

Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

Profoundly Powerless Chapter 02 - Practically Paula

Paul started narrating to himself as he caught his reflection in the mirror. *Ladies and gentlemen... who are now mysteriously also ladies due to a strange syringe, the story you are about to hear is true. The names are changed to protect the innocently transformed.*

This is Populous City, New Mexico. I work here. I'm a barista, and I have a secret. Paul paraphrased some shows he enjoyed as a kid growing up.

Squinting his eyes and focusing intensely on his intended outcome, Paul felt a slight tingle vibrate across his skin. *It's working! I'll be back to my own body momentarily.* Paul was giddy as he finally had the chance to demonstrate that he did have a superpower. It was dumb, but he had one. The fact that it was self-serving in this situation was acceptable to Paul. Maybe he could even report back to S.U.C.K.S. on his successful demonstration of his power. *That might get them to up my power ranking, and perhaps I won't be dead last anymore. I should document this so they will believe me. Once I'm back to myself, it's not like I will ever transform into someone else again. That was a fluke accident. One in a billion. No, one in a trillion. I would have heard if seven people mysteriously transformed into women across the globe. That would get the news cycle rolling for sure. Anyways, cheese!* Paul held his phone up and got a classic pouty-lips duck-face bratty-girl mirror selfie. He reasoned that covering as many of the cliches in one go was best.

Paul took... about ten too many selfies of himself. The camera's shutter sound on his phone almost wore out from taking so many shots of himself in various poses. Paul found the idea of a broken camera shutter funny, at least. Scientists would later remark that there were precisely three humans alive who thought this was a funny joke.

Turning his attention back to the pressing task, he searched for that innate feeling that all superheroes possessed—the sensation of exerting his superpower. A few minutes passed, and Paul only felt a similarly light tingle in his skin. Nothing was visibly happening. Paul's frustration started to build. *I guess I truly am Mr. Irrelevant, aren't I? Some power I have, huh? I can make my skin tingle. What a disaster.* Paul's thoughts carried on similarly for another few moments. Placing his hands on the edges of the sink, Paul hung his head. *I need this. I need to prove I can do it for myself. Otherwise, all the abuse over the years has been for nothing. If I can't do the one thing my power works for, then I'm not just Mr. Irrelevant; I'm Mr. Inept, Mr. Useless, Mr. Waste-of-Space. Alright, that last one wasn't my best self-deprecating vocabulary selection. So here we go. Counting down, 3... 2... 1... Change!!!*

Paul focused and channeled his feelings deep inside. He could feel it, and it was working. He was doing it, and he just needed to keep pushing. *Keep pushing. Oh, God! One more push. There it goes! It's working; don't give up now!* Paul's power washed over him. He felt a surge, and then it happened. One whisker on his chin burst out, making itself known.

A moment of silence fell over the room. A quietness replaced the heavy breathing and exertion of a moment ago. Paul stared at his reflection in the mirror. Sticking his chin forward, he moved his face from side to side to better look at the newly emerged hair.

"Yes!!!! It worked! I have powers. Awww yeah," Paul yelled out and started to do a stilted dance he had memorized from watching social media dance crazes of the last decade. With arms moving into patterned shapes and hips and legs alternately performing some dance motion, Paul looked like a fool.

A knock came at the door, "You all right in there, miss?"

Paul immediately stopped his gyrations and shot straight to attention, "Uh, yeah. Everything is fine! I'm coming right out."

Paul surveyed the room for the next hour. He didn't want to sprout a full beard and not realize it. A cross-eyed look from someone in the crowd would tell him if his power were to increase in speed or effect. It kept him busy, at least. For a minute, he thought a woman might have given him side-eye. Then he realized she just had a lazy eye. *Stop staring, Paul. You'll give her a complex. Look away slowly, yes, that's right. Ok, good. Now, don't make eye contact again. Shit! I said don't make eye contact. Alright, she thinks I'm an asshole. Ugh...*

Before he could take another action, the all-clear lights and announcement

started, saving Paul from further social awkwardness. Paul's responsibility as the most senior cafe employee kicked him into gear again. "All right, everyone, one single-file line up the stairs, please. Let's keep this orderly!" Paul projected his voice. *I hope the crowd will be willing to take orders from a Valley Girl.* Paul said, acknowledging his body's new voice. Looking down at his body, he hoped he wouldn't get run over. He was much smaller now and wouldn't be as effective at shepherding people outside.

Finally, back at the top of the stairs, Paul performed his duties to point people to the exit. It went much smoother than the evacuation. The only hiccup was the two women who never found Mr. Irrelevant. "You're doing so much better at this than your coworker," Harriet said as she passed Paul. "Yes, but dear, you'll have to go looking for him. He's nowhere to be found. We searched downstairs, but he wasn't with us," the woman whose name Paul never caught said.

"Maybe his power isn't as useless as we all suspect. Maybe he can hide from danger by turning invisible? That would still earn him a meager score from S.U.C.K.S.," Harriet said to her friend. With their exit, Paul was finally back to the usual peace and calm of his job.

The peace did not last. A strange ringtone chimed from Paul's phone as he stood by the front door of the freshly empty cafe. "Huh? What's that?" Paul asked as he inspected his cell phone. "The Kimper Society is calling me? Why would they call me?"

"Hello? This is Paul...a"

"Paula? We're trying to reach Paul Mansson. Is he available?"

"Umm, well..."

"It's a straightforward question. Is Paul available or not?"

"You see..."

"Oh goodness, did something happen to Mr. Mansson?"

Paul tried to respond, but the caller continued, "We were alerted that an under-leveled inactive-duty hero was near a super-powered incident involving two Omega-level supervillains."

"Omega-level? Wait, under-leveled? What..." Paul tried to interject again with no success. The caller continued speaking over him.

"Situations like this are exactly why this system exists. We can start preparations to notify the next of kin and surviving family members immediately. Can you let us know how Mr. Mansson passed away?"

"I'm not dead!" Paul yelled in frustration.

"Well, of course not. I'm speaking with you now. You couldn't possibly be dead. Now, I assume crushed by debris is a reasonable enough cause of death..."

"Mr. Mansson is not dead either!" Paul's frustration vibrated through every word. He wished he didn't sound so feminine. The caller on the other end would get a different experience if he still had his male voice.

"Oh, wonderful. Then I can speak with Mr. Mansson. Would you please hand him the phone?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Paul started to answer.

"We can't be back to an untimely death now, can we? Please hand Mr. Mansson the phone, little girl."

That was the last straw. Paul was going to unload on this unidentified caller. With all his strength, he yelled, "I. Am. Mr. Mansson!"

"Paul! So good to hear your voice. You don't need to yell; I can hear you just fine," the caller responded. *Had something changed?*

Paul calmed himself and replied, "I'm sorry. I was just frustrated, that's all." *My voice! It's back to normal. Oh, thank God.* Paul was overjoyed to recognize his voice in his head again. He felt confident that he'd be able to clear everything up now.

"Not sure why you're frustrated. I was speaking with the most confounding young woman—the absolute worst. We got nowhere until she handed you the phone. Oh... I hope there's no relation. She was truly the worst; we went interminably round in circles."

"Just stop. Are we done here? You can tell I'm not dead. So we can conclude our business?"

"Almost. I'll need you to report to headquarters. You have to report on the incident and why you chose to intervene. You're much too weak to have engaged against Omega-level villains."

Paul's nerves were back on edge. He hated S.U.C.K.S. Headquarters. It's where he learned he would become the laughingstock of humanity, Mr. Irrelevant. Paul hung his head in disappointment.

"Are you still with me, Mr..."

"Don't say it!"

"Mansson."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were going to say something else."

"We'll expect you within the hour," the caller ended the call curtly.

Shit. Where is my S.U.C.K.S identification badge? Paul wondered while he sifted through cards stored in his wallet. Grocery rewards, why do I even carry this? Government ID, fat lot of good that will do me looking like this; library card, never going back there; credit card, credit card, expired credit card; Ah, my Hero ID: Oof, not a good picture on there. I wish I hadn't gotten that haircut; it does not hold up.

Paul built up his courage. *I'm going to get in and out. They will ask me questions, and I will answer them. It won't matter to them that I'm a woman somehow. No one will give me any grief. I look like any other 20-something young woman. I'm glad my powers worked to change my voice back. That was so annoying sounding like that. Oh, shit! My voice doesn't match my body now. I guess I'll keep my mouth shut until I have to. Or maybe I can fake it, "Hello? Testing... Can I sound like a woman?" Paul tried to raise his voice to a feminine register. He failed horribly. He sounded like a mouse.*

That's a resounding 'no' then. I'll keep my mouth shut. No one talks to strangers in public anyway.

Paul scanned the coffee shop. No customers had entered since the incident. *Mr. Weathers will be fine if I close up early today. It was a pretty traumatic experience. It's not every day that an Omega-level villain attacks. Only the strongest heroes are called in for them.*

"Hey, Mr. Weathers, how are you?"

"Yes, the cafe is fine."

"No, no one was hurt evacuating."

"No, I don't think you will get sued."

"Yes, I helped everyone down the stairs."

"Yes, I agree the first step can be a doozy."

"No, that's not why I was calling. I was hoping I could close up early today."

"No, none."

"Yes, it's still 3 hours early."

"Yes, I know I'm scheduled to close today."

"It's just I have to..." Paul paused. He isn't allowed to reveal his identity as a super-powered individual to others. Plenty of people recognize him, but he's still not supposed to reveal this secret.

"I have to see a doctor," Paul finished his thought. This should get his boss off his back. The threat of a medical claim would be enough to keep his boss at bay.

"Yes, I just feel a little bit woozy. Yes, ever since we came back up from the shelter."

"All right. I'll lock up on my way over. Thanks!"