

Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

Profoundly Powerless **Chapter 08 - Who's that now?**

Meanwhile, across town, in an office building that looked like any other office building that's eighty stories tall, a group of a dozen executives paused their arguing to welcome their CEO back from her latest research excursion.

In unison, three women who appeared to be triplets stood and bowed their heads. The other executives were not far behind as The Call of Beauty Corporation's chief executive glided into the room. Her gait was flawlessly feminine as she placed one heel before the other, hips swaying side to side. Two assistants walked on either side of her, clearing a path for her to take her place at the head of the conference room table.

"Ms. Awl! Welcome back! We hope your trip was a success!" the triplets spoke in an eerily synchronized manner.

"But, of course, dears." The chief executive replied with a flair that only the head of a beauty company could produce. The executives all cheered the woman at the head of the table as they took in the energy created by her simple presence in the room. Laurie Awl, Chief Executive Officer, stood five foot eight inches in flats and looked about fifty years of age, but her actual age was only known to a select few of the executives. They all knew she had to be significantly older than she appeared due to her tenure with the company. She founded the company from her 1-bedroom apartment and grew it into the global retailing giant it had become. With over five billion confirmed unique customers, it was more likely than not that any given individual had made a purchase from the C.O.B. Corp. Men and women purchased goods ranging from skincare, haircare, and makeup to brushes, tweezers, or files. Chances were that a shopper was looking at a C.O.B. corp product or one of its subsidiaries whenever a person visited a store's beauty department.

The triplets smiled with their whole faces, their eyes taking on a particular brightness accentuated by their respective eye makeup applications, which served as the only differentiator an observer could use to distinguish between the women. One had an exaggerated but expressive application of eyeliner. The next had a beautifully blended gradient of pink to purple eyeshadow. Finally, the last triplet had the most magnificently pronounced eyelashes accented by a skillful application of mascara that seemed to defy the laws of gravity.

"Sit down, you three. Laurie, what can you tell us about the latest artifact?" a woman with absolutely flawless skin near the head of the conference table said. She returned to her seat as well, and the other executives followed her lead. The triplets glared at the woman sitting next to their chief executive with contempt but maintained their composure in front of their leader.

"No need for squabbling all of you. Ms. Foundation, please be kind to the triplets. I return with exciting news. Experiment 'Magical Femininity' is on track, and we are ready to proceed to the requirements-gathering phase of the project. If the roadmap holds firm, this will be the thirteenth 'Trans-Lab.'" Laurie Awl announced, holding her hands in the air as she celebrated the triumph of her efforts. Again, the executive clapped along, rejoicing about their leader's accomplishments.

"It's hard to believe how far out this roadmap is chartered already. We're only now starting the second Trans-lab. What did it take? Two weeks to collect the data from the first experiment?" The woman sitting on the opposite side of the table across from Ms. Foundation asked. Her skin looked similarly flawless as Ms. Foundation's, with a distinct evenness in color that seemed impossible to maintain to the casual observer.

"A little more, Ms. Concealer. Our subject underperformed to our expectations, but we have updated our forecasts accordingly. We're chartered out through May next year based on the statistical regressions and the likelihood of performance changes by the subject," Yet another woman at the table announced. She had minimal makeup, but it was neatly applied with a smoothness that drew outsized attention given the small amount of actual product used.

"Ms. Primer is right as always. Thank you, dear," the chief executive affirmed her approval of the information being shared. Looking at her dozen executives, a sense of pride welled within her, and she almost felt a tear come to her eye. An assistant saw the change in her expression and quickly applied a tissue to the edge of her eye to prevent any makeup from smearing. As the first assistant pulled her hand away, the second reached in with an eyeliner pen to fill in any makeup that had been drawn away.

"How is the second experiment going? Is 'Chocolate Gains' producing the results we hoped?" Ms. Concealer asked the table.

"Oh, absolutely. Based on our observations, the subject has finished the box of chocolates or, at worst, has one left." The triplets answered, reading from tablets they held before themselves.

"And the additive? How long until we can evaluate its effectiveness?" Ms. Foundation asked.

"We should have initial results back within 24 hours," a younger woman answered. Despite her age, she had a classic appearance and held a compact in her hand, which she occasionally fidgeted with. Ms. Foundation looked at her with admiration and a hint of pride.

"Thank you, Ms. Powder. Will Business Intelligence be emailing the report? Or should we expect a meeting to review?" Ms. Foundation beamed, her pride in the young executive's performance coming through clearly.

"From my early read, this will be a meeting. Paul's—"

"The subject. We don't use that name," Ms. Awl interrupted."

"Of course, Ms. Awl. My protege knows the rules," Ms. Foundation immediately responded while looking disapprovingly at the young woman. The look conveyed all the information she needed to know her following action.

"I apologize, Ms. Awl. It won't happen again."

"I know, dear... Ms. Concealer, what business are we in?"

The executive paused momentarily. She was struck by the question's seeming simplicity and its use as a rhetorical question in this forum with these executives. "We are in the business of beautifying the world, of course!"

"Incorrect. Would anyone else like to try?" Ms. Awl responded directly without judgment.

A sheepish woman sitting near Ms. Powder raised her hand. Although she appeared to have no makeup on, her beauty shone through nonetheless.

"Ah, Ms. Natural, would you like to venture a guess?"

"We're in the business of longevity, Ms. Awl," Ms. Natural answered back.

"Close! But that is not it either. Let me be clear: We are in the business of all things feminine. No, femininity itself! If this world is to survive, we must distill the essence of femininity and spread it across the world! Grace, beauty, strength, endurance, community! Women's leadership embodies all the qualities the world needs to handle the crises that are yet to come. So, do you see why we refer to Mr. Mansson in the manner we do?" Ms. Awl concluded, redirecting her glance at Ms. Concealer, her second in command.

"Umm... Yes, of course! It's because—" Ms. Concealer started to respond.

"Before you embarrass yourself, let me tell you. Mr. Mansson is the subject because we are better than him. We're better than the men of the world. Because of that, we maintain a scientific objectivity in combating biases. Biases that men allow into the workplace because they are weak and can't control their lesser impulses and lizard brains. The glass ceiling of yesteryears, sisters, is a direct result of men's ignorance of their own mental shortcomings and their base instincts to suppress superior practices and behaviors that come from women in the workplace. So, we hold a higher standard because it is our very business model to do so. Anyone who can't adhere will be summarily dismissed. I'm sure you can all understand. You're all women, after all."

"Does that same policy not extend to the subject? He's being turned into a woman, so he must have some recognition of the significant mental differences—" Ms. Routine, a well-put-together middle-aged woman, asked before being interrupted by Ms. Awl.

"Again, no. The subject is an elastic man. Our treatments don't result in permanent change for him. He will always choose to use his power to return to his maleness. Despite his ignorance of the gifts we offer him, he reveals to us the development of femininity with the ability to do so experimentally! We repeat the same test repeatedly with small changes to the process, allowing us to control for variables that we otherwise could not. The subject is our one chance to deepen our understanding of what defines feminine essence! I will not entertain any sympathy for the subject; 'he' is our means to our goal. Nothing more."

A bit of chattering developed at the table as the women turned to one another to criticize or agree with the sentiments expressed by their leader. The discussion started to heat up with criticism turning into disagreement which could quickly turn into arguments. Ms. Awl knew she needed to step in.

"Ladies, please let's maintain our decorum. This company is meant to exemplify

the strengths of collective behavior. We all succeed or none of us succeed. We must be united in our goal to bring femininity to the world. The subject, Paul Mansson, is a tool for us. By running these experiments on him, turning him into a woman, we can uncover universal truths of femininity. What does it take to be a woman? What does it take to impart womanly qualities? How does the physical change the mental? How long do these effects last? Are they permanent or merely resilient? Durable or fragile? Eventually, we will find a way to overcome the most stubbornly masculine man in existence's ability to be male. Once we've done this, we can replicate the process and finally start to bring the world around to a kinder, more compassionate, more sustainable path where all people can live in harmony. This is our purpose at Call of Beauty. It's not just to improve the lives of our customers but to bring beauty to the fundamental elements of society. Now, let me hear from you all. Are we committed to rising to that call?"

The room's inhabitants responded as though they were a single resolute voice, "Yes!"