



**SECRETS**  
*of a*  
**FANGIRL**

ERIN DIONNE



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# 1

“Sarah Anne! Look!”

For the hundredth time, Dad grabs my arm and points. This time, it’s a life-sized Chewbacca with his weapon-thing.

“Yup. Cool,” I say, hoping my flat voice gives him the clue that I’m done goggling at the assorted aliens, superheroes, monsters, and zombies. I keep my eyes on the signs pointing us to Hall C, where we’ll find the Nightshade panel, and hope that my stomach settles by the time we get there.

Entering the MK Nightshade trivia contest seemed like a good idea at eleven p.m. on a random Tuesday in February. I was deep into my whatever-number reread of *A Glut of Ghosts* and had gone online looking for info about the release date of the movie. It wouldn’t be out until May, but the blinking banner on the movie page read: “MK Nightshade Ultimate Trivia Contest!!! Fantastic Fans Will Win Prizes!!” The questions were so easy. I thought I’d win a T-shirt, not an invitation to be on a panel at FanCon.

Someone jumps in front of me, blue cape swirling. I almost crash into him, but he doesn't even glance in my direction.

"You'll never terrorize Gotham City again!" Old-school Batman points a gloved hand at The Joker and The Riddler, who are strolling down the concourse on the other side of my dad. They all crack up.

"Dude, take our picture?" The Joker, in full makeup and the purple suit, hands his phone to my dad, who happily steps in. I step behind the nearest pole and rub my temples. My heart thuds in my chest and my stomach rolls like Sir Oakheart's boat in the storm in *A Sea of Serpents*.

I take a breath, hold it, and let it out, like my lacrosse coach, Ms. Vaughn, taught us to do when we're nervous.

I peek around the pole: Batman and the gang pose for another pic. Behind them, a group of girls around my age dressed in matching Vampire Skool T-shirts and black lipstick come toward us, snickering. I pull my head back, fast.

Uggghhhh. This whole scenario violates one of my major rules: Keep your Geek on the down low.

In elementary school, it was okay to wear character T-shirts and carry a *Star Wars* lunch box. But by the time I got to middle school, being so into a fandom was not cool anymore—sports and hair and clothes were.

At least, that's what's cool to my friends. Since I want to keep being friends with them, I stick to those guidelines. So far, I always have a party to go to and people to eat lunch with—unlike the kids who still carry those *Star Wars* lunch boxes.

Crossed arms over my chest, I wait for the girls to pass my hiding spot. Hopefully none of them go to Howard Hoffer Junior High with me—or sense the giant Nightshade-dork beacon that I feel is attached to me.

One of the girls spots me and cackles. What the . . . ?

“Oh. My. God. It’s Princess Perfect! Great costume!” The others turn to me.

“That’s hilarious!” says another.

I glance down: pink-and-purple sparkly tunic, charcoal leggings, and boots. My BFF, Roxy, told me pink and purple are totally in this season, and if she says it’s in, that’s what I wear.

*Princess Perfect . . . ?*

“My four-year-old sister loves that show,” the third says. “All you need is her big bow and you’d nail it.”

It clicks: Princess Perfect is a cartoon character on the Beanpole network. I want to climb a beanpole right out of here. Instead I give them a weak smile as they goth on their way.

“Sarah Anne—?” Dad’s voice breaks through my thoughts. Batman and the villains are gone—presumably back to Gotham City—and Dad’s turning in a slow circle looking for me.

“Sorry,” I say, crossing the floor. “I wanted to check something out.”

“We need to get you to the panel,” he responds. “No more lingering.”

“As if I’m the one who stopped to chat with the Justice League,” I mutter under my breath.

Dad cocks an eyebrow at me but doesn’t say anything. Instead,

he takes a deep breath and pushes his glasses up on his nose. We follow the Hall C signs again. But two steps later his head swivels as he takes in the costumes and merch. We're in the *Star Wars* section.

Two kids dressed in Jedi robes stage a mock lightsaber battle.

"Jedi don't fight one another." This time it's Dad doing the muttering and me giving the side-eye.

Dad's a total *Star Wars* geek. He and Mom have been into it for years. Coming here is almost more of a treat for him than for me. Luckily I talked him out of wearing his VADER FOR PRESIDENT T-shirt, but had to compromise with his Boba Fett tee. At home this morning I thought his outfit was embarrassing. Now? He's fitting in better than I do, so there's that.

I kind of wanted to wear the MY OTHER HORSE IS A CHARIOT Sir Oakheart T-shirt that my sister, Penny, gave me for Christmas, but it definitely makes Roxy's "fashion don't" list. I only wear it to bed.

A girl dressed as some alien creature strolls by, trailing tentacles from a mess of long dreadlocks. A couple in solid Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy costumes stop for a photo with an okay-looking Voldemort. Bunches of zombies, some with really good makeup, others looking like Halloween costumes gone wrong, stagger past.

What am I *doing* here?

I mean, I love MK Nightshade and his world and all, but this is . . . a bit much.

Dad keeps pointing and walking slower and I just want to get this over with.

And then there it is: a huge—I mean *huge*—replica of Castle Crepacuore, complete with the Forsaken Turret where Lady Althena was held captive for sixty-five nights in *A Mausoleum of Monsters*.

I freeze.

“Cool, huh?” Dad says, nudging me. I just nod. He gives my arm another nudge and we move closer to the castle. It has to be thirty feet tall! Maybe bigger. The ceilings in the convention hall are super high, but still. It’s *tall*.

When we get through the crowd at the base of the castle, I read the banner hanging across a table near the gate: THE MK NIGHT-SHADE X-PERIENCE. BE SIR OAKHEART! BATTLE THE THING! TAKE OUT THE SEA SERPENT!

But—*seriously?* The crest over the drawbridge features two ravens. Everyone knows that Castle Crepacuore was guarded by the Ravens Three for centuries. Who designed this thing?

“It’s like a walk-through attraction!” Dad’s voice is filled with amazement. “Wanna do it? We still have time before your session.”

I clamp my lips together hard, because even though they got the ravens wrong, so much of it is *right*. My heart wants to cross that drawbridge *so bad*, but my brain insists that someone from school will see me in there.

“That is *amazing!*” The sharp cracking voice comes from a high school kid next to me. Next to him, a woman my mom’s age dabs at the corner of her eyes.

Is she *crying*?

Geek-outs lead to freak-outs. That's another one of my rules. No geeking out over the castle.

MK Nightshade is awesome, but that world isn't real. People who think it is are so lame.

I'm not lame.

So my mouth says, "Nah. Let's get to the hall. I don't want to be late," even though my heart begs me to stay behind.