

Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

Profoundly Powerless

Chapter 06 - Nothing Routine About It

"Work... Work never changes," Paul paraphrased aloud as he heard the cafe door's attached bell ring out its familiar cacophony. Even on a typical day, Paul's demeanor soured on hearing the familiar sound. Today had been anything but ordinary. The looks he got from customers as he spoke to welcome them in or to take their orders were chilling. Out of a hundred customers, ninety-nine of them scowled, criticized, or insulted Paul. Having a man's voice and the body of a woman had been too discordant for casual politeness to prevail. The litany of derogatory remarks from customers was enough to crush a person. Paul managed to get through it by reminding himself that they were only offended enough by Paul's state to say something rude but not offended enough to leave the cafe. There was a perverse humor to be found in making them their 24oz triple-shot caramel-swirled mocha latte with extra whipped cream and, of course, caramel crunch on top. The irony of their precious drink orders was not lost on Paul.

Looking up, Paul recognized the arriving customer. It was Lee arriving in the mid-afternoon, looking like he had just rolled out of bed. Lee had attended New Mexico College with Paul, and the two young men met during their first week of classes in their first-year introductory classics lecture. Lee stumbled over another student while taking his seat in the giant hall—a lecture hall with three hundred other students. Lee's gaff had disrupted the professor, who was just beginning his lecture, prompting him to ask the student sitting next to Lee to help pick his 'friend' up. Paul did as directed, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The two became fast friends. Lee liked to play games, maybe too much. Paul, well, Paul was an accommodating friend. Lee often wasted hours playing the latest Car Fetch Throttle game in Paul's dorm room. Lee approached life with the same enthusiasm that he played the game—reckless

abandon. So, saying Lee burst into the cafe that afternoon was a more accurate description. His first reaction upon seeing Paul was to hit on the "new girl."

"Oh my, I didn't realize someone new had started," Lee began reaching out to take Paul's hand into his own. Paul stood dumbstruck. "By what grace am I standing here with a woman as beautiful as you?" Lee asked, giving Paul a look that would scare off any woman but that Lee hoped would endear him to this 'mystery' woman.

"Lee! Cut it out!"

Lee dropped Paul's hand and just about jumped out of his skin. His face was priceless. A mixture of shock, terror, and waning horniness. The next words out of his mouth said it all, "What the fuck?!"

Paul spent thirty minutes explaining the past 24 hours to his oldest friend. Lee nodded along and asked a few clarifying questions but said nothing worth mentioning here. His eyes communicated more than anything he said. They comically grew wide in shock and shrank in focus as Paul recounted the particulars of his transformation. Lee, basic as he was, went straight for the obvious question once Paul finished his story.

"So! You checked yourself out last night, right?"

"What? You want to know if I ogled my body?"

"Yeah, it's..." Lee paused as he looked up and down Paul's body uncomfortably, "...new."

"Dude, we are not going to talk about my body. I already told you it's not going to be mine for long. I am already seeing my waist expand back out."

"So you did check yourself out! I knew it. Was it awesome? Heh, it was awesome. I can tell just by looking at you. Man, I'm so lucky! We've got a man on the inside now. You can finally reveal all the secrets that women keep. We will be like gods! Gods, I say! No woman will be able to withstand our charm and wit with this new inside knowledge. They'll be like putty in our hands! Hahahaha!"

"Ok, first, you need to chill out. You're at a seven, and I need you to come back down to a three. Second, I am not magically knowledgeable about womanhood just because I have this body. The only women I've even spoken to since yesterday are my sister, that crazy scientist at S.U.C.K.S., and today's customers, who have all been rude to me. So, even if I wanted to help you on your diabolical scheme to woo women, I wouldn't be able to."

"Yeah, obviously not with that attitude, my dude. You need to immerse yourself in the process! Oh, and stop being such a prude. It's your body! Enjoy it, man!"

"Yeah, none of that is happening. I'll be back to my usual self in no time. You need to let this go."

"Ugh, fine. You can't blame a guy for trying. We've been perpetually single for years... Sorry for getting excited," Lee said, looking dejected.

Paul sighed heavily; he wanted nothing to do with this line of thinking, but he hated to disappoint his friend. "I'll keep my eyes open and ears listening for anything that might come up."

"Yes! That's amazing! You're the best!"

Lee asked for his usual drink and bolted shortly after this exchange, but Paul's day wasn't over yet. As he exited the back room of the cafe where he had been trying to use his power to further his transformation back, Paul saw a customer behaving oddly. The man heard Paul's arrival and instantly locked eyes with him and began to stare uncomfortably at Paul. As he walked behind the counter to the register to take the customer's order, the odd man kept his gaze affixed to Paul. Paul's voice quivered uncomfortably as he spoke.

"What... uhh... Can I make for you today?"

"You some queer?"

"Excuse me?"

"You deaf, too?"

"Uhh, no."

"Well, then, what's your deal? You sound like a man, but you ain't one."

"It's a long story. Did you want to order something? Or..."

"Yeah, I'm looking for this guy. You seen him?" The customer asked as he held out a picture of Paul.

Paul froze momentarily but regained his composure, realizing that the man couldn't see the

resemblance to his former self. Now, Paul had to decide how to handle this. He could lie and say he didn't know. He could taunt the man and lean into his shared identity with the man in the picture. Paul relished the idea of seeing the bigot squirm, but looking at the guy, he thought better of teasing him. Paul was considerably smaller than this behemoth.

"No, can't say I have ever seen him."

"Really? He's wearing the same uniform as you are. He obviously works here."

"Nope, he doesn't work here. I'm the only person that works the whole day shift. I would know."

"Uh-huh. You know this guy's abducted an old woman last night. If you're trying to protect him, you could get in trouble too, little missy."

"Little missy? Little missy? Are you serious? Why would you call me that?!"

"What?! You don't want to be called a queer, and you don't want to be called a girl. What are you then?"

"None of your business! That's what I am to you! You need to leave now!"

"No way, you're coming with me. I'm going to collect the bounty one way or another, and you clearly are working with that idiot who abducted that rich old woman. Her company is offering a huge reward for this idiot's capture and her safe return. So, let's go!" The brutish man grabbed Paul's wrist and pulled him hard.

Paul was shocked as his body lunged forward across the counter. Paul struggled mightily, but the man's strength was too much for Paul. He easily dragged Paul across the counter and then out the front of the cafe. It was there that two grunts lifted Paul up, placed a bag over his head, and flung him into the back of a vehicle. Paul assumed it was a van, but it could have been a truck. Not a pickup but one of those trucks you see that carries money around for security firms. Paul's thoughts on the matter were scattered as he coped with the reality of being abducted.

Arriving at a mysterious location, Paul was stunned to see his surroundings when the hood was removed. He was in that scientist, Kylie's, lab.

"What the fuck?!" Paul exclaimed.

"Hey, no cursing. It's impolite for us ladies," Kyrie answered back.

"Why did you have those guys abduct me?"

"What? We rescued you."

"Rescued me? When?"

"Yesterday. Don't you remember?"

"I was here yesterday, but that was just so you could get that junk out of me. I was abducted today."

"Nope, that was yesterday."

"Not possible, crazy lady. I would remember losing a whole day."

"Uhh, let's assume you're right. You realize you're claiming to be able to remember that you haven't forgotten something."

Paul looked at Kyrie seriously and contemplated her words. He reflected on if he could have blacked out for an entire day.

"Fine. Maybe I wouldn't know. That still doesn't explain how I got here."

"We got a distress signal that some citizens saw a woman being attacked. S.U.C.K.S. sent a hero straight away, but you were already gone. Fortunately, the hero on location spotted some oil trails. He followed them to a warehouse where he dispatched with a small group of wannabe vigilante thugs. You know the type. They were a real wound-up group of powerless humans who think they know what's best. Paul did know; he knew about the powerless world intimately as a result of his closeted hero status. He regularly mingled and hid among the powerless population and was privy to how some people viewed the emergence of superheroes and superpowers.

"Yeah... I do. Why would a group like that come after me, though? I'm not out as a superhero."

"From what we can tell, there's a bounty on your head. Someone wants you brought in."

"What? Why?"

"Uhh, we don't know. Why do you think we would?"

"You've known everything else practically. Is it really that big of a leap?"

"Eh, guess not. But we aren't psychic here. Wouldn't that be cool, though?"

"You don't have any psychics at S.U.C.K.S.?"

"No, we applied to have one transferred to us. I think we're up to the low 3000s on the waitlist."

"Uh-huh, okay. So, no psychics. Got it."

"Well, you're free to go now. You seem fine. Have a good day!"

"Wait? That's it? You're just sending me home?"

"Yeah, you're not a hero. So, you go home after you are confirmed to be okay. You clearly don't have any better leads than we do. Have a nice night."

"Umm, no?"

"No? Are you telling me or asking me?"

Paul paused a moment before insisting, "Telling. I'm telling you I need more answers, and I'm not leaving until I get them."

"Right... Security! Please escort this lady to the curb."

"I can't believe they threw me out!"

"What did you expect?" Annie asked.

"I dunno. Maybe some more support? They could assign a hero to research my case. Or show me the evidence they collected at the warehouse. Something... Anything!"

"Yup, that sounds right. The society of superheroes shares their intelligence with the victims of

crimes so that they can crack the case all the time. I think you might watch too much television, little 'sis-bro.'"

"Eww, don't call me that."

"Why not? You are my sister and brother for the time being."

"Yeah... I don't like it, though."

"Welcome to the sisterhood. Lots of things other people do that we don't like and can't do anything about. This is a small penance in the grand scheme of things."

"Ungh, fine. I'm hanging up now. I'm going to go work on changing back. Goodnight, Annie."

"Goodnight, Paul-a..."

Paul groaned as he heard the silence of the call disconnecting. He retired to his bedroom first and got changed before returning to his bathroom. Standing in his pajamas with his shirt pushed out by two foreign orbs, Paul finally dedicated more attention to activating his power.

"Be a man, be a man, be a man!"

Nothing happened. Feeling frustrated, Paul slammed his fist against his bathroom mirror. A small crack spread out from where he struck the surface. Pulling his hand back, a small shard of the glass came with it. A few beads of blood formed and began to drip from the wound.

"Damn it. Why won't this just work."

He winced as he pulled the small piece of glass from his hand. The shock caused his arm to tense up, and he was surprised by a sudden burst of mass growing on his forearm. His right forearm had just reverted to a more male state. The muscles looked surprising on his more petite frame. He wasn't particularly muscular, but this was enough of a difference to look off.

Paul spent the next half hour aggressively flexing his muscles, hoping to trigger more changes. He eventually concluded that his change had been prompted by the pain of his injury. He was wrong. Several applied bandages later, Paul relented that his power didn't have a shortcut to activation. Sleep was fitful that night, but it came eventually after he was finally able to leave the events of the day behind him.

Two weeks later...

Two weeks of insults.

Two weeks of bigotry.

Two weeks of side glances.

Two weeks of discomfort.

Two weeks of Lee's badgering.

After two weeks of continued exertion, Paul's body regained its standard form. When he showed up for work, he was all smiles. Paul gave the first customer of the day his best customer service. He was just that happy, even at 5 a.m.

"Hi! Welcome! What can I get for you?"

"Oh, uhh, hey. I just want the largest cup of black coffee you can make me."

"Ooph, rough morning already?"

"Night... I haven't slept yet."

"Oh, man. It's pretty early... or late then."

"Yeah, it's been a tough few weeks."

"Well, this one is on the house then."

"What? Really? You don't have to do that..."

"It's my pleasure, pal. I'm having a great day, and I'd like to pay it forward to you."

"That's very nice of you, Paul."

"Of course!" Paul responded earnestly before a strange sense washed over him. Paul didn't wear a name tag. He had never seen this guy before, either. The man seemed to realize what was happening in Paul's head as he stuck his hand out, "Whatever you're thinking, don't. You need to stay right there."

"Right..." Paul wished he was a little closer to the emergency signal under the counter. The man standing across the counter could easily grab him before he could get back to it. He could probably stop a three-hundred-pound linebacker. This 'customer' was built like an 80's action movie star. Paul's thoughts should have been dedicated to keeping himself safe, but he was just frustrated. He could hardly believe how ridiculous his life had been these last three weeks. He transformed into a woman, was abducted, verbally abused, and now he was again being threatened with some unknown punishment.

"Cream is on the counter behind you. I'll stay right here..."