

THE WOMAN WITHIN

A transformation story by JohnManTD

Chapter 2: Trying It Out

The last few days had been a blur of muted panic and obsessive curiosity. Monday morning, I'd woken up with the distinct, phantom sensation of breasts on my chest, a ghost of a memory that made my skin crawl and tingle in equal measure.

I'd gone to work, the ring and the journal tucked away in a hidden compartment of my messenger bag, their weight a constant, secret reminder of the impossible truth. I couldn't bring myself to leave them at home. The thought of a burglar finding them, or a fire, or some other mundane catastrophe erasing the single most extraordinary thing that had ever happened to me, was unbearable. So I carried them with me, like a bomb I didn't know how to defuse.

The OmniCorp presentation was that morning. I stood in front of Frank and two stern-looking executives in grey suits, clicking through slides about market synergy and brand actualization. The words came out of my mouth on autopilot, the practiced speech I'd rehearsed a hundred times. But my mind wasn't on the projected revenue charts. It was on the small, heavy lump in my bag.

The presentation, by all accounts, went well. The executives nodded, my boss, Frank, clapped me on the back, and the air was thick with the cloying scent of potential success. I cornered Frank near the coffee machine afterward, my heart thumping with a nervous energy that felt quaint and outdated after what I'd experienced on Sunday.

"Frank, that went great," I started, trying to sound casual. "I was hoping, with this momentum, we could talk about that senior coordinator position again."

He took a long, slow sip of his coffee, his eyes crinkling in a way that was meant to be paternal but always felt condescending. "Alex, you knocked it out of the park. You always do. But you know how it is. Budget's tight this quarter."

"But the OmniCorp account would more than cover the salary increase," I countered, the argument tasting like ash in my mouth. I'd made it before.

“It’s not just about the money, son,” he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It’s about stability. You are the absolute bedrock of the marketing assistant team. You’re my rock. If I move you, I have to find someone to replace you, train them... it would be a whole thing. You’re just too valuable right where you are.”

Too valuable to be promoted. The corporate logic was so twisted. He was punishing my competence by locking me in place with it. I gritted my teeth in defeat. I knew better than to push him. “I understand, Frank. Thanks for the time.”

Monday night was a self-imposed exile from the supernatural. I got home, tossed my bag on the couch, and pointedly ignored it. I ordered a pizza, drank three beers, and watched a brain-dead action movie, trying to drown out the voice in my head that was whispering about the book. The temptation was a physical presence in the room. I could feel its pull, a siren song promising a solution to the frustration that was churning in my gut. But I resisted. The price was too high, the path too strange. I went to bed a little buzzed and angry, the taste of my stagnant life bitter on my tongue.

Tuesday was more of the same. A grey, unremarkable day spent answering emails and updating spreadsheets. I still carried the ring and journal with me, the habit now ingrained. At lunch, I met up with my friend Dave from college. He worked in finance a few blocks away, and his life was a perfect blueprint of the one I was supposed to be living. He talked about his recent engagement to his long-term girlfriend, the down payment they were saving for a condo, the promotion he was getting at the end of the year. He was happy, genuinely and uncomplicatedly happy.

“So, how’s things with you, man?” he asked, taking a huge bite of his burger. “Still seeing that barista girl? What’s her name, Clara?”

“Claire,” I corrected him. “And yeah, it’s... fine.”

“Just fine?” He raised an eyebrow. “Dude, you gotta lock that down. We’re not getting any younger.”

I just shrugged, pushing some fries around my plate. He just doesn’t get it. The weight of this promotion and this job is weighing me down in ways he could never understand. And things are moving so slow with Claire.

“Dude, it’s your attitude. Look at you! You’re so full of self pity. Where’s the energetic and

sociable college Alex I met all those years ago?”. The words bounced off me. I just wasn’t feeling it this week. Plus, that’s not even mentioning what happened Sunday. I still had no idea what to do about the discovery I made. How could I explain to Dave the fact that I had a magic ring in my bag that could turn me into a woman, and that I was seriously considering using it to perform sexual favors for strangers in exchange for the power to manipulate people? I changed the subject, and we spent the rest of the lunch talking about sports and complaining about rent, the safe and familiar territory of male friendship. But as I walked back to the office, the weight in my bag felt heavier than ever.

Which brought me to Wednesday. It was two in the afternoon, the post-lunch lull settling over the office like a heavy blanket. The rhythmic clatter of keyboards was the only sound, a monotonous digital rain. I’d finished my main tasks for the day and was now just staring at my screen, pretending to work. In my hand, under the desk, was the ring. I rolled it between my thumb and forefinger, the smooth, cool gold a familiar comfort now. I was tracing the faint inscription, lost in thought, when a shadow fell over me.

“Whatcha got there, Alex?”

I jumped, my heart leaping into my throat. I snapped my hand shut, the ring digging into my palm. It was Frank, leaning over me with that same folksy grin.

“Nothing, Frank. Just a... a fidget thing. Helps me think.” The lie came out smoother than I expected.

He nodded, seemingly buying it or not really caring. “Listen, Alex, I just wanted to circle back to our chat on Monday. I hope you’re not too discouraged. I really do value you here. It’s just... I don’t have room in the budget right now, and honestly, I need you right where you are. Nobody formats the quarterly reports like you do. You’re the best.”

He gave my shoulder a patronizing squeeze and then walked off, whistling a cheerful, off-key tune.

I sat there, my hand still clenched into a fist, the ring a hard knot against my skin. He was whistling. He’d just told me, to my face, that my own competence was the anchor holding me down, and he was fucking whistling. My frustration boiled over into a white-hot rage. So being too good at my job means I’m stuck? This is so fucking stupid.

If only... if only there was a way to convince him. To make him see that I deserved it, that it

was the right thing to do for the company, for him, for me.

And then the thought hit me, not like a whisper this time, but like a thunderclap.

Influence.

I froze. The answer had been in my bag this whole time. The solution to my biggest professional frustration. I glanced around the office. No one was looking. My hands moved with a sudden, decisive purpose. I pulled my messenger bag onto my lap and, shielding it with my body, unzipped the hidden compartment. I slipped out the small, leather-bound journal.

My heart was hammering. This was different from just exploring. This was using it. Using it to change my life. With trembling fingers, I opened the journal to a blank page. I took a pen from my desk organizer, its click echoing in the quiet of my cubicle like a gunshot. I paused, my hand hovering over the page. What was the right phrasing? The book said it had to be a clear, declarative sentence.

Frank Hayes wants to give Alex Winters a promotion

I wrote the words, my handwriting shaky. For a second, nothing happened. Then, next to the sentence, a number materialized in the same ethereal ink as before.

Frank Hayes wants to give Alex Winters a promotion 1

One. It would only cost one single point of Influence.

My mind reeled. It was so low. It made a strange kind of sense. Frank didn't hate me. He liked me. He just needed a nudge, a slight alteration of his priorities. It wasn't like I was asking for world peace. It was a simple, selfish desire, and its cost was tantalizingly small.

But I had zero Influence. My eyes flickered to the red number. Then, like a reflex, I flipped to the 'Challenges' page. My eyes fell on the first, and only, available entry in Tier 1.

Get a man to buy you a drink: 1 Influence.

That's all it would take. One simple, seemingly harmless act of feminine charm. I looked at the clock on my computer screen. 2:15 PM. I'd already smashed through my work for the day. I was just running out the clock until five. I could do it. I could slip out, find a cafe, and be back

before anyone even noticed I was gone.

My fingers found the ring in my palm. The smooth gold felt warm, inviting.

Fuck it.

A jolt of adrenaline, sharp and exhilarating, shot through me. It was a cocktail of fear and excitement, a feeling I hadn't experienced in years. I looked around the open-plan office. Too many people. I couldn't just transform here at my desk. And my clothes... I glanced down at myself. I was wearing a brown short-sleeve button-up shirt, left open over a plain white crewneck t-shirt, and a pair of jeans. I couldn't just become a woman in the exact same outfit, could I? Someone might find it weird that a woman who looked kind of like me is here in the same outfit as me.

An idea sparked. The call booths. They were small, soundproofed boxes scattered around the office for private phone calls. They were almost always empty in the afternoon. Perfect. My movements were swift, deliberate. I stood up, grabbing my phone, the ring and the journal. I walked towards the row of booths, trying to look casual, as if I was just going to take a call. I slipped into the last one, the door hissing shut behind me, sealing me in a small, quiet bubble.

Privacy. Now for the clothes. I quickly shrugged off my brown shirt, folding it and setting it on the small stool in the corner.

The plain white t-shirt would have to do. It was a bit loose on my male frame, which was probably for the best. I took a deep breath, my heart thudding a frantic rhythm against my ribs. I glanced out the glass door. The hallway was empty. It was now or never.

I took the ring from my pocket and, without letting myself think about it for another second, slid it onto my finger. The transformation was so fast, so seamless, that my brain couldn't keep up. One moment I was standing, the next the floor seemed to rush up to meet me as my height dropped by several inches. A wave of vertigo hit me hard. I stumbled, my hands flying out to brace myself against the wall.

Whoa. I'd forgotten how disorienting it was. The world recalibrated around my new, lower perspective. My center of gravity settled, a solid, feminine weight in my hips. I felt a soft, insistent pressure against the inside of my t-shirt. I took a shaky breath, the air filling a pair of

lungs that felt subtly smaller, more delicate.

My eyes drifted downwards. The white t-shirt, once loose, was now filled out by a pair of modest but undeniable B-cup breasts. They were soft, perfectly shaped, and they strained gently against the cotton fabric. I reached up and, with a strange sense of detachment, cupped one of them in my hand. It was warm and heavy. Thank fuck they aren't any bigger, I thought. Walking around without a bra with anything more than this would be a nightmare of jiggling and unwanted attention.

The jeans felt different, too. My once-lean hips had flared into gentle curves, filling out the denim in a way that felt both foreign and oddly right. Luckily, they were a looser, straight-leg cut, so they weren't uncomfortably tight, just... snug in new places. The shirt was a little baggy, so I tucked it into my pants, which had the extra effect of highlighting my wider hips and narrower waist.

I pulled out my phone and switched on the camera, turning it to face me. The face that stared back was still a shock. It was me, but not me. The softer jaw, the fuller lips, the dark hair that now fell in messy waves around my shoulders. It was a mindfuck, every single time. But there was no time to dwell on it. Focus, Alex, I told myself, my new, lighter voice a whisper in the silent booth. I looked at the ring on my long, slender finger. The number was still a stark, accusing '0'.

Let's do this.

I took one last deep breath, smoothed down my t-shirt over my new chest, and pushed open the door of the call booth. I stepped out, my folded brown shirt in my hand. The hallway was still empty. I walked quickly, my stride feeling different. My hips swayed, a gentle, pendulum-like motion that I couldn't seem to control. It was just... how this body moved. The subtle biological differences were fascinating and unnerving.

I reached my desk and, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, casually tossed my folded shirt onto my chair. Thank god this was a big, impersonal company. A random girl in a white t-shirt and jeans wandering through wasn't going to raise any alarms. Most people would assume she was an intern, or visiting from another department.

I made my way towards the communal cafe area on our floor, a large, open space shared with two other companies that rented offices here. It was the perfect hunting ground, busy

and anonymous. The feeling of being out in public as a woman for the first time was terrifying. Every footstep felt loud, every glance from a stranger felt like a penetrating stare. I was acutely aware of my body, of the way my small breasts bounced with each step, of the gentle sway of my hips. It was a level of self-consciousness I had never experienced as a man.

The cafe was bustling with the mid-afternoon coffee crowd. Am I really about to do this. This is fucking crazy. I'm literally a fucking girl right now. I guess I'm doing it. I tried to calm down, and my eyes scanned the room. How the hell am I going to do this? I couldn't just walk up to a guy and ask him to buy me a coffee. That felt too forward, too transactional. It had to be subtle.

I saw a line forming at the counter and had an idea. I spotted a guy in a blue polo shirt, probably in his early thirties, looking at his phone as he waited. He was my target. I got in line behind him, my heart starting to pound with a nervous rhythm. Okay, act natural.

As the line shuffled forward, I took a small step and "accidentally" bumped into him, just enough to get his attention.

"Oh, excuse me! So sorry," I said, pitching my voice to be a little softer, a little more apologetic than necessary.

He turned, a flicker of annoyance on his face that quickly softened when he saw me. "Oh, no problem," he said with a small, dismissive smile, and then turned back to his phone.

Shit. Not even a second look. Plan B. I waited another moment and then let out a small, frustrated sigh, loud enough for him to hear. I started patting the pockets of my jeans with exaggerated movements.

"Oh, damn it," I muttered. He didn't turn. I tried again, a little louder. "Looks like I forgot my purse at my desk! And I was really hoping for a coffee to keep me going."

This time he turned, offering a sympathetic but unhelpful look. "Oh, that sucks," he said, before once again turning his attention back to his phone.

This was harder than I thought. The guy wasn't biting. I was going to have to be more direct. My mind raced. What would a girl do in this situation?

"I'm Alex, by the way," I said, forcing a bright, friendly smile. "What's your name?"

He seemed a little taken aback by my directness but answered quietly, “Uh, Mark.”

“Nice to meet you, Mark.” The line moved forward again. It was almost his turn to order. It was now or never. I needed to do something. An idea, born of desperation and a half-remembered scene from a romantic comedy, popped into my head. It was cheesy as hell, but it might just work.

I stretched my arms high above my head, arching my back and letting out a fake, theatrical yawn. “Ughhh, I need a coffee so badly,” I said, my voice laced with a playful, pouting tone. “Too bad I don’t have my wallet.”

I was hoping the combination of feigned exhaustion and a cute pout would be enough to sway him. But I wasn’t used to this body. I wasn’t used to having breasts. As I stretched upwards, my white t-shirt pulled taut across my chest. The thin cotton offered no support and very little concealment. My small, firm breasts were thrown into sharp relief, and my nipples, hardened by the cool air of the office and the nervous adrenaline, poked out as two prominent, dark circles against the white fabric.

I didn’t realize it at first. But Mark did.

His eyes, which had been politely focused on my face, dropped. They widened almost imperceptibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. His casual disinterest evaporated, replaced by a focused, hungry attention. He stared for a solid three seconds before snapping his eyes back up to meet mine, a faint blush coloring his cheeks.

“You know what?” he said, his voice a little thicker than before. “Don’t worry about it. I can get it for you. What do you want?”

Success. A thrill, hot and triumphant, shot through me. It was that easy. A simple, unintentional flash of anatomy, and he’d folded like a cheap suit.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I said, feigning modesty, but I was already telling him my order, a simple black Americano. He ordered for both of us, paying with a tap of his credit card. A moment later, the barista called out our drinks. Mark handed me my cup, his fingers brushing against mine.

The moment our skin touched, I felt it. A soft, warm pulse from the ring on my finger. It was a subtle, almost imperceptible vibration, like a tiny electric hum. I glanced down. The number

etched on the gold band had changed.

1

Yes! I did it. A grin spread across my face, genuine and victorious. I took a sip of the hot coffee, the bitter taste a perfect counterpoint to the sweet taste of success.

The feeling was so intoxicating, so novel, that I acted on pure impulse. "Oh my god, thank you so much, Mark! You're a lifesaver!"

Before he could react, I leaned in and gave him a tight, enthusiastic hug. Again, I forgot about my body. My braless breasts pressed firmly against the solid wall of his chest. It was a completely new sensation, feeling a man's body not with my own male chest, but with these soft, sensitive mounds of flesh. He stiffened for a second, clearly surprised by the sudden intimacy, his hands hovering awkwardly in the air before settling lightly on my back.

I pulled back after a moment, still smiling. And then I felt it again. Another pulse from the ring, stronger this time.

Huh?

I subtly angled my hand to look at the ring. The number had changed again. It now read:

3

What? Why? I got the one Influence for the drink. Where did the other two come from? My eyes darted to Mark. He was looking away, a deeper blush on his face now, and he was subtly adjusting the waistband of his trousers. His hand was tenting the fabric of his khakis, trying to conceal an obvious and growing bulge.

Oh my god. Is he hiding a boner?

A wicked, triumphant smirk tugged at the corner of my lips. I had done that. Just by being a cute girl in a t-shirt and hugging him, I had given this complete stranger an erection in the middle of a crowded cafe.

"Well, thank you again," I said, my voice dripping with a sweetness I didn't know I possessed. "See you around, Mark."

I gave him a little wave and walked away, not looking back. I found an empty booth in a

quiet corner of the cafe, my heart still racing with the thrill of it all. I slid onto the leather seat and, making sure no one was watching, slipped the ring off my finger. The world stretched and solidified around me, the familiar weight and height of my male form a comforting return to normalcy. I was me again, Alex, sitting in a cafe booth with a free coffee in my hand.

I pulled the journal from my back pocket and opened it to the 'Challenges' page. The first entry, Get a man to buy you a drink, was now greyed out, unavailable until tomorrow if the rules are correct. And underneath it, a new line of text had appeared, no longer blurred out.

Make a man visibly erect in a public, non-sexual setting: 2 Influence.

I let out a quiet, breathless laugh. I had completed a challenge I didn't even know existed. And I now had three influence. And as I watched, another line of text materialized below the second one, a third challenge unlocking in Tier 1.

Kiss a man you've never kissed before: 2 Influence.

Interesting. The system was dynamic. Completing challenges didn't just earn Influence, it revealed new ways to earn more. I had a surplus now. I only needed one for Frank's promotion. With a sense of profound, almost giddy power, I flipped to the page where I had written my desire earlier. I took out my pen.

Frank Hayes wants to give Alex Winters a promotion 1

The number wasn't red. I took a deep breath and, with a firm, steady hand, I underlined the entire sentence.

The moment the line was complete, the number one flickered from black to a vibrant, satisfying green. Then, the ink of the entire entry, my writing and the journal's response, seemed to sink into the page, becoming a permanent, indelible part of the book. It didn't fade. It stayed.

Frank Hayes wants to give Alex Winters a promotion 1

A shiver ran down my spine. It was done. The spell was cast. The will was exerted. I checked the ring in my pocket. I pulled it out and looked at the side. The number now read 2. The transaction was complete. God, what a thrill. This was better than any drug, any adrenaline

rush I had ever known.

I sat there for a moment, sipping my coffee, the warm buzz of power humming through my veins. I had two Influence left. I could save it. I could be sensible. Or...

I looked at the newly unlocked challenge. Kiss a man you've never kissed before. Two Influence. It was right there for the taking. The man, Mark, was still sitting at a small table near the counter, scrolling through his phone, trying to act casual as he waited for his... situation... to resolve itself.

Fuck it.

The thought was becoming a mantra, a philosophy. In for a penny, in for a pound. I glanced around. The booth offered perfect cover. When no one was looking, I ducked my head down and slipped the ring back on my finger. The transformation was smoother this time, less disorienting. It was starting to feel... natural. The soft weight of my breasts, the curve of my hips, it was like slipping into a familiar costume.

I slid out of the booth, the journal still clutched in one hand. I walked over to Mark's table, my hips swaying with a confidence I didn't have just ten minutes ago. He looked up as I approached, his eyes widening in surprise, a hint of embarrassment still lingering on his face.

"Hey," I said, my voice a low, playful purr. "Thanks again for the coffee."

"Uh, yeah, no problem," he stammered, clearly flustered by my return.

I smiled at him, a slow, deliberate smile. "I just realized I forgot to give you a proper thank you."

"A proper thank you? What's that?" he asked, his confusion evident.

I didn't answer with words. I leaned in, my long hair brushing against his cheek. I tilted my head and pressed my lips to his cheek in a soft, cute peck. It was chaste, innocent, but the effect was electric. I felt the pulse from the ring, a confirmation of another success. He froze, his skin flushing a deep, blotchy red. He was so flustered he couldn't even speak.

God, are men this easy? A voice in my head asked. Was I this easy? I honestly couldn't remember. I glanced down at the open journal in my hand, my thumb holding my place on the challenges page. The 'kiss' challenge was now greyed out, and a new one had appeared

beneath it.

Have a man you don't know touch you inappropriately: 3 Influence.

Damn. The stakes were rising. Three Influence was a decent chunk. The word 'inappropriately' was loaded, but the challenge itself was vague. What counted? A hand on the ass? A deliberate grope? My mind started churning, scheming. I looked up at the still-blushing Mark. He looked like a deer in the headlights. He was perfect.

I put on my most innocent, concerned expression. I bit my lower lip, a gesture I'd seen Claire do.

"Hey, uh... I have a weird question," I started, my voice soft and hesitant. "This is going to sound crazy, but... I'm a little worried about cancer. I have a family history of it, and I've been feeling... I don't know. Stressed about it."

He blinked, his flustered state instantly replaced by confusion. "Oh. Uh, I'm sorry to hear that. Is there... anything I can do to help?" Bingo. He'd taken the bait.

"Thank you!" I said, my voice full of false relief. "It's just... my doctor told me to do regular self-exams, you know? For lumps? But I'm always so scared I'm doing it wrong. Could you just... could you just feel for me? Please?" I leaned forward slightly, sticking my chest out, presenting my t-shirt-covered breasts to him like an offering. Mark's eyes nearly popped out of his head. His jaw went slack. "What? Me? I... I can't do that. That's... no."

I pouted, letting my shoulders slump in disappointment. "Oh. Okay. Don't be such a baby about it. It's for my health. I guess I'll just have to ask one of the girls in the office. It's probably better if a woman does it anyway."

I started to turn away, and that's what did it. The fear of missing out, the weird, competitive male instinct.

"No, no, wait!" he said, his voice a little too loud. "It's okay. I can... I can do it."

I turned back, a triumphant grin hidden behind a mask of sweet gratitude. "Really? Oh, thank you so much, Mark!"

He swallowed hard, his eyes locked on my chest. He hesitantly reached out a hand, his fingers trembling slightly. He placed his palm flat against my right breast, over the thin cotton

of my t-shirt.

The feeling was... bizarre. His hand was warm and large, completely covering my small breast. It was a clinical, awkward touch, devoid of any real passion. He was trying to be respectful, but the context made it intensely, thrillingly inappropriate. I felt my nipple harden instantly under his palm. He gently, clumsily, prodded the soft flesh, his fingers moving in a small circle. He was careful to avoid my nipple, but the pressure of his hand was enough to send a strange, pleasant ache through my chest.

After a few agonizingly long seconds, he pulled his hand back as if he'd touched a hot stove.

"Feels... uh... they feel normal to me," he stammered, his face a veritable bonfire.

Pulse. The ring vibrated against my skin, confirming the completion of another challenge. Yes.

I grinned, dropping the innocent act. "Just normal?"

He panicked. "Uh, I mean... they're nice! Really nice! But, like... no lumps! No lumps is what I mean!"

I let out a genuine laugh, the sound light and musical. "I'm just messing with you, dude. Thanks a bunch. You're a good sport."

I glanced down at the book. Another challenge had appeared. The second to last for Tier 1.

Show a man you don't know an inappropriate body part: 4 Influence.

Four Influence. That was a serious reward. My mind was buzzing. I was on a roll. I couldn't stop now. I looked back up at Mark, who was starting to look like he deeply regretted his decision to come to the cafe today.

"I don't think we were thorough enough, though," I said, my voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "We need a better look. Follow me."

I turned and walked back towards the empty booth I had come from. He hesitated for a moment, then, against his better judgment, he got up and followed me.

"Look, I don't know if this is appropriate," he said as we reached the privacy of the booth.

“Bah, it’s fine!” I said, waving a dismissive hand. “We’re just two people helping each other out with... public health.”

Before he could protest further, I turned to face him in the narrow space. I hooked my thumbs under the hem of my white t-shirt and, in one smooth motion, lifted it up, baring my breasts to him completely.

“Hey!” he yelped, his voice cracking. “What are you doing? You’ll get us fired!”

His eyes were wide, a mixture of terror and fascination. He got a full, two-second view of my pale, perfect B-cups, my hard, pink nipples, before I felt the tell-tale pulse from the ring. I laughed, dropping my shirt back into place.

That seemed to be the final straw for him.

“Look, stop messing with me, okay?” he said, his voice shaking with a mixture of anger and arousal. He was already adjusting his waistband again. “Leave me alone. You’re trouble.”

He turned and practically fled from the cafe, leaving me alone in the booth, my body thrumming with a potent mix of adrenaline and power. Damn, that had really gotten to him. I couldn’t help but laugh again.

I sat down in the booth, still in my female form, and looked at the journal. The ‘flash’ challenge was greyed out. And below it, the final challenge for Tier 1 had been unlocked.

Get asked out on a date by a new man: 5 Influence.

Five. That was the biggest prize yet. But... hell no. That sounded like actual work. It would require conversation, charm, building some kind of rapport. I couldn’t just rely on cheap tricks and my body. That was a challenge for another day. I’d had enough excitement.

I was about to take the ring off when a familiar voice startled me.

“Hey, miss? Uh, sorry to bother you, but have you seen a guy named Alex Winters around here? He’s supposed to be at his desk.”

I flinched, my head snapping up. It was Frank. He was standing at the entrance to the booth, peering in at me with a confused expression. My blood ran cold.

“Uh... I think... I think he’s at his desk?” I squeaked out, my voice sounding unnaturally high

even to my own ears.

Frank squinted at me for a second, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes, before he shrugged. “Okay, thanks.” He turned and walked away.

I waited until he was out of sight, my heart pounding a frantic tattoo against my ribs. That was too close. Way too close. I quickly slipped the ring off, the familiar stretching sensation a profound relief. I was Alex again. I took a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart, then slid out of the booth.

I caught up to Frank as he was nearing my cubicle. “Hey, Frank! Sorry, I was just over here.”

He turned, and his eyes widened in surprise for a second before settling back to normal. “Alex. There you are. Why did you take your brown shirt off?”

I stumbled for a second, my mind blanking. “Oh! Uh, I got a bit hot,” I lied, gesturing vaguely towards my clean t-shirt. I walked to my desk, grabbed the brown button-up from my chair, and quickly put it back on, the familiar fabric a comforting shield.

Frank just nodded, his mind already elsewhere. “Well, I’m glad I found you. Can we have a word in my office?”

My stomach did a nervous flip. Was this it? Was the Influence working already? I followed him to his glass-walled office, my hands feeling clammy. He closed the door behind us and gestured for me to sit.

He sat down opposite me, leaning forward with his elbows on his desk. He steepled his fingers, a serious expression on his face.

“Alex,” he began, his tone completely different from his earlier condescension. It was serious, respectful. “I’ve been doing some thinking since our conversation this morning. A lot of thinking. And I’ve come to a conclusion. I’ve been... shortsighted.”

I just stared, trying to keep my expression neutral.

“I said you were too valuable where you are,” he continued, “and that’s true. But I was looking at it the wrong way. Your talents aren’t being leveraged properly. Your skills, your dedication... they’re being wasted on spreadsheets and report formatting. Your talents would be better flourished in a higher role. A role with more responsibility, more creative input.”

He paused, letting the words hang in the air. I held my breath.

“Effective immediately, I’m promoting you to Marketing Associate. It comes with a fifteen percent raise and your own office. You’ll be heading up the new social media campaign for the OmniCorp account, should we land it. Which I have no doubt we will, thanks to your presentation.”

The air rushed out of my lungs. I was floored. It worked. It actually, tangibly, reality-alteringly worked. I had bent my boss’s will to my own with a flick of my pen and a few cheap thrills in a cafe.

“Frank... I... I don’t know what to say,” I stammered, a genuine, stupid grin spreading across my face.

“Don’t say anything,” he said, smiling warmly. “You’ve earned it, Alex. You’ve more than earned it.”

I walked out of his office feeling like I was floating on air. The world looked brighter, sharper. The monotonous hum of the office sounded like a triumphant symphony. I had done it. I had taken control.

Back at my desk, I surreptitiously pulled the ring from my pocket. I had started with 3. I had kissed Mark, which should have brought me to 5. I had let him touch my breast, which should have taken me to 8. And I had flashed him, which should have put me at 12. And then I spent one on Frank. So I should have 11. I checked the number.

11

Oh my god. Eleven Influence. I had earned eleven points of pure, reality-bending power in the space of about twenty minutes. I didn’t even know what to do with it. The possibilities were dizzying, stretching out before me in an endless, tantalizing vista.

I glanced at the clock. 4:45 PM. Wow, how time had flown. The afternoon had been a whirlwind, a fever dream of transformation and manipulation. I started packing up my things, a new energy buzzing through me. The walk home tonight wasn’t going to be the usual tired shuffle. Tonight, I was going home to decide how I was going to spend my newfound wealth.

I walked out of the office building, the evening air cool on my skin. I felt like a king. A god. I

wasn't the same person who had walked in this morning, frustrated and powerless. I was someone new. Someone with a secret. Someone with power. And I was just getting started.

The next two chapters to this story are available now (featuring images) to read at patreon.com/johnmantd and on my website JohnManTD.com