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COSPLAY CRIME

MARTY CHAN

Cosplay Crime

Author: Marty Chan

February 13, 2024

In this high-interest accessible novel for middle-grade readers, shy thirteen-year-old Bree Wong must channel her inner anime heroine to solve a crime at the Anime Expo.

FORMAT

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KEY SELLING POINTS

- Shy thirteen-year-old Bree steps out of her comfort zone to investigate a theft at an anime convention.
- This story explores themes of friendship, overcoming fears and following one's passions.
- The main character's best friend identifies as female and nonbinary, but this is incidental to the storyline.
- In recent years, anime and cosplay have exploded in global popularity and have become part of mainstream culture. This book will appeal to both devoted fans and newcomers curious about this community.
- This is another fun, heartfelt story by Marty Chan with great comedic elements.
- Enhanced features (dyslexia-friendly font, cream paper, larger trim size) to increase reading accessibility for dyslexic and other striving readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Credit: Ryan Parker

MARTY CHAN is an award-winning author of dozens of books for kids, including *Kung Fu Master*, *Willpower*, *Haunted Hospital* and *Kylie the Magnificent* in the Orca Currents line and *Final Cut* in the Orca Anchor line. He tours schools and libraries across Canada, using storytelling, stage magic and improv to ignite a passion for reading in kids. He lives in Edmonton.

PROMOTIONAL PLANS INCLUDE

- Print and online advertising campaigns
- Promotion at national and regional school, library and trade conferences
- Extensive ARC distribution, including NetGalley and Edelweiss
- Blog and social media promotion
- Outreach in Orca newsletters

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Orca Currents are short, high-interest novels with contemporary themes written specifically for middle-school students reading below grade level. Reading levels from grade 2.0 to 5.0.

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MARTY CHAN

orca currents

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Summary: In this high-interest accessible novel for middle-grade readers, a cosplaying thief at an anime expo has stolen a valuable print belonging to the celebrity that shy thirteen-year-old Bree Wong has come to meet. She hopes that she'll get a face-to-face with her idol if she can catch the culprit and recover the stolen print.

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To Sylvia Moon, my anime spirit guide.

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

hardcore cosplayers had gone all out, and it looked like they had spent years making their picture-perfect costumes.

Alix and I played spot-the-anime as we stood in line.

I pointed at a kid with a green jumpsuit and floppy bunny ears. He had a matching green wig. “One point for Deku,” I said. “*My Hero Academia* is in the lead.”

“Awesome, Bree,” Alix said. “I like his power gloves.”

A girl strolled by wearing a long trench coat with broad shoulder pads. Her black hair was slicked back under a cap. A thick gold chain dangled from one of her shoulders.

Alix beamed. “Jotaro! One point for *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure*.”

“She nailed the look,” I said. “She looks just like him, right down to the sneer.”

Suddenly a kid in a black-and-green-plaid jacket

rushed past us. He carried a black sword. Alix and I turned to each other at the same time and shouted, “*Demon Slayer!* One point.”

“I’ll bet he’s trying to track down his sister,” I said.

“Well, there’s no shortage of Nezukos,” Alix said. They pointed to a group of half-dozen black-haired girls in brown-and-pink kimonos running around. I recognized the anime character when I saw the bamboo muzzles strapped across their mouths and the pink ribbons in their long hair.

In the series, the mouthpiece was to keep Nezuko from biting any humans when she transformed into a demon. The bamboo muzzle completed the look for one of the most popular characters of the convention. I’d easily give *Demon Slayer* twenty points for all the cosplayers paying tribute to the series.

As we inched closer to the sign-in table, a guy with a *Red Squirrel*, *Black Heart* T-shirt strolled up

to us. "Can I get a selfie?" he asked.

"Sorry," I said, taking a step back. *Who is this guy with the phone?*

"I love Red Squirrel," he said. "You have a great tail. Can I get a picture with you?"

"Maybe another time," I said.

"You look just like her," he said. "It's a cool costume. Just one shot."

Alix stepped in front of me. "How about one of Black Heart?"

"Uh, I was kind of hoping just Red Squirrel."

"Maybe the two of us together?" Alix suggested. "What do you say, Red Squirrel?"

Alix loved being the center of attention, while I preferred to stay in the shadows. They nudged me in the ribs.

"One shot. What will it hurt?" they said.

I sighed. "Okay, one shot. Make it fast."

Unfortunately the one photo turned into many as more fans gathered around us to snap pictures.

Alix pulled me out of the line. I stood awkwardly while Alix went through a series of poses and called out Black Heart's special power moves. "Thunder Hands! Underworld Smash! Double Trouble!"

"We have to get our badges," I said. "We can't get in without them."

"Just one more shot," Alix said. "Snap your tail at me."

"No," I said.

"Aw, come on, Bree."

I glanced at the strangers around us. I couldn't stand the attention. I shook my head. Finally a trio of Sailor Moons walked by, and all the picture-taking fans started filming them.

"Don't you want one more photo with me?" Alix pleaded. "I'll show you my Breaking Wind."

I grabbed my friend's arm and pulled them toward the lineup. "Let's get our badges. I don't want to miss the Midori panel."

"But I haven't broken wind," Alix whined.

After what seemed like forever, we got our badges and convention guides. I steered Alix away from picture-snapping fans and into the convention building. I checked the guide map for the location of Midori's panel, and I started leading Alix there. In hindsight, I realized I should have kept an eye on my friend instead of looking at the map.

Alix shouted, "Bree! They're making a cosplay video. I bet they'll put us in it. Come on."

"No," I said. "We're going to be late for the panel."

"Just one pose," they begged.

"No," I said.

However, saying no to Alix was next to impossible. About thirteen poses later, the fans stopped filming and taking photos. I thought the fans tired before Alix did. My friend lingered in the hallway, looking for another fan with a camera. I grabbed Alix and pulled them along with me.

"We have an hour before the panel begins," I said.

“See?” Alix said. “Nothing to worry about. Plenty of time.”

We jogged around the corner and skidded to a halt. The line for Midori’s panel went all the way down the hallway. It snaked back onto itself twice before extending around another corner.

I looked up and down the line, hoping it was for someone else. I spotted another Red Squirrel cosplayer in the lineup. I slipped up next to her and asked, “Excuse me, are you here to see Midori?”

The girl nodded, then pointed at my arms. “I like your gauntlets.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled. “And your costume...it’s the nuttiest!”

She laughed. “Took me forever to sew the tail on. You could say I was out on a limb.”

We smiled knowingly at each other because we had both quoted Red Squirrel’s dialogue. My hero used “nuttiest” when she liked something. And she

said “out on a limb” when she was in trouble, which always seemed to happen at the end of an episode.

“I hope Midori likes it,” she said.

“I’m sure she’ll love it,” I said. “I’d better get in line.”

“Oh,” she said. “You’re too late. The panel is full. You should have been here an hour ago.”

I gasped. I was out on a limb!

Chapter Three

I couldn't believe my ears. We still had an hour before the panel started. How could it be full? Maybe the other Red Squirrel was wrong? Another glance at the winding lineup, and the truth slowly sunk in. Getting into the panel would be a tough nut to crack.

"Thanks," I mumbled as I slunk away.

Alix grabbed my arm. "Let's double-check with the volunteers at the door."

“If we hadn’t stopped for all those photos...” I muttered.

“Don’t give up yet,” Alix said. “We’ll find a way in.”

“Look how long the line is.”

“Hey, this is not the Bree Wong I know. The Bree Wong I know would never give up.” Alix reached up and adjusted my red wig to hide the strands of my black hair sticking out. “Let’s shake this tree and... and...” They quoted the first half of Red Squirrel’s battle cry.

I perked up and followed their prompt. “And crack this nut!”

Alix jogged to the panel entrance. I followed, my red bushy tail waving back and forth as I ran. With Alix in front, it looked like we were acting out a scene from *Red Squirrel, Black Heart*. Fans pointed at us, and a few people pulled out their phones to film the action. I blocked my face with one hand as I ran to the door.

Standing there was a bald volunteer sporting a bright yellow T-shirt with the word *Volunteer* across

his chest. My gaze zeroed in on his purple ID badge. I had this habit of always reading people's name tags. His read *Topher*.

"Ex...cuse...me, Topher," I said, trying to suck in air as I talked. "Is...the...panel...full?"

Topher nodded. "It's been full for a while now. Sorry."

"Is there *any* chance we can get in?" Alix asked. "We're huge fans of the series."

He sighed. "Rules are rules. If there's a panel you really want to get into, your best bet is to camp out in front of the room at least five hours in advance."

"The only one I wanted to see was Midori's," I said.

"Midori will be doing photos and autographs at the expo. But she leaves this evening, so you only have one chance to catch her. She should be heading over to the signing area after the panel is done."

My knees began to shake. "Where will she be?"

He pointed down the hallway. “Go down the escalator to the basement level, and you’ll see the dealers’ hall. The signing area is on the other end. You’ll find all the featured guests there. You can’t miss it.”

“That’s the nuttiest!” I said. “Thanks!”

I ran to the escalator. Alix caught up to me. “Hold on, Bree. The panel hasn’t even started yet. We have time before Midori shows up at her booth.”

“I’m not missing her,” I said.

Alix lowered their head. “Yeah, sorry about that. I guess I got carried away with the photos.”

“If I get a chance to talk to Midori, all will be forgiven,” I said. “If.”

“Okay, let’s go to the booth,” Alix said. “But I’m pretty sure the people who are lined up for the panel are the same ones who will line up at the booth. We’ll be the first ones there.”

“I’m not taking any chances,” I said. “Let’s shake this tree and crack this nut!” It felt good to

use Red Squirrel's battle cry. I led the way down the escalator.

The dealers' hall was an anime fan's dream come true. Vendor booths were crammed side by side in long rows. Here you could pick up complete manga collections, ready-to-wear cosplay costumes, Japanese toys and trinkets, and rare items that would wow even the most hard-core fan.

I slowed as we shuffled past a booth selling *Red Squirrel*, *Black Heart* backpacks. A red bag with a giant squirrel tail dangling from the bottom practically screamed "Buy me!"

"So cute," I said. "I wonder how many pockets it has."

Alix coughed. "Ahem. The signing."

"Oh. Right."

It took everything I had to tear myself away from the booth and keep going to the autograph area. But the progress was slow. It seemed like every vendor had a key to my fan heart and my wallet. I kept promising myself that I would drop by later.

Finally we got to the back of the dealers' hall, where autograph tables were set up for fans to meet the featured guests. A line of people snaked back and forth between yellow guide ropes. The fans seemed excited about the featured guest who was signing photos and posing for pictures. The poster over her table showed Annie from the series *Attack on Titan*.

Right beside her signing table was the one for Midori. A poster of Midori as Red Squirrel hung above, and about three dozen fans were already waiting.

"I'll bet they also missed the panel," I said.

"Well, I don't see too many people here," Alix said. "Maybe we can kill some time and check out some of the other events."

"You are a few acorns short of a winter stash if you think I'm missing my chance to see Midori," I said.

"At the very least, we could cruise the dealers' hall and get some of the stuff you saw," they said.

Tempting as it was, I didn't want to miss my chance at meeting Midori. But I also knew Alix was more interested in showing off their costume.

"You know what?" I said. "You go. I'll hold our place in line."

"I don't want to leave you alone, Bree. You know, nutty buddies forever, right? I mean, what is Black Heart without Red Squirrel?"

"As long as you don't get your sword stuck on anything, I think you'll be fine," I said. "And don't worry about me."

"You're sure?" they asked.

"Go. I can keep myself busy." I reached into my satchel and pulled out my sketch pad.

They hugged me. "You're the best. I'll be back in a bit."

Alix skipped away from the signing area, but not before stopping to pose for a photo with a fan.

"Watch out! I'm going to break wind!" Alix shouted.

I chuckled as I opened my sketch pad. In the middle of the page I had drawn Red Squirrel posing next to Midori. This was the sketch I was going to give her. I glanced up at the poster over her table. Something wasn't right about my drawing. Mine didn't have Midori's dazzling smile, so I pulled out a pencil and eraser and began revising.

I sat down and brought up my knees as an easel, setting the pad on my legs. I erased and redrew Midori's mouth, trying to match it to her poster. At school my teacher had to beg me to revise. Now that I was doing something that mattered, I was happy to redraw the sketch until it was perfect.

Finally I had a version I liked. As I stretched out my legs, I surveyed the lineup, which had grown quite a bit. No sign of Alix. I imagined them tracking down anyone with a phone or camera so they could strike a pose.

I climbed to my feet and slipped the sketch pad back in my satchel. I could feel the excitement

building. Far back, I spotted the Red Squirrel I'd met outside the panel room. She was joining the back of my line. If she was here, that meant Midori was on her way!

Time crawled by as more people arrived for the signing. Then a tall skinny man stepped up to Midori's table. He wore a royal-blue shirt with the word *Staff* across the chest. He raised his arms and waved at all of us.

"Can I get your attention, please? Please! Everyone settle down for a second. I have some bad news. If you are here for the Midori autograph session, I'm sorry to say this, but due to an unforeseen incident, we have to cancel her signing."

Groans filled the air.

"It's something out of our control," the skinny man said. "We're truly sorry, but things happen."

Judging by the stunned expressions in the crowd, everyone's reaction was exactly the same as mine.

SHOCK!

Chapter Four

Cranky Midori fans shuffled away from the signing area. Quite a few stayed in the line, forcing the staff member to again announce that the signing had been canceled.

I wondered what had happened at the panel. I scrambled to the back of the line to find the other Red Squirrel. She was one of the stragglers who

weren't sure whether to stay or go. Her eyes lit up with recognition.

"You missed an awesome panel," she said.

"I'm kicking myself," I said. "How was it?"

"She was amazing, even through her Japanese translator. He was so full of himself, but Midori was the nuttiest."

"What did she talk about?" I asked, knowing this was the closest I would ever get to my idol.

"Oh, she told the best story. Midori said that Hiroto based the Red Squirrel manga character on her after he saw her in the movie *Moon over Tokyo*. Midori said that she didn't even know about the manga. Not until her agent told her that they wanted to cast her as the voice actor for *Red Squirrel*, *Black Heart*. The first day of recording, Hiroto showed up at the studio with the original sketch that he did after he saw Midori's movie. She said he gave it to her and told her that she was his

muse for the manga. That's the story in a nutshell. Pretty cool, right?"

"Wow," I said. "An original Hiroto print. I'd give anything to see it."

"Actually, she had it on display at the panel. We all got to see it. She was planning to set it up at her signing table so people could take pictures of it. I know I wasn't supposed to, but I grabbed a picture of it at the panel."

"Can I see?" I asked.

The other Red Squirrel pulled her phone out of a pocket sewn into her tunic. I wished I had thought of that when I built my costume. It would have made things so much easier.

"Check this out." She had set the picture as the background of her phone's home screen.

I felt like I was peeking at the birth of Red Squirrel. The drawing of Midori as Red Squirrel looked rough, but it had all the classic features of the character. The fluffy tail. The Acorns of Justice.

Even Chitter Chatter, her shadow tail, stood just behind her. But in this original sketch, the shadow tail looked different. She was more like a giant tree rather than the acorn-headed human in the manga and anime series. However, what struck me the most about the sketch was how the real Midori looked so much like Red Squirrel.

“Thank you for showing me,” I said, not wanting to look away.

“Hey, we Red Squirrels have to stick together, right?”

“Nuts in a cluster,” I said. “So what happened to Midori? Did she get sick or something?”

The other Red Squirrel shrugged. “No clue. She was perfectly fine at the end of the panel. She even stuck around to chat before her translator took her away. He was a bit of a nutjob. Maybe something happened on the way here. She could have tripped and broken an ankle.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“You know what? I saw the cutest Red Squirrel backpack in the dealers’ hall,” she said. “That way the day’s not a total loss, right?”

I knew exactly which backpack she was talking about. I was tempted to race her to the booth so I could get the bag first, but something kept me from leaving. I stuck near the signing table, watching the skinny staff member write on a sign.

Wondering if he had any information about Midori, I slid closer to him and peeked at his badge. *Razmin, Anime Expo Head*. He wasn’t any ordinary staff member. He was the organizer. If anyone knew what had happened to Midori, it had to be him.

“Excuse me, Razmin,” I said. “Why is the signing canceled?”

“Do I know you?” he asked.

I pointed at his badge.

“Oh, right,” he said.

“Is Midori okay?” I asked.

“Yes, she should be fine,” he said. “Excuse me, I have to go check on her.”

Razmin propped the handwritten sign up on the table.

Canceled.

Then he left the signing area. If he was going to check on Midori, I knew exactly where I had to be. I followed Razmin through the crowd. We weaved through the dealers’ hall, up the escalator and past the main entrance.

While I could see a few volunteers, I noticed no fans were in this area. I stuck out like a leafless branch. I pulled the convention guide out of my satchel and pretended I was lost. Peeking over the guide, I watched as Razmin entered a hallway.

I crept after him. Razmin walked toward a door at the end of the hall. I followed, trying to make as little noise as possible. He opened the door and entered the room. As the door closed, I saw something that made my heart skip. Midori!

The door closed all the way, leaving me to look at the sign.

Green Room

Featured Guests Only.

Getting into the room was going to be a tough nut to crack. Should I or shouldn't I? I had to meet Midori, so I reached for the door handle.

"Hey!" a voice called from behind me. "You're not supposed to be here."

A stocky security guard in a black T-shirt hurried toward me.

"I was lost," I said, staring at his chest until I found his name tag—Don.

"This is off-limits. Only gold badges allowed," he said. "Get back to the main site."

I nodded and started to leave when the green-room door opened. Another security guard stepped out.

"Calvin!" Don yelled. "What are you doing in the green room?"

“Sorry,” the guard said, looking down.

Another man slipped out of the room. The first thing that struck me about him was his silver hair. He looked like he could have stepped out of the *Demon Slayer* series. Well, if he had muscles.

“My fault,” the man said.

I looked for his name tag but couldn’t spot it.

Don growled, “Jordan. You are not to order my staff around.”

Jordan explained, “Midori has a photo of the stolen print. I wanted Calvin to print it off so we could distribute it to the volunteers,” he said.

Don said, “You’re the translator, not security. And you’re not his boss, Jordan. I am. Calvin, next time don’t leave your post. You can radio me if anyone in there wants something.”

“Yes, sir,” said Calvin.

I stopped and pretended to fix my bushy tail as I eavesdropped on them.

“Whoever took Midori’s print is going to have a

tough time sneaking it out in its frame,” Don said.

“And besides, everyone’s on the lookout.”

“Well, this is on you if you can’t recover the print. Midori is very upset,” Jordan said.

“We’ll find it, Jordan,” Don said. “We have every volunteer watching the exits. If the thief is still here, we’ll get them.”

I figured they must be talking about the print that Midori had planned to display at her booth. The one that the other Red Squirrel had mentioned. So this was why Midori couldn’t do the signing. Someone had stolen her print. If I could return it, I’d have a chance to meet my hero.

I had to find the print!

Chapter Five

The theft of Midori's print reminded me of episode 75 of *Red Squirrel, Black Heart*. A woman's engagement ring went missing, and it was revealed that one of the gemstones was a power stone that could brainwash people. The thief turned out to be one of Black Heart's greedy minions. He could make himself two-dimensional and slip through cracks in windows and walls to steal things. Red Squirrel

eventually caught the burglar using Chitter Chatter and a jar of superglue.

I had no idea how the expo thief had stolen Midori's print. But I knew I'd have to start the same way Red Squirrel did in episode 75. I had to visit the place where Midori's print was last seen—the panel room.

I joined the crowd of fans headed to the dealers' hall, looking for the way up to the panel rooms. With so many people browsing the gear at the booths, movement was slowed to a crawl. Finally I stepped out from a row of booths. As I did, I spotted Alix doing what they loved—striking poses for the cameras.

“Alix!” I called. “Over here. I have to tell you something.”

“Venom Spit Take,” they cried as they pretended to spit at the fans taking pictures. Alix didn't even look my way. I decided to let my friend have their fun and continued upstairs to Midori's panel room.

The doors were open. Inside the room volunteers were straightening chairs and picking up garbage.

I guessed they were getting the room ready for the next panel. A cloth-covered table and microphones sat on the raised stage at the front. Right beside the table stood an empty easel, which had probably held Midori's print.

Topher, the volunteer I'd talked to earlier, looked up from one of the rows of chairs. "Sorry, you're too late for the Midori panel. And the sword-making session doesn't start until three."

"I'm not here about the panels," I said. I had to convince Topher that I was in the know, so I did some name-dropping. "Razmin told me what happened. I just wanted to see where it went down. You know, the print."

Topher looked at my badge. "How do you know Razmin?"

"He's a family friend," I said. "He said Midori's print was stolen, and I wanted to see where it happened."

Topher glanced around. "Well, you're in the wrong place. It was in the stairwell. Becky came to get the

print, and she was supposed to take it straight to the signing area. We're guessing the thief followed her from the panel."

"But the expo is packed," I said. "Someone would have spotted them."

"Nah," Topher said. "Becky took the back stairwell to avoid attracting attention. She said she was halfway down the stairs when someone shoved her. She fell and broke her arm. The last thing she remembers was the thief picking the framed print off the landing and running away."

"Where's Becky?" I asked.

"The hospital," Topher said. "I was the one who found her in the stairwell. They radioed me to look for her when she didn't show up at the signing area."

"Did Becky see the thief at least?"

Topher nodded. "Yeah, she said the thief was dressed up as Nezuko."

"From *Demon Slayer*?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. A brown-and-pink kimono with a black wig. Except she lost one thing in the robbery."

"What?" I asked.

"You know how Nezuko always wears that bamboo stick in her mouth? Well, I found one in the stairwell. Becky might have knocked it out when she was trying to save the print. I'm pretty sure the thief will be a Nezuko without the bamboo."

"Thanks," I said. The first break in the case. "I'm sure they'll find the thief."

"Doubt it. She's probably long gone by now," Topher said.

I thought he was wrong. I believed the thief wanted to sell the print to one of the vendors, and I was sure I could catch her. But as soon as I stepped into the hallway and saw the cosplayers in the crowd, I realized how hard my search would be. At least a dozen or more cosplayers around me wore the Nezuko kimono.

I wasn't about to give up. I decided to take my investigation away from the main panel area to the smaller panel rooms. If the thief was still here, she'd probably look for a place where she could pull the print out of the frame.

I turned down a hallway and headed past a series of rooms. Each room was full of fans and artists either running role-playing demonstrations or talking about how to do things like attach fake jewels to leather. One room was for free screenings of old anime shows. I thought I heard the jazzy soundtrack to *Cowboy Bebop* as I walked past one doorway.

The hallway opened up to a courtyard. It looked like I had just stepped into a jungle with palm trees, rock pathways and a small waterfall near the back. Hiding behind one of the large trees was a cosplayer in a brown-and-pink kimono. Nezuko! I moved in for a closer look and noticed her face was bare. No muzzle.

I charged toward the thief and yelled, “Stop right there! Don’t move!”

The stunned girl looked up at me, confused.

I grabbed her arm. “Where’s the print?”

“Hey! Let go of me,” she said.

“You stole Midori’s print,” I said.

“Is this part of the shoot?” she yelled into the jungle.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She pulled out of my grasp and ran up a rocky path.

I chased after her. “Come back!”

She ran toward a guy with a camera on a tripod. Next to him was a cosplayer trying to fit into a *Demon Slayer* outfit. He struggled to get his arms into a green-and-black-checkered jacket. I knew at first glance that this was the costume for the series’ main character.

“You’re too early!” he yelled. “I’m not dressed yet.”

“Is she part of the video?” Nezuko asked.

The two guys looked at me, then at each other and shook their heads.

“What are you doing here?” the man with the camera asked.

“I’m looking for a Nezuko who lost her mouth-piece. Where is your bamboo muzzle?” I asked the girl.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s part of the bit we’re filming. They have it.” She nodded over at the guys. The *Demon Slayer* guy reached into his pocket and pulled out a thin piece of bamboo.

“I’m trying to get it back to her before she turns into a demon and bites someone,” he explained.

The camera guy sighed. “Look, I’m a fan of *Red Squirrel*, *Black Heart* too, but I’m not doing any mash-ups in this video. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to get my shot.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to bother you.”

I left the jungle area. My blushing face must have looked as red as my wig. As I headed back down the

hallway, I realized I'd have to be more careful with my accusations. Instead, I focused on the thief's motive for stealing the print. I wasn't sure how much the stolen artwork was worth to someone outside of anime. But to a hard-core anime fan, the first-ever sketch of Red Squirrel could fetch a few thousand dollars.

The best place to sell stuff like this was the dealers' hall. So I had to find vendors that sold collectibles. But I'd have to hurry before the thief sold the print and the trail went cold.

Chapter Six

The dealers' hall was still packed with fans looking to buy and vendors happy to sell. With the Midori signing having being canceled, fans of the series had time to do some shopping. I searched for a vendor selling *Red Squirrel*, *Black Heart* gear. I stopped at the booth that sold the cute backpack with the squirrel tail.

Unfortunately the other Red Squirrel was in the process of paying for the last backpack. If I were Black Heart, I'd have been tempted to club her over the head and run off with the bag. But heroes had to do the right thing.

I reminded myself that my mission was to look for the thief. I couldn't be sure which vendors she would try to approach, but I had to start somewhere. I approached the seller standing behind the table and searched for his name tag—Erik. He reminded me of the Black Heart minion from episode 4 with his nose ring and the butterfly tattoo across his bald head.

“Excuse me, but I'm looking for artwork for the manga or series,” I said. “Do you have any prints?”

Erik smiled. “I have plenty. See the collector's cards over here. They have hologram backs. Pretty cool.”

I glanced at the cards on the table. They were tempting, but I had to keep on track. “No. I'm thinking about something hard to find.”

He rubbed the tattoo on his head, thinking. “Well, I have a poster of season four. It’s pretty rare.”

“Any original artwork?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Sorry, I don’t sell that kind of stuff. You might want to try Up a Tree. Her booth’s about halfway down this aisle. She has tons of prints. All the great anime shows. *One Piece*. *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Even *Cardcaptor Sakura*.”

“Thanks!” I said.

I tore myself away from the hologram cards and searched for the booth. When I arrived, only one customer was talking to the vendor. A Nezuko with no bamboo muzzle! I inched closer and pretended to examine the prints of anime characters on the display rack while I tried to eavesdrop.

“So are you interested?” Nezuko asked.

The Japanese woman behind the table answered, “Very.”

I leaned over to read the woman’s name tag—Karyn. She noticed me. “Just looking,” I said.

“Feel free to browse,” she said, smiling. Then she turned her attention back to Nezuko, who switched from English to what sounded like Japanese. Something was up. I tried to sneak a peek at her badge. It was purple, the badge volunteers and staff got to wear. I couldn’t make out the name, but I thought I could see the letter J.

I slipped my phone out of my satchel and pretended I was answering a text. Then I angled the camera lens toward the pair and started recording a video.

They finished their conversation with a bow and the word *arigato*, which I thought meant thank you. Nezuko hurried away from the booth, looking over her shoulder at me.

Something was definitely up. I didn’t know what the two had talked about, but I guessed they had arranged for the sale. If that was the case, then the thief was off to get the print.

I followed her as she strolled out of the aisle

and turned right. I picked up my pace. I rounded the corner and ran into a parade of cosplayers. At least four other Nezukos marched past me. I had to focus on their faces to make sure they were wearing muzzles.

Then I caught sight of the thief moving against the stream of cosplayers. I started to go after her when a hand grabbed me.

Alix smiled at me. "Got Midori's autograph already?" they asked. "That was fast. Good timing, Bree. The cosplay contest is starting now."

I shook free, watching the thief slip away. "Alix, I have to catch her."

"Who? What's going on?"

"A thief stole a print Midori brought to the expo. They had to cancel the signing. Now I have to catch the thief."

"Slow down, Bree," Alix said. "So you didn't get to see Midori?"

"No," I said. "But I can catch the thief."

“What are you going on about?” Alix asked.

“I can explain on the way,” I said. “Come with me before she gets away.”

“But we have a great chance of winning the cosplay contest. I haven’t seen that many Black Hearts around, and your Red Squirrel costume is the nuttiest.”

“If I get the print back, I can give it to Midori personally. I’ll get to talk to her.”

Alix shook their head. “I’m sorry, Bree. None of this makes sense. Just forget about it and join me in the cosplay contest. Thunder Hands! Underworld Smash! Breaking Wind!”

“No!” I yelled. “I’m going to lose the thief. Are you coming or not?”

Alix shook their head. “Do what you want, Bree. I’m going to the cosplay contest.”

“Fine,” I said.

I left my friend and sprinted out of the hall. But it was too late. I had lost the thief. I scanned the

site left and right. Anyone in costume seemed to be headed into the dealers' hall while non-cosplayers mingled in the central area. There was no sign of the thief.

GONE!

Chapter Seven

Before I could continue the search, I had to be sure that this muzzle-less Nezuko was the thief. The answer had to be in my recording. I pulled out my phone and downloaded a translator app. Then I played the video, hoping the volume was loud enough for the app to translate the conversation. More important, I hoped the chat would point to where the thief had stashed the stolen print.

I headed into the women's washroom to listen. I slipped into one of the bathroom stalls and held the phone closer to my ear.

"I will pay top dollar if it is an original Hiroto print." I recognized the voice as Karyn, the vendor.

"Trust me, it is," answered Nezuko.

"Well, if it looks delicious, I'll ride it," said Karyn.

Delicious? Ride? What? I replayed this section of the clip, hoping the translator app would do a better job.

"Trust me, it is," answered Nezuko.

"Well, if it's authentic, I'll buy it," Karyn said. "How did you get it anyway?"

"The less you know, the better," said Nezuko.

The app froze and couldn't translate the rest of the conversation. If the beginning of the recording was correct, I had evidence. Now I had to recover the print. I stepped out of the stall and heard the sound of dripping. My tail had fallen in the toilet. I wrung it out and left the bathroom.

What would Red Squirrel do? If I couldn't find the thief, maybe I could guess where she had hidden the print. From the conversation on the recording, it sounded like she'd gone off to get it.

I decided to start at the stairwell that Topher had mentioned. The thief could have removed the print from the frame and sneaked it out of the expo. However, the fact that she hadn't shown the print to the vendor at the booth suggested that she hadn't removed it from the frame yet. Which meant that she'd hidden it someplace on site.

As I walked past the main panel room, a couple of girls in cat-ear headbands caught up to me.

"We love Red Squirrel!" one of them said.

The other one raised her phone. "Can we get a picture with you?"

I winced at the unwanted attention. "Sorry, I'm trying to sort some nuts," I said, quoting one of Red Squirrel's lines from the show.

The girls laughed and clapped at the line.

I ignored them as I continued down the hallway, searching for the stairwell near Midori's panel room. Once I found it, I began to explore the area near the stairs. I picked up my pace as I jogged through a maze of hallways until I entered an open area. Lined up along the wall were colorful displays of different anime series, from *Dragon Ball* to *Death Note* to *Attack on Titan*. There were giant posters that lit up with LED lights, costumes on clothes dummies, and mock weapons.

The one thing that caught my eye was a giant LEGO sculpture of the ninja Naruto in mid run. It was protected behind a velvet rope. And standing in front was a cosplayer in a brown-and-pink kimono with a pink ribbon in her black hair. She looked about the same height as the thief, but her back was to me, so I couldn't see if her bamboo muzzle was missing. The only way to know for sure was to get a closer look.

I inched toward the massive statue of Naruto. One of his feet was off the ground, and both his arms stretched out behind him.

“Wow,” I said. “I can’t believe they were able to get the spikes on Naruto’s hair with just LEGO bricks. And he’s doing a Naruto run.”

She said nothing. I glanced at her face. She had a bamboo muzzle strapped across her mouth. I was disappointed that I hadn’t found the thief, so I started walking away.

Then something caught my eye. Behind the LEGO leg planted on the floor, I noticed the edge of a picture frame. Could it be the print? I had to find out.

I waited until the area was empty before I stepped over the velvet rope. I worked my way to the back of the statue and grabbed the picture frame hidden behind its leg. As I pulled the frame into full view, my heart sank. The frame was empty.

Still, it could be valuable as evidence. Maybe the police could dust it for fingerprints.

“Hey!” a voice shouted. “You’re not supposed to be there.”

A security guard had spotted me. Panicking, I tried to step back over the rope, the picture frame in one hand, but I lost my balance. I reached out to steady myself against one of Naruto’s LEGO arms. My hand slipped against the smooth surface, and my entire body weight landed on the planted leg. *Crack!*

It snapped from the impact. More cracking as the statue shifted, and the LEGO bricks popped off in response. Naruto tilted to one side. With his outstretched arms, he looked like a wounded duck hurtling to Earth.

Smash!

LEGO pieces flew everywhere!

As the security guard spoke into the radio clipped to his shoulder, I scrambled to my feet. “We have a situation in the Hall of Anime,” he said.

I jumped over the velvet rope to make my escape.

“Don’t move!” the guard shouted.

No way was I going to stick around. I had a thief to catch. I stepped on the LEGO debris, scattering bricks across the floor. The security guard gave chase. I lowered my body and held up the frame to ward off the crowd of curious fans gathering to see the destruction. My squirrel tail flapped as I fled.

Zippering through the hallways, I knew the security guard would radio the others to look for me. I needed a place to hide. Suddenly a foul odor punched me in the nose. It came from the open doorway of a dark room. I had heard about con funk, a gut-turning stench of sweaty costumes the cosplayers had been wearing all day long. But this was particularly foul.

No wonder. I had found the gamer area, where fans played endless hours of their favorite video games in a dark room. I winced from the stench, but this room was a perfect place to hide if I could stand the smell. I took a breath and ducked inside.

Gamers yelled random curses at each other as they mashed the buttons on their controllers. The screens around the room lit up with multiplayer games like *Genshin Impact*, *Overwatch* and *Mass Effect*. I found a dark corner near the back of the room and curled up in a ball just as a female security guard poked her head into the room.

She took one whiff and immediately backed out. I doubted she would return, even if she knew I was here. Now I had to find a way to move through the convention site without security spotting me. Unfortunately, by now the guards would have heard about the Red Squirrel who had wiped out the Naruto statue.

No two nuts about it—I was out on a limb.

Chapter Eight

I couldn't hide in the gamer room forever, but the security guards would nab me if I wandered back out. The only solution was to go out as myself. I had to get rid of my cosplay costume.

I lost the squirrel tail, red wig and tunic. No one watched me strip because they were too wrapped up in their video games. All I had left on was my

tank top undershirt and a pair of sweats, and both were damp from running around.

I bundled up my costume and looked for a safe place to stash it. I noticed a pile of backpacks in a corner of the room. I assumed these belonged to the players, and I figured none of them would be leaving anytime soon.

I buried the costume, my satchel and the picture frame under the pile of bags, feeling like a real squirrel stashing away her acorns for the winter. Then I left the gamer area, relieved to finally be able to breathe fresh air again.

A security guard talking on his radio walked toward me. I froze, but he walked right past without a second glance. I was invisible now that I was out of the Red Squirrel costume. I followed the guard for a bit to eavesdrop on the radio communication.

“Keep your eyes out for a girl dressed up as Red Squirrel,” the radio voice said.

“Who is that?” the guard asked.

“A kid that looks like a squirrel,” the voice snapped.

The guard nodded. “Ah. No sign of any squirrels so far. I did see three Squirtles.”

“Not Pokémon! Just look for a big bushy tail,” the voice said.

With security off my back, I could now deal with finding the thief. However, as I walked through the convention site, I was getting attention of a different kind now. A few fans were puzzled at the sight of my tank top and mussed-up hair. Some men were staring at my chest. I folded my arms to cover myself up, feeling almost naked.

A Sailor Moon with long blond hair in pigtails stopped me and asked, “Which anime are you from?”

On the spot, I struggled for a quick answer. “Um...I’m...an original character. Yes, I made this costume up.”

“Well, with the messy hair and the tank top, you kind of look like Bakugo from *My Hero Academia*. Cool.”

A creepy man with a telephoto lens on his camera strolled up and asked, “You two ladies mind posing for a picture? I’m loving your outfits. Especially your tops.”

I glanced at Sailor Moon’s Japanese school uniform. The white shirt had a few of the top buttons undone. I could guess why this creep wanted our pictures.

“No, thanks,” I said and walked away.

“Jerk,” Sailor Moon muttered as she joined me. “I hate lurkers like that. Always getting a peep.”

“I know,” I said.

“Anyway, nice costume,” she said, waving as she veered off to join a group of other Sailor Moons.

I hadn’t liked the attention before when I was hidden in the Red Squirrel costume. But now I felt even more out in the open. I tried my best to ignore people staring at me.

I needed help to find the thief and recover the print. I decided that I’d bring the recording to

Midori and her translator, Jordan. Once they heard the conversation, they'd be able to get security to stop chasing me and go after the thief.

At the green-room door, Calvin stood guard. I remembered he was the one who had left his post to help Jordan. I used this information to my advantage as I moved to open the door.

Calvin raised his hands and blocked me. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where do think you're going?" he asked.

"Jordan told me to see him," I said, trying to sound confident. "I have information about the stolen print."

"No one gets in there without an artist badge," Calvin said.

"Jordan's not going to like this," I said. "He's going to be very upset if I don't give him this information."

"Rules are rules," he said.

I shifted tactics. "Then can you ask Jordan to come out? He's waiting for me. Tell him it's about the stolen print."

Calvin began to reach for the radio mic attached to his shoulder.

“I don’t have time to waste,” I said. “Are you going to get him or not?”

He chewed his lip and finally took his hand off the mic. “Stay here,” he said before pushing the door open and stepping inside the green room.

As the door closed I leaned forward to see if I could catch another glimpse of Midori. No sign of her. A few minutes later Jordan stepped out. At first he looked puzzled to see me. I looked for his badge again, but I couldn’t spot it. All I could see was the shock of silver hair on his head.

“Who are you?” Jordan asked.

“I’m Bree. Bree Wong.”

“Calvin said something about the stolen print,” he said.

I nodded. “I think I know who took the print.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

I held up my phone. “I overheard her trying to sell the print to one of the vendors in the dealers’ hall. I can’t be sure because they were speaking Japanese. But I recorded them talking about the print.”

“Let me see this recording,” Jordan barked.

I pressed *play* on the video as he leaned closer. His eyes widened as he listened to the entire conversation.

“Is this the only copy?” he asked.

“Yes. Now do you believe me?” I said.

Jordan eyed my phone. “Hmm, they say some disturbing things.”

“It’s the thief, right?” I asked.

“We can’t be sure without the print.”

I said, “I also found the picture frame. The police can dust it for fingerprints and connect it to her.”

Jordan stared at me. “You have the frame? Where’s the print?”

“I don’t know. The thief must have it.”

“I think I need to show this video to Razmin,” Jordan said, pointing at the phone. “He’s in the green room. Do you mind if I borrow your phone? I promise I’ll bring it right back. If what I heard on the recording is true, we have no time to waste.”

“Can I come in?” I asked. “I’d love to meet Midori.”

“Sorry, you can’t,” Jordan said. “Tell you what. I’ll get her to come out. How’s that sound?”

If I were the real Red Squirrel, my tail would have puffed out. “Yes! That would be awesome.”

I handed Jordan my phone.

“Be right back,” he said, then slipped back inside the green room.

I couldn’t believe it. The next time the door opened, I’d be face-to-face with Midori herself. I would get a chance to give her the sketch I had draw—

Oh no! The sketch! I had left it in my satchel. Everything was stashed away in the gamer room. I kicked myself for leaving my bag there.

“What are you doing here?” a voice called out.

I turned. Don, the head of security, stomped toward me.

“I’m waiting for Jordan. He has my phone,” I explained.

“I don’t care. This area is restricted to featured guests and their helpers. You’re not supposed to be— Hey, where’s your badge?”

In my mind I could see it clearly pinned to my satchel.

I said, “This is about the stolen—”

He cut me off as he grabbed my arm. “No badge, no entry. Come with me, young lady.”

“But, but, but—”

He hauled me away from the door—away from Midori.

“I’m firing Calvin for this,” Don muttered.

“If you just talk to Jordan, he can explain everything,” I said.

“He’s not in charge,” Don said. “Now if you want to get into the expo, you pay like everyone else.”

“I have a badge,” I tried to explain. “It’s just not on me.”

“Not my problem,” he said as he escorted me out of the building. “Now, do yourself a favor and don’t try to crash the expo again. Next time I catch you in here, I’m calling the cops. Got it?”

I said nothing. Don stared at me.

I finally mumbled what he wanted me to say. “Got it.”

“Good,” he said before turning on his heel and heading back into the expo. The automatic glass doors slid shut, cutting off any chance I had of meeting Midori.

Chapter Nine

Outside the building, I paced back and forth near the entrance. Why hadn't I remembered to take my satchel with me? I kicked myself for the oversight. If I were the real Red Squirrel, I'd have remembered. Well, I would have stored the badge in my cheeks. But, to be honest, if I were her, I would have used magic acorns or Chitter Chatter to blast a hole in the wall so I could get back into the building.

I searched for any unguarded entrance. No luck. Through the large plate-glass windows, I could see all the action of the expo. Fans showed off the stuff they had bought. Cosplayers posed for photos. The featured guest from *Attack on Titan* made her way to a panel room, and fans flocked to get her autograph.

I had to get back in and find the thief. I hoped Jordan would tell security to look into the recording, but I couldn't wait for someone else to take action. I knew the thief was going to sell the print. So I had to be there to catch her red-handed. But how? This was a tough nut to crack.

Then, through a big window near the far end of the building, I saw a gathering of cosplayers. One by one, they climbed on a platform and showed off their costumes. The cosplay contest!

I pressed my hands against the window. Alix had to be somewhere in the crowd. I spotted three Black Hearts in the audience, but one stood out

above the others. Alix stood tall near the front with their giant foam sword jutting over their head. Alix definitely had the most enormous sword of the bunch, and I was sure they would get the judges' attention.

But right now I had to get my friend's attention. I waved, hoping they might glance out the window, but they were too interested in the action on the stage. *Knock, knock, knock.* I rapped against the glass, but it was no use. They weren't turning my way.

The only way to get Alix to look out was to do the one thing I dreaded—I had to make a scene and become the center of attention. I waited until the stage was clear, then danced around in front of the window, making huge gestures. I mimed the actions of a battle scene, pretending I had an invisible squirrel tail to ward off sword blows from an invisible enemy. At one point I wiggled my butt three times as if to summon Chitter Chatter. Then I repeated the actions again and again until someone saw me.

Sure enough, a few people started to notice. I waved my arms around and slammed myself against the glass as if my invisible foe had flung me. More people turned to watch. Some pointed. Others laughed. More started checking me out, including Alix!

I waved frantically at Alix, trying to mime that my badge was missing. I made a rectangle with my fingers and threw my hands up, then scratched my head.

Alix tilted their head to one side, confused. I waved at them to come out. Finally they understood and left the area.

With almost all the cosplayers staring, I suddenly felt very naked. I sheepishly walked from the window and ran to the nearest entrance.

A few minutes later Alix rushed out. "What happened to your costume, Bree?"

"It's a long story," I explained. "But I have to get back inside to stop a thief."

“Wait! That thing you were talking about before. It’s real? I thought you were doing some weird scene.”

“Yes, it’s real,” I said. “I need your help to get back inside so I can get Midori’s print back.”

Alix chewed on their bottom lip. “The cosplay contest. I’m up in a few minutes.”

“All I need you to do is go to the gamer area and get my badge—it’s on my satchel. I hid it under a pile of backpacks.”

“What? I’ll never get back in time for my turn,” Alix whined.

“This is important,” I said. “You can show off your costume anytime.”

“No, I want to do it here,” they said.

“What’s so important about doing it at the expo?” I asked.

“Yeah, well, here I can be Black Heart. For once, I don’t have to explain my pronouns to some jerk,” Alix said. “I can just talk about how much work I put into my costume. You remember the lady on the bus?”

I don't see any of her kind here. I feel like I fit in. It's what I've been looking forward to all year."

"I'm sorry, Alix. I didn't know," I said.

"Don't get me wrong, Bree," Alix said. "I know who I am. I like who I am. It's just that sometimes I want to be a cosplaying *Red Squirrel*, *Black Heart* fan and not have jerks making rude comments about me."

I nodded. "I think I get it. Cosplay lets you forget the real world for a bit. I'm sorry I didn't see that. This cosplay contest isn't really my thing, so I couldn't see why it mattered to you. Now I do."

They smiled. "Yeah, I know how hard it was to even convince you to come here in costume."

"I did it anyway," I said. "Anything for my best friend."

Alix nodded. They looked through the window at the contest, saying nothing. Finally they unstrapped their sword.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

“Outside of my sister and my mom, you’re the only one who sees me for me,” they said. “The least I can do is help you when you need it. Take Reaper’s Revenge.”

They handed me their sword and badge.

“You know I just need the badge to get in,” I said.

“No way. If you’re going to take on an evildoer, you should be armed.”

“You know this thing is made out of foam, right?” I asked.

Alix grinned. “We do, but the thief doesn’t.”

I strapped the sword to my back. “How do I look?”

“Like a badass anime hero,” Alix said, beaming.

“Now go shake that tree and crack that nut!”

Chapter Ten

With Alix's badge in one hand and the sword strapped to my back, I entered the building to find Karyn's booth in the dealers' hall. I was sure the thief was headed there to sell the print. I only hoped that I could get to the booth before she did.

I marched through the site, trying not to bang people with the sword. Fans wanted to stop me so

they could see the weapon on my back, but I brushed them off. I was on a mission.

Finally I reached Karyn's booth. She was trying to sell a print to a guy wearing a tight-fitting purple suit and sporting a gorgeous blond wig with triple curls. As soon as I saw his outfit, I could almost hear the theme song of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. This was my second-favorite anime series after *Red Squirrel, Black Heart*.

I waited until the *JoJo's* cosplayer had left happily with a poster tucked under his arm. Then I walked up to Karyn.

"Nice booth," I said. "I'm a huge fan of *Red Squirrel, Black Heart*. Do you have anything for this series?"

She smiled. "You bet. What are you looking for?"

"Is it mostly posters?" I asked.

Karyn shook her head. "I have some cards and a few shirts too."

“I was hoping for something special. Rare. Maybe a vintage poster or the early sketches Hiroto made for the manga.”

Karyn beamed. “Well, it just so happens that I might be getting my hands on something later. A Hiroto original.”

“Really?” I asked.

“If it’s what the seller promised, it should be quite the find for any fan of the manga,” she said.

“I’d love to be able to see it,” I said. “When are you going to get it? Do you have a picture?”

“Just so happens the seller sent me a picture,” Karyn said. She grabbed her phone from the table and flicked through it. Then she turned the screen so I could see. It was a picture of a print that looked like the one the other Red Squirrel had shown me. It had to be Midori’s stolen print.

“Impressive,” I said. “It definitely looks like a Hiroto original. How did the seller get this?”

Karyn turned off her phone and pocketed it. “She said it was a gift from her uncle in Japan. Said that he was Hiroto’s high school friend. He died recently and the print was passed on to her dad. If it’s for real, it would be the first-ever drawing of Red Squirrel.”

“Wow,” I said. “The original Red Squirrel.”

“I’m supposed to get the sketch later today. If you’re around, drop by the booth and I’ll show it to you.”

“How much are you going to sell it for?”

“If it’s for real, I’m not selling it here. I’ll host an online auction. I’m going to give all the fans a chance to bid on it.”

“Thanks for showing me,” I said.

I walked away from Karyn’s booth. I needed to watch her stall and hope the thief showed up. I’d need some help so as not to raise any suspicion. From how Karyn had talked, I didn’t think she had any idea that the print was stolen. I also figured the

thief would bring the print to the booth when things quieted down in the dealers' hall. This would give me enough time to collect my costume and badge from the gamer area. Then I could bring Alix back as my partner to stake out the booth. I headed off to get my gear.

However, as I made my way out of the dealers' hall, I spotted Jordan walking through the hall with Midori and Razmin. My heart stopped when I saw my idol. She looked just like the sketch I had drawn. The long black hair and the mysterious eyes that seemed to know the universe's greatest secrets. She was perfect.

I had to meet her, and I had the perfect excuse. Jordan still had my phone.

I jogged over to the trio and waved. "Jordan, Jordan," I called.

He narrowed his gaze as I ran up.

Razmin stepped in front of Midori. "Sorry, miss. No autographs today. Midori's had a trying day,

and we'd like to give her a break before she flies home."

"Jordan, you still have my phone," I said.

"I'm sorry," Razmin said. "Who are you?"

"Bree Wong. I'm the one who recorded the print thief talking to the vendor. Jordan was going to show the recording to you."

"I don't know what she's talking about," Jordan said. "But I'm all too familiar with her phone and the picture she left on it."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Jordan reached into his pocket and pulled out my phone. "Razmin, she's the one who approached me about the stolen print."

Razmin glared at me. "Young lady, we do not take kindly to thieves."

"Me? I didn't steal anything. I've been trying to help get the print back."

Midori knifed between the two men. "Who...this?" she asked.

Jordan began speaking Japanese to her and pointing at something on the screen of my phone. Midori gasped, then glared at me. I was out on a limb! This was not the Midori meeting I had wanted.

“The nerve of this kid, shaking Midori down for ransom money,” Jordan accused.

I was confused. “I’m not asking for anything other than my phone,” I said.

“This is now evidence,” Jordan said. He turned my phone around to show me a photo on the screen. It was the same picture that was on Karyn’s phone. The only difference was the text overlay at the bottom of the image.

“I didn’t take that,” I said.

Jordan said, “‘Pay up or rip up.’ That’s the message on the photo. It’s pretty clear that you want money, or you’ll destroy the print.”

My heart jumped up to my throat. How had the picture ended up on my phone? Why was Jordan accusing me?

“I didn’t write that,” I said. “You have to believe me.”

Razmin reached out to grab my arm. I jumped back.

“Security!” he called.

Two guards jogged over. I had to run. Now!

Chapter Eleven

The security guards closed in on me. Alix's giant foam sword was slowing me down, and I thought about ditching it. But I knew how much work Alix had put into making it, and I couldn't bear to lose it. Not after what Alix had given up for me.

I veered back to the dealers' hall, hoping to get lost in the cosplayer crowd. Instead I slammed into a wall of people. I figured another panel had just

let out. I knocked over a *Dragon Ball* cosplayer. His spiky black wig flew off his head.

“Sorry!” I yelled, barely stopping.

The guards stopped to help the kid back to his feet while Razmin, Jordan and Midori continued the chase. I slipped between two cosplayers in Wonder Woman outfits.

“Hey, you wrecked the shot!” one of them yelled.

“Sorry,” I said, zipping around the guy trying to take their picture.

The crowd packed the hall like acorns stashed in a tree hollow. I felt like I was trying to get off a crowded bus. Finally, about halfway down an aisle, the crowd thinned out enough that I could get some breathing room.

Then, just ahead, I spotted the thief walking toward me. She had no bamboo muzzle in her mouth, and she was carrying something rolled into a tube. It had to be the print! She was going to meet Karyn.

“Hey!” I yelled. “Stop!”

Her gaze shifted nervously.

“Thief!” I shouted, charging toward her.

Her eyes widened, and she began to back up, but she wasn't looking at me. She was looking behind me. I turned to see Jordan, Razmin and Midori marching toward us.

Jordan mouthed something. It looked like “run.”

Was he talking to me? Why was he helping me? I turned around and saw the thief already heading off into the crowd. Suddenly all the nuts shook out of the tree. The thief's name tag started with the letter *J*. At first I had thought it belonged to her, but then I remembered that Jordan had no name tag. He must have given it to her. The photo Jordan had shown me on my phone was identical to the one Karyn had shown me. And now he was telling the thief to run.

Jordan was in on the theft, and he was framing me for it. I had to expose him. But the only way to do that was to get the thief to confess.

First I had to catch her. So I grabbed the sword strapped to my back and tried to draw it out like the anime heroes did. Except they were animated, and I was dealing with gravity and friction. As I struggled to yank the sword free, I must have looked like I was trying to pull a soaking-wet T-shirt off.

Finally I freed the sword. Razmin approached me. I waved the sword at him.

“Back!” I commanded, keeping half an eye on the fleeing thief.

“Drop the sword,” Razmin ordered.

Fans gathered around to watch us. No time to waste. I swung the sword in a wide arc, forcing him to jump back.

Then I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Look! Midori’s here!” I pointed right at her.

The crowd exploded with excitement, fans pushing at each other to get to Midori to talk to her. They swarmed Razmin and pushed him back. Jordan tried to shield Midori, but there were

too many fans snapping pictures and asking for autographs.

I slipped away from the scene and made a beeline for the thief, who was fleeing to the exit.

“Let the nuts of justice fall!” I screamed, quoting Red Squirrel.

The thief slipped through the doorway.

I wasn’t going to let her get away. I waved Alix’s sword in front of me as I ran. “Stop her. Someone stop her!” I yelled.

The fans parted, avoiding my sword. I followed the thief up the escalator toward the panel rooms. Fans were lined up along the wall, waiting for the next session to begin. This left the hallway clear for the thief to run along, but she was slowed down by her flip-flops. They flapped until finally one of them flew off and bounced along the carpet. She hobbled ahead. I gripped the sword hilt and closed the distance.

“Nutcracker!” I howled, pretending to summon one of Red Squirrel’s special power moves.

A few of the people in line looked at us.

One guy yelled out, “Awesome! It’s a mash-up of *Demon Slayer* and *Red Squirrel!*”

People cheered. I ignored them.

The thief stopped, took off her lone sandal and raised it as a weapon.

“Don’t come any closer,” she warned.

“Give up,” I said. “You are out on a limb.”

Many people in the lineup pulled out their phones and began filming us. I used this to put some pressure on the thief.

“Even if you get away, you’re on camera. Look at everyone filming us,” I said.

The thief lowered her sandal and eyed the lineup of filmmakers. Then she turned back to me.

“Who are you?” she growled.

“I am the defender of truth, the protector of hope and the sorter of nuts. Red Squirrel,” I said, puffing out my chest and putting my hands on my hips. I couldn’t believe I’d had a chance to use Red Squirrel’s

famous introduction line. Silence fell across the crowd. I realized I wasn't in costume.

The thief hurled her sandal at me, but I batted it away with Alix's sword. It flew at the lineup, and a kid in a Naruto outfit caught it. Everyone cheered.

"You might as well hand over Midori's print," I told the thief. "I know you stole it."

She stared at the rolled-up paper in her hand. Then she began to unroll it as she flashed an evil grin.

"It would be a real shame if something happened to the print," she said. She grabbed the edge of the paper with both hands.

"You wouldn't," I said.

"Back off or I'll tear it up right here and now," she threatened.

I was up a tree.

Chapter Twelve

“I mean it,” the thief warned. “You take one more step, and I start tearing.”

I lowered the sword. “Please. Don’t.”

“That’s right. Back off.” She inched toward an exit door at the end of the hallway. “I’m leaving with this, and if anyone follows me, it’s gone. Forever.”

A girl in a Harley Quinn outfit stepped out of the line with her phone raised to take a picture.

The thief raised the print and began to make a tear in the paper. Gasps rippled up and down the line. Eventually the girl backed up and mouthed, "Sorry."

"You won't rip it up," I said to the thief. "Your partner wouldn't like it."

She hesitated. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Then are you okay with being the only one who gets arrested? You think your partner is going to take the fall for you?"

She ripped a bit more of the print. "Shut up."

"You'll go to jail alone," I said. "How do you think I found you? He told me where you'd be," I said, lying.

My bluff had an effect. The thief stopped tearing the print.

"What did he say?" she asked.

This nut was starting to crack.

"He told me everything," I said, stringing her along with my lie. "He said you were going to take the fall if things went wrong."

She chewed her bottom lip as her eyes darted back and forth. Just one more nudge, and this nut would split wide open.

“You’re the one they’re all filming. Your partner can hide in the shadows,” I said. “Unless you talk.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” she blurted. “He’s the one who told me about the print. He told me to wait for them to move the thing to the signing. He even showed me the back stairwell the staff use to avoid the crowds. He gave me his badge so I could get to areas only staff and volunteers are allowed to go.”

“Why did he make you do all the dirty work?” I asked.

“He said we could make some big coin from the print. Said we wouldn’t get caught because he could lead everyone down the wrong trail. It’d be an easy job, he said. Well, he lied. Jordan Wilson is a jerk.”

“No!” a voice screamed out.

Everyone turned. Jordan stood in the hallway, his eyes filled with rage. Behind him stood Midori,

Razmin and two guards. Judging by Jordan's red face, he had heard the thief's confession. So had Razmin.

"Hold Jordan," he ordered the guards.

The guards rushed at Jordan, but he sprinted away from them. I couldn't let him escape.

"Sweet Swing of Justice!" I howled one of Red Squirrel's special power moves as I flung Alix's sword at Jordan.

The sword spun through the air and wedged between his legs. He tripped and tumbled to the floor. The guards pinned him down.

"Let me go," he growled. "Don't you know who I am?"

I turned to see the thief slinking away with the print. No way was she going to get away. I went after her. Without the sword to weigh me down, I closed the distance between us quickly. Though I wasn't in my Red Squirrel costume, I felt like my anime hero.

I shouted another one of Red Squirrel's special power moves. "Avenging Acorn!"

I grabbed the thief's kimono and yanked it toward me. She lost her balance and slammed into me. The print flew out of her hands and unrolled on the floor. She tried to get it, but I had a firm grip on her kimono.

"Chitter Chatter, let's get at her!" I screamed.

I yanked on her kimono again, sending her flying into the arms of Razmin. The crowd roared. I knelt down and carefully picked up the stolen print. The tear in the paper reached just to the top of the drawing of Red Squirrel's head. It was damaged, but it could be fixed. I couldn't believe that I was holding the very first drawing of my hero. Then I looked up, and my hands began to tremble as I saw who was standing before me. Midori.

"I think this belongs to you," I said, offering the torn print to my idol.

She examined the print, then smiled at me.

“Arigato. Thank...you.”

The crowd erupted in cheers as fans rushed over to take pictures of us. Midori put her arm around my shoulder and smiled for the cameras. I struck a Red Squirrel pose, wishing that Alix could be here to see this.

For the first time ever, I didn’t mind the attention. I might not have been Red Squirrel, but today I was a hero.

Acknowledgments

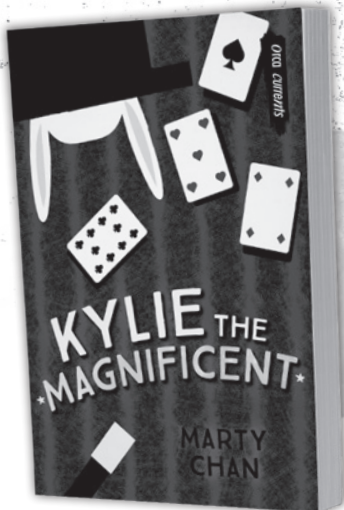
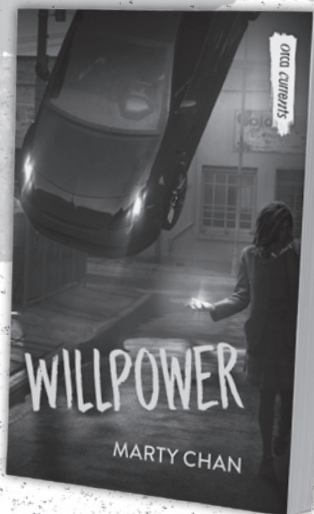
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