

Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

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Chapter 16 - Welcome to the Game, Paula

"Hi! We were hoping you had drop-in availability for mani-pedis. Any chance you can fit us in?" Annie asked the woman standing behind the counter at the salon. For a moment, Paul worried that they would notice the subtle masculine traits he had managed to achieve since his haircut. Paul shook it off quickly when he realized he was worried about being viewed as "too masculine." He didn't know what that was or where that feeling would have come from. He didn't have time to ponder it, though. The woman was ushering them both back to two stations by each other.

Paul knew what to expect when getting his hair cut. He was a fish out of water regarding manicures and pedicures. The first thing that struck him as being peculiar was the chairs themselves. They had little tubs at the base, and he was instructed to remove his shoes before sitting down. Paul hesitated to put his feet in the basin, but Annie did so immediately and even leaned back in the chair, looking completely carefree. Paul put his feet in and felt rather silly sitting there. Two women came up shortly and sat at the base of the oversized chairs. Without speaking, they both started water pouring into the basins, which was far too hot for Paul's comfort. He tried to pull his feet back, but the woman held his foot down. The water level continued to rise around Paul's foot, and his discomfort with it. He looked over worriedly at Annie. His eyes were pleading for some acknowledgment of the torture he was experiencing.

Annie turned and caught Paul's eyes and reached her hand out. "Aww, it's alright, Paula. I forgot the water temperature can be a bit hot for a first-timer. Don't worry; you'll get used to it soon." The two women looked slightly surprised and exchanged their own glances before pouring some form of soap or... something, Paul wasn't sure what, into the basins. Paul caught this reaction and tried his best to brush off Annie's comment, "Annie, you know this isn't my first pedicure, silly." Paul paused

and looked intensely at Annie while gesturing with his eyes at the women working. "I've just been so stressed..."

"Oh... Oh... I..." Annie looked at the women, who seemed to be quietly working but in a way that conveyed they still knew everything happening between the siblings. "My bad, Paula. Of course, I totally misread the situation."

"No problem, Annie. Now, what were you saying about that story in the newspaper?"

"Oh, the one about that long-lost supervillain?"

"Yeah, that's the one. I heard she abducted someone, and S.U.C.K.S. hasn't been able to rescue him."

"Yeah! It's totally ridiculous! It's been months and nothing."

"I wonder where they could be?"

"Probably hiding in plain sight, honestly. S.U.C.K.S. Is so overworked," Annie responded, looking over to the workers to see if their conversation was creating any kind of reaction from the women working on their feet. Unfortunately, there was nothing of note visible on their faces. On the other hand, Paul was now visibly grimacing as the woman at his feet was using the pumice stone on his heel.

"You okay there, Paula?"

"Mmhm," Paul winced his response out. Annie realized that she should have prepared Paul a bit more about the process he was about to go through as his face contorted further still.

"Well... I'm sure if someone knew something, they'd come forward. I'm sure that poor man's friends and family must be worried sick," Annie tried to keep on the script that the two had prepped in advance. Paul was supposed to continue things at this point, but he was too busy jerking around in response to all the ministrations of the woman working on his feet. Annie reached her hand out and put it on his shoulder to try and calm him. This seemed to work until Paul's esthetician looked up and said, "You want your legs waxed? You have lots of stubble."

Paul was about to respond, but Annie interrupted, "Yes, she does. Thanks for asking."

Paul's face turned beet red in anger. He was about to protest when Annie put her finger up, indicating she had a plan. "Can you imagine?" Annie asked as she implored Paul to play along.

"Imagine what?"

"Being a supervillainess and needing to go for a wax?"

Paul looked confused at Annie, and she mouthed, "Laugh." Paul did as instructed, letting out a modest chuckle. "I wonder who does her waxing? There's a whole lot of her to have to cover after all," Annie went for it. She wanted to see if she'd get any reaction. To her immense relief, she saw the two women look at each other as she concluded.

"Oh? Does she actually come in here?" Annie didn't hold back.

"No," both women responded. The woman working on Paul's feet redoubled her effort in deeply massaging them, causing him to squirm even more.

"Well, I wouldn't judge you if she did. I think it's interesting is all. Living this life outside the law. Honestly, she probably had a good reason for abducting that guy," Annie kept on the pressure.

The two women continued working, but Annie could see that her words were getting through.

"In fact, I'd probably make it a point only to go somewhere that served all customers equally. So if I do find that salon, I'm going to make sure they get a lot of my business... and tips."

That seemed to get their attention. The two women stopped their work and turned the water jets on in the basins. They instructed the women to enjoy the jet massage before they moved on to painting their nails. They then excused themselves and went to talk to the woman behind the counter. Annie tried not to be obvious about watching the three, but it was hard not to in the small shop. On the other hand, Paul was sitting with his hands covering his face, trying to recover from the physical ordeal he'd just been through. "You voluntarily pay people to do this to you?" He asked Annie before she shushed him. "I'm trying to hear what they're discussing."

The three women returned to the siblings, holding a tray with several different types of nail polish.

"Color?" The woman holding the tray asked.

Annie leaned forward, lifted one of the bottles, and turned it around in her hand. "I'll take this one,"

Annie answered, holding a light pink one.

The woman with the tray held it out in front of Paul next, "Color?"

Paul was a deer in headlights as he stared at the array of polishes. He didn't want any color but was overwhelmed by the number of options. He started to reach for a clear bottle when Annie interrupted again. "She'll take the same as me."

This was clearly Annie teasing Paul. When he looked over at her, she gave him her usual "gotcha" expression. Paul smiled at the woman and affirmed that this was also the one he wanted.

The siblings sat through the rest of the pedicure and subsequent manicure, trying to pry at the workers with little invitations to discuss Sorceress. The women never did, though. As the siblings sat under the UV lights to hasten the nail polish setting, the women approached and placed a bill on a tray in front of each of them. Annie thanked them for their work, and they both gave a slight bow of their heads in appreciation before returning to their respective stations.

Annie grabbed Paul's and her bills and was about to pay them when she noticed that her bill had something written on the bottom. It was a street number and name, 406 Hill St. Annie showed the message to Paul. His eyes lit up. "Finally, a lead!"

"You need to go back home, Annie."

"I'm not letting you do this on your own. I understand why you don't want to tell Mom, but you've got another thing coming if you think I'll let you do this alone."

"We don't know what Sorceress could do to either of us. We should try to minimize our exposure. So you should go home. It's the responsible thing to do. If I'm not back in an hour, you can call Mom."

"Nice try, but I can do that from around the block. I'm not leaving you."

"Annie, this is serious."

"Exactly. I know my power isn't helpful here, but I won't leave you here. That's final."

"I..." Paul started before realizing he wouldn't succeed in getting his way. "Fine, but you need to be a safe distance away first. Once you are around the corner, I'll knock."

"Fine by me."

Annie tucked herself behind the corner of the building at the end of the street and peeked her head around so she could see what Paul was doing. On cue, he knocked on the door. It seemed there was no response, so Paul knocked again. It felt like an eternity passing as the siblings waited. Paul started to turn around to leave but paused. He shrugged his shoulders, facing towards Annie when the door swung open. Paul turned and was face to face with Sorceress. She said nothing as she looked around her door at what Paul had been looking at. Annie was immediately spotted but tried to hide.

With a snap of her fingers, Sorceress transported both Annie and Paul to a room with her. The room was devoid of furniture, doors, or windows. It seemed to be an impossible situation. "Who are you? How did you get this address?" Sorceress yelled at the siblings.

"I'm Paul. That's my sister, Annie."

"You don't look like a Paul."

"It's a long story."

"Wait... Paul. I didn't recognize you. You're that bitch's kid."

"Don't call my mom a bitch!" Annie yelled back.

"What are you going to do about it? I know who you are, too, Annie. You don't pose any threat to me. Neither of you do, so why would you come here so unprepared?"

"We're not unprepared, though," Paul answered.

"Huh?" Annie was surprised by Paul's response.

In a blink of her eyes, Paul was engulfed by a flash of light, and a thunderous sound erupted. Suddenly, in Paul's place was The Roman, who immediately threw a punch that landed squarely on Sorceress's equally chiseled jaw. The sound of the impact was deafening. Annie took a moment to regain her composure before she saw that Sorceress was knocked out flat across the floor. The

Roman was busy inspecting the room for an exit.

"You knocked her out?!"

"Oh, you're here too. I guess Paul wasn't able to convince you to go home."

"No, he wasn't. But why are you talking about this so casually? How long have you two been talking?"

"Not long. A day, maybe two. We can talk about this later. Right now, we need to find a way out of here."

"How? There are no doors or windows. For all we know, this isn't even a real room."

"It's real, or my teleportation sigil wouldn't have worked."

"Okay, so that's like a magical device of some sort?"

"Yeah, a blessing from the gods."

"So why don't you use that to get us out now?"

"It doesn't work that way."

"Of course it doesn't."

"Look, I know this is frustrating, but we just need to put in a little effort, and I'm sure we will figure something out. How did you end up here in the first place?"

"Sorceress snapped her fingers, and then we were here."

"Okay, so teleportation. Probably not too far away either."

"Why would you say that?"

"Teleportation magic uses a lot of energy. Transporting herself and two others far away should be outside her capabilities."

"Alright, but that doesn't matter if we are trapped."

"I know; I'm just trying to work through what I can."

"You're clearly not the brains of the operation... Fine, I'll sort us out."

"Huh? How are you going to do that?"

"I'll use my powers, duh. You really don't keep up, do you?"