

Profoundly POWERLESS

A Novel by Jenny Amara

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Chapter 19 - When Paul Wishes Upon A... Vase?

"Just sign already. You said you're sorry enough times," the delivery man said, forcing the tablet and pen into Paul's hand. The man's clothes were in tatters, and his face red. Blake and Paul's arrival at his apartment had been a traumatic experience. The speed with which they arrived and the resulting force of propelled air whooshing past the delivery man as the pair stopped just in front of Paul's apartment door was like a momentary tornado. Had the wind continued, it undoubtedly would have caused even more extreme damage. Paul was the first to recognize the flaw in Blake's actions and immediately went to the man who had fallen to the ground when Blake stopped.

Paul helped the man up, apologizing profusely as he saw the impact of Blake's super speed on a fellow citizen. Paul's self-identification with the unpowered caused him to feel a heightened sense of shame at the collateral damage from Blake's superpowers. Paul heard the man utter a disparaging remark about super-powered individuals as he helped him up. When the man regained his composure, he was ready to get the package signed for and move on. Paul's shame kept his apologies coming quickly to try and make amends for the slight of being involved with a superpower user.

"If you sign this, I'll leave, and you two can go about doing whatever you 'people' do. Okay?"

The words struck deep at Paul's very core. Being Mr. Irrelevant for so many years had worn on his psyche. The recent closeness with superpowers and the minimal amount of use he had gotten from his superpower had been so readily embraced. He felt deep embarrassment at how easily he was won over by the intrigue and glamour of being around people with real powers.

"Yes, right," Paul's tone changed to contrition. He signed the tablet and handed it back solemnly. "Here you go. Sorry again."

The man grabbed the tablet and pushed the large box by his feet towards Paul with his foot. He said nothing more. He simply turned around and walked away. The implied "Good luck" or "Good riddance" was apparent enough on its own. When the package moved on its own, Paul and Blake's suspicions escalated to their highest levels of concern. Paul jumped back from the package, and Blake immediately jumped between Paul and the box with his arms positioned to provide cover for Paul.

"What do you think it is?" Paul asked.

"How should I know? Did you order a new pet?"

"No! That's ridiculous. I can barely care for myself, let alone a dog or a cat."

"We can file that one away for another time. I think the package is... glowing?"

As the men stood there looking on, the cardboard box began disintegrating, revealing the package's contents.

"It's... a vase?" Paul questioned in disbelief.

"Did the vase make the box disintegrate or something else? Are we being watched?"

"Probably only by my neighbors. Not much happens here."

"...Right. We better get out of the public's eye. Something very unusual is happening here."

Blake picked the vase up while Paul unlocked his apartment door, and they both quickly moved inside. Blake set the vase down on Paul's dining table, and the two continued to watch it with anticipation of what it might do next. For several minutes, they stared with no response. The vase was simple in appearance, with only minimal artistic detail. The most curious thing about it was that it appeared to have a cork plug covering the vase's opening.

"Well, one of us has got to open it, right?" Blake eventually asked after an uncomfortably long silence had fallen over the duo.

"What? Why?"

"Something could be alive in there. Why else would it move?" Blake asserted and then challenged Paul's caution.

"It also made a cardboard box disappear into thin air. That's not normal, Blake. We should probably just blast the damn thing to smithereens. Or you could probably hurl it at the sun, right?"

"What? No, I can't do that. How strong do you think I am?"

"Oh, I guess I figured you could. It's not like I've done the math to know if you could or not."

"Well, I don't think I could. But now that you mention it, I've never bothered to think about it scientifically. Maybe I could throw something into outer space. Should we find out?" Blake asked, grabbing the vase with both hands and preparing to try the experiment.

"I guess it would get smashed one way or another. Sure, let's go try it out," Paul's answer seemed to have been heard as the vase began shaking violently in Blake's hands. Blake wasn't ready for it, so the vase slipped out of his hands and fell precariously towards the floor. On its way down, the vase contorted in mid-air and collided with the edge of the dining table, causing the cork to pop free from the vase as the vessel came to a rest on Paul's apartment floor. Immediately after coming to a stop, red and black smoke started to emerge from the vase.

"Shit! It's poison," Paul exclaimed, but before Blake could rush Paul from the apartment, a bright flash enveloped the room. The duo shielded their eyes and stumbled as they tried to flee. Upon regaining their vision, they were shocked to see a man wearing little more than a vest and large parachute pants standing before them. The mysterious man wasted no time in speaking. "Ah, my new vict— master. Madam, you are entitled to three wishes courtesy of Ramnaghast, the ancient."

"Hey, I'm a dude. Watch it with calling me madam!" Paul clapped back at the intruder.

"Not from where I'm standing, Miss. I'm somewhat of an expert on the matter; you see—"

"Ramnaghast responded before turning and seeing Blake. "There! This one," Ramnaghast floated over to Blake's side. "This is a man. Quite the man, too," the djinn said with a hearty chuckle. Paul started to advance towards Ramnaghast aggressively, causing Blake to step in and hold him back.

"Ho ho, your wench certainly behaves boorishly as though she thinks herself a man," Ramnaghast directed his words at Blake, causing Paul's fury to burn all the brighter. Blake turned to Paul and

whispered a word of caution before turning around to face the djinn. "I think you've commented enough on my friend. Why don't you tell us what it is that you want?" Blake asked the newly floating djinn, who had moved on to inspecting the contents of Paul's apartment. Before he could answer Paul, the pair heard the djinn criticizing Paul's possessions as 'meager.'

"Grand sir, you have it wrong. It is what you want that matters to me. As I have offered already, your wench is entitled to three wishes, and may I suggest it could be time to 'upgrade' the standard of living you share."

Paul slipped past Blake with a speed the hero hadn't anticipated. With his arm cocked back, Paul swung grandly at the floating djinn, but his effort was in vain. Ramnaghast vanished in a puff of smoke, reappearing next to Blake before wrapping his arm around the hero's muscular shoulder. The lither djinn took special note of the man's physique as though it was of utmost interest. "It's hard to tame the wild ones. Certainly, a specimen of a man such as yourself is up to the task, but with a wish, I'm certain you could bring her to heel sooner. Would you like that to be your first wish master?"

To his credit, Blake had a look of distaste form on his face in response to the question. However, Paul was not as willing to keep his temperament to himself. "I thought I was your master? Maybe I should wish you weren't such a misogynist pigheaded—" Paul's rant was interrupted once more by the djinn.

"As the young Miss is certainly aware, anything that is hers is also her husband's," Ramnaghast said before disappearing in a puff of smoke, then reappearing behind Paul with his head hovering over his shoulder and uncomfortably close to Paul's face. "Look at him; you want to serve him just as I am forced to serve the masters of the vase."

"Isn't it usually a la—" Paul started to ask.

"It is not! That is a horrible stereotype and I'll have you know that virtually any vessel can be enchanted to contain a djinn. Hrmph..." Ramnaghast said before disappearing once again, but this time, Paul and Blake also were transported.

Freshly sitting on Paul's couch with Blake's arm resting on Paul's shoulder. The sudden transposition disoriented the pair. Blake was the first to realize his arm was holding Paul, and he slowly moved it away, catching Ramnaghast's attention. "I'm sensing that the two of you are quite uncomfortable around each other despite such tight living quarters. Certainly, such closeness would bring physical intimacy and comfort. So why do you behave as such?"

"We're not together!" Paul finally asserted. He, too, had just realized the closeness they had been teleported into. The words lingered in Blake's ears, and a knowing longing engrossed him. Paul moved forward with intent while Blake sunk back into the couch before Paul continued, "If I wish three wishes, then will you go away?"

"Why, certainly. I would be required to," the djinn answered. Paul prepared in his mind to utter three nonsense wishes to get this nuisance out of his life so he could get back to finding Lee. Before he could finish this thought, a glimmer of hope, or greed, worked through Paul's mind, "Maybe I could wish Lee back?" Paul questioned in his thoughts. Ramnaghast's face seemed to gleam with pride as Paul's mind worked through the idea, causing Paul to wonder if the magic being could actually read his mind.

"Fine. I wish Lee would be returned to me and that whatever happened to him these past months would be forgotten."

"Thy will be done, Master," Ramnaghast said, snapping his fingers. A split second later, a great light overcame the room. Paul was disoriented momentarily but quickly came back to his senses. He was no longer in his apartment. Instead, he was in a small bungalow. The living room was modest and a bit untidy. While Paul was inspecting his surroundings, a rustling came from the door. "Hi honey, I'm home," a voice said. The words brought Paul's attention to the door but also to his own appearance, which was entirely unexpected. He was wearing a pink sleeveless booker dress and an apron. Disturbingly, his breasts were compressed aggressively against the fabric, pushing their flesh up into a voluminous cleavage that was readily visible to any in eyesight. He began to cover himself with his arms in distress when he saw his best friend Lee cross the door's threshold.

"Shit! Lee, you're safe!" Paul called out.

Lee looked startled at first, but a smile broke out on his face. "Yes... I'm safe, Paula. I know being away at work all day can be hard on you, but you really shouldn't worry so much about me."

Lee's calm demeanor and formal tone caused Paul's demeanor to shift straight to outright worry. The fact that he was called Paula didn't even register.

"What the hell happened to you? What did you do to my friend Lee?" Paul asked in quick succession. His first question was for Lee, and his second was for Ramnaghast, who had yet to make his presence known."

Lee moved into the room, placing a briefcase down before approaching Paul with his hand cautiously positioned in front of him. "Paula, you must have had another bad dream, dear. I'm the same man you married and have been the same since we met in college."

"Bullshit! Lee was always so chill and easygoing. Whoever you are, you're definitely not that. Ramnaghast, come out! You need to fix this! This is not what I wished for!" Paul wasted no time in advancing through his thoughts.

"Paula, honey, who is Ramnaghast? What would you have to wish for? Have I not provided you with everything you've ever asked?" Lee sounded alarmed and confused as he spoke.

"Not now, Lee. Just sit down while I sort this out. I'm glad you're back safely, but give me a minute to fix this."

"Sure, I'll sit down, but I think you should sit down here with me, too," Lee said, moving to the couch and gesturing for Paul to join him. Paul's head was on a swivel, looking for the djinn or any clue as to what was truly happening. "Where is Blake? Blake? Can you hear me? I need you!"

"Who is Blake?" Lee asked, this time more firmly. "Paula, you're scaring me."

"Lee, not now. I need Blake to get back here so he can help me with Ramnaghast. This whole situation is some fantasy that he's concocted."

"Oh, you're talking about 'The Roman' again, aren't you?" Lee said, moving back over to Paul to try to steady him. "Honey, we've talked about this. You're not friends with The Roman. He's a superhero who fights crime in Populous City. He wouldn't be here in Ohio unless something horrible happened that needed him. Last I checked, today has been a 'low-risk-of-villainy' day. We're not even at level 2 restrictions. Now, please come sit down with me," Lee wrapped his arms around Paul's waist and gently pulled the disoriented man back to the couch with him. Paul could barely believe what he was hearing from his friend.

"When did we move to Ohio?" Paul asked as he got settled on the couch. Lee was sitting uncomfortably close for Paul's tastes.

"After we graduated," Lee answered plainly before a grave look of concern came over his face. "Is something wrong with your memory, Paula?"

"No, nothing is wrong with my memory. Something is wrong with reality. But it's my fault. I'm the one

who wished for you to be returned from Sorceress."

"You 'wished' for me to be returned from someone called 'Sorceress?'" Lee asked cautiously but also incredulously.

"Yes, I did. And it worked... somewhat. It just changed a lot of other things, too. Like why I'm wearing this dress. Or the fact that you think I'm Paula, but I'm really Paul. Look, I'll show you." Paul focused his energy on utilizing his power. He was determined to get some aspect of his maleness to return in short order. He hoped it might break through to Lee to help revive some of his true memories.

"Paula, what are you doing now? What's with that face?" Lee asked, holding Paul by the shoulders.

"Just give me a minute!" Paul answered, continuing to exert great focus, causing his face to contort into drastically unattractive ways.

"This is officially too much, Paula. Stop this now," Lee said, giving Paul a firm jostle.

Paul steadied himself to the motion and felt his power activate. In an instant, faster than his power had ever activated previously, he felt his shoulders broaden, and his muscles expand to their typical male size. "There! See! I changed!" Paul triumphantly cheered.

"Holy shit! What did you do?!" Lee exclaimed, releasing Paul from his hold. The look on Lee's face was of utter shock and horror. Paul regretted that he had caused such a state to befall his friend, but he was glad that he accomplished his goal of divorcing Lee from the fantasy reality he was living.

"I told you, I'm really Paul—your college best friend and briefly your roommate. We're not married. We've never been romantically involved at all. We were always two dudes who just enjoyed hanging out. Nothing more," Paul said, causing Lee to look distraught.

"I'm sorry, Lee. I know this is upsetting, but it's not my fault. It's not anyone's fault other than that damn djinn's."

"Ramnaghast..."

"Right, Ramnaghast. Now, where could he be? He promised me three wishes, and I only used one..." Paul said. Paul began searching the home for the case, hoping it would be nearby. While he was

looking, Lee continued to sit on the couch with his hands over his face and elbows on his knees. Paul occasionally thought he could hear Lee crying.

"Damnit! Why isn't it here?!" Paul cursed. Just as he finished saying this, a knock came at the door again.

"Who is it?" Paul asked from behind the door, cautious of any further visitors.

"It's me..." a voice came through the door. "Just open up. I'm... not supposed to be here."

Paul opened the door and saw a man of meager build holding Ramnaghast's vase.

"Holy shit! The vase! But who are you, and why do you have that?"

"Do you really not recognize me?" The man asked as he walked through the door, ensuring it was closed behind him. "It's me, Blake."

"Blake?" Paul asked in disbelief.

"Yes, is it really so hard to believe? I don't look that different when I transform," Blake asserted but then paused before continuing, "Do I?"