



BE DAZZLED

Ryan La Gala

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ONE

----- NOW -----

The Boston Convention Center has good security, but it doesn't have missile launchers, which means it would have a pretty tough time defending itself against Evie Odom.

My mother.

If she knew I was outside this place, she'd probably descend from the low clouds on this foggy Boston morning like some sort of alien doomsday spacecraft and vaporize me.

And if she knew I was standing out here in a costume that can only be described as "fungus chic" for all of Boston Seaport to see? Well, what's worse than being vaporized? Whatever it is, *that* is what she'd do to me.

Some might think I'm being dramatic. Which, okay, fine. Maybe they'd be a little right. But mostly, they'd be wrong. This is Evie *fucking* Odom here. The self-made millionaire artist turned gallery

director. The woman of onyx eyes and champagne lips (according to her *Times* profile, which was for sure penned by a gay man).

But in my opinion, Evie is just sort of evil. Like a fashionable Antichrist sent by the art world to look down upon all things pop culture, cartoon, and craft. So her son, Raphael Odom, the boy currently stumbling out of an Uber dressed *as* a cartoon made *out* of crafts, on his way *into* a pop culture convention? Evie would hate it. Actually, she *does* hate it, but we're a two-person family—we can't discuss the things we hate about one another without polarizing the entire house. So, to survive her wrath, I hide my crafting and my cosplaying. And I pretend I don't spend hours fashioning incredible costumes out of hot glue and household hardware. And I lie. And I sneak. Basically, I do *whatever* I can to avoid Evie's particularly flamboyant form of hate.

What Evie hates, she destroys. It's her thing. For a while in the early nineties, she was famous for hating and destroying replicas of her work. Usually she did this in front of an audience, often for a lot of money.

So as you can imagine, I'm not trying to get caught sneaking into conventions. I'm rushing, dragging my friend May behind me as we exit the car and dive into the crowd of con-goers loitering outside. May is slow in her clunky costume (100 percent my fault, I built it—sorry, May), but we don't let two tons of foam and hot glue stop us from hitting warp speed. People scream and scatter in our wake. Maybe someone loses an eye. I don't know, I don't care about injuries. There's only one—only *one*—force I trust to

keep me safe from my mother, and that's the group of ladies that runs check-in at Controverse. I don't know if they volunteer or if they're paid handsomely; I only know that if you're not on their list, you're not getting into the con. Not if you're the president, not if you're Jesus H. Christ, not even if you're Satan.

And yet...

Evie is Evie, so just in case they can't stop her, I've taken every precaution to make sure she doesn't know I'm here in the first place. She thinks May and I are camping. *Camping!* Out in the Blue Hills of Massachusetts, like some plucky settlers of CATAN! It is the most outrageous lie I have ever told her, and I was downright offended when she accepted it without protest, only saying, "Do not bring any ticks into my house, Raphael."

"Out of my way," I snap at a group of girls trying to take photos of us. They lower their phones and drift apart, letting us pass to the front of the crowd.

"Raffy, will you just calm down for two freaking seconds?" May protests.

I certainly will not.

"Come on, they just want photos with us."

"You're not even on your stilts, and we still need to do final touches."

"Oh, you mean when you make me sit on the floor so you can glue mold to my face?"

"It's not mold, it's *moss*, and it's not just glue, it's *spirit gum*. It needs to look real, like little organic puffs."

“The little organic puff,” May says in her *grand* voice, which is just her normal voice but with an affected Maggie-Smith-in-*Downton-Abbey* accent. “That’s the title of your memoir. *The Little Organic Puff*, by Raphael Odom.”

I continue listing all the things we—or really, I—need to do before we hit the con floor.

“And then I have test the power packs for the LEDs and check to make sure the vape cartridge is full, and you need to practice walking in those stilts, and I need to touch up some of my toadstools. There’s a lot to do. I don’t want anything hitting social until we’re perfect.”

Typically, you show up at a con ready, but with all this sneaking, we have to get ready on the go. Not ideal, but necessary. Lucky for us, the bigger cons now have changing rooms so people can suit up on location. This is why I have a rolling suitcase.

“But the moss—are you sure I need to wear it? It’s itchy, and besides, my mask nearly covers my whole face.”

“Yes, I’m sure. It’s all about being fully in character. The judges will appreciate the detail if they ask you to remove the mask, which they will. You’ll see.”

May scrunches up her eyebrows.

“Fine, fine, you can mold me,” she says. “Sometimes I think you get off on these things, Raff.”

“May, gross. I’m gay. And so are you.”

“So what? Gay people do all sorts of things. They wear, like, harnesses and leather straps. Just out and about.”

“So do horses, but no one kink-shames them. Now drop it.”

She murmurs, “Oh, you can bet I’ll drop something. And I’m sure you’d love to watch me pick it up real slow.”

May basks in my discomfort. She is doing me a huge favor this weekend by competing with me; putting up with her weird jokes is the least I can do. If I weren’t so anxious, I’d be laughing and joking around, too. But I am anxious. I’m *always* anxious about something, but on competition days, I’m anxious about *everything*. And usually, I have ways of calming myself down, but this is the biggest show I’ve ever competed in. This is *Controverse*. It doesn’t get any bigger than this, so nothing is going to calm me down. Not listening to music. Not meditation. Maybe tranquilizers, but probably not. Only winning.

Once I win, I’ll relax. Once I take home the top prize, it won’t matter that Evie will probably, eventually find out that I’m not camping (and have never camped a day in my seventeen years of life). Once I become the youngest person ever to take best in show at Controverse, I’ll be a legit award-winning crafter, and Evie will finally have to admit that this whole “arts and crafts obsession” of mine is not a phase.

Or...

Or she’ll promptly fake her own death out of embarrassment and then start over in Toronto or something, but that’s okay. Because if I play my cards right—which I will, which I *am* by showing up in this sickening look—winning Controverse is going to come with something even better than my mother’s approval.

Sponsorship! In the past few years, Craft Club has been giving major sponsorship deals to the crowd favorites at Controverse. And other businesses are starting to tap into the young, influencer-driven craft market, too. The cosplay scene at Controverse has become a hotbed of recruitment and sponsored content. And if I want to have a future after high school that isn't passing mini Bellinis at my mother's shows, I need to make it happen.

Put simply, I need money to pay for art school, because Evie is *not* about to waste her wealth on that shit. She doesn't believe in formal arts education at all. She says that any artist worth their paints is guided by talent and instinct. *She* didn't need college to be a success, after all. And it's a major point of pride for her. (She has many points of pride; she's a sea urchin of prideful points.)

I'm less prideful and far less pointy. I know I need to go to art school. And I will need money to pay for art school. And, to a lesser degree, I will need money for food and Crunchyroll dot com.

I'm not just here to win a competition or my mother's respect. At the end of the day, I'm after one thing: a future, on my terms.

"Name?"

We're at the tables where they give out the badges. I pull my ID from the pocket I smartly sewed to the inside of my robe.

"Raphael Odom," I say.

The lady looks at my ID, then at me. My ID says that I am seventeen, that I am five foot six, and that I have brown hair and brown eyes. In this moment, though, I am an ancient spirit of the

forest, a druid, wearing six-inch platform heels. My face barely shows beneath a hooded robe clotted with fungus and ferns. One of my eyes is pure black due to the scleral contact lens I spent the entire Uber ride trying to put in.

But then the registration lady's scrutiny breaks into gleeful recognition.

"You're Evelyn Odom's kid, right? I grew up with your mom in Everett! We went to high school together! Oh, she must be so proud of you. She was always an eccentric one, too."

"And I'm May Wu," May says grandly, cutting off the conversation like a benevolent guillotine. I suffer through check-in, refusing to look at anyone else directly until the woman finally hands us our badges.

I pull May into Controverse, one determined step at a time. No matter what I make myself into, there is no escaping who I am. No amount of makeup will cover it. Not the thickest of latex. Not even platform heels make me big enough to escape my mother's shadow.

But this weekend, everything will change.

As we enter Controverse, I start to breathe a little easier. These are my people. Geeks and weeps, but also a handful of nerds and a dash of dorks. The kind of people who sit through family dinners silently contemplating the fact that Carol Danvers got a haircut between appearances in the Captain Marvel movie and the final Avengers movie, which means that somewhere in the MCU, there are scissors powerful enough to cut the hair of a woman who has

broken *several* spaceships apart with just her body. Without suffering a single scratch! Thanos should have grabbed those scissors and added them to his bejeweled oven mitt.

This is *the* con in Boston; it materializes every October, gathering together a million-person family made up of every fandom. Lately there has been a lot of Marvel and DC because of the movies, of course, but if we're being honest, the anime contingent (to which I proudly belong) holds the con together. And then there's the noble Star Wars fandom, which has more rules than a ballet academy for assassins. The Trekkies used to be like that, too, I hear, but now they spend most of their time chasing after their little grandkids, because all of them managed to couple up and start nerd families. Weird. Oh, and of course there are the Doctor Who people. Every single one of them put on their TARDIS dresses this morning thinking, "No one will see this coming."

I kid. I like the Doctor Who people. But they get very, very angry if you don't have an opinion about which one of the seemingly infinite number of actors who have played the Doctor was best. Oops.

Fandoms, families, fans—they form a buzzy, diverse congregation that makes the annual pilgrimage to the Boston Convention Center at the city's seaport once a year to celebrate their mythologies and their lore and, of course, pay tribute to their gods.

And by gods, I mean cosplayers.

Trust me, cosplay is *the* cool thing to do at these events. Costumes don't just transform the people wearing them; they

transform the world around them. At a con, one second there'll be just a crowd, and then Goku enters, and suddenly *everyone* is screaming. But not just *regular* screaming. I mean full-on, throaty, anime-power-up screaming. It's something else.

I love cosplay. I've always been good at creating things, but I only got big into creating cosplays in the last couple of years. It took convincing. And, admittedly, some spite. I kept watching other people's follower counts skyrocket after they put on ratty shake-and-go wigs and called themselves Sailor Mars, and it annoyed me. I always said to May, *Why doesn't anyone brush out their wigs? Do they like looking like microwaved showgirls? I could do so much better.* And she was finally like, *Okaaaaay, then why don't you?*

So now I do. And I was right. I'm great at this. I create almost compulsively, my stuff isn't bad, and I've even won a few titles at smaller regional cons. I'm not big or anything, but like a young god, I have gained a small but devoted following. About fourteen thousand people, give or take a thousand, tune in to watch me hot glue shit together on my Ion livestream twice a week.

But that count is going to double by the time I'm done with this year's Controverse. For the first time, I'm entering the Controverse Championship of Cosplay (Trip-C, pronounced "Tripsy" if you're cool). It's the biggest, baddest cosplay competition in Boston—a multiday contest famous for its weird rules and twists. Just about all the criteria change from year to year, except one: People must compete in pairs. Controverse famously considers cosplay a team sport.

Enter May and myself. We're doing a twist on the classic game *Deep Autumn*, in which the hero gets trapped in an enchanted forest and must battle through each season to escape. The character designs are nuts. Perfect for a team of cosplayers looking for a recognizable but difficult build.

I'm dressed as a druid, a keeper of the Spring Temple, and May is dressed as a Pinehorn, a low-level beast common on the temple grounds. Except we've been corrupted, which means we've been overtaken by fungus and mushrooms, turning us evil. As a result, I've taken the usually playful design of *Deep Autumn* and rendered it with gory realism.

I straighten May's helmet and step back to admire my work.

May is gone. In her place is a creature hunched atop four clawed-footed legs that bristle with pine cone scales. Glowing red eyes glower from beneath a spiked mask of deep aubergine, a lethal spike slicing up from the snout like a gargantuan Japanese horned beetle. A riot of leaves and rotting flowers grow from the creature's ridged back, where two ragged wings of transparent cerulean twitch. Its whole body sprouts clumps of neon moss and fungus that glisten in the fluorescent lights of the convention center. It looks powerful and decrepit and diseased at the same time. Shockingly monstrous.

"Perfect," I tell it.

I tell *May*.

"You look pretty good, too," she says from beneath the mask.

Whereas May's Pinehorn cosplay emphasizes illusion, mine is

a more subtle, though just as complex, build. My character—the Spring Keeper—is mostly human-shaped. But because I’m extra, I’ve fashioned prosthetics that give me a long, sharp nose, spiked cheekbones, and an overbearing brow. I’ve altered my exposed chest, too, creating tissue-thin, clammy skin over blue veins and spindly bones. The image of health.

Only the shine of my one black eye shows from beneath my hooded robe, which I’ve sewn and embroidered. It took ages to do, but the effect looks both whimsical and ghastly, as though I’m one blink away from being completely overtaken by nature itself.

We are unrecognizable. We are totally transformed.

We are for *sure* going to qualify.

“Remember the poses?” I ask her.

“Of course.”

“And the cues?”

“Yup.”

“And you can walk okay?”

“For a girl in a forty-pound costume, balancing atop four stilts? Sure. But Raff, next time can I be the one in the pretty mushroom dress?”

I barely acknowledge her sarcasm as I unfasten and refasten one of her straps for the eighth time. I’m afraid that the moment I decide we’re ready, everything will fall apart.

“Relax, Raff. Listen, this is going to go well,” she tells me. “We’re going to *win*, and we’re going to get you that sponsorship, okay? And then it’s only a matter of time before those

fancy-shmancy art schools will be begging to review your portfolio, okay?"

I force a smile (a small one—I don't want to risk dislodging my prosthetic cheekbones). I hope she's right. Everything—every dream of mine, every winking whim—rides on proving I can do this without Evie. In spite of her, in fact.

"And listen." May's voice turns solemn. "I know you miss him, and I know it was supposed to be him in this costume and not me, but—"

"Stop."

"Raff—"

"You know I don't want to hear about *him*."

"Yes, but Raff—"

I give her a warning glare, and she stops talking. There's one last reason why I'm here, but I won't let it be the main reason. I won't even let May say the reason's name. I only want to hear his name when the announcers award him silver right before awarding me gold.

"I'm just saying that you can do this without him," May says.

"*We* can do this." I give her a small nudge, and the Pinehorn armor shakes as we start our walk out onto the con floor.

"I'm doing this for you, but remember our deal? I get Sunday to set up at the Art Mart. There are some top online artists here, and I'm aiming to make some friends."

The Art Mart is where all the artist booths are set up, a huge room that bustles with shoppers looking for custom prints, gifts, shirts, phone cases, comics, and anything else you can imagine. It's

a small nuclear power plant of creativity and bootlegged shit. It's May's Mount Olympus, and this year she's got a chance to drop in at one of the amateur booths on Sunday, where she'll be selling merch for her recently kinda-famous webcomic, *Cherry Cherry*. As a fellow art-trepreneur, I couldn't be prouder.

"Of course."

As soon as we hit the con floor, I know we've nailed our look. Within two seconds, people are calling out famous lines from *Deep Autumn*. Kids rush over, asking if they can take pictures with us. A circle forms around us, but at a distinct distance, like the moss on our skin is contagious, like its spores might float through the hot air of the con and lodge in skin, throats, and eyes, burrowing into bones and turning them soft with rot.

Perfect. May and I are ready. We get into our practiced stances, but before anyone can snap a picture, May turns on her stilts and lumbers off.

People are confused. *I'm* confused. I run after her.

"May, what's wrong?"

"We need to go."

"What? We just got here."

"Yeah, well, it's urgent."

I grab May's arm through the joint of the costume. We need to build up excitement now if we're going to have a reputation by the time we're onstage in front of the actual judges. I want people in the audience to know us, to *cheer* for us. I want to be recognized.

"Shit, I wanted to warn you," she says, stopping short as a

commotion begins in the crowd behind us. Whatever she wanted to warn me about, it's too late. I track the shouts. Is it Evie, here to take me home? How did she get here so quickly?

But it's so much worse.

A new couple has entered the room. The screams that go up are hysterical with excitement, people practically crawling over one another to see the latest looks. I hear a bellowing laugh over the racket; I see sunlight on the curve of a muscled back and the shock of white teeth in a broad smile.

No.

I see a girl slinking across the floor, stalking her prey. Not a girl—a deer. Arrows protrude from her back and throat, and blood streams down her lithe body in glistening ribbons that look fresh enough to paint with. It's an expert job.

She is dressed as Bambi's mother, shot dead and now risen with undead vengeance. I know this without even seeing her partner, because it's my idea. Down to the bloody ribbons, it's all my work. My drawings come to life, splayed out before me on the Controverse floor.

How could this happen? Who took this from me?

But I know who. I follow the eyes of the crowd to where her partner lies on the ground. His body has been completely airbrushed to resemble that of a deer, every muscle painted in soft browns and beiges. A bite mark on his upper thigh seeps blood, and the flesh around it is already zombified, the infection curdling his young flesh and turning his veins black.

He drags himself up and pretends to limp on the bad leg, desperate to flee the zombie his mother has become. But he's laughing. His smile is what slaps me. A smile that wins everything and everyone over. A smile that won me over for a long time, too, until it vanished from my life.

He's here.

Luca Vitale is here.

My biggest competition. My worst nightmare.

My ex-boyfriend.

Given how much TV I watch, I know tropes. Broken love is, of course, the perfect origin story for mortal enemies, so I guess that's ours, but I'm still not sure who the hero is. We hurt each other. The hard kind of hurt that doesn't heal up quickly.

I've clung to that hurt for a long time. It's what has kept me going; it's what got me here. But when I see him, the hurt abandons me, leaving behind an overwhelming, disorienting nostalgia. When I see him, I see us. How we came together, what we created together, what we ruined together. I see our every moment, and at the same time, I see us unraveling all at once. It's gutting. And the only way to understand how we fell apart is to understand what made us *us* in the first place.