


TAMORA CARTER: GOBLIN QUEEN



JIM C. HINES

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A decorative flourish consisting of two symmetrical, swirling lines that curve upwards and then downwards, framing the bottom of the title text.

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CHAPTER 1

HONEY BADGER VS. GOBLINS

Tamora used to come to roller derby practice for the sheer joy of pushing herself until every muscle in her body ached. And spending two-and-a-half hours kicking butt, of course.

Since her best friend Andre had vanished two weeks ago, she'd come to escape. The moment she entered the Crystal Lewis Skating Rink, twelve-year-old Tamora Carter and all of her problems disappeared, and she was T-Wrex of the Grand River Honey Badgers.

She was playing as a blocker in tonight's scrimmage, doing her best to clear a path for her team's jammer to lap the red team while preventing the red jammer from lapping hers. It was like a loud, chaotic, full-contact race on roller skates.

It was just what she needed.

Tamora's team was down four points. A peek

over her shoulder showed the red jammer closing in.

Sweat dripped from beneath her helmet. She jerked her head to keep it from her eyes, then spread her skates into a partial split. Dazer, a heavyset girl to her left, did the same. Both girls turned their skates inward, cutting their speed and blocking the track, forcing the red team's jammer to slow down behind them.

"Nice teamwork!" The shout came from their coach, a meaty woman who went by the nickname Vorpal Thorne. Thorne's voice sliced through the clacking of skate wheels and the grunts of the skaters like a plow through Michigan's winter slush. She was the fastest skater Tamora had ever seen, and she had the power of a monster truck.

The red jammer put on a burst of speed, aiming to sneak between Tamora and Dazer. Tamora's leg muscles protested as she stretched to try to stop her, but it was too late. The jammer vaulted over their outspread skates.

It was a risky move, but a good one. Dazer flinched and swerved out of bounds. The red team cheered.

Tamora ground her teeth into her mouth guard and glanced back to check the rest of her team. The white jammer was coming up fast. Tamora raced ahead, ignoring the burning in her legs as she positioned herself to interfere with the red blockers. If they couldn't stop the red team, they could at least score a few more points of their own.

“T-Wrex, get back here!” shouted one of her teammates.

Tamora hugged the inner curve of the track and kept going. Up ahead, the four red blockers had come together as a human dam. The moment Tamora entered the straightaway, she crouched low and increased her speed. She skated right into the opposing team and landed a hip block on an older white girl who called herself Terror Swift. Swift lost her balance and grabbed Tamora’s jersey.

They both went down. Tamora’s helmet smacked the floor, and her vision flashed. She hunched her body protectively as the others skaters swerved and jumped past.

Thorne’s whistle put an end to the jam. “What the heck was that, Swift?”

Swift spat out her mouth guard. “T-Wrex tripped me!”

Tamora’s lower lip stung. She tasted blood. “You grabbed me, you clumsy—”

“That’s enough, both of you.” Thorne slid to a stop between them, forcing them apart. “Swift, that was a legal block and you know it. You’re lucky you didn’t both end up with broken ankles. Penalty box, now.”

Swift rolled her eyes, but she didn’t argue. Nobody argued with Vorpal Thorne.

“You’re bleeding, Wrex,” said Thorne.

“I know.” Her mouth guard had saved her from losing any teeth, but it hadn’t saved her from a split

lip.

She didn't care about the pain, but the rules were clear. No blood in the rink. With only a few minutes left of practice, Tamora was done for the night.

"You got ahead of your team," Thorne continued. "You've got good moves, but—"

"I *know*." Just like that, she was Tamora Carter again. She got to her feet and skated off the track while Vorpal Thorne started everyone else practicing double-knee slides.

Tamora yanked off her helmet and sat on the bench with a handful of other skaters and parents. Her own father worked overnights at the hospital and slept during the day, so he rarely made it to her practices, though he'd never missed an actual bout.

Dad had been reluctant to sign her up for Junior Roller Derby. She'd worn him down by going on about the benefits of exercise. Parents were all about physical activity and getting out of the house, away from phones and tablets and computers and video games. Especially video games. Andre was always getting grief from his parents for all the time he spent gaming.

Thinking of Andre made her throat hurt. She blinked hard, wishing she could keep skating, keep pushing herself until she was too exhausted to think.

The end of practice was when she used to pick up a pair of grape Slushees from the Qwik Stop, then head down to Andre's house to hang out until

Dad made her come home for dinner.

But Andre Stewart was gone, along with Kevin Lord and Elizabeth O'Neil. Three kids taken in a single night, and nobody had any idea what had happened to them. She hated not knowing. Hated that there was nothing she could do.

She took a shaky breath, wiped her face, and grabbed a squeeze bottle of Gatorade from her bag to drink. Her practice jersey and pads went into the bag, and she began swapping out her skate wheels. Dad had gotten her a set of FastSwap wheels for her birthday, letting her alternate between the pink wheel covers she used indoors and the neon green covers for skating around Grand River.

"Hey." Terror Swift, whose real name was Paige Reed, sneered down at Tamora. "Sorry about that hit. I should've known you couldn't handle it."

Tamora spotted Paige's mother watching with her arms folded. She must have sent Paige over to apologize. Tamora licked blood from her swollen lip and turned away. "Whatever."

"Ask if she needs a ride home," called Paige's mom.

Tamora shook her head. "No thank you, Mrs. Reed. I'm fine."

"That's what those other children must have thought, the ones who disappeared." Mrs. Reed came closer. "I don't know what your father's thinking, letting you skate around alone when—"

"It's only a mile or so," snapped Tamora. "I said I'll be fine."

Mrs. Reed drew back, her mouth set in a frown that made her look like a tanned, freckled gargoyle. Paige simply smirked.

Tamora wiped her lip on her sleeve, hunched her shoulders, and tried to watch the last minutes of practice, hoping it would distract her from thoughts of Andre.

It didn't.

While everyone else left through the front door to the big lot, Tamora shouldered her bag and rolled down the hall toward the back.

"Dad isn't *letting* me skate around alone," she muttered to herself. In order to *let* her do that, he'd have to know about it. Dad was under the impression that Tamora would be coming home with a group of friends from practice, an impression Tamora had encouraged by telling him she'd be coming home with a group of friends from practice. Since Dad would be busy getting dinner ready, he'd never know.

She felt bad about lying, but not bad enough to stop. It wasn't far from the rink to her house, and she'd been skating all over Grand River for years without any trouble.

The back lot was for employees only, which in this case meant Vorpil Thorne. For such a large woman, the coach had a tiny car, a yellow Mini Cooper convertible with black racing stripes. She was parked directly under the flickering, pole-

mounted light.

Tamora moved closer. The car's roof was torn. It had been fine two hours ago when she passed it on her way in. Someone must have broken in during practice. She started to turn back, when voices by the rusted green dumpster across the lot caught her attention. It sounded like a pair of kids arguing.

"Can't eat that," said one, a girl. "Too many bugs on it."

"Can too," a boy replied. This was followed by a loud yelp. "Bugs stabbed Gulk's tongue!"

The girl's laughter echoed through the parking lot.

Tamora skated cautiously toward the dumpster. Nobody should have to dig through the trash and the bugs for food. She had ten bucks in her pocket, more than enough for a few slices of pizza from the concessions. And maybe they'd seen whoever broke into Thorne's car.

Or they might be the ones who did it. In which case one shout would bring Thorne running. Given how much Thorne loved that car, the kids would be begging to turn themselves in to the police.

"Hey guys. What are you...?" Tamora's voice trailed off.

The girl's skin was the color of blue spruce in springtime. She wore some sort of black raincoat with the sleeves torn off, exposing her bare arms. A yellow fanny pack cinched her waist, making the bottom of the coat flare out like a skirt. Strings of black hair hung to her shoulders. Her nose was

wide and flat. Her oversized, yellow-tinged eyes widened at the sight of Tamora.

Her friend peered up from behind her. His skin was a slightly greener shade. He'd used a torn blue tarp to make a kind of toga that crinkled and crunched with his movements. He held a flimsy white bowl with a bit of melted ice cream and fudge in the bottom. A pair of angry bees buzzed on the edge of the bowl.

"Oh, dung." The girl snatched a broken shard of blue plastic from her fanny pack and waved it at Tamora like a knife.

The boy hurled the bowl at Tamora's head, which would have worked much better if it hadn't been Styrofoam. It tumbled through the air and landed on the blacktop between them. The bees buzzed up, circled toward him just long enough to make him flinch, then flew away.

He glared after them. "Stupid stabbing bugs."

"Take it easy. I'm sorry if I scared you." Now that Tamora looked more closely, she saw that the raincoat was actually a garbage bag with holes either cut or torn for her head and arms. The girl kept her makeshift weapon pointed at Tamora and snatched a filthy Hello Kitty backpack from beside the dumpster. The backpack bulged with junk, from old pop cans to a stuffed purple elephant to a set of silver CDs or DVDs.

The girl shrugged into the backpack and climbed onto the top of the dumpster.

"Did you take those disks from that car?"

Tamora pointed at Thorne's convertible.

The girl bent over and farted at Tamora hard enough to flutter the back of her trash bag coat.

Tamora's eyes widened as a stench like port-a-potties on the hottest day of summer wafted over her. She skated backward, waving her arms to ward off the smell. "What *are* you?"

Both kids were about the same size as Tamora, but she was starting to question whether they were children. She'd thought their weird skin color was makeup, or maybe the effects of a disease, but they didn't act sick, and the shape of their faces was all wrong. They had thick foreheads, like cavemen. Their chins jutted too far out. Oversized, slightly pointed teeth jabbed upward from their lower jaws.

"Human's boots have wheels." The girl pointed her knife. "Mine!"

"I don't think so," said Tamora. "Besides, you'd probably fall and break your coccyx."

"My what?"

"Your butt bone."

The girl cocked her head. The boy twisted around, as if to check his backside for secret bones.

"What is it you want?" asked Tamora.

"Wheeled boots!" said the girl.

"Also food," added her companion, looking sadly at the bowl on the ground. "Mostly food."

The girl licked her lips. Her tongue was a dark blue. "Eat the human?"

"Excuse me?" Before Tamora could say anything more, the girl leaped at her from atop the

dumpster, plastic knife raised. Tamora spun out of the way. The girl crashed face-first onto the pavement. Tamora kicked her elbow, which made her yell and drop the knife.

“What’s wrong with you?” demanded Tamora. “I’m trying to help.”

“Humans don’t help goblins.” The boy scooped up a chunk of broken blacktop from the edge of the lot and hurled it at her head.

Tamora ducked. The rock thudded off her helmet. She muttered a quick thank you to her father. Dad was an emergency room nurse, always nagging her and her brother about seat belts and helmets and all that. “Goblins? Like fairy tales and role-playing games?”

The boy laughed and scooped up another rock. “Stupid human. Fairies don’t have tails.”

“Want helmet, too,” said the girl. “Good armor.”

A dog barked a few streets over, and both kids—both goblins—perked up. The girl smiled and rubbed her injured elbow. “Food!”

The other goblin groaned. “Last dog tried to make food of us.”

A trickle of inky blue blood dripped from the girl’s nose. She must have hit the ground hard when she jumped off the dumpster, but it didn’t seem to bother her. “New world! New things to eat!”

“New things to eat us!” the other goblin countered.

“Better than fighting humans.” She snatched a short, rusty metal rod from her backpack. Waving the rod like a sword, she scampered onto the grass beyond the parking lot. Her companion followed.

Tamora’s legs ached from practice, and her jaw throbbed where she’d fallen. It took a moment to piece together what the goblins meant, but when she did, she forgot all about the pain. “Oh, no. You are *not* going to eat somebody’s pet!”

She skated out of the lot and turned up the road after the goblins. They were running away from Pinecrest Street toward the residential area, tearing through yards and bushes and flowerbeds. Keeping up was easy enough, but she couldn’t skate over grass. All she could do was keep pace and look for a chance to cut them off.

The goblins darted across another street, narrowly avoiding a red pickup that screeched to a halt, horn blazing. The boy screamed and ran faster. The girl hit the front of the truck with her rod before scampering after him. The driver started to get out of his car, but the goblins were already out of reach.

Tamora skated past, ignoring the man’s angry shouts. She turned up a driveway and onto the sidewalk. She’d lost sight of the goblins, but the sound of barking dogs told her where they were going. She pumped faster.

Another block up, she spotted the goblins next to a blue one-story house on the corner, with a fenced-in backyard. A pair of beagles pawed the

fence and yapped at the top of their small lungs.

The boy started to climb the fence, while the girl stepped onto the sidewalk and readied her metal club.

You should have stayed on the grass, goblin girl. She probably expected Tamora to slow down. Instead, she bent both knees, dropped her weight, and skated hard. By the time the goblin drew back to swing, Tamora was there. She slammed her shoulder and hip into the goblin's side. The goblin spun in a circle before toppling backward into the grass. The metal rod landed in the road with a loud clank.

Tamora spread her arms for balance as she slowed, then spun. One goblin down. The other was halfway over the fence. He reached for the dogs, but yanked his hand back with a cry when the beagles nipped at his fingers.

"Hey!" Tamora raced toward him, building up speed before jumping from the sidewalk onto the grass. The instant her skates hit the ground, she started to fall. She turned her momentum into another desperate, uncontrolled jump, driving her head and shoulder into the goblin's hips.

He shrieked, and they both fell onto the grass. Tamora landed on her back, on her equipment bag, which promised to leave an interesting set of bruises along her spine. She reached for the fence to pull herself up.

The goblins were backing away. "You win," said the girl. "You eat the dogs."

"Told you," the other muttered. "Humans all

cursed. Dogs too. And stabbing bugs. Everything cursed.”

They turned and fled toward the woods behind Schoolcraft Street. Tamora wouldn't make it three feet on the trails in her skates. “That's what happens when you mess with a derby girl,” she yelled. “Especially a Honey Badger!”

She glared after them until they vanished among the trees. Grimacing, she adjusted her bag and stretched her shoulder. Once she was sure the goblins weren't coming back, she turned and started home.

First Andre and the other kids disappeared, and then goblins showed up? What the heck was going on?

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