

pivot

A NOVEL

LOVE WHERE YOU WORK

BOOK 2

ANNA PULLEY



First published by Red Heel Press 2022

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To Vika, for saying yes

one

PAULA SUAREZ COULD NEVER GET her tentacles to stay.

She adjusted one—a long, thin latex tube dyed blue that bobbed just to the side of her face. It was one of the many tubes that made up the elaborate and heavy head-piece she was wearing. Some fell almost to her knees, where they dangled like puppy-less leashes in the refrigerated air of the massive convention center hall.

It wasn't like her to be so fidgety, but then, it wasn't like her to do something as grand and potentially humiliating as she was planning to do today. She smoothed a hand over the skin-tight metallic baby blue bodysuit that hugged her every contour. It was her best costume yet. She knew it. And this knowing filled her with an admiration and confidence that didn't exist outside the world of cosplay, as much as she wished such confidence would eke into her ordinary, day-to-day life.

She pressed her fingertips into the intricate black neck, waist, and wrists adornments and grinned. In spite of the limited mobility of the dress, it made her feel celestial and

powerful. Like a goddess. A shiny, blue, alien goddess, queen mother of dragons, going warp speed ahead! Not to, you know, mix fandoms.

And then, she tripped.

Her lithe regal form twisted into a grotesque flail as she stumbled forward into a group of My Little Ponies, clutching one by their rainbow tail in order to keep herself from falling face first to the ground.

After apologizing profusely, she realized her confidence was no longer so godly.

She texted Julia for backup.

Paula: **Tell me I'm great. Please.**

Julia: **You're a national treasure! Why? What's up?**

Paula: **I'm about to hit on the most popular cosplayer in the continental US at one of the most popular Cons in the US.**

Julia: **Nerdi Gras???**

Paula: **Ahem, Just Cos Con. We've been DMing about costume design and I think ... she might be into me. But you don't just waltz up to Mistress Riina and ask her out. She's too famous. It needs to be big. Bold! A grand romantic gesture.**

Julia: **You know I love a grand gesture. So you're gonna do it after all?**

Paula: **I am! Soon. But right now, I need validation.**

Julia: **Your eyes are like deep pools of awesome sauce. Your style is so en pointe it makes ballerinas give you unintentional bitch-face, which everyone knows is a sign of respect amongst ballerinas. (I know because I was one for seven minutes in second grade.) You make great totchos. You know how to fold a fitted sheet!**

Julia's odd compliments were working. She had started to feel a little bit better, but then Julia continued.

Julia: **But, wait! Are you sure about this? A public declaration of love is no small thing. I don't want to see you get hurt.**

Paula: **I have a plan! Plus, the situation is perfect. I'm dressed as The Diva and she's dressed as Leeloo.**

Julia: ?

Paula: **For the love of Joss, from *The Fifth Element!* Bruce Willis and Mila Jovovich. Only one of the greatest sci-fi action movies ever?**

Julia: **Oh, right! Yes, so you're the blue alien super star singer and she's the orange-haired hottie and clearly Bruce Willis was just a diversion until her true lesbian love came along?**

Paula: **Exactly!**

Julia: **Well, that is romantic. I'll give you that. Best of luck, bestie! Give me all the details later.**

Paula: **I will, but it might be a while, considering all the hot gay sex I'm about to have.**

Julia: **You are so cocky when you cosplay. I love it. I guess I won't bore you with the hot gay sex I've been having with Clare.**

Paula: **Gross.com/barf**

Jk love you, boo, and I'm so happy for you and Clare!

Paula put her phone in the strap of her boot and jumped up and down a few times, both to ensure her head piece was secure and to work off some of this nervous energy.

Outside in San Jose, the sky was so blue, it burned. She'd been too busy inside the hotel convention to pay much thought to the outside world but had to admit it was beautiful out. Perhaps Paula and her soon-to-be lover would make sweet love on their hotel room's private balcony later and enjoy this fresh, spring air.

Mistress Riina was conducting an interview about 15 feet from where Paula stood. She looked fantastic as Leeloo. The tight, gold leggings with black trim hugged her muscular thighs perfectly. The short, tousled orange hair and micro-fringe bangs looked so real they might not have been a wig. The short, ribbed crop top showed Riina's taut midriff, and the orange rubber suspenders that led down and down to the V of her perfect—

Focus, Paula! she chastised herself. *Don't screw this up.*

When Riina finished her interview, an adoring entourage of fans, handlers, stylists, vloggers, and TikTokers followed shortly behind her. This was it. Paula's chance. She cleared her throat, the lump of her nervousness a hard Werther's candy in her esophagus, and stepped in front of Mistress Riina's path.

Time slowed and blurred as Paula opened her mouth, fearful suddenly that nothing would come out. But then—miracle—it did, and she began to sing The Diva's song, "Il doce suono," changing the name to that of the object of her affection. Not that anyone would know what she was singing. Unless they spoke Italian.

At first, Paula's voice could barely be made out among the clatter and clang of the convention space, but when Riina looked at her—Paula was 6-feet tall in heels—and smiled, a surge stormed through her and she sang louder, with more conviction.

A crowd began to gather, wanting to witness the spectacle, or perhaps were merely confused by the tall, blue, celestial alien singing off-key (yet enthusiastic) soprano at the most famous cosplayer in the United States.

Paula glimpsed in her eyes' corners the blue screens of the phones all around her, recording her. She hoped her singing wasn't *too* off. Though Paula had taken singing

lessons when she was younger and apprenticed with a musical theater company in college—an apprenticeship that birthed her love of theatrical costumes and also annihilated her spirit—that all felt like another lifetime. Even though it was, in reality, four years ago. She hoped any missed notes would come off as endearing to Riina, rather than embarrassing.

As Paula's aria swooped into its dramatic crescendo, the notes swelling and burning as they crossed the threshold of her lips, she dropped to her knees, which was difficult to do in the blue leather mermaid dress. She held out her hand, her lungs galloping, her heart stampeding in her chest, as the song reached its peak.

Riina reached a hand out toward Paula and Paula felt as if she might faint. Out and out the hand went. Where would she touch her? Was it possible to die by fingertip brushing? Paula would soon find out.

But then, as the song eddied and swirled inside of her, releasing all the longing and pent-up agony in Paula's weary soul, Riina's hand found its way to Paula's head piece. She patted her on the head, tenderly, gingerly, as if Paula were a kindergartner or a golden retriever, and continued on past her, into the convention hall.

two

NITA FUNMAKER SAT with a recorder and a notebook in the hotel's cafe, scribbling to herself. The white lab coat she wore had been accidentally helpful in carrying around all the things she needed to cover the Con. If she'd known being a fake scientist came with this many pockets, she might have considered an earlier career switch.

Her phone pinged in her pocket. Another email from her editor. Nita glimpsed at the text preview.

"Just checking in. How's the story coming along?"

She put the phone away and sighed. If she didn't come up with a story idea soon, Marcus, publisher of the East Bay Weekly (and also her father) would be, to use his words, "majorly bummed."

If she came all this way and failed to sniff out a good story, she'd be too hard on herself about it, then her dad would lecture her on how she was "too serious," and sign her up for an appointment to get her chakras aligned with someone named River or Nyx. She still didn't know what exactly that meant.

In any case, Nita had never been to a cosplay conven-

tion before and wasn't sure why he'd chosen her for this assignment.

That was a lie. She knew why he'd chosen her. It was the same reason he'd chosen her to cover DomCon: Strapped for Cash, and the Sacred Sex Goddess Tour, and Fur Real.

You're all business, he'd said to her, on more than one occasion. *There's a wide, wonderful world out there just waiting to be explored.* Her hippie father was possibly one of only a handful on earth who hoped his daughter might discover a newfound purpose in life at the annual furry convention.

She hadn't, but from that assignment, she had developed an appreciation for soft things.

Still, her pieces were popular. She knew this was likely due to the subject matter more than her sparkling prose, but still, she loved the praise. Readers had devoured her piece on the sex goddesses from the Pagan conference. They also loved the piece from the BDSM conference on DIY sex toys, where she'd learned how to fashion a flogger out of rubber bands and a No. 2 pencil. Not that she'd ever flogged anyone. Or had anything approaching intimacy in months. Even her brother's ferrets scurried away when she came near them. Too needy. They could smell it.

Nita sipped at the last dregs of her coffee and looked around her. Everyone else seemed to be having so much fun. Why couldn't she? Maybe her dad was right. Maybe she was too "business." Maybe it was the bad wig.

Just as Nita was about to give up for the day and go back to her hotel room for a nap, a tall woman dressed entirely in blue leather began to sing opera about 15 feet away from where she was sitting. *Well, this may be something*, she told herself, and joined the throng that began to gather around the scene.

Nita finally managed to push her way through to the front of the crowd of sweaty bodies, whose strong odors told her they probably hadn't showered in several days. She led with her recorder, forcing an arm out past several bemused bodies in spandex, latex, elf costumes, and gold bikinis. She reached the second row just in time to hear the blue woman pitch her mouth upon a rich, silky high note, mellow yet full-throated, sailing out into the cavernous ceilings of the convention hall.

Nita felt herself rooted to the floor, her arm and recorder extended outward desperately toward the hypnotic blue mouth, as if Nita was an anthropologist and the woman a newly discovered species.

Nita didn't know the song the woman was singing, but she didn't need to. The woman's lilting, sonorous cries felt to Nita like an act of pure devotion. She felt the song deep in her center, as if she was witnessing something miraculous. Something divine.

Apparently, not everyone felt this way, and certainly not the object of the blue woman's affections, who patted her on the head dismissively and began to walk away in one of the most spectacular rejections Nita had ever witnessed. "Stone cold," as her brother might have said.

The blue woman stopped singing. Her face, which only seconds before had been jubilant and light, was now a wall of pain. And Nita knew the worst was still to come. A mob of con-goers brandishing smartphones began to spray questions at her like artillery fire.

Nita watched the woman stutter and shrink further into herself. Her eyes darted in panic, looking for an escape route. Should she do something? She should do something, right? Nita was not the kind of person to intervene in others' affairs. She preferred to stay on the sidelines.

But then she questioned herself. Such a majestic creature should be the one rescuing Nita! From what? She couldn't say exactly. Perhaps the blue woman could save Nita from her writer's block.

The vloggers' swarm thickened, and the woman attempted to shield herself with one of the many blue hoses attached to the sides of her face. Nita shored up her courage. She couldn't stand idly by.

She decided to play the journalist card and pushed herself into the small dense circle of air where the woman was kneeling. "There you are!" Nita said. "I've been looking all over for you."

The woman looked up from between her hands, confusion and panic muddling her.

Nita carried on, dialing up her voice and charm to its most affable and agreeable levels. If someone had held a mirror to Nita's face just then, they may have seen her pupils replaced by tiny anime rainbows. "We have that interview at 4, remember?" She held out her hand.

The woman seemed to have caught on and took the hand Nita offered. "Right, yeah. I forgot."

"No trouble at all. I know that people as industrious and well-known as you have a lot of demands on their schedule. Come with me."

Nita's compliment had the intended effect, as the crowd now tittered with questions as to who the blue woman was and why she was so important, rather than focusing on the public rejection they had all just witnessed.

Nita pulled the woman up with one hand and held the other out like an invisible shield as she pressed their bodies through the crush of elbows, foam, mesh, adhesives, and glitter. Once they were at a safe distance, Nita let go of the woman's arm, realizing too late that she felt reluctant to do

so. From here Nita could smell the woman's scent, which was otherworldly but also effervescent, like a star fruit mimosa.

"You smell like brunch."

"What?"

"Sorry. Not important." Nita adjusted the orange wig she wore. It itched unbearably. She wasn't a cosplayer but didn't want to come off as an interloper, so she decided to wear her Halloween costume from several years back. She still liked it, even though it had collected dust in her closet for ages. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know, but thank you ..." The woman held out her hand.

"Nita."

"Paula." They clasped hands and for a moment Paula seemed to calm down a little, but then her hand began to shake. She shoved a black thumbnail between her teeth and started chewing. "Oh god, I'm so embarrassed. I can't believe that happened. Did you ... did you see everything?"

"I'm afraid so," Nita said.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god."

Paula's breaths came out in short, staggered bursts. Nita feared she might be on the verge of hyperventilating and steered her to a lounge chair. "Oh, okay, um—" she said, fumbling in her backpack for something—anything—that might soothe this panicked alien goddess. She pulled out a journal, several hair ties, \$.85, and a phone charger she thought she'd lost, before she found a folded-up poster of Lucy Lawless dressed as Xena: Warrior Princess. She'd grabbed the promotional poster from one of the booths on her seemingly endless trips around the convention center floor, hunting for interviews.

She held the picture up to Paula's face. "Concentrate on

Lucy Lawless. You are just like her: fearless, fierce, unstoppable. Be Xena. Be. Xena.”

Paula stared into the fiery blue eyes of Lucy Lawless until her breath began to slow and return to normal. “Thank you,” she said. “Again.” For the first time, Paula looked at the stranger who had intervened during what was likely the most embarrassing moment of her life. And that was counting the Great Hummus Incident of 2020. Her eyes were wide, wild, and strikingly blue, which stood in sharp contrast to her light skin and brown hair that peeked out of her ill-fitting orange wig. Her prominent facial features were arranged delicately, as if by a Renaissance sculptor. Her face and posture said *Don’t look at me* but her outfit and flame-hair said *Well, maybe one look*. It was a striking contradiction.

Paula mapped the atlas of bone that framed Nita’s cheek as her breath slowed. The hot white ball of shame in her chest still lingered, but not as brightly.

“Are you a []er?” Nita asked. She set the Xena poster in her lap, but kept her fingers clutching its corners, in case she might need to thwart another panic attack.

“A what?”

“A singer?”

“No, well,” Paula said. “I used to be, kind of.” She concentrated on Nita’s ripe plum of a mouth. She needed to see Nita’s lips to understand, yet found herself inexplicably distracted by it at the same time.

“You sounded pretty good from where I was standing.”

Paula blushed. “Thank you, I ... I’m out of practice.”

“What happened?”

Paula made a face. She considered lying, but this person—this stranger! In a dollar store wig, no less—had saved her. Plus, there was something comforting about her togetherness. The least she could do was try a little honesty. So she tilted her head and pointed to the hearing aid that sat behind her ear. The shells had been beige, originally, and didn't really match her skin tone, but were more or less invisible, which is what she preferred.

But when she cosplayed, she painted them to match her costumes, taking painstaking care to avoid getting any pigment in the tiny microphones or holes. This resulted in several dismayed lectures from her audiologist, who wasn't actually an audiologist. He was a "hearing aid professional" at Costco, who sat in a tiny booth all day, and whose opinion she no longer solicited. It was bad enough that she needed to subsidize her health care at the same big box store that sold cheese poofs by the barrel. She didn't need a lecture on top of it. But Costco's hearing aids were thousands of dollars cheaper than elsewhere. She had no idea why, but she didn't make the rules.

Not that she was *ashamed* of her hearing loss, per se. She just didn't want anyone to know she was pretty deaf. She didn't want to be treated differently. Or othered any more than she was by virtue of her skin or queerness or weirdness. She preferred to be different on her own terms, not anyone else's. With tentacles and pleather.

"You lost your hearing?" Nita's eyes held Paula's with tenderness and concern.

"Most of it. The hearing aids help, and I read lips."

Nita nodded sagely. Paula trained her eyes on Nita's mouth once more. "Do you need me to—" She gestured with her hands.

In a move that felt suddenly so intimate to Paula—even

though she was always super affectionate with her friends—she placed the side of her index finger against Nita’s chin and gently angled Nita’s face toward her own, so she could see Nita’s full mouth.

“That’s better,” she said.

The hearing aids did help but not a lot. It wasn’t like a near-sighted person getting glasses—how quickly everything settled into perfect clarity. It wasn’t like that at all. Before she was diagnosed, she hadn’t encountered much in the realm of hearing loss, except for the occasional misunderstandings of her grandfather, which were fondly laughed about and then dismissed.

“Do you know sign language?”

“I wish. I took a few classes, but aside from my friend Julia, I didn’t have anyone to practice with. So I kind of fell off that wagon.” Paula looked off into the middle-distance, where someone dressed as Kylo Ren was practicing sword-play. “I should get back into it.”

“When did you lose your hearing?”

“I was diagnosed about 10 years ago, but I started having trouble hearing when I was a kid. I just ... ignored it.” Was she being interviewed? Paula wasn’t usually this forthcoming with strangers. She wasn’t sure what had come over her exactly. Maybe she was still reeling from Riina’s rejection and babbling out of nervousness. But then again, there was something about Nita that felt ... trustworthy. Paula didn’t sense in Nita’s face any of the usual pity she got when she told people about her hearing loss. She hated such looks. But Nita seemed merely curious. A little too curious, perhaps.

“And you still sing?”

Here Paula paused. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Sorry,” Nita said, “journalist habit.”

“So you really are a journalist? The ‘interview’ bit wasn’t a line?”

“I am. East Bay Weekly.”

“I love that paper!”

“Really?”

“Where else can you read your horoscope, get recs on the best banh mi sandwiches, *and* find classified ads featuring erotic didgeridoo players in one place?”

Nita smiled. It was the first Paula had seen since their, admittedly, brief encounter. That smile lit something inside of her.

“I was hoping the questions might distract you from the —” Nita said.

“From the public and humiliating combustion of my self-respect and dignity?”

Nita raised her fist in solidarity. “Are the questions helping?”

“Actually, yeah. Ask me another.”

Nita toyed with the hem of her lab coat. “What’s the best snow cone flavor?”

“Blue cotton candy, obviously.” Paula was surprised to learn how strongly she felt in this matter.

“Are you Team Cats or Team Dogs?”

“I pledge fealty to neither. In fact, I think it’s pretty weird that people want you to choose one or the other. It’s like Star Trek versus Star Wars. I like both! Get off my jock, world.”

Nita’s face brightened. “Who was your first celebrity crush?”

“Gillian Anderson. As Scully from *X-Files*.” The rapid-fire exchange of personal trivia was really working. She could no longer feel her heart racing against her constricting neck brace. A knot loosened in her and she

relaxed a little deeper into the hotel lounge's uncomfortable sectional sofa. "I still sing, by the way. Just not professionally. Just, you know, for fun. If you can call what just happened 'fun.' It takes a lot more effort now. Visual tuners and muscle memory and, well," Paula paused, looking once more into Nita's gently probing eyes, "trust."

"That's wild," Nita said. "And cool. I'm glad you didn't stop. I ... it's ... it would've been understandable, if you had."

"How bad was it?" Paula asked.

"You sounded great. I mean, not that I'd know. I'm not an opera aficionado, but—"

"No, not the singing, the ..." Paula flailed her arms in the air. "... romantic gesture."

"Oh, I don't know. Grand gestures aren't really my thing. I'm much more likely to whisper 'I like you' to a photo of a crush on Instagram and then throw my phone into the sea."

Paula looked at Nita, who looked down at her feet.

Nita tried again. "I mean, I give it four stars for effort, intrigue, and poetic flare," Nita said. "Was she an ex-girlfriend you were trying to win back?"

Paula looked around uneasily. "No."

"One night stand?"

Paula shook her head again.

"Woman whose headpiece recently became entangled with yours, thus leading to an adorable cosplay meet-cute?" She tugged one of Paula's tentacles, which broke off and hung like a limp spaghetti noodle between them. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I can't get them to stay put for long." Paula took the hose and twisted it in her fingers. "We've never actually spoken, Mistress Riina and I," Paula whispered. She cleared her throat. "In person."

Nita stared at her. Was she humiliating herself further?

“We’ve DM’d though! Like four or five times.”

“Are you telling me you orchestrated that spectacle for a woman you’d never met?”

Paula squinted uncomfortably, as if it might prevent some of Nita’s words from getting in. It didn’t work. They got in anyway. She nodded.

“Well, damn. Go big or go home, right? You got balls.” Nita squeezed the hose that dangled in Paula’s hand. “Or hoses. You got mad hose.”

Paula grinned in spite of her embarrassment. “Do you have to be somewhere? Am I keeping you from—” She looked at the woman’s costume, the white lab coat and neon orange polyester wig, trying to place who she might be emulating.

“Oh, no, no. I’m not ... it’s no trouble. I mean, technically I’m ‘working,’ but—”

“You’re covering the Con?”

“That’s the idea.”

“What do you usually write about?”

“Pagans, witches, furies, and uh—” She swept her hand across the wide convention space.

“The freak beat.”

“Well—”

“No, it’s a compliment.”

“I’m interested in stories,” Nita said. “Good stories. Not the kind that are like, ‘Hey, look at this grown man wrapped in cellophane!’ If that’s what you’re thinking.”

Just then, three middle-aged men walked by, one of whom was wrapped in a shimmery cellophane, like a life-sized present, or one of JoJo Siwa’s hair bows. Paula nodded at him. “Hey Jerry.”

He bowed. “Diva.”

“What do you do, if not singing?” Nita asked. “Something in fashion?”

“I’m ... between jobs at the moment, but that’s the dream. Costume design. I just quit my job a few weeks ago. Ever heard of W;nkdIn?”

“No shit, yeah, that’s where I met my—”

Paula tilted her head, waiting, but Nita apparently did not want to finish that sentence.

“—I know it, yeah.” Nita settled on. “You worked there?”

“Yeah, as an admin assistant. Hated it. But I met my BFF at W;nkdIn, Julia, and Clare, who was the head of HR, but is now Julia’s girlfriend.”

“That sounds like a whole story.”

“Oh, it is. It could fill a whole novel.” Paula laughed, remembering the tumult of that whole saga. “Anyway, they roped me into doing admin again for a new company they’re starting.”

“Some friends.”

“It’s pretty cool, actually. Their new business helps women change careers or reenter the workforce if they’ve been out of the game for a while. But they need some help, and I need the cash so...”

Just then, a sexy Chewbacca and Dr. Beverly Crusher walked by holding hands. Paula rubbed the back of her sore neck, as much of it as she could reach anyway. She wondered if she would ever hold hands so sweetly with someone again.

“Come on,” Paula said. “Let me take you on a tour. Maybe it’ll help you with your story? It’s the least I can do, after you saved my ass.”

“Are you sure you’re up for it? Did you want to ... change first?”

Paula hadn't thought about the state of her costume after everything that happened. Her dark blue lipstick was probably horribly smudged, and her neck was sore and stiff from holding up the elaborate headpiece she'd been wearing all day. "Right. That's probably best. Meet me back here in an hour."

A half-smile spread across Nita's cheek. "Okay."

As they said goodbye, Paula turned back once more to Nita. "By the way, what's your costume?"

She touched the orange spikes of her wig. "Oh, this ... it's a Halloween costume. Beaker. You know, 'mee mee mee mee mee.'" "

Paula's eyes widened but she managed to avoid gasping out loud. *Chaos muppet!*

three

WHEN PAULA RETURNED to the hotel lobby dressed as herself, Nita didn't recognize her. As Nita waited, she people-watched, which was very easy and very entertaining at a cosplay convention. As her eyes flitted from costume to costume, a sharp figure emerged from the brightness. Nita marveled at the casually devastating air of a very tall woman swaggering in her direction. She had a nihilistic presence about her, as if everything was meaningless so you might as well wear your tallest boots and smoke filterless cigarettes. (Nita didn't even smoke!) She noticed the sharp line of the woman's jaw, which was so defined it basically proved Pythagoras' theorem. And then that theorem spoke her name.

Paula's short black hair was dyed blue at the tips and styled messily, the forelocks curving near her face and ears at intricate angles. Her tight black jeans and wide-legged stance gave her a distinctive John-Wayne-meets-The-Matrix vibe. It shouldn't have worked, and yet it did. With the sleeves of her black leather jacket pushed up, Nita could

see the hint of a tattoo wrapped around her sculpted forearm. (Nita had a thing for forearms.)

Paula greeted Nita warmly and began her tour.

Nita watched Paula's forearms as she pointed things out to her. In her head she thought, Paula should get paid to point at things.

"See that guy over there?" Paula said. Nita watched her forearm flex. "He's a first-timer."

"How can you tell?"

"He's been standing in that line for at least 6 hours and his enthusiasm hasn't flagged at all."

"But isn't that the line for the bathroom?"

"Yep." Nita's eyes widened but Paula continued on. "And that guy over there? Avoid him. He's a fan-splainer."

"A fan-splainer?"

"Like a mansplainer but for fandoms specifically. If you say you like a particular fandom or series, a fan-splainer will ask you 8,000 questions to prove your knowledge. You can hear their scoffs from across a football stadium."

Nita laughed.

"If you ever want to start an honest-to-god riot at a Con, walk past a Star Wars booth and yell, 'Han didn't shoot first!'"

Nita had no idea what this meant but chuckled along anyway. She liked listening to Paula talk. It reminded her of Celine. Or, at least, the way Celine once talked to her.

Before she could rip the sutures off her heart once more thinking about the past, a group of several scantily clad cosplayers walked up to them. One touched Paula's arm in a way that was excessively intimate. Nita almost felt like she should look away, to give the arms privacy.

"Pauuuuula," the woman said, still clutching Paula's

arm. “You didn’t text me. I thought we were gonna ... hang out again.”

Nita swore she saw Paula blush. “Hey Gina, yeah, I haven’t forgotten. I’ll get at you soon.”

Gina clutched Paula’s bicep one last time before swishing away. A twinge of jealousy clanged like a bell inside Nita. How bizarre, she thought. It’s not like she had any claims on Paula. They had just met, for christmas sake.

But the twinges kept appearing. Especially as more and more people came up to Paula and simpered and cooed and laughed and made nerd jokes with her that Nita didn’t understand. One woman, dressed as Scorpion from Mortal Kombat, asked Paula to autograph her cleavage! (She hadn’t played the game in years but was pretty sure Scorpion didn’t have cleavage.)

Nita remembered a similar fan request with Celine, early on in their relationship, at the first show Celine had invited her to. But then, it had seemed funny to Nita. She was awestruck and loopy with new relationship energy and couldn’t imagine a world in which Celine would hurt her.

Another group of girls approached Paula, one with an enormous headdress made of soap bubbles. It seemed as if not even thirty seconds passed before another hand outstretched for Paula to clasp or another autograph requested. Paula was *popular*, that was sure. And kind of a player it seemed, by the amount of “hanging out” she was evidently not fulfilling.

Once the last breast was Sharpied, Paula pulled Nita aside. “Hey, can you do me a quick favor?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Follow me.”

She led Nita to a side hall where a defeated-looking person dressed as Pikachu slumped on a metal bench.

Paula tapped Pikachu. “Oh my god. I love your costume. The stitching is so even. And where did you get this fabric? Can I take a picture with you? Nita, do you mind?”

Pikachu’s whole body perked up when Paula placed an arm around them. Nita snapped several shots and watched as the life seemed to flow back into Pikachu’s form. When they were out of earshot, Paula said, “Thanks for that. Some cosplayers get really disappointed when they work so hard and don’t get much recognition. I noticed them earlier today and know they’re new to the scene, so I wanted to give them a little boost.”

Nita didn’t say anything, but inwardly was endeared by this touching gesture. It was sweet. She was sweet?

Paula still couldn’t believe what had happened to her with Riina. She kept expecting to run into her at every turn and corner. And her heart spiked each time she saw anything approximating orange suspenders or gold leggings, which, as Leeloo was a popular costume, happened approximately every five seconds.

Each time she jumped, she had to pretend to Nita that it was something else, which she hoped made her seem “excitable” and not like a nervous chihuahua.

Almost every part of her had wanted to retreat to her room after it happened, tentacles tucked between her legs, and stay there for the rest of the Con. But then Nita appeared, as if by osmosis, or magic, to pull her up from her literal knees and save her from the marauding crowd that threatened to consume her. She had to say thanks, didn’t she? Plus, it didn’t hurt that Nita was very easy on the eyes. Even more so once she was out of that terrible wig.

The distraction was nice, too, Paula had to admit. The more she walked with Nita and talked about her love of cosplay, the less she thought of Riina and how she could ever recover from something so embarrassing. She went over the DMs in her mind dozens of times. They had been so *flirtatious*. Isn't that what Julia had said? She'd called Paula *luv*, for crying out loud. She'd used the dancing bunny girl emoji *twice*, which everyone knew was third base for queer girls.

Oh god, Paula thought. *Maybe she isn't queer at all. Maybe that's how she talks to her "girlfriends."* Paula cringed. She thought of Julia, her platonic best friend, who put 15 hearts at the end of every text, even ones about dental floss. Not only had she just hit on the most famous cosplayer, but she'd hit on the most famous *straight* cosplayer. She swallowed the lump that had worked its way up her throat.

Her phone buzzed. Paula reached into her pocket to see a text from Reaux, her roommate back in Oakland. It was a photo of a sign that Reaux had posted above their sink full of dirty dishes. It read:

Dear Paula,

I'm feeling so ... dirty.

Do me.

Do me now.

Love,

Your Dishes

The letters in "Do me" were covered in red glitter. Paula rolled her eyes. Was this what happened to art school dropouts? Without a proper outlet, they found creative

ways to annoy you? Paula admired Reaux's lettering and delivery, yet couldn't help but think that in the time it took her to make this sign, she could've done the dishes three times over.

"Bad news?" Nita asked.

Paula shook her head, still scowling. "Just my roommate giving me shit."

She dashed off a hurried reply: **Sorry, roomie. I'm in San Jose for the weekend. Will do them when I get back. Wet emoji. Fireworks. Fisting hand.**

Reaux: **Thank you. Tryna keep it decent for the ladies, you know?**

Paula: **Ladies, as in multiple?**

Reaux: **Purple Grinning Devil emoji**

Paula chuckled. Reaux was a jill-of-all-trades. On any given day, she had about 15 different gigs, working seasonal or odd jobs as a weed trimmer, bike mechanic, DJ, and sometimes, during peak summers, as a waiter on a cruise ship. By night she was the drummer with the Bay Area-famous queercore band, Lesbian Bed Death Metal, which ensured she always had a rotating cadre of women, men, genderqueers, and enbys in and out of her bed.

Reaux: **Speaking of, any con hotties banging down your door?**

Paula glanced up at Nita, who was talking with Link from the Legend of Zelda. Paula liked the way Nita's head tilted and her tongue grazed her upper lip while she took notes. She had a breezy grace to her movements, as if nothing fazed her.

She texted Reaux, **Nope**, transfixed by the full moons of Nita's cheeks, and sighed.

Several hours later, Nita had multiple story ideas and leads, 8 tote bags, 15 keychains, a fanny pack that read CON WOMAN, and a quiet stirring in her core that she couldn't quite identify. Or perhaps didn't want to.

More than anything, she was amazed at the camaraderie she witnessed all around her. She had assumed that the air would be more competitive, especially amongst the cosplayers, but that wasn't the case at all. If anything, people seemed happy to share resources, tips and tricks, and fashion advice. One person was even offering "free cosplay repair," offering to fix wigs, makeup, and any drooping bits that needed a refresh. Nita hadn't seen anything like that elsewhere. Though, at the BDSM conference, she did see an enterprising domme offering free floggings to anyone who wanted one, which was perhaps given in a similar spirit of generosity.

Nita had not partaken, of course. An adventurous person would have, a different Funmaker. Even her grandmother had been known to throw down an impromptu fancy dance at powwows. But not Nita. Nita would stand on the sidelines and watch and scribble in her notebook. Had she always been this bland?

People often mistakenly thought she was outgoing, in part because of the unconventional stories she covered, and because being a journo required a certain amount of, you know, talking to people she didn't know. But Nita didn't have trouble asking questions. She just didn't like answering them herself. She was inwardly shy and reserved. An outsider. She never felt like she really belonged anywhere. At least, not anymore. And yet here was a group of outsiders who had seen the world as it was and decided to create their own weirder, *better* versions. Nita respected this and admired the hell out of them.

Just then, two cosplayers brandishing enormous, ornate foam swords ran past, knocking Nita's bag off her shoulder and scattering the contents on the floor. "Sorry!" one yelled, as Nita stooped to pick up the pens, Flamin Hots, and a plastic bag full of red Starbursts.

Paula picked up the red candies and eyed Nita. "You know they come in other colors, right? A whole rainbow of them, in fact." She spread her arm in a wide arc in the air as she said this.

"I like the red ones."

"And these?" Paula dangled a bag of Flamin Hots in front of Nita. "Do you only eat red foods?"

"No, but if you touch my Flamin Hots, I might eat you." Nita watched a blush splash across Paula's neck. "Don't think I won't use those plastic fangs I got at booth #C47," Nita said.

Paula grinned as she held the Cheetos out to Nita, who snatched them back eagerly. A silence settled over them. It was nearing midnight. "I guess you've gotta be writing that story soon, huh?" Paula asked.

Nita had forgotten she was on a deadline. Her feature on the Con was due in an hour. (Though she doubted her dad would be editing it tonight, so that bought her a few more hours.) Her shoulders slumped. She wasn't ready to say goodbye yet. Not when she'd had such a surprising day. "Yeah, I guess I'd better."

They stood facing each other, then Paula stuck her hand out. "Thank you for today. Considering how it started, you've made it really ... fun."

"Likewise." Nita turned to walk away, but Paula didn't let go of her hand.

"You should try other Starburst flavors."

“*You* should not sing arias to people who don’t deserve it.”

They both smiled. Paula turned to leave, walked three paces, and circled back to where Nita stood. She hadn’t moved. “So at the risk of making a complete fool out of myself for the second time today, you got a girlfriend?” Paula asked.

“No ... yes. I mean, no.” Nita frowned. “Had one. A wife. We’re separated.”

“Shit.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s ... well, complicated.”

“What happened?”

“Her bassist.” Nita’s palms began to sweat. She didn’t like talking about it. Especially not when Paula was looking at her with such *sympathy*. “I really should ... get started on my piece.” She pointed in the direction of the elevator.

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t call you?”

“I’m saying I gotta write this piece.” Nita was torn. She had liked hanging out with Paula. There were very few strangers with whom Nita could spend several uninterrupted hours with and not feel awkward or bored. And she couldn’t deny that Paula was hot. But something about Paula reminded Nita of Celine, and Nita couldn’t be hurt like that again.

Then Paula looked at her, hands on her hips, those devastating forearms showing in all their glory, thanks to her scrunched up leather jacket sleeves, and Nita’s face turned crimson. “Gimme your phone,” Nita said, and punched in her number.

Find out what happens next at <https://amzn.to/3COgSjK>

