

***TAMORA CARTER:  
GOBLIN QUEEN***

***Jim C. Hines***

Preview – text is not final.

Copyright © 2020 [Jim C. Hines](#)

Cover art by TK

All rights reserved.

ISBN:

ISBN-13:

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **HONEY BADGER VS. GOBLINS**

**T**amora 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 heavysset 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 match.

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 Vorpal 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?

## CHAPTER 2

### MISSING FRIENDS

Tamora spent the whole trip home looking over her shoulder. By the time she rolled up her driveway, her body felt like one giant, throbbing bruise.

She sat on the concrete porch step and took off her skates. Movement in the yard made her jump, but it was just a squirrel. She searched the shadows, then looked up and down the street one last time before heading inside in her socks.

From the smell, Dad was making kimchi scrambled eggs again. He worked long overnight shifts, so supper for Tamora and her older brother Mac was breakfast for Dad. He called it bupper, or sometimes “burper,” which always got a laugh from Mac.

“Is that you, Tam?” Dad’s voice echoed from the kitchen.

“Nope. I’m a goblin. I’m here to eat your pets.”

“Could you start with the pigeon my daughter keeps in her room?”

“*Dad!*”

“If you’re not interested in pigeon, these eggs will be ready in about five minutes.”

She moved into the living room, where Mac had spread a minefield of Legos over the carpet. She tiptoed to the couch and sat down to see what he was working on. He’d clipped upward-pointing swords

and spears onto linked green baseplates, like a farmer's field of plastic weaponry. A large, partially-constructed yellow woman was stepping from a blue baseplate onto the blades. Scattered red bricks beneath her feet looked like drops of blood.

"What are you building?"

He didn't answer, of course. Nor did he look up from his work. But after several seconds, he pointed toward the television, which was playing Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.

Where most fourteen-year-old boys were into sports and girls and things like that, Mac was obsessed with fairy tales and folk stories. He liked to draw or build characters from whatever story he was fixated on. Tamora remembered him going on about the Hans Christian Anderson version of *The Little Mermaid* last week, and how the mermaid was cursed to endure pain like knives stabbing her feet with every step she took on land.

Mac chewed absently on a Lego spear as he worked. Appa, the family's sheepdog, was curled up beside him like a giant furry black-and-white beanbag chair. The dog was so deaf she hadn't heard Tamora come home.

Like all their pets, Appa was a rescue. Nobody had wanted to adopt a deaf dog with matted fur from the humane society. Nobody but Tamora, who'd homed in on the shaggy beast and refused to budge until Dad signed the adoption papers.

Over on the recliner, an orange cat stretched, then started sneezing so hard he fell out of the chair. He regained his feet and licked snot from his nose, then padded over to the couch as if nothing had happened.

Tamora had found the long-haired Himalayan roaming the streets a year ago. She'd named him Smoosh for his scrunched-in face. With his patchy fur and constantly running nose, Dad had described the pathetic cat as "exactly the kind of animal Tam would bring home."

Smoosh purred in anticipation as he flopped down on Tamora's leg. She scratched behind his ears. Within seconds, the pink tip of his

tongue was poking from his mouth, and he'd begun to drool.

"Mac, in all the stories you've read, do goblins ever steal people? Or..." She swallowed. "Eat them?"

He kept building, pressing bits of what looked like seaweed onto his mermaid, then reached for his iPad. His fingers raced over the screen, and the software's artificial British-sounding voice said, "There's the 1986 movie *Labyrinth*. The goblin king Jareth stole a baby from a girl named Sarah. Maurice Sendak wrote a picture book called *Outside Over There*. Goblins steal Ida's little sister and replace her with a changeling, a baby made of ice. The book was based partly on the Lindbergh kidnapping on March 1, 1932, and was one of the inspirations for *Labyrinth*."

Mac rarely spoke aloud, finding it easier and less stressful to write or to type. He'd never explained why he chose the UK voice setting for his text-to-speech app, but he'd used it for as long as Tamora could remember. The software showed a split screen. He could type out his words or click common phrases on one side, and the other showed his words in large type for people to read.

"There are lots of stories about goblins and other fairies taking babies and leaving changelings," he continued, rocking in place as he typed. "People used the stories to explain children who were born different."

"Do goblins and fairies only take babies?"

"*Tam Lin* is one of the most famous stories about a grown man being stolen. Not by goblins, but by fairies. It's more than four hundred years old, and—"

"What about older kids?" Tamora interrupted.

Mac hesitated longer this time. Normally, Tamora didn't mind waiting for him to organize his thoughts, but tonight it was all she could do to keep from snapping at him.

She knew pushing Mac would only upset him, so she clenched her jaw and kept petting Smoosh, even as his drool-puddle spread.

"Is this about Andre?" Mac finally asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” It couldn’t be coincidence, could it? Three people disappeared, and then two goblins showed up, stealing stuff and complaining about humans being cursed?

Except the goblins had run away from her, a twelve-year-old girl. How could they have overpowered Andre, let alone the other two missing kids? Kevin Lord was a football player, and two years older than Tamora. He would’ve torn through the goblins like Appa through a flower bed.

Mac kept building, but Tamora knew he was listening. He was always listening. Where most people could filter out distractions or focus on one voice, Mac heard it all, even if he couldn’t process it. It was the difference between eating dinner one bite at a time and having it all force-fed to you in a single mouthful.

Mac would be starting ninth grade next month. He was large for his age, with black hair and a few spots of acne on his nose and forehead. He usually wore khakis and too-tight polo shirts with the buttons cut off to keep him from chewing them.

“What do you think happened to Andre and the others?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. Either he didn’t have any ideas, or else he found it too upsetting to talk about. Possibly both.

“You didn’t say whether goblins ate people.”

“It depends on the story, but not usually.”

Someone needed to pass that information along to the goblins Tamora had met tonight.

“Burper is served,” Dad called, earning a giggle from Mac.

Tamora lifted Smoosh from her lap and grimaced at the drool spot he’d left behind. Mac kept working. He’d join them as soon as he reached a good stopping point.

The stone-topped island in the middle of the kitchen served as the makeshift table for family meals. The instant Tamora sat down, Dad frowned and asked, “What happened to your lip?”

“I took a spill at practice.”

“Do you want ice?”

She shook her head.

“If I’d known, I would have made something less spicy.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Dad had been adopted from South Korea as a baby and raised in Tennessee, so his English was perfect save for a slight drawl. He hadn’t started teaching himself Korean or researching the country of his birth until college. He still went by his American name of Scot, but he and Mom had given both children Korean middle names. Soo-jin for Tamora, and Hyun-jin for her brother.

He was right about the spiciness. The eggs diluted it a bit, and Tamora tried to keep from touching her lower lip with her food, but by the third bite, her cut was burning. She took a sip of milk and sucked her lip into her mouth, letting the milk extinguish the worst of the fire.

Mac appeared in the doorway and sniffed warily

“Don’t worry,” said Dad. “No onions, peppers, or meat, and I kept your eggs separate.”

Mac was the pickiest eater Tamora knew. He couldn’t stand mixing most foods together, or even letting them touch one another, and he’d starve before letting certain foods touch his lips. He sat down beside Tamora, hunched over his plate, and started eating.

Tamora set down her fork and, as casually as she could, asked, “Dad, has anyone come into the hospital lately talking about seeing...monsters?”

“Nothing unusual. We had one lady last month rambling about toilet gremlins. We had to do a 72-hour psych referral so they could get her back on her meds. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” she said quickly. Tamora wasn’t about to risk being drugged or hospitalized. She could see the worry in his eyes, behind his rectangular, black-framed glasses. Since Andre disappeared, he’d been treating her like fragile china. “Hey, didn’t you say you once had a patient who’d been drinking silver?”



“Colloidal silver, that’s right. She thought it would protect her from cancer. The only effect was that it turned her skin a weird blue-gray color.”

“Did it do anything else?” Tamora asked. “Like mess up her teeth or change her blood?”

“Nothing like that. She looked like an android, but otherwise she was perfectly healthy.” He rubbed the small tuft of beard beneath his lip. He called it a soul patch, but to Tamora, it looked like a short, fat, black caterpillar had hitched a ride on his chin. “Why the sudden interest in life at the hospital?”

“Just something I saw on the internet,” she lied. “A list of crazy emergency room stories.”

Maybe there was some other explanation for the so-called goblins, but deep down, she didn’t believe it. Those teeth, the blue blood...she knew in her gut they were real, just as she knew there had to be a connection to Andre’s disappearance. Whatever was going on, Tamora intended to find out.

Tamora’s bedroom was in the back corner of the first floor, meaning it was always too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer. It smelled like birdseed and feathers. Her pigeon, Woodstock, cooed from inside his cage as she entered and turned on the light. She’d found the bird during a school trip to the Michigan Historical Library. His wing had been broken, and the poor thing had been hiding behind a garbage can, crying pitifully. She’d used part of her lunch to lure him out.

Her teacher had refused to let her take an injured pigeon onto the bus. Tamora had refused to leave the bird there to die. In the end, Dad ended up driving to the library to pick them up. Tamora got detention, but she’d saved Woodstock’s life.

The vet said he’d never fly again, but he seemed happy here in her room, where an endless supply of food and water magically appeared

in his cage every day. He was particularly fond of dried peas.

She cracked open the window to get some air moving through the room, then sat down at the small desk beneath her loft bed and took out her phone. She hesitated a long time, thumbs hovering over the screen, before pulling up the texts Andre had sent her the night he disappeared.

Andre: "I've been thinking how to celebrate the start of seventh grade. How'd you feel about helping me dump a hundred goldfish in the fountain the night before school starts?"

Andre: "I can't decide between that and turning crickets loose in the vents."

Andre: "Hey, when you come by, remind me to show you the expansion pack I found for Dragon's War IV. It's got six new epic spells, and an awesome soundtrack. I haven't been able to get it out of my head."

Andre: "See you tomorrow after your practice!"

Dad had told her about Andre's disappearance the next morning. She hadn't believed him, thinking this had to be another of Andre's stupid pranks. It wasn't until Dad turned on the news and she saw the school photos of Andre, Kevin, and Elizabeth all labeled as "Missing" in big red block letters that it sank in. She'd turned it off when they switched to footage of police dogs searching the yard around Andre's house.

Andre's humor was one of the things that had drawn them together, back in second grade. That was right after Mom had left. They'd just moved to Grand River from Dearborn.

On the first day of school, she'd found herself in the cafeteria with a Tupperware container full of Dad's Napa cabbage kimchi while everyone else was scarfing down sandwiches and Lunchables and chips. Her meal of fermented cabbage, radish, and onions stood out

like a fart in church.

“What is *that*?” asked a pale kid with a smear of grape jelly on his T-shirt. He plopped down in the seat across from her. “It looks like seaweed and puke.”

Her cheeks felt hot. She ignored him and jammed her plastic fork into the kimchi.

Several other kids joined the first. A brown-skinned boy with a round face and a gap-toothed grin leaned closer. “What’s it taste like?”

Tamora pushed the Tupperware container across the table. “Try it and find out.”

“Don’t do it, Andre!” said Grape Jelly. “My sister says Chinese food is made from cats.”

“It’s Korean,” Tamora snapped. “And your sister’s an idiot.”

“At least we don’t eat seaweed puke!”

“That’s because you’re scared.” She folded her arms. “Go ahead and take a bite. I dare you.”

Andre grinned. “I’ll do it.”

Before she could warn him, he’d speared an enormous forkful of kimchi and shoved it into his mouth.

He chewed twice, and his triumphant grin disappeared. He opened his mouth and gasped like a fish out of water. He leaned over the table, snatched Tamora’s thermos, and poured cherry Kool-Aid into his mouth.

Tamora and the other kids howled with laughter.

Andre finished drinking, slammed the thermos down, and stared at Tamora with newfound respect. He grabbed a napkin and blew his nose. “Wow! Mike, you gotta try this.”

Grape jelly boy—Mike—shook his head. “No way.”

“Wimp.” Tamora reclaimed her food and took a bite, doing her best to act like it was no big deal, but secretly loving their awestruck expressions.

“We should bring some in for Ms. Herford,” said Andre. “Can you imagine? You can tell her people give food where you come from, and

it would be an insult if she doesn't eat the whole thing."

"I come from Dearborn," said Tamora.

"She doesn't know that."

They'd been friends ever since. Tamora never managed to convince Dad to let her take a batch of kimchi to their teacher, but Andre found other ways of livening up the second grade, like his chocolate cupcakes that were actually frosted cakes of baked meatloaf.

Tamora pulled a news printout off the bulletin board on the wall beside her desk. She'd memorized the entire article. Three photos were printed in color beneath the headline, *State Police Join Search for Missing Children*.

Kevin Lord, Andre Stewart, and Elizabeth "Lizzy" O'Neil. Lizzy was the youngest, and would have started fourth grade next month. She was described as a shy girl, and a bit of a bookworm. Kevin was a football player and straight-A student.

She skipped to the part about Andre, who'd last been seen at home wearing a gray Power Rangers T-shirt and black jeans. Because Andre was into video games, the police had spent a lot of time examining the family's computers, in case he'd gotten mixed up with an online predator.

They'd even questioned Tamora, asking if Andre had been happy at home, if he'd ever talked about running away, if she'd noticed anything unusual about him before he disappeared.

What would the police say if she called to report a pair of goblins who'd assaulted her with scraps of garbage before running off to try to eat beagles? They'd probably lock her up.

She'd have to find them the goblins herself.

She could head out tomorrow morning after Dad got home and went to bed. She'd start at the skating rink to see if the goblins had dropped anything that could help her track them down. Then she could check the woods behind Schoolcraft. Maybe she could figure out where they'd gone when they ran off.

The bedroom door opened, and Dad poked his head in. "I'm leav-

ing for work. Don't stay up too late."

"I won't."

He stepped inside, and his attention went to the article in Tamora's hands. His lips and eyes tightened. He squeezed her shoulder. "They'll find him, Tam."

She didn't answer. How could the police find him if they didn't know what they were dealing with?

A low, wet growl made her jump. Smoosh stood in the doorway, his body arched like a croquet hoop. His tail lashed from side to side.

Woodstock flapped his wings in alarm. He jumped into his water dish and splashed lukewarm water onto the carpet in his own peculiar version of self-defense.

Smoosh ignored the bird. He crept across the room and jumped onto her windowsill to stare at something in the backyard.

"Must be a squirrel or a rabbit." Dad kissed her on the head. "Love you."

"Love you too." As soon as he'd shut the door, she got up to see what Smoosh was so upset about. She'd seen him stalk animals through the window before, including a white-tailed deer who'd wandered up to the fence. This felt different.

Patches of Smoosh's fur stood up like he'd tried to lick an electrical socket. He was angry, so intent on whatever was out there, that he didn't notice Tamora getting up. When she touched his back, he jumped and hissed.

She jerked her hand away. "Chill, furball."

Out back, a hummingbird feeder hung on a pole near her window. A few small pine trees grew along the inside of the fence. Appa's faded orange doghouse sat near an old swing set neither she nor Mac used anymore.

Someone darted from the trees to hide behind the doghouse. A second figure followed.

Smoosh growled.

Tamora held her breath, her heart pounding. She couldn't make

out their faces in the darkness, but she recognized the long limbs and frantic movements.

She didn't have to go searching for the goblins. They'd found her.