

Chapter One

Nothing was going to ruin my day. On the number 8 bus, all I could think was, *Three more stops until we get there. Three stops from my dreams coming true. Three stops before I get to see—*

"Hey, Bree," Alix whispered. "You might want to move over."

"Why?" I asked.

My best friend nodded behind me. My giant squirrel tail was tickling the nose of an old woman seated on the bench.

I swiped the bushy red tail away. "I'm so sorry," I said. "The tail has a mind of its own."

The woman eyed my costume. "It's a bit early for Halloween, isn't it, dear?"

"Yes. No. It's just that..." I tried to explain but trailed off. New people made me super nervous.

Alix placed their hand on my shoulder and said, "We're cosplaying. It's like Halloween, but we get to dress up for a different event. That's where we're going right now. To the Anime Expo. I'm Black Heart, the evil warrior supreme who is part demon, part human." They flicked the long curly black strands of their wig.

Then Alix thrust out their chest to show off the intricate snake designs crisscrossing their vest. They struck an attack pose, hands held high, and boomed,

"Thunder Hands!" as they brought their hands down in one big clap.

"Uh...nice?" the woman said, puzzled. "Say, what is that black thing on your back?"

"Oh. This is Reaper's Revenge." Alix turned around to show off the gigantic foam sword strapped to their back.

The woman smiled, then turned to me. "And who are you supposed to be?"

"Um...I'm Red Squirrel," I said. I clung to my giant tail with one hand while I showed off the velvet gauntlet on my other arm. Three rows of acorns circled the red leather band of the glove. It had taken me two weeks to glue all of them on. "My Acorns of Justice can take out any enemy. And with three swishes of my tail, I can summon my shadow tail," I mumbled.

"Shadow what?" she asked.

"It's an energy spirit that can help me defeat my enemies. She's called Chitter Chatter, and she has

super strength. Plus, she can turn invisible and she can fly."

The woman fell silent. I suddenly felt like I had just offered my hand out for a high five only to be rejected. Why had I let Alix talk me into cosplaying? Why had I agreed to go to the Anime Expo on the bus? Why couldn't I just use my shadow tail to turn myself invisible?

"Red Squirrel is my sworn enemy," Alix said. "I shall defeat you this time! Put up your claws."

I froze as all eyes on the bus turned to us.

"Not here," I whispered.

"Let us battle, Red Squirrel. Let's see how Chitter Chatter fares against my shadow tail, Fist of Vengeance."

I backed up, letting go of my tail, which smacked another passenger in the face.

"Watch it," the seated man growled.

"Sorry," I said.

He glared at us.

Alix ignored him as they explained to the woman, "In the *Red Squirrel, Black Heart* series, our characters are half sisters. But we went down two different paths, and now we are mortal enemies."

The woman shrugged.

"Let me show you," I said, waving Alix off. I reached into my satchel and sifted through baggies of apple slices, oatmeal power bars and makeup kits until I found my phone. I turned it on and showed her the web poster for *Red Squirrel, Black Heart*. Alix's costume matched the poster almost perfectly. Mine was okay, but it lacked the details of Alix's outfit.

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed. "You like cartoons!"

Alix corrected her. "Not cartoons. It's anime."

"What's the difference?" she asked.

I explained, "Anime is Japanese animation. The stories aren't just for kids. They can be super complicated and deep. And they can stretch out over years."

"In fact, *Red Squirrel, Black Heart* has 126 episodes,"

Alix pointed out.

"What have they been doing for so long?" she asked.

"Well, the main story is Red Squirrel has been trying to defeat Black Heart and get her back on the side of good," I said. "But my half sister has always escaped."

"Not without a cost. Red Squirrel usually takes out one of my minions. But I have plenty of them to fight her another day," Alix said. "One day we will fight face-to-face and see who will become the ultimate champion."

"Oh, like arch-nemeses," the woman said.

Alix raised an eyebrow, confused. "Uh...no. It's like JoJo and Dio. Or All Might and All For One."

"What?" she asked.

"They're mortal enemies," Alix explained.

"That's what I said. Arch-nemeses. Like Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner."

I stared at her blankly.

"I guess you kids are too young to remember," she said. "You'd like those cartoons. They're funny."

I faked a smile. "We'll have to check them out."

"So where did you say you were off to again with these pretty costumes?" she asked.

"We're headed to the Anime Expo," I said.

Alix explained, "That's a convention where fans get to meet some of the people who make our favorite anime."

"Like Midori," I said. "She is the original voice actor for Red Squirrel. She flew in from Japan just for this. She's my favorite of all the actors on the series. And she did movies before—"

"Don't mind Bree," Alix said. "She's fangirling hard for Midori."

The woman chuckled, then turned to Alix. "And you don't mind dressing up as a girl?"

Alix stiffened.

I jumped in. "Alix is a girl."

A puzzled look crept across the woman's face. Awkward silence. Then the woman slowly turned to face the front of the bus.

I patted Alix on the arm. "Forget her."

Alix said nothing, but they glared at the woman until the bus came to the next stop.

"Two more stops," I said, trying to distract my best friend.

"Why do people always have to be jerks?" they asked.

I nudged Alix. "Hey, Black Heart. There's always a bad acorn," I said, quoting Red Squirrel's line from the series. "You just have to turn the other cheek."

I spun around, smacking the woman in the head with my tail. This time I didn't apologize.

Alix snickered.

"Oops," I said, leaving my tail where it was.

The woman stood up and moved to a seat near the front. At the next stop, she hurried off the bus. I didn't know if this was her stop or if she was trying

to get away from us. Honestly I didn't care. One more stop, and we'd be at the Anime Expo.

Nothing else was going to ruin our day.

Chapter Two

The final stop! The bus rolled up in front of the convention hall where the Anime Expo was taking place. The building stood three stories tall with glass lining the walls. A massive line of fans waited outside the main entrance to get their badges and welcome packs.

I couldn't believe I was about to meet Midori. It was rare for an anime expo to bring in an original

Japanese voice actor. Usually English-speaking voice actors were the featured guests at an expo. But Midori was a special case. She was already a famous movie star in Japan, so casting her as an anime voice actor was huge for the series. Some people said that without Midori as Red Squirrel, the series would never have been as popular in Japan as it was. And now I was going to meet this star.

"I can't wait to do the cosplay contest!" Alix yelled as they headed off the bus. They stopped short as their sword caught on the overhead bar. I helped them free it.

"Thanks," Alix said. "Probably not a good look for Black Heart to break her sword jumping off a bus."

I laughed. "Or to have Red Squirrel save her."

We ran to the lineup to sign in. Fans had gathered all over the site. A few wore T-shirts with a picture of their favorite anime character. Others wore store-bought costumes for the most popular anime shows, including *Demon Slayer*. Some of the