

## Chapter One

The mask was going to be my downfall—or possibly land me in airport jail. I should have considered how the pointy wings on the sides, which had looked so elegant in my sketchbook, would appear in real life on an X-ray machine.

A TSA agent was tugging my carry-on suitcase off the conveyor belt and toward the table reserved for suspicious characters. Which now included me. The man's first thought was not likely to be *This girl has impressive artistic abilities and a strong understanding of the aesthetics of the Elven Realms universe*. I suspected it would trend more toward *This girl is packing stabby things clearly intended for wrongdoings*.

Even scarier was what my classmates would think if they saw the contents of this bag.

Most of the group had gone through ahead of me and waited several yards away. A dozen students from my school, plus that many from two other schools in our area. Bryce Carter caught my gaze and smiled. I waved and returned the smile, trying to hide my worry.

He started toward me. While I normally appreciated our shared desire to help everyone, I waved him off and mouthed, *I'm good*, which was a lie, unless *good* could be defined as "desperate and close to hyperventilating."

Next to Bryce was another of my friends, Dai Tanaka, who would have gladly caused a scene to distract the authorities if he knew I needed help. Except he didn't know. Neither of them did, and I had to keep it that way if I wanted to hold on to everything I'd built the last four years.

Word could not get out that Evie Whitmore, vice president of Central High, yearbook art manager, peer mentor, constant winner of the perfect attendance award, shoo-in for the senior-class Most Outstanding Citizen prize, was carrying cosplay outfits.

The TSA agent donned blue gloves, like this was a crime scene or he was preparing for surgery or something equally gruesome that involved blood and my imminent demise.

My art teacher, Mr. Owens; my best friend, Natasha Gutierrez; and two final classmates were the only ones left behind me. Natasha stuffed her laptop back into her leather backpack and grabbed her white Vans. As always, she exuded the air of organized competence befitting the senior class president. She was the sole person who knew about my obsession with fantasy books and my secret plans for the upcoming week.

I loved my friends, who were considered the popular crowd, but we were hardly the crew in *Mask of Souls*, sharing every secret and fighting to the death to protect each other. I had found a place, and sure, it didn't always fit perfectly or feel like home. But it fit well enough, was nice, and made my life easier. Like that outfit that wasn't exactly what you wanted, but after weeks of searching, you doubted that the idea in your head actually existed, so you settled for something less than perfect, but real and still good.

Natasha would save me, but I didn't want her to suspect I didn't have this situation handled. She must have sensed something was up, though, because she hustled the last two students on in her usual take-charge way.

The agent's hands were now properly gloved, and he was turning my bag so the zipper faced him.

*Wait ten more seconds, dude. Life or death, here.*

My fingers crossed in hopes of a sudden zipper jam.

Mr. Owens hadn't passed through security yet. Where was he? How close was danger?

The TSA agent was frowning at me.

I gave him a bright *I'm harmless* smile to hide my sudden urge to throw up on the conveyor belt, which seemed like a bad idea since it

would keep circling around and around, and then I'd feel bad for whoever had to clean up the mess.

Shuffling in my socks, I joined the agent at the end of the screening area. He unzipped the suitcase and started rummaging through my belongings the way Natasha and I did in the bargain makeup bin at Ulta.

The mask was carefully wrapped in a sweater to protect it, right on top. If the agent removed it, what else would be visible? My sketchbook full of fantastical drawings? The two Elven Realms costumes I had designed and a seamstress I found online had made to my specifications? All would lead to so many questions that I didn't want to answer.

Past comments that had led me to hide my interest in the books looped through my mind—from the self-proclaimed nerds at the bookstore who had told me someone like me couldn't be a true fan, from my oh-so-delightful older brother who said fantasy was childish and I'd never make friends in high school if I admitted I liked that stuff. Of course, he'd waited until after our dad died to say those things, since Dad was the one who'd spurred my interest.

"Excellent craftsmanship," the man said.

I whirled back to my TSA nemesis. Safe from my classmates for now, but airport prison remained a possibility.

His words registered.

I blinked. "What?"

He was holding up the mask and inspecting the silver swoops and golden swirl accents, the winglike shape, and the blue silk ribbons.

My stomach flipped. The clear barrier separating us from the rest of the airport would give anyone who looked our way a view of everything. But my classmates had moved on.

I exhaled hard.

"*Mask of Souls*, right?" the guy asked. "Elven Realms? My daughter loves those books."

Embers stirred inside me. And pride. I'd worked hard to get the design right after carefully reading every description in the books, then spent hours at the 3D printer in the school art studio. I'd longed to show it off to someone, but the one person who would

have appreciated it, who should have been on this trip with me, was gone. The man's simple comment, the way he said *daughter*, dropped a boulder in my stomach.

"I do too," I said, my voice thick.

"Did you make this?"

I nodded. "It's plastic, not metal. That's okay for a plane, right?"

He turned it over again. "Yeah, it's fine. This is impressive. What's it for?"

*Sneaking out to find an underground fan club, thereby endangering my reputation and my GPA.* "I'm on my way to Venice. It's for fun."

"My daughter would love it. I don't suppose I could send her a picture."

Sure, wave it around, pose with everyone in sight, wear it and plaster your picture on the airport's Employee of the Month wall. Don't forget to shout my name while you're at it.

Except I couldn't deny the request of a dad who wanted to make his little girl happy.

"Go ahead," I said.

He snapped a photo, and as he pocketed his phone, his love for his daughter drew me in, transporting me to the days before we lost my dad. He'd been the one to foster my love of reading, the only one who knew how much I loved the Elven Realms. My mom had no clue I was still obsessed, partly because keeping it for myself made life easier, and partly because the first time I'd left a fantasy book lying around after Dad's death, she'd told me to clean up after myself in a businesslike tone but with suspiciously shiny eyes. I didn't want to add to her burden by talking about things that made her sad.

"How old is your daughter?" I asked the man. "Has she read the other Elven Realms books too?"

"She's fourteen. Always has a book. I can't keep up."

"If she likes *Mask of Souls*, make sure she's read the Dreaming Forest series."

Memories bubbled up, causing a burn in my throat and nose, but I shoved them down. I'd only had twelve years, but my dad had tried

to keep up with me too. I wanted to tell this man's daughter how lucky she was.

We chatted for another minute. Talking about my favorite books in person was weird after limiting my interactions to strangers on the internet. But soon I could do it more freely than in an airport. I would meet people like me, and the mask would ensure none of them knew who I was.

Excitement was replacing nerves.

Mr. TSA was kind enough to rewrap the mask before returning it to my bag.

"You're all set," he said. "Enjoy your trip."

I wasn't getting hauled in for questioning or locked up in a magical elven prison. No one had seen my costumes. And I hadn't broken down in the security line. Had I really escaped?

"Evie, there you are."

The voice came from someone stepping through the body scanner. My breath froze.

Mr. Owens.

I slammed my suitcase shut. My heart hammered even though I hadn't done anything wrong.

Yet.

Packing cosplay outfits wasn't illegal. My teacher didn't know about my plans to sneak out, go rogue, and violate his trip rules once we reached Venice, while wearing said outfits. He never would have guessed, either, since I was the person who never got in trouble, never did anything remotely wrong.

"Just the person I wanted to see." Mr. Owens didn't seem to notice that I was guarding my luggage like Ana de Rossi making her stand against the armies of the dark elves.

I shifted my bag open a fraction to check the contents without letting my teacher see. Everything was in place. I quickly zipped it closed.

"What's up?" I asked as I grabbed my sneakers.

"I have a favor to ask." Mr. Owens almost toppled over trying to tug on his still-tied tennis shoes without sitting.

I liked Mr. Owens. He was eccentric but encouraging. I'd been taking art classes with him for four years, and he kept trying to convince me to do more—enter contests, explore college art programs. To make him happy, I always told him I'd consider it. Which wasn't a total lie. I wasn't *not* thinking about it, because I was thinking about pretty much everything. Or nothing at all. Depended on the day. He let me experiment with different mediums outside of class, and I cleaned brushes for him, because I liked the smell and feel of the art studio, and because I had a pathological need to be helpful. Also, I felt guilty using supplies without contributing in return.

"Anything you need," I said.

"It may inconvenience you," Mr. Owens said. "We've had a last-minute addition to the group, and our newcomer needs a partner for the week. I was hoping you'd work with him. I know you and Natasha had plans, and I'm sorry to ask, but I trust you to help him."

*I trust you. Help him.* Words guaranteed to make me agree to basically anything.

Helping was my thing. Beyond the art studio, I also volunteered in the tutoring center, served on committees, and was the go-to welcome guide when a new student transferred to our school—even if the last one hadn't gone so well. Excuse me for wanting to know more than your name, Mr. Brooding Loner, who'd ignored my questions and hadn't spoken in more than single syllables. I'd felt like I was trying to talk to my brother, who had the conversational skills—and general personality—of a cactus. Wrapped in barbed wire.

It would be disappointing not to work with Natasha. She was smart, so our report would have sealed my A in art—assuming I didn't get caught sneaking out and have the entire week blow up in my face. But it was an honor that Mr. Owens trusted me, and Natasha would understand.

"What will Natasha do?" I asked.

"I'll let her join another team, so one group will have three. But I thought our newcomer would be more comfortable one-on-one."

I'd still have plenty of free time with Natasha, Bryce, and Dai this week. I couldn't let someone be alone and uncomfortable. "I'll do it."

Like I ever would have refused once Mr. Owens called it a favor. Mom always said that setting limits was good, that *no* was a complete sentence—except she never said no to anything, and I couldn't either or I risked disappointing someone.

"Who is it?" I asked.

I hadn't seen anyone new with our group when we arrived and met the students from the other schools.

Mr. Owens motioned to the guy stepping through the scanner behind him.

Yeah, I definitely should have asked that question before agreeing.

Of course it was him.

Mr. Zero Words. Mr. Unappreciative. Mr. Broody Loner.

Aka Gabriel Martinez.

His olive skin and stylish black hair, with a sharp line shaved on one side, framed guarded eyes. I could admit he was classically handsome, but his dark brows made a permanent slash across his face, and his jaw was always clenched in a way that said he was prepared for battle, or readying himself to jump into a pit of venomous snakes.

I met him in late January, when he'd transferred to our school with only months remaining of senior year. When I'd asked how he was, he replied, "I'd be better if I weren't here."

Those were the most words I'd gotten out of him for the next half hour as I showed him around campus. I hadn't realized kindness was so offensive.

Why was I incapable of saying no? If there had ever been a time to disappoint a teacher, this surely would have been it.

"Good news, Gabriel," Mr. Owens said. "Evie has agreed to be your partner."

Gabriel's flat expression told me that he did not, in fact, find the news good.

I was on my way to see a city I'd dreamed of for years. Touring it with a sullen partner incapable of conversation had not been part of the plan.

But I would make it work. He couldn't resist my efforts to be friendly for an entire week. People liked me. Gabriel would just require extra work to figure out what made him tick and how best to get to know him.

"I said I was fine on my own." His voice was a low rumble, his tone as flat as his eyes.

Okay, maybe he could resist my efforts. But I was as determined to make a friend as he was to push me away, and I would win this battle.

Mr. Owens remained unfazed by Gabriel's rudeness. "One of the rules this week is no going off alone. I know most of you are legally adults, but this is a school trip, and it's my responsibility to make sure everyone is safe."

I nodded wisely as if I hadn't spent weeks carefully plotting how to break that rule.

But I did feel bad about it, and I doubted Gabriel could say the same.

"Plus," my teacher went on, "the project would be a lot of work for one person."

The project. Great. My AP Art grade depended on a guy who wouldn't respect me enough to look me in the eyes when he tried to get out of spending time with me.

This trip was officially for Art and Architecture Club seniors and those taking advanced art or architecture classes. I hadn't seen Gabriel in class or in the club. In Natasha's case, the club was an extra on top of a hundred other activities, no matter that she'd received early acceptance to USC and, short of getting arrested in Italy, her fall semester was set.

I ... could not say the same. But I wasn't dwelling on that now. Or ever.

"I can handle it," Gabriel said. "I work better alone."

I barely contained a snort. But Mr. Owens was counting on me. "I'm sure it will be fun to work together," I said. "We have two hours until our flight. Why don't we discuss the project while we wait?"

Gabriel finally looked at me, scorn in his eyes. His scowl was a storm cloud, dark and ominous. My smile brightened. Like Mom always said, a positive attitude wins more friends.

"Great idea," Mr. Owens said. "I'm glad you two are figuring it out."

He shouldered his backpack and marched off, leaving Gabriel and me to follow.

"He won't change his mind," I said. "So we might as well do our best to make this work."

Gabriel grunted.

"I'm interpreting that to mean you're sorry and you're willing to work with me."

One eyebrow shifted up a fraction, the only change to his face. "Why would I be sorry?"

I gritted my teeth to keep my smile. "Think of it as having someone to help, so you don't have to do all the work."

"I can manage."

"I'm sure you could, but Mr. Owens didn't leave that as an option, which means you don't have to. That's what partners are for."

"Mr. Owens is gone. You don't have to pretend to be nice to me."

My nostrils flared. "Believe it or not, some people are nice when no one is watching."

His forehead creased in skepticism.

Time to try another tactic. "How did you end up on the trip?" I asked. "Mr. Owens said it was last minute."

"It was."

"Why?"

"I decided to run away."

I dodged a lady with a service dog and hurried to his side again. "But you have to have a passport."

"Maybe running away is a regular thing."

"Arizona would be cheaper."

"No canals there. I only run to places with canals."

It sounded like a joke, except his expression and tone remained the same.

“Where else have you run to? Amsterdam? Las Vegas? Venice Beach?” I stopped, having officially exhausted my canal knowledge.

“I wish I were any of those places right now so I could jump in a canal to escape this conversation.”

Even though he sounded entirely serious about going for a swim to get away from me, I kept my face pleasant. “If you don’t like conversation, this will be a long week for you. Do you plan to jump in lots of canals?”

“If you keep talking this much.” He moved on, and I scrambled after him, towing my suitcase and its incriminating contents, which I’d nearly forgotten about thanks to Gabriel’s rudeness.

What was his problem?

I just needed a new strategy. I would keep trying. Everything would be fine. Spending the days with Gabriel might not be fun, but it wouldn’t ruin my main plans for the trip, the secret, nighttime ones. I could write our report. All Gabriel had to do was not screw it up. And if I could get him to be nice ...

Who was I kidding? That would take magic greater than that of the fictional elves.