or something, they’d probably be called the good people. Fairies. The fae.

A few times, inexplicable stuff had happened to her out here. It was only ever when she came alone into the woods, which was inconvenient, since she would have appreciated some witnesses.

One spring evening when she was eight, trotting back to the house through the woods at sunset, a sweet scent stopped her. It was the smell of cookies—vanilla-rich sugar cookies, as if someone was baking them a few feet away. She'd been saying to Livy that very afternoon, as they walked through the forest, that sugar cookies were her favorite food. (Livy told her she'd die of malnutrition if she didn't come up with some healthier other favorite foods.) Skye looked around, and saw a skinny path winding off through a clump of red huckleberry bushes. The path was just wide enough for one of her feet at a time, and she was sure no path had ever been there before. She'd have known if it had. Though it twisted back into the forest, away from home, she followed it. As she walked, the scent of cookies grew stronger. Then a scratchy, tinny voice called, from high above her head, "Little girl. Do you want a treat?"

She stopped and stared up into the trees in the fading light.

Her mother called for her, sounding strangely far off. Skye whirled and called back, "I'm out here!" and a noise scurried in the trees like a squirrel dashing away. Then Skye found herself in the middle of the forest, surrounded by red huckleberries, with no path to guide her back. She followed her mom's voice and got home, and by dinnertime a few minutes later had reckoned she had probably been imagining things.

When she was twelve, tromping around the woods one October afternoon, she heard music and followed it. It wasn't beats from someone's car stereo; it was otherworldly music, like if you took cricket chirps, frog croaks, breaking twigs, and river gurgles, and set them to a rhythm. That time, a friend of Livy's soon appeared on her way through the woods, and waved to Skye. Skye turned to join her, and the music died away.

When she was fourteen, a glowing line of mushrooms at dusk—actually glowing—led her a few yards off the trail before she got spooked and ran home.

And when she was twenty, lying on her back with her eyes closed on a fallen log in the forest at sunset, listening to hip-hop through her ear-

buds, she suddenly smelled coffee. It was strong enough that she figured someone had to be standing next to her with a steaming cup in hand, but when she opened her eyes no one was there. Instead she found another of those paths that hadn't been there before, this time a line of rocks, alternating gray and white. She took the earbuds out and followed it, her heart pounding. The smell of coffee clung to her like a cloud. Then came the voice. She heard it for sure this time; she was no little kid anymore. From overhead it said, in an eerie, squeaky tone, "Freshly brewed coffee, pretty lady?"

She looked all around, trembling, then nearly screamed when her phone jangled. It was a text from her boyfriend, asking where she was. She darted back to the log where she'd started, and sure enough, when she looked again, there was no line of rocks. With the next breeze, the coffee smell blew away and vanished.

All those phenomena had taken place around nightfall. She was almost never in the woods during actual night; it was too dark and there was no reason to be there. But dusk, twilight, when you could still see a little, she'd been here then, admiring the way the forest transformed into something mysterious and sinister in the dark.

As a kid she'd tried telling Livy about the sugar-cookie voice and the strange music. Livy had gotten excited and told her she'd seen or heard similar stuff. But then, she and Livy liked making up Teeny-tiny stories for each other, along with ghost stories and monster stories and alien stories and time-travel stories, so neither of them quite believed the other, was the impression Skye got. She even began to doubt her own memory of those uncanny events. She didn't try telling anyone at all about the coffee-scent incident from a few years ago; it would sound crazy, and probably she had just been tired and half-dreaming.

But now, at twilight, alone in the woods, her curiosity flared to life. She fancied herself brave and open-minded, no longer as easily-freaked as in childhood. She looked around at the darkening forest, and said

aloud, “You out here, Teeny-tinies? Making your coffee or cookies? Playing your tunes? Come on. Show yourselves.”

And someone, or something, cackled.

The laugh came from the shadows, higher up, as if the person or thing was in a tree. Skye squinted to look, but the trees had all become featureless black trunks with bits of dusk-blue sky caught between their fingers. Someone could be messing with her, or maybe she just happened to hear a bit of conversation from a person approaching on the path...

Then she smelled dessert. Not a mere whiff, but a wave of scent that made her mouth water. Fruity this time, a berry pastry perhaps—not sugar cookies, but pie or other baked goods. Where could that be coming from? The few restaurants in town were behind her, downwind, and the scattered country-road houses in the forest were nearly a mile away.

Her gaze dropped to the underbrush to seek a way through, and she blinked in surprise. Hundreds of flat white mushrooms grew low on the tree trunks, sticking out like rounded shelves. That she already knew; she saw them every day. But they didn’t usually line up in a perfect row the way they were currently doing, striping around one tree trunk and continuing onto the next and the next, like a dotted line pointing the way into the woods. There were two such lines, in fact, one on each side of a thin space between the trees, delineating a path.

The path hadn’t been there a minute ago. Skye would have bet all her colored pencils on it.

Her fingers tingling in excitement, she pulled out her phone and snapped a photo of the mushrooms. When she looked at the picture, it was hard to see the lined-up pattern that was so obvious in real life, and in any case the darkness made everything grainy.

She considered trying again, then the mouth-watering smell gusted stronger. Someone above whistled a sing-song call, three notes, low to high to middle. Someone else emitted a stifled giggle.

Skye stepped onto the path between the mushrooms and walked

forward. Her shoulders brushed wet tree branches. Moss and soggy fir needles squelched under her rain boots. She considered switching on the flashlight bulb on her phone, but soon her eyes adjusted to the darkness—and besides, the mushrooms had started glowing. Now they looked more blue than white, and when she knelt to touch one, blue light spilled across her hand and cast a shadow from one finger onto another.

“Pretty la-dy,” a voice sang.

She snapped her gaze up, still crouching by the mushrooms.

A dark shape moved among the bare branches of a tree.

“Who’s there?” she asked.

“Blackberry tart for the pretty lady? Fresh and sweet.”

Blackberry was her favorite variety of pie, tart, or jam. And it did smell maddeningly enticing, which was a beyond-weird thing to be distracted by right now. This had to be a hoax, maybe pulled off by people she’d gone to school with. And yet...

“I’ve heard your voice before.” She stood slowly, scanning the darkness, trying to pin down the shifting shadows. “Or voices like yours. When I was a kid.”

“Did she?” The new voice, higher than the other, sounded delighted.

“Has the lady been looking for us?” the first said.

“I have.” Her heart thudded in her throat. “Who are you?”

“I think the lady means *what* are you.”

*Holy shit.* Skye swallowed. “We’ve called you the Teeny-tinies, my sister and me. But we don’t know what you’d call yourselves.”

Many voices laughed now, in pleasure, it sounded like.

“Lady wants to see us?”

“Skye. My name’s Skye. Yes, I would. Please.”

“We are not so teeny tiny. Though we can be if we want.” The shadow took shape as it crept head-first down the trunk of the tree, into the range of the blue mushroom light.

A chill skittered up Skye's flesh. The creature reminded her of a giant spider, dark and spindly-legged. But she counted only four limbs, and two eyes gleaming at her, so, more like Gollum than a spider. Still creepy.

If it was Gollum, though, it was a Gollum made of twisted sticks and clumps of lichen, or some kind of natural camouflage that had evolved to look like that. She and Livy had pictured the Teeny-tinies as truly tiny, little enough to stand on the palm of your hand. This creature, while still smaller than her, certainly outsized that imaginary being. It was almost as big as Skye had been herself as a child.

Others approached too, descending trees and crawling across the ground. Her feet felt rooted to the earth, and her breath came shallow and fast. She looked behind her, and a new rush of fear dizzied her. The lights of Bellwater's streets, shops, and docks, modest in number though they were, should have been visible through the trees. Instead only a dark forest stood there, stretching away into the indigo night. Shadows moved toward her, and fuzzy lights floated in the air or bobbed across the ground. Decidedly not the lights of Bellwater. No lightbulbs behaved like that.

"You see us. You like us?"

Skye pivoted to face the closest creature. A tarnished ring glinted on a string around its neck, and a few small, white shells dangled from its thin hair. Those touches of human-like decoration gave her hope. Anyway, as they'd pointed out, she had come looking for them. She had been curious, and still was.

She nodded. "What are you, then?"

"We have many names. Most commonly 'goblin.'" The creature, the goblin, smiled, and Skye tried not to shudder. Its teeth were pointed and long.

"Goblin." She cleared her throat. "Well then, sure. I've heard of you."

Another goblin emerged from the shadows on a trunk on her left, at face level like the first. "She is a keeper."

"Oh yes," the first said. "We would like her. We like someone new

once in a while.” The goblin pulled a pastry from a dirt-colored sack hanging around its body. It extended the pastry toward Skye. “Blackberry tart?”

Despite its disgusting storage location, the tart looked luscious, its crust golden, its scent warm and buttery and so pungent that Skye could nearly taste the flaky shell, could almost feel the sweet cooked berries melting on her tongue.

She closed her teeth with a deliberate click. Magic. Had to be. Everyone knew you shouldn't go biting into fruit offered to you by magical creatures in the woods, even if you'd thought until just five minutes ago that such stories were, you know, only stories.

But her head swam pleasantly, as if she were drunk, and it was hard to say what she meant. “I don't know,” she said. “What does it do?”

“It helps you join us.” The goblin nudged the tart closer. “Have a little party with us. Fun. Right?”

“I...I'm not...”

But as Skye groped for what she intended to say, someone shoved her head from behind, knocking her forward. Fast as a pouncing cat, the other goblin pushed the blackberry tart into her face. Sticky filling invaded her mouth, so hot it burned her tongue. Juice and crumbs smeared down her chin. Her throat made a muffled scream, but instinctively she swallowed the bite. Her arms flailed, feeling as heavy as if she were swimming. Little hands, rough like twigs, caught hold of her in several places at once.

She fell and never hit the ground. The goblins carried her crowd-surf-style. Everything became a dream; she couldn't respond the way she wanted to.

Afterward she still remembered what she saw and what they did before releasing her. Even though she couldn't speak of it.