

Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

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Chapter 17 - Annie Enters the Arena!

Blake and Annie stood staring one another in the eyes in the windowless room. The walls appeared solid, with no apparent exit available to them. Sorceress's unconscious body sat uncomfortably nearby, but Annie was convicted to try and resolve their inadvertent captivity. She stood in the middle of the room, visibly psyching herself up to use her superpower. Blake felt Annie looked ridiculous as she slapped her arms, shook them out, and then pushed them out forcefully to the sides. "Remind me again, what is your power?" Blake asked Annie with frustration evident in his voice. Despite Annie's assurances that she would get them out of this, he was still scanning the walls from the center of the room. Annie took note of Blake's typical dismissal of her and proceeded to move right in front of him.

"Stay behind me. I don't want you making this take longer than it needs to," she said, holding her arms out to take up as much space as possible.

"What are you—"

"Shh!" Annie scolded Blake, who immediately kept quiet and watched the woman before him. She looked like she was trying to use her body like an antenna based on how she was fanning her hands and arms out.

Blake was about to say something when Annie started rotating in place. She was about to collide with him, but he quickly moved to stay behind her arms. "There! We are about ten feet away from someone in this direction."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. My power has never been wrong before."

"Right... And your power is?"

"Stranger Danger... I can detect people around me. If I focus on it, I can tell where they are and how far away, too."

"Is that really a superpower? Can't lots of people kind of do that?"

"Sure... Let's minimize the powers of the person who just told you what way to smash us out of here," Annie said biting at Blake. The look of disgust in her eyes was enough to shut down even the most ardent misogynist.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you shouldn't have, but you have work to do now. We'll work on your ability to apologize later."

With that, Blake lined up to punch the wall that Annie had indicated. A second later, a cavernous hole afforded the two an exit to a fairly standard-looking hallway. Annie rushed through the hole first, causing Blake to panic about her reckless action.

"Hey, you don't know who is out there!"

"Stranger Danger, remember? It would be going crazy if there was an imminent threat. Plus, it's far more likely that I was detecting Lee. He's been Sorceress's hostage for months now."

"Ah, uhh. Yeah, all right," Blake stammered a response but felt frustrated that Paul's sister was completely outmaneuvering him. He turned his attention back to Sorceress, hoping to do something without critique. Lifting her up over his shoulder, her heft surprised him, but he knew he needed to get her back to S.U.C.K.S. for interrogation.

Annie moved swiftly but alertly through the hallway, hoping to close out the additional mystery of what had happened to Lee. She opened a door at the end of the supernaturally long hallway, revealing another hallway. This one went off perpendicularly—neither route offering any clues on which to follow.

"What does your power say?"

"I don't detect any presence at all," Annie answered cautiously.

"That's... not good. What could that mean?"

"My best guess? We're dealing with magic location transmission."

"You mean we're teleporting around?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"So, are we closer to getting out of here or not?"

"How should I know?" Annie gruffly retorted. "You go left, and I'll go right. The first one that finds something calls back for the other. Sound good?"

"No... But I don't see a better option."

"Exactly. Now scurry on; I want to get out of here."

The two went off in opposing directions. Annie moved on confidently, but Blake couldn't help but continue to look behind him to check on Annie. He knew he'd be in deep trouble with Helen and Paul if anything happened to her. After a few further minutes of walking, Blake looked back and couldn't see Annie anymore.

"Annie? Annie, where are you?"

No response came back. Blake began to run back towards where he had left Annie. As he did, the hallway seemed to change around him. He had walked for a greater distance than he'd run, but he could already see a door approaching him. He hurriedly opened the door and fell through it as he tried to step on the other side. Blake tumbled to the ground, and Sorceress fell alongside him. He put his hand down and felt... grass. He was outside. Blake stood quickly to survey his surroundings.

"Annie?! Are you here? Answer me if you can!"

"Who's Annie, fella? Is that the big lady next to you? Do I need to call the cops?" A casually dressed middle-aged man asked from across the street.

Blake was caught off guard when he saw the man but quickly regained his composure. He asked the man if he'd seen a young woman fitting Annie's description but got an equally confused response to this prompt. Blake thanked the bystander before lifting Sorceress back to his shoulder. With a resigned sigh, Blake launched into the air, resigned on getting back to S.U.C.K.S. with Sorceress.

"You left her?!" Paul yelled.

"I didn't have a choice! It was like a magical labyrinth!"

"Shouldn't you be good at those? Are you all into mythology and fantasy stuff?!"

"Uhh—"

"Hang on. Don't answer that. I'm sure it's something my Mom will get an answer about," Paul responded to Blake before turning his head to see someone approaching the pair.

"Don't worry about it, I'm fine. No thanks to you, though," Annie walked up to the duo, interjecting her sarcasm. Her eyes lingered on Blake as she spoke each word with sharp deliberation.

"Thank goodness! Annie, I was worried about you!" Paul reached out to embrace his sister.

"Uh-Uh. I'm not happy with you either, mister."

"What? This was all part of Mom's plan. I thought you knew about it, too. Otherwise, why did you insist on coming with me so much?"

"Mom arranged this? Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm serious. She has been making me go to that salon for weeks, plying them for information."

"So your haircut wasn't about you freshening up your look? Why would you fib about that?"

"Uhh..." Paul's lingered uncomfortably.

"He didn't lie!" Blake interjected. "He did want to get his hair cut like that."

"Is that true, Paul? You wanted to get your hair styled?"

Paul stammered momentarily before committing, "So what if I like my hair?! I'm allowed to!"

"Yeah, no complaints here. Just surprised by it."

"Mmhmm," Blake added his agreement with Annie. Looking at Paul, both Annie and Blake reflected on Paul's current state. Blake noted the slight bounce in Paul's hair—a sign that it had been styled. Annie noticed that Paul had something sparkling in his hair—with further focus, she noted that he now had small but sparkly earrings in his ears. He wore the same gender-neutral clothing, but his body still lacked many of the masculine traits it usually possessed. Paul's shirt was tucked into his pants, highlighting his feminine hip-to-waist ratio. Annie noticed this was in contrast to Paul's habit of leaving shirts untucked. Blake was able to detect a further invisible difference. Paul's heart rate had increased in response to the line of questioning he'd just received from his sister and the hero.

"Maybe Paula will be hanging around more often now? I'm sure that'll make you happy, right, Blake?"

"What? Why do you think that?" Blake was flustered.

"Cause you have a crush on my little sister, and—"

"I'm not your little sister, Annie," Paul interrupted.

Annie cocked her head to the side and glanced at Paul before responding in a slow drawl, "Right..."

"Really, Annie! Don't go making a bigger deal of this than it is!"

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much," Blake chimed in.

"Eww, gross," Annie rejected Blake's attempt at humor.

"Stay out of this, Blake!" Paul promptly followed on. "Annie, whatever you think is going on is in your head. I can already feel my powers working better since I got back to S.U.C.K.S. this afternoon. So, let's just move on. We need to go check in with Mom."

"Right, you said Mom was up to something. What's she doing exactly?"

"She's currently interrogating Sorceress."

Annie started marching toward the detention center without saying a word. Paul and Blake rushed to catch up, and Annie couldn't resist one more tease, "Keep up, little sis!" Paul growled his discontent, but Annie wasn't done. "We're off to see the Sorceress, the Giant, Oafish, Sorceress of the Salon!" Annie sang whimsically, practically skipping along as she took each step.

"Does she think she's Dorothy?" Blake asked Paul.

"Yeah, and you're Toto. So keep up!"