





"Gawd, yes... please," Amanda croaked and rolled her weary shoulders. "After dinner, though. Did you get my message?"

"I did," Ingrid said and put a hand on the small of Amanda's back to guide her into the living room. "I've set the table but haven't prepared anything for dinner."

"Good... when I went past Xong Wu's, I noticed they had a whole string of specials lined up in their storefront window. My gut was screaming for nourishment so I had a spring roll there. I also bought a box of my favorite beef chop suey," Amanda said and held up the bag from the Chinese restaurant as she crossed from the hallway's soft carpet to the living room's hard parquet floor.

"Oh, that's nice, darling."

"Mmmm."

The L-shaped living room was a cool, classy affair with white walls and exquisite furniture. The room was dominated by a beechwood couch arrangement consisting of a three-seater settee and two satellite armchairs that were placed around a low coffee table - in addition to that, a beechwood sideboard stood up against the nearest wall. The various accessories were of a high standard, too, with a wooden bowl of African design on the table, two brass candlesticks on the sideboard, and microfiber cushions in the couch and the armchairs.

Two white doors led off from the room, one into the kitchen and the other into the bedroom. The bedroom door was closed, but the other was open.

In the narrow end of the L, a small dinner table with seating for two had been placed up against a holo-panel to give the illusion it was a room with a view. Similarly, several of the white walls were adorned with colorful, abstract paintings that seemed to ebb and flow in accordance with how the mood lighting caressed them.

Ingrid smiled sweetly as they went over to the small dinner table that had been set for one. She pulled out the chair for Amanda and gestured for her to sit down.

"Oh, not yet, thank you," Amanda said with a little smile as she put the bag with the food on the table. "I need to slip into something more comfortable first... perhaps you could arrange a little music while I change?"

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said with a sweet smile as she pushed the chair back under the table.

Amanda returned the smile and moved into the bedroom where she took off her suit jacket. Sighing from the fatigue that had turned her limbs into lead, she put the jacket on a coat hanger that had been placed very conveniently on the outside of the massive, white wardrobe.

Groaning from the stress she had been under the entire week, she sat down at once on the black-and-red bedspread of their queen-sized bed. She rubbed her face several times before she took off her pumps and massaged her aching feet.

From the living room, airy bossa nova rhythms wafted through from the many hidden speakers. Amanda chuckled as she stood up and unbuttoned her skirt. Once free of the constricting garment, she rolled down her pantyhose so her legs could be liberated.

At first, she whistled along to the bouncy rhythms but soon came to the conclusion that she was simply too tired for something as energetic as South American music. "Sweetie? Sweetie, would you mind putting on some romantic classical music instead?" she said as she took off her silk blouse and put it into the laundry basket.

"*Of course not, darling!*" Ingrid said from somewhere in the living room. The bossa nova was instantly replaced by the opening bars of Jean Sibelius' First Symphony.

"Thank you!" Amanda said as she dug into her closet and found the most comfortable clothing she had: her old college sweats. Although washed out to the point of being threadbare, she loved the outfit and would never get rid of the crimson sweatshirt and the navy blue jogging pants, even if every last seam would burst. Grinning, she held it to her face and reveled in the softness.

"Sweetie?" she said out loud to be heard over the romantic violins. "Would you mind getting me a beer? Non-alcoholic!"

"*Certainly, darling,*" Ingrid said from the living room. Soon, a shadow fell over the animated walls as the tall, regal woman moved near-silently into the kitchen.

Smiling, Amanda put the college outfit where she could reach it and hurried into the adjacent bathroom to freshen up before dinner.

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After washing her hands and splashing a few drops of cooling water on her face and neck, Amanda shuffled back into the living room in her college comfort-wear - and socked feet in her favorite pair of bathing slippers - where Ingrid had already put the imported beer and an old-fashioned tumbler on the dinner table.

The tall, regal woman stood stock-still by the chair, waiting for Amanda to return from the bedroom. Smiling sweetly, she pulled out the chair and invited her partner to sit down.

"Thank you," Amanda said and moved over to Ingrid instead. "But first... I need a kiss, sweetie. Just a little one," she continued with a wink.

Smiling sweetly, Ingrid put out her arms. As her shorter partner came into her embrace, she leaned down and puckered up her lips. Duly kissed, she stood up straight and smiled just as

sweetly as before. "Do you wish me to unscrew the cap for you, darling?" she said and pointed at the dark brown bottle of beer.

"No thank you, I need a little exercise," Amanda said and pulled out her chair. Once she had transferred the beef chop suey from the cardboard box to a proper plate, she poured the pale golden beer into the tumbler and marveled at the way the white froth bubbled up perfectly. "C'mon, sweetie... sit down. How has your day been?" she said, reaching out for the regal woman.

Ingrid smiled sweetly and walked around the table. She sat down facing Amanda and crossed her legs away from her dinner partner in a very lady-like fashion. "The eCommunication panel rang four times. The first caller was a telemarketer who wanted to offer you a full set of the Encyclopedia Americus for nine thousand dollars. Failing that, he offered you an update to your old set to get it up to the proper 2084 spec. That would only cost you fifteen hundred dollars."

"Wow, the Encyclopedia Americus?" Amanda said, balancing a large piece of beef on her chopsticks. "Talk about being stuck in the old century... I can't believe they're still trying to sell actual, physical books! I remember those huge tomes from my grandmother's. She has the whole set and it weighs a ton!"

"I see."

"Yes. Well, you know she's kinda old-fashioned. She's told me a lot of fun stories, though. Would you believe that when she was a very young girl back in the 1990's, she didn't even have an online presence... at least not for most of the time?"

"Shocking."

"You said it. I think I'll visit her when she turns ninety-five next month," Amanda said and let out a chuckle. Smiling, she dabbed her lips on a napkin that carried the restaurant's logo. "Please go on. You said four calls?"

"Yes. The second caller was Frank Schwann who wanted to ask you out on a date."

Amanda rolled her eyes and stuffed her face full of chop suey to muffle the cusswords that would inevitably bubble up from her chest. Once the food had been chewed thoroughly, she chased it down with a long swig of beer. "Will somebody please buy that man a clue? I mean... how many times do I have to tell him to back off...? Oh, he's so... so... so taxing."

"Like we agreed upon, I told him once more you weren't interested," Ingrid said with a head that was cocked slightly and eyes that didn't really seem to focus on anything.

"Hrmpf. Thank you, sweetie."

"You're welcome. The third caller was your good self calling to tell me I shouldn't prepare dinner because you brought home Chinese. The fourth caller was a telemarketer trying to sell you a set

of PlasTastico Dinnerware. Thirty-two tumblers, plates and cutlery of the finest hard plastic. Now also available in cherry red, burnt orange and mint green. Yours for only five thousand five hundred dollars."

Amanda chuckled and dabbed her mouth again before she crumpled up the napkin and threw it into the spent cardboard box. The chop suey had been food for the Gods, and the contents of her plate had mysteriously vanished like the morning dew.

She leaned back in her chair and enjoyed the easy classical music that was still playing from the hidden speakers. Taking the tumbler, she savored the taste of the chilled, non-alcoholic brew when she suddenly remembered the two fortune cookies that she had seen Xong Wu put into the cardboard box.

After emptying the glass of beer, she pulled the box towards her and peeked down into it. "Oh, there they are... I thought I'd forgotten them. Ingrid, sweetie... which of 'em would you like?" she said and scooped up the two, small packages that had been wrapped in greaseproof paper and decorated with a red bow tie.

"It doesn't matter," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

"Okie-dokie... this one's for me and this one's for you," Amanda said and put the fortune cookies down on the tabletop. She quickly pulled off the bow tie and unwrapped the paper to reveal the small pastry. Breaking it in two, she unfolded the piece of paper inside it and turned it around so she could read it. "Tonight, you shall meet a dark stranger... oooh! Now who could that be, huh? Not Frank Schwann, that's a fact," she said with a grin.

Smiling sweetly, Ingrid picked up her fortune cookie and unwrapped it. It didn't take her slender fingers long to break it in two, but when she looked at the piece of paper, her eyes didn't seem to focus on it. "Matters of the heart are only ignored by the foolish..." she said, but stopped speaking from one word to the next.

When nothing further came, Amanda cocked her head and turned to look at the tall, regal woman next to her.

Ingrid closed her eyes and moved her head in an odd, jerky pattern. "The first caller," she suddenly said in a voice that didn't hold a Scandinavian accent, "was a telemarketer who wanted to offer you a full set of the Encyclopedia-"

"Oh no! Ingrid!" Amanda said and jumped up from her chair.

"-Americus for nine thousand dollars dollars dollars dollars doll- Stand by. Warning. Critical motherboard error. The motherboard has exceeded recommended temperature levels. The system is rebooting. eFriend Ingrid Scandia model Twenty Seventy-nine dash oh-six step two rebooting. Performing power-on self test. Four thousand ninety-six terabytes memory okay. Basic input-output system okay. Date-time uplink failed, disregarding. Internal chronometer okay. Pain receptors disabled. Loading eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality base functions. Base

functions version one point oh Charlie loaded okay. Searching for eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality add-on packs. Found-

"Aw, no... Ingrid... not now! Not after the rotten week I've had! Aw, hell!" Amanda said and clapped her hands over her eyes. Growling, she bolted from the table to search for Ingrid's remote.

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Three minutes later, Amanda had finally rummaged through the contents of four different drawers to find not only the remote to her malfunctioning eFriend but also the cordless screwdriver she would need to open her up. When she came back to the dinner table, her artificial girlfriend had finished rebooting but was sitting passively on the chair with her face straight ahead, her feet firmly on the floor and her hands resting on her thighs.

"Ingrid?" Amanda said, approaching with caution. Though the eFriends typically weren't aggressive, Amanda took the long way around in case the odd crash had triggered reactions from the regal woman's core program.

"Hello, registered owner Amanda Paulsen," Ingrid said in the metallic, default voice that she had been given at the factory. "I am currently performing level three diagnostics. Four percent completed. For the time being, eFriend capabilities have been limited to rudimentary functions only. Four percent completed. Press cancel on the remote to abort level three diagnostics. Five percent completed."

Amanda sighed and clicked the large, red On/Off button on the remote to turn Ingrid off instead. A chill crept down her spine as she watched the eyes of her eFriend slip shut and the breathing stop.

"Ew, this is why I never turn her off," Amanda mumbled as she held the screwdriver ready. Grimacing, she walked around the back of the eFriend and used her fingers to seek out the four hidden clamps that held the back part of the skull in place. Once the clamps had been released, she removed the scalp with the picture-perfect hair and put it on the dinner table next to the empty plate and tumbler.

Underneath the hair, a skin-colored plate that followed the curvature of the skull was fastened with four screws, but they had no chance against the cordless screwdriver. With everything loose, Amanda took off the plate and peeked into Ingrid's brain.

At first glance, all the little doodads, thingamabobs and whatsits on the print boards looked fine, but there was a certain smell of warm metal that Amanda didn't like. "Hmmm," she mumbled, craning her neck to look inside the brainbox of her artificial girlfriend. "Hmmm... looks good to me... what I can see, anyhow. There's a funny smell, though... smells like..." - *sniff, sniff* - "what

my old curling tongs smelled like just before I had to send them to recycling. Nah, I better view the instruction manual. I wouldn't want to mess up her head..."

Amanda took the opportunity to do the dishes before she went back to the holo-panel she and Ingrid were sitting at. Touching the screen, she disabled the serene view of the Seychelles at sunset before she accessed her home entertainment system and went through the various folders. "eFriend instruction guide... where are you?" she mumbled as she swiped through an endless list of guides for things she didn't even have anymore. "Ah, okay... got it. Okay, troubleshooting... video, female presenter. Activate," she mumbled as she went through the options on the screen.

The monitor blinked green a couple of times while it accessed the guides but soon displayed a full-frame video of a woman dressed in a white lab coat standing next to a model of Ingrid whose head had already been taken apart. *'Welcome to the eFriend Ingrid Scandia model Twenty Seventy-nine step one and step two instruction guide. Section troubleshooting. Please choose your problem and press Okay,'* the woman said in a pleasant voice.

Amanda went through a short list of options before she found one that said *'Unwanted/unexpected reboots'*. "That's gotta be it," she said and folded her arms over her chest, ready to be awed by the infinite wisdom of the tech-heads.

*'Unwanted or unexpected reboots can be caused by several different factors. Please choose the problem environment closest to your experiences,'* the female technician said before another list of options popped up.

Groaning out loud, Amanda rubbed her brow furiously before she touched the screen again to carry on in the vast jungle of more or less identical options.

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A short half hour later, Amanda had finally reached the end of the troubleshooting sequence - not to mention the end of her patience. After testing a dozen or so scenarios and possible solutions without getting any nearer to finding out where the smell of warm metal inside Ingrid's head could possibly come from, she touched the screen one more time to abort the troubleshooting and return to the glorious vista of the Seychelles.

"If I had a time machine," Amanda said and rubbed her mouth, "I'd go back to five minutes before somebody had the clever idea of inventing technobabble... and I'd whack the Joe over the head until he changed his mind!"

Sighing, she tried to put the tip of her right index finger on a few of the printed circuit boards inside Ingrid's head to test if they were still warm. None of them were, but she got a bad case of the creeps at the thought of rummaging around inside someone's head.

She pulled back and took the skin-colored skull-plate that she attached without adding the screws. Walking around the eFriend, she knelt down on the parquet floor and looked at the regal - and completely passive - face of the woman she had lived with for two years. "Dammit,

Ingrid," she whispered, reaching up to run a few fingers across the eFriend's silky smooth and almost lifelike cheek.

"I do like you, you know... and right now, you're scaring me. Please don't do this kind of stuff. You hold me at night, you whisper sweet nothings in my ear when we're intimate, you make me breakfast, lunch and dinner... and midnight snacks, and... it may not be the same as living with a real girlfriend, but... oh... to be honest, I wouldn't want to trade now. We never fight because you've been programmed to follow my every whim. We never disagree because you've been programmed to always agree with me... we're always the best of friends... you treat me so well, and you know me so well... what can possibly be better than that?"

Getting up, she took the remote and looked at it like she didn't know what on earth to do with it. She eventually held it to her forehead in the vain hope the piece of electronics would speak to her and give her a clue what to do about the unexpected, nightmarish situation she found herself in.

Sibelius' First Symphony had long since stopped which left the apartment in an oppressive silence that was only broken by Amanda's breathing and the occasional ticking from the electronic equipment.

She scrunched up her face and found the screwdriver. "Listen to this awful silence, Ingrid... without you, everything will be so much worse," she whispered, walking back around her eFriend to attach the four screws so she could be reactivated.

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The first twenty minutes after the reboot went without a glitch, but then - out of nowhere - Ingrid accessed her housekeeping program and started vacuuming. The eFriend shuffled around the living room hunched over and with her long, slender fingers in the positions they would be in if she was holding the stainless steel pipe on the vacuum cleaner. The only problem was that she was nowhere near the vacuum.

Amanda stared wide-eyed at the grotesque sight of a grown woman using an imaginary vacuum cleaner, but soon snapped out of it and hurried over to the holo-panel. She swiped the Seychelles off the monitor and found the number to go directly to the eFriend Corporation's free service hotline. When she had it, she touched Dial and then Hands-free.

It didn't take long for the connection to be established, and she soon heard an automated voice say: *'You've reached the eFriend Corporation service hotline. Good evening-'*

"Hello!" Amanda shouted, jumping back to the holo-panel. "Hello, I'm the owner of a model Twenty Seventy-nine and I have a real prob-

*'-All our lines are currently busy. Please hold-'*

"Whut? Hold?" Amanda croaked and stared at the holo-panel. When it did indeed start to play electronic muzak, she sighed and rubbed her brow again. "Oh, I don't need this after the week I've had... I just don't need this..."

*'You're calling the eFriend Corporation service hotline. You are now number fourteen. An eFriend hotline employee will be with you shortly. Please hold.'*

"Fourteen?!" Amanda cried and threw her hands in the air in frustration. When she noticed a new set of movements being performed behind her, she turned around to see what Ingrid was up to.

The eFriend had finished the vacuuming program and was presently doing the dishes without a kitchen sink, water or indeed filthy dishes. The artificial girlfriend took an imaginary item from an imaginary pile of dishes, dunked it into imaginary water, scrubbed it off with an imaginary brush and finally put it to drip-dry on an imaginary rack.

Amanda stared at the odd sight for so long that she almost missed the holo-panel changing behind her.

*'This is the eFriend service hotline, how may we help you?'* a voice said that seemed to belong to a real human being.

"Whut? Oh... oh, finally," Amanda said and turned back to the panel. "Hello, my name is Amanda Paulsen and I'm experiencing severe problems with my model Twenty Seventy-nine, an Ingrid Scandia."

*'Have you tried the troublesho-'*

"Yes, but it didn't help me. The problem wasn't solved," Amanda said, eyeing the eFriend with some trepidation. Ingrid had finished doing the dishes and just stood there passively.

*'I see. Miss Paulsen, I think we need to send a service technician-'*

"Oh, baby! Ohhhh, baby!" Ingrid suddenly howled. Her hips began to gyrate, a motion that soon spread to her entire frame. Soon, it became quite clear her entire body was engaged in that most ancient of functions. "You drive me so wild, baby! Yes, baby! Yes, touch me there! Ohhhh, baby!" she howled with very little regard for the mental health of her owner. A series of increasingly frantic moans and groans only added to the colorful imagery.

Amanda's face had turned beet-root red and she thanked her guardian angel for providing her with the notion of choosing an audio connection to the hotline rather than a video link. She stared at the eFriend - who was bucking and groaning, groaning and bucking - with an acute sense of embarrassment blasting through her system.

*'Miss Paulsen, I take it the behavior I can hear quite clearly isn't intended?'* the hotline employee said at the other end of the connection. The question was followed by a drawn-out giggle.

"No... no, it isn't," Amanda croaked, rubbing her burning cheeks.

*'I have just bumped you to the head of our queue. I promise you that you will be visited by a service technician within twenty minutes.'*

Amanda buried her face in her hands and only dared to peek out between her fingers. "Gawd... thank you... thank you..."

*'In the meantime, may I suggest you... uh... turn her off?'* - The comment was accompanied by a long, juvenile giggle.

"I will! Thank you... thank you so much!"

*'You're welcome, Miss Paulsen. A service technician will be with you in less than twenty minutes.'*

"Thank you... goodbye," Amanda said and closed the connection. Once the holo-panel had returned to the Seychelles, she grappled for Ingrid's remote and jammed her thumb down onto the Off button.

On the floor, Ingrid stopped her lewd show and assumed a perfectly passive stance. As she received the shut-down order, her eyes slipped shut and she stopped breathing - or rather, panting.

Amanda threw the remote down into the three-seater settee with a long, throaty groan. "Oh Gawd, I need some coffee... strong coffee!" she croaked as she stared at the inactive eFriend. Sighing, she spun around on her heel and stomped into the kitchen.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

The twenty-minute deadline came and went with no sign of the fabled service technician. To kill time, Amanda put the rectangular, electronic device for her portable holo-panel on the low table before she took her mug of strong coffee and sat down in the center part of the three-seater settee.

"Activate," she said and watched the familiar bluish wall pop up from the holo-hardware. It was empty at first, but another list of options soon appeared on the virtual screen. Sighing in frustration, Amanda said: "Latest news. Any channel."

A stern-looking newscaster from one of the local network affiliates appeared on the portable holo-panel and began to give a brief summary of the day's headlines. There had been a hold-up at a convenience store just around the corner from where Amanda lived, an elderly man had been

severely injured in a hit and run on one of the major boulevards, a leading scientist from the local power grid explained how the electricity prices were in for a spike following the recent tornado strike on the wind farm, the President had made a brief statement on the ongoing troubles in the Middle-East, and the Dow had reacted negatively to the President's words.

"Eh," Amanda said and took a long swig from her strong coffee. "Not exactly eternal sunshine and sparkly unicorns, huh? News item one."

As the story on the convenience store hold-up flickered onto the holo-panel, she leaned back in the settee and snuggled down with a cushion so she could cover her eyes in case they showed any scary images, like blood, dead bodies or the mayor who was up for re-election.

The news item had barely started before the easily recognizable shape of the mayor came into view speaking to reporters in front of the store. As he went into a well-rehearsed speech to tell the public - the voters - about his tough stance on crime, Amanda groaned and promptly buried her face in the cushion.

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A little later on, Amanda had watched all the news items, she had emptied her mug of strong coffee and she had ranted and raved about the shocking fact that even in September 2084, it was still impossible to rely on what people working at service hotlines told her.

She knew she was about to blow her already stressed-out lid, so she forced herself to keep sitting in the settee instead of bouncing off the white walls like she wanted to. Huffing in frustration and fatigue, she crossed her legs the other way and began checking her eCommunications on the holo-panel to have something to do.

It was the same as always; her mother asked when she could come over for an afternoon talk and some apple pie, her brother had sent her a supposedly oh-so-funny list of the top ten best pickup lines for '*snatchin' Hawt Babez*' - Amanda rolled her eyes repeatedly while mumbling "Thirty-five years old and frickin' clueless about women!" - and the building supervisor advised the tenants that a new security system would be installed on the front doors of all apartments on November 7th.

On top of that, she had received twenty-two spam eComms offering everything from penis enlargements to holographic sweethearts. Amanda groaned and looked over at the inactive Ingrid. "Don't need one of those, thank you!"

She dumped the spam into the overflowing Spam Folder, moved the message from the supervisor into a folder labeled Important, deleted the one from her brother and finally leaned forward so she could reach the small keyboard below the holo-panel. She typed a quick but polite message to her mother saying that it wasn't a good time right now, but maybe next weekend.

After sending the message, Amanda leaned back in the settee and let out a long sigh. Before her hair could reach the top of the backrest, she changed her mind and got up instead. She went over to the inactive Ingrid and studied the tall, statuesque woman with the perfectly proportioned physique, the picture-perfect features and the lifelike, yet utterly unblemished skin and hair.

When Amanda tried to wrap her arms around Ingrid's body and pull herself into a hug, she was reminded at once that her partner of the last two years was merely an advanced piece of machinery despite her human appearance. With Ingrid being inactive, all her functions mimicking true life had been shut down - she wasn't breathing, she didn't have a heartbeat and her artificial skin was cold and stiff to the touch.

"Sweetie, you're just a mannequin," Amanda said and pulled back from the cold, passive machine. "A mannequin that cost me thirty thousand dollars... and another five thousand for the software upgrades along the way... dammit. If only we were allowed to have pets here... a tabby would only have cost me fifteen, eighteen thousand, tops. Gawd, what am I saying? I dearly hope they can fix you... I'm not ready to give up on you yet, you know," she said, stroking Ingrid's cheek with the back of her fingers.

Moments later, her dark train of thought was interrupted by the electronic doorbell on the front door playing Frosty The Snowman. "About frickin' time!" she growled as she stomped over to the door.

She whooshed it open with a barb all ready to fire but stopped dead before she could even part her lips enough to speak. Instead of emptying the proverbial bucket all over her overdue guest, she simply stared at the gorgeous female service technician who was standing in the corridor beyond the door.

The compact technician was an African-American with a skin tone like aged mahogany, and she appeared to be in her late thirties. She was wearing a heavy toolbox over her shoulder, common, sturdy workboots and a tan boiler suit that couldn't be more non-descript if it tried, but she had that certain something that separated the humans from the eFriends - imperfections, albeit minuscule ones, like dimples, early crow's feet around her eyes and a slightly crooked front tooth.

The woman's dark brown eyes sparkled, and the amused grin on her lips was clearly brought on by the unexpected attention. She wore a baseball cap with the eFriend Corporation logo, but she reached up and took it off to show respect for her hostess. As the cap came off, her dark hair was revealed to be short and spiky. "Good evening, Miss. My name is Keilani Shaun and I'm the technician... who's... been..."

Amanda simply stared at her.

Keilani stared back and put the cap back on. "Okay... oh man, this is gonna be one of those evenings. Hello, may I speak to your owner, please?" she said, carefully pronouncing every syllable like she was speaking to a small child, or indeed a malfunctioning eFriend.

Then Keilani happened to look to her left at the passive Ingrid. Whistling through her teeth, she dug into her toolbox and found her best screwdriver. "Man, this must be contagious..." she mumbled as she tested the electrical device and turned back to the honey-blond, green-eyed eFriend closest to her.

Just as Keilani got the screwdriver ready to investigate further, Amanda snapped out of whatever bit of paradise she had found herself in and held her hands high in the air. "Oh! Ha, ha... uh, sorry... no, I'm actually one of the living. Ha, ha. I'm Amanda Paulsen, hello," she said and put out her hand.

Keilani shook it with some trepidation but was soon able to feel that the short woman before her was indeed not an eFriend. "Hello, Miss Paulsen. You called the eFriend Corporation service hotline?"

"Ah... yes, I did... it's this way, please," she said and reached behind the technician to close the front door. When Keilani turned her back to her, Amanda could see that it said eFriend Corp. Industrial Division across the back of her boiler suit. "Oh... the Industrial Division? But my eFriend is just a regular household one, not a factory droid..."

"I just happened to be fairly close when the call came, Miss Paulsen. The dispatcher said it was kinda urgent. Anyway, before I moved over to the Industrial Division, I worked at the home unit for nearly five years, so..."

"Oh, I didn't doubt your abilities, ha ha," Amanda said, but even as she did so, she wanted to slap herself silly.

When the two women walked into the living room, Keilani put down her toolbox with great care so it wouldn't dent or scratch the parquet floor. "Hmmm... well, that's an Ingrid Scandia, all right," she said as she shuffled up to stand behind the eFriend. "Tall girl, huh?"

"Yes," Amanda said with a nervous chuckle. She could see at once that Keilani - who was only a few inches taller than she - wouldn't be able to reach up and peek into Ingrid's brain unassisted. "So... uh... would you like a footstool or something to stand on?"

"Not at first, thank you. I'm going to activate her so I can monitor the exact behavioral patterns and processes in case there's a more substantial problem," Keilani said and took off her cap. Crouching down by her toolbox, she found a tablet computer that she turned on. She swiped through a couple of menus before she reached the program she needed to keep track of the eFriend's internal workings. "Before I get started on her, I'd like to hear in detail what happened here tonight."

"Sure, sure..." Amanda said and wrung her hands. "Oh, would you like some coffee while you-"

Keilani smiled as she reached into the toolbox and found a data transmission cable that had - inevitably - rolled itself up into a knot. "No thank you, Miss Paulsen. I just had some at my last client."

"Oh... of course. Well..." Amanda said and ran a hand through her hair. "Well, I didn't notice anything when I got home. I had called Ingrid, oh, half an hour ahead of time to tell her that I'd take home some Chinese so she shouldn't prepare dinner, and she was fine then, too. Like I said, when I got home, she was just... uh, fine. I ate, and... and... when we got to the fortune cookies, she went haywire," Amanda said and shrugged so hard her shoulders nearly reached her ears.

"The fortune cookies, huh?" Keilani said with a chuckle as she tried to unravel the knot on the cable.

Amanda echoed the chuckle despite the odd situation. "Yeah. The fortune cookies. We were talking just... uh, fine, when she suddenly repeated something she had said only minutes earlier. Then she just... I don't know... seemed to crash."

"Mmmm. Okay. How much time would you say went by before Ingrid lost control?" While she spoke, Keilani finally finished de-knotting the cable. Holding it straight, she moved over to the three-seater settee and put it across the backrest for safekeeping.

"How much time? Oh... twenty minutes. Maybe a little less. Why?"

"I'm thinking one of her CPU fans could have failed. Twenty minutes would be about right."

"Oh! They can do that?" Amanda said and hurried up to stand next to Ingrid. She briefly sniffed the eFriend to check if the smell of warm metal still lingered on her, but it didn't. "Earlier, there was a peculiar smell when I opened her up. Like my old curling tongs when they got warm."

"Now Miss Paulsen, as you can see, I don't have much experience with that kind of apparatus!" Keilani said and laughed out loud as she ran a hand through her short, spiky hair.

Amanda snickered into her hand, secretly marveling at the sound of genuine, human laughter filling her apartment. "Perhaps I should say it smelled like a soldering iron?" she said with a broad grin.

"Ah! Now that's a smell I know," Keilani said and matched the grin with one of her own. As she smiled, her face grew even more charming. Not only were the dimples in her cheeks highlighted, her dark brown eyes narrowed and sparkled like she thought the whole situation was rather entertaining.

Amanda found herself smiling like a maniac at the sight - there she was, with an actual, living woman in her apartment, and not only that, but a woman who could smile, laugh and crack jokes. *'How long has it been that I've had a friendly conversation with a real woman? Ohmigawd, so long I can't even remember the last time... she isn't even flirting, she's being completely professional about it... Gawd, I'm so fond of Ingrid, but I need to get out more...'*

"So," Keilani said and reached for the remote that she had spotted resting on one of the cushions, "shall we try to breathe some life into the tall girl?"

"Yes, but she's cooled off now, so it'll be a while until she starts acting weird again," Amanda said and moved around the passive Ingrid.

Keilani held the remote ready and pressed the red On/Off button. Almost at once, Ingrid opened her eyes and looked around. Keilani put away the remote and began to study the eFriend's behavior. "Oh that's all right, Miss Paulsen," she said with a tired chuckle, "my shift ended while I was driving over here."

"Oh! Oh, no... on a Friday night!" Amanda said and wrung her hands. "Listen, Keilani... I don't want to hold you here. I'm sure you've got a lot of things lined up after work... I'll just keep Ingrid turned off over the weeken-"

Keilani grinned and waved a hand to shoot down the offer. "No, no, everything's just fine, Miss Paulsen. To be honest, not only do I get double pay for working this time of night, I only have an empty apartment to go home to."

The word *'Interesting!'* flashed through Amanda's mind, but she wisely stopped her thoughts from bubbling to the surface. Instead, she uttered a simple "Oh," before she moved over to her eFriend and reached out for the tall woman's hand.

Ingrid looked at their house guest with a sweet smile on her lips. When she had finished returning from her inactive state, she took Amanda's hands in her own. "Good evening, darling," she said in her bought Scandinavian accent. "Would you like your massage now?"

"Oh, you remembered that..." Amanda croaked, suddenly feeling her cheeks begin to burn. She cast a sideways glance at Keilani who held the transmission cable and the tablet computer ready, but apart from a cheeky little smirk, the technician kept a straight face. "Uh, maybe a little later, Ingrid."

"Certainly, darling," the eFriend said with a sweet smile.

"Ingrid, this is our guest, Keilani Shaun," Amanda said and pointed at the woman in the boiler suit.

Ingrid immediately accessed the appropriate program and turned to their guest with her right hand stretched out. "Good evening, Ms. Shaun. Welcome to the home of Amanda Paulsen and I, Ingrid Scandia. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Keilani chuckled as she shook the eFriend's hand. "No thank you, Ingrid. I'm good."

Ingrid pulled back with a sweet smile on her lips. She looked back at Amanda before her arms fell down her sides. "If you change your mind, Ms. Shaun, just let me know and I'll make you a cup of delicious coffee. Would you like to listen to some mood music while you're here?"

"No music, sweetie," Amanda said and put her hand on the eFriend's elbow. "Miss Shaun is a service technician who's here to work on you. Please sit down on one of the chairs."

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said and walked towards one of the satellite armchairs. When she noticed Amanda pointing at the kitchen chairs instead, she smiled sweetly and changed directions. Sitting down, she crossed her legs in a very ladylike fashion and made sure the knee on top pointed away from Amanda and Keilani.

While Keilani walked around the back of Ingrid, Amanda knelt down in front of her and took her hands in her own. "Sweetie, Miss Shaun is just going to run a diagnostic on you. She's going to unscrew your skull and peek into your brain, but I promise it won't hurt."

"Oh, but that's fine, darling. The program that controls my pain receptors has been disabled," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

Amanda grunted and scratched her neck. "Oh... yeah... that's right. Keilani, I had to disable Ingrid's pain program because she, uh... whined a lot over the silliest things."

Keilani chuckled as she clicked off the four clamps and removed the scalp with the perfect hair. The four screws holding the skin-colored skull-plate in place were soon dealt with to allow her access to Ingrid's inner workings. "You'd be amazed how many people do that, Miss Paulsen," she said as she attached the data transmission cable to the appropriate socket in Ingrid's head and then into the tablet computer. "Actually, from model Twenty Eighty onwards, the pain receptors were disabled across the board when they arrived at the service centers. If people want 'em, they can just turn 'em on again. Okay... I'm receiving data now," she continued, looking at the tablet.

A new chill ran down Amanda's spine at the creepy sight of the cable running from Ingrid's head to the tablet, especially since the eFriend was still awake and alert while her data was being monitored.

Ingrid's pale blue eyes scanned the living room with her usual cool detachment. Now and then, she stopped and zoomed in on an item that needed some kind of attention later on. When her eyes ran across Amanda's nervous face, her lips creased in a sweet smile and she gave her owner's hands a little squeeze.

The gesture was a familiar one - and one Amanda usually loved - but the bigger picture lurking just behind the strange scenario sent yet another chill down her spine.

Keilani nodded confidently as she studied the data that was being transferred to her tablet. "So far so good. I think my initial theory will be proven correct," she said as she tapped on the tablet to get it to show a different data stream.

"With the CPU fan?" Amanda said and began to chew on a fingernail.

"Yes. Ingrid has been active for four minutes and twenty-two seconds, and her internal temperature is already creeping up towards the high end of the scale. Mmmm-yeah. Ingrid?"

"Yes, Ms. Shaun?" the eFriend said over her shoulder.



Keilani chuckled and felt down Ingrid's sides until she found the hidden clamps that would release the large, flexible panel that covered most of her back from her neck to just below where the rib cage would have been on a human being.

As the panel came loose, Keilani carefully detached all the fiber optic cables that operated the shoulder blades and the muscles on the back, the neck and the shoulders. When it was ready to go, she lifted it off the eFriend and put it on the coffee table behind her for safekeeping.

Amanda stared wide-eyed at the creepy sight of the pink, artificial skin lying on her pristine table with a bunch of optical cables sticking out of it, and she broke out in a shimmy when the goosebumps became too strong to bear. "I honest to goodness didn't even know she had a panel there..." she croaked, poking an index finger into the loose panel to feel the lifelike skin.

"Well, as it says on a little label on the rear of the panel, there are no user serviceable parts inside. This is her real brain we're looking at now," Keilani said and pointed down at the highly advanced electronic marvel known as an eFriend model Twenty Seventy-nine, Ingrid Scandia.

Amanda was too busy breaking out into goosebumps to reply, but she eventually looked over Keilani's shoulder with a great deal of interest and watched as the technician attached the data transmission cable to the appropriate socket in Ingrid's central processing computer.

Soon, data streams flowed onto the tablet and prompted Keilani to let out a string of grunts in several different intonations. Some sounded good, some merely okay, and some quite bad.

"Why do I feel like we've morphed into Doctor Frankenstein and Igor?" Amanda croaked.

Keilani chuckled and cast a brief glance at the nervous woman next to her before she went back to grunting at the data streams.

"Keilani, will you please tell me what your grunts mean? I'm getting kinda nervous here," Amanda said and started chewing on her fingernails to prove her point.

"Sure. Okay, the good stuff first. Ingrid doesn't have any broken solderings, cracked printed circuit boards or crooked chips in her central processing computer. She has a high data transfer flow to and from the receptors in her limbs... which can be a weakness in this design, by the way, 'cos she's so tall... all memory registers come back clean and green save for one that I need to investigate further in a little while."

"Oh... and the bad stuff?"

"Her system log indicates she's been running hot for a few weeks. Basically, she's been having a fever," Keilani said and winked at her hostess.

"Oh... shoot. I haven't noticed at all," Amanda said and leaned in over the opened panel to take a look at the machinery. "Her body heat was the same as always, and so were h- her... uh..."

things. I've been really busy at work for the past two weeks, but Ingrid has seemed just fine when I got home in the evenings."

Keilani shrugged and turned back to the eFriend. Swiping the tablet, she soon found the corresponding data stream. Once it was on the readout, she held up the tablet so Amanda could see for herself. "I obviously don't doubt you, Miss Paulsen, but..." she said as she handed the tablet to the nervous woman above her.

Amanda scrunched up her face as she read the log numbers that showed a clear increase in base torso temperatures. Even from complete hibernation, Ingrid was nearly at the top of the scale within an hour of activation. The last entries in the log showed that she was way up in the red zone after less than twenty minutes. "Yeah... okay," Amanda said and scratched her neck.

"And that's why she's been behaving weirdly tonight, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said and moved the tablet back down towards her so she could continue working.

Amanda shuffled around the settee and looked down at the operating theater from the other side. "Yeah... no wonder with those readings. I bought her second hand two years ago. I... I felt... mmmm, for a lot of reasons I won't bother you with, I felt really lonely at the time. I caught an ad for the eFriend Service Center and I thought... well... why not try it again?"

"Oh... again? You've had one prior to Ingrid?"

"Yes, a second-hand model Twenty Sixty-four 'bout fifteen years ago," Amanda said and ran her fingers across the top of the settee's backrest.

"Wow, a Sixty-four? That was one of the earliest designs."

"Yeah, she was far more basic than Ingrid. But she was a good friend." Amanda looked around the living room with a wistful smile on her lips as she remembered the lively, red-headed eFriend who was always good for a laugh and a cuddle to brighten any day. "I called her Jessica. She was modeled to be twenty-five like I was at the time. I had her for four years until I graduated from San Angeles U. I guess it looked kinda odd for a thirty-year old who tried to be cool and suave to share a home with a bouncy redhead with dungarees, a striped blouse and a baseball cap that was on backwards most of the time."

Keilani chuckled and looked up. "I've never worked on the Sixty-fours but I've heard some of the old-timers talking about them. They weren't called Strawberry Kids for nothing. By the way, San Angeles U... that's my old college."

"No... really?"

"Yep."

"Huh. Small world," Amanda said with a genuine smile. "Oh, I'll bet we could share some wild stories..."

"I bet we could, Miss Paulsen. So... you bought Ingrid two years ago?"

Amanda smiled again, but it faded as she looked down at the sorry state of her eFriend. "Yes. I shuffled down to the flagship store on Third Street looking like a teenager who was trying to work up the courage to buy her first contraceptive. I couldn't afford any of the new range, but the sales person led me down to the second-hand units in the basement. It's actually kinda creepy down there... like a wax cabinet, except the models all follow you with their eyes as you walk around. Brrrr!"

"Mmmm! I know, I used to work out of the Third Street store."

Amanda fell silent as she remembered the glitzy showroom. Dozens of eFriends had been put up in dioramas so the potential customers could see how the various models looked in real-world settings. The tall, elegant Ingrid Scandias were primarily designed to act as trophy wives and to look good on any important person's arm - which wasn't what Amanda had been looking for at all - but she had felt a curious attraction to the regal blondes. There had been several Ingrid Scandias to choose from, but one in particular had caught her eye.

"Yeah," Amanda said quietly as she returned from her trip down Memory Lane. "Like the first time, I wanted an eFriend who roughly matched my age. They had all kinds of models down there, tall and short, skinny and not so skinny... but my interest was piqued by the different Ingrid Scandias they had on display. I chose this one because she... oh, this is gonna sound so corny," Amanda said and let out an embarrassed chuckle. "When I came up to stand in front of her, she smiled at me. Completely unprompted... can you believe that? She smiled at me, and I thought, wow, is that a match made in heaven or what?"

Keilani offered her hostess a similar smile as she unplugged the transmission cable from Ingrid's socket. "Awww, that's so cute. I can definitely understand why you would go for such an eFriend. Now, Miss Paulsen-"

"Oh, no... are you saying you've done all you can for her?" Amanda said and scrunched up her face into a mask of concern.

"No no, far from it, Miss Paulsen. But I'm gonna have to perform a little deeper surgery on her," Keilani said and reached into her toolbox to find a different screwdriver. "I want a look underneath her protective shield. That's usually only done in a controlled environment, but... you know... I can see how much she means to you," the technician said with a friendly smile.

"Oh... yes. Thank you. Uh... please go on," Amanda said and started chewing her fingernails for real.

Keilani assumed a determined expression as she unscrewed the eight special locking bolts that kept the protective shield in place. One after another, the long screws with the peculiar heads were pulled out and placed on the coffee table in strict order so she wouldn't get confused when the time came to put them back in.

The experienced technician stuck her tongue in the corner of her mouth as she wiggled the protective shield free from the eFriend's torso. Little by little, the shield was removed to reveal the true nature of Ingrid's behavioral problems.

"Ho-ly shhh-it! No wonder she's been running hot!" Keilani exclaimed loudly as she caught a glimpse of the jungle-like conditions underneath the protective shield.

Amanda's eyes popped wide open at the sight of the gross collection of dust bunnies that had been fused into a mess resembling half a cashmere sweater. Years and years of gray dust had gathered around the primary CPU and the adjacent fans, and the entire area had turned into a furry colony. "Buh...!" she croaked, staring at the plainly obvious cause of all Ingrid's problems.

"Hello, world! What is this, cocktail hour at a dust bunny fan convention? Man, this is too wild. I've never seen anything like it... not even in some of the industrial eFriends," Keilani said and poked a finger into the dust. Scrunching up her face, she looked up at Amanda who was too shocked to reply. "Miss Paulsen, I guess you didn't get the memo where it said that models of the Twenty Seventy-nine range must be brought in every five months or so for a full service...?" the technician continued in a slightly accusing tone.

"I... I... I was never told!"

"Oh... really?"

"No!"

"Yikes, that's what I call a lawsuit in the making. They're obliged to tell you, even for a second-hand eFriend... but, huh, look at this mess," Keilani said and once again tried to poke her finger into the cashmere sweater. "She's never been serviced since she was created. That's just wrong, man... such a great model and she's been neglected..."

"Do you think that's why someone got rid of her after only three years?"

"Hard to say... do you know who owned her originally?"

"No, her service records and warranty certificate weren't properly kept," Amanda said around chewing on her lips.

"Yeah, well, that should have- oh look!" Keilani suddenly said, pointing at a particular dust bunny that she subsequently tried to yank free from its comfortable home. "She's got a bearded clam stuck in her hypral flux ventilator circuitry! How 'bout that! Awwww!"

Amanda's cheeks flushed beet-root red at the unexpected innuendo, and she had to fan herself to get her own temperature back down from the red zone. "Uh... buh... she's got a wh- whut?"

"Sorry, Miss Paulsen, 'was just a silly old joke," Keilani said with a broad, cheeky grin that really made her sparkling eyes light up.

Amanda snickered into her hand and shimmied around on the spot to get at least some of her blushing to go away. Just when she thought she had it licked, it came back with a vengeance and she had to do another shimmy.

Still grinning at her hostess' cute reaction to the risqué joke, Keilani gazed up at the shimmying Amanda before she turned her attention to the furry mess ahead of her. She tried to jab an index finger into a corner and pull away some of the fluff, but she could see at once it would be a tough job. "Ah, Miss Paulsen, once you're done shimmying, could I borrow your vacuum cleaner for a little while? I'm afraid it's gonna get a real workout here... as you can see."

"Oh, sure... sure. Just a moment," Amanda said and hurried into the bedroom. Soon, she came back with a dark blue retro model designed to look like those her grandmother had used in the 2020's. "Here you go... wait, let me plug it in for you," she said and dove down onto her hands and knees to plug the power cord into the wall socket behind the sideboard.

"Thanks!" Keilani said and adjusted the suction level on the vacuum cleaner. She chose the lowest one so there wouldn't be any risk of sucking up anything vital. With everything in place - including Amanda who was dusting off her hands - Keilani turned on the vacuum and moved the plastic head across the dust bunnies.

"Man, the little buggers don't wanna leave their comfy home," she said under her breath as she needed to use her fingers to tear chunks out of the look-alike cashmere sweater in order for the vacuum cleaner to go where it mattered.

Amanda bared her teeth in a worried grimace as she watched large and small chunks get sucked up into the stainless steel pipe. Ingrid's highly advanced circuitry eventually came into view, but everything had been painted gray after years of neglect. *'I can't believe they never told me about the service requirements! I've studied the paperwork cover to cover... it didn't say anything about regular service intervals. What, were they hoping I'd sell Ingrid back to them at the first sign of problems like the previous owner...? Or did they think I wouldn't know the difference?'* - "Keilani," she said, but piped down when the technician put her hand in the air to signal that she couldn't hear a thing while the vacuum was running.

When the loud machine was shut off, Keilani looked up at her hostess. "That's an improvement, huh? You were saying?"

"Well, uh... I just wanted to ask if you thought that... well... if Ingrid's been permanently harmed by the dust or the excessive heat?" Amanda said and shuffled back around the settee so she could get a better look at Ingrid's exposed back.

Keilani shrugged and leaned down towards the eFriend's central processing unit. She sniffed at it a couple of times and furrowed her brow. "Mmmm. Can't say. Compared to the whiff of warm metal you mentioned earlier, she smells quite strongly of it in here."

"Oh... dammit. I wish I had known about the service intervals. I never had such a problem with my old Jessica..."

"No, the Sixty-fours didn't need to be regularly serviced. The newer models have a lot of advanced electronics that need quite a bit of cooling, though. I guess Ingrid is just a high maintenance g-friend, huh?" Keilani said with a cheeky gleam in her eye.

"Huh, yeah... she's definitely high maintenance, all right..."

With Ingrid's vitals finally liberated from the dust, Keilani began a more thorough investigation of the various circuitry, chips and crystals. Her skilled hands probed here, squeezed there, wiped hither and pressed yon until she had assembled enough data to come to a conclusion. "Well," she said and rubbed her nose to get rid of some of the dust that had been kicked up by her probing fingers, "she's clean again. Her fans are clear and fully functional... in theory, she should work just fine now. However, and I'm afraid it's a big however... I can't say whether or not the excessive heat has warped her circuit boards. There's a risk it may have. A section of her is loose that definitely shouldn't be. It could be something silly like the proverbial screw that's gone loose, but it may also indicate she's suffered a... well, I guess you could call it a heatstroke. Potentially a debilitating one."

Amanda furrowed her brow and tried to look closer at Ingrid's computers - but all it gave her was another layer of confusion. "So... so her memory is... what, fried?"

"Well, not her memory banks as such, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said and moved back from Ingrid, "more like her central processing computer. Her personality. The crystals that control her functions and social behavior must be calibrated with great precision or else she'll be-"

"I get the picture, Keilani," Amanda said and took a deep breath to combat the cold wave that splashed over her. For a brief moment, she felt a deep sense of loss that was as strong as the one she had felt when her father had died of a heart attack some years earlier.

She clenched her jaw and tried to hold back the emotions, but she was unable to stop a single tear from trickling down her cheek. Grunting angrily, she wiped it away in a hurry before her guest would have a chance to see it. "All right," she said after a little while. "I need some more coffee. Are you sure you don't want some?"

"Well... I could use a cup if it isn't too much hassle?" Keilani said with a smile.

"Of course it isn't," Amanda said and looked like she wanted to say something more. Instead, she let out a sigh and shuffled off to the kitchen.

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Standing at the black, hi-gloss granite counter in her kitchen, Amanda followed the usual procedures for making coffee, but in reality, she was just going through the motions without any conscious thought. It came back to haunt her when she realized that she had only added enough water and coffee beans to make one cup - it had been so long since she'd had a reason to make two cups at once that her hands had worked on autopilot.

Amanda clicked off the machine and added more water and another dose of the deliciously smelling beans into the top end. With everything in order, she clicked the machine back on and turned around so she could rest her rear against the granite counter.

As she stood there, another tear followed the one from before. She wiped it away, feeling in her bones that her fatigue and the evening's unexpected, shocking events were ganging up on her. When the original glitch had happened to Ingrid it had merely been annoying, but with the news that the years of neglect may have caused fatal damage to the tall, regal eFriend, Amanda was once again faced with the depressing prospect of returning to a cold, empty apartment day-in, day-out. "Dammit," she mumbled, thumping her fist down onto the granite counter in despair. "I knew it was too good to last. For the past two years, I've been happy... I should have known it was a frickin' illusion."

An electronic ding behind her brought her back to the present, and she took the pot and poured the coffee into two ceramic mugs. "Keilani! Do you need cream or sugar?" she said loudly through the kitchen door.

"*No, just black, thank you!*" the technician said from the living room.

Amanda grunted and took a mug in each hand. As she left the kitchen, the LED lights in the ceiling automatically turned off. "Here we go," she said as she shuffled over to the low table where Keilani was busy putting Ingrid's protective shield back in place. "Oh... I forgot the coasters. Keilani, would you mind taking them for me? They're in the top drawer of the sideboard over there," she said, nodding her head at the beechwood sideboard that was placed up against the wall.

"Sure thing, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said and got up.

With the coasters doing their duty of protecting the coffee table from the mugs, Amanda and Keilani sat down in the two satellite armchairs to discuss the possibilities.

"So," Amanda said after putting down her mug following her first sip. "What can you suggest, Keilani?"

"First of all, just so we're on the same page... here's what I've done. Ingrid has been cleaned thoroughly and I've checked her vital circuitry... with inconclusive results, unfortunately. The acute issues that caused her to overheat have been dealt with. I've attached the protective shield for the central units and also the outer panel because she's unable to start without them," Keilani said and leaned forward to stress the seriousness of the matter. "I think we should activate her. Her temperatures should stay within the green zone, but, like I said, she may have suffered lasting damage. We can tell from her behavior."

"I see... she isn't going to go all Freddy Krueger on us, is she?"

"Ah... who?"

"Freddy Kru- never mind," Amanda said and waved her hand dismissively. "It's a character in an ancient horror movie that I know my grandmother loves. It's from her youth."

Keilani chuckled and took her mug. "Okay. You must have an interesting grandmother..." she said and took a sip.

"Yeah... yeah," Amanda said with a faint smile. "But, uh... back on topic... she'll still be the old Ingrid, won't she? I mean, personality-wise?"

"It's very difficult to say, Miss Paulsen."

"Rats..."

"Her resident software and add-on packs haven't changed, though. I'll patch her to do a verbose boot so we can keep track of what's loaded when."

Amanda nodded somberly. She took a long swig from her coffee to quell the dark thoughts that still swirled around in her mind. "Then I think we should try. Uh... but first... would you mind if I put her clothes back on before we start? I, uh... I'm, uh..."

"No worries, Miss Paulsen. I'll even look away so you girls can have some privacy," Keilani said with a grin.

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"Okay... we're set. Hit the remote," Amanda said and covered her eyes with her hands as she stepped back from the eFriend who was once dressed in her brown one-piece suit and her cream blouse.

On the settee, Ingrid opened her eyes and looked around. She wasn't wearing her hair or her skin-colored skull-plate and she had the data transmission cable sticking out of her head, but other than that, she looked normal.

"Verbose boot request confirmed," she said in her default flat accent. "eFriend Ingrid Scandia model Twenty Seventy-nine dash oh-six step two rebooting. Performing power-on self test. Four thousand ninety-six terabytes memory okay. Basic input-output system okay. Date-time uplink failed, disregarding. Internal chronometer okay. Pain receptors disabled. Loading eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality base functions. Base functions version one point oh Charlie loaded okay. Searching for eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality add-on packs."

"Wow... when she said verbose, she certainly meant it, huh?" Amanda said, peeking through her fingers.

"Yeah," Keilani said with a chuckle as she kept track of the data streams on her tablet computer.

Ingrid continued unperturbed. "Found add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified. Add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified loaded okay. Caution, unconventional function call in personality add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified, file EXTFEAT.CRR line seven-one-nine. Proceed yes-no. Three... two... one... disregarding. Found add-on pack traditional Danish language and culture one point seven. Add-on pack traditional Danish language and culture one point seven loaded okay." - Ingrid suddenly spoke with her characteristic sing-song Scandinavian accent - "Search for eFriend Ingrid Scandia personality add-on packs completed. Adding boot details to log. Boot completed okay."

Once she had finished her near-endless list of information, Ingrid sat still in the settee and smiled sweetly with her legs together and her hands on her knees.

Amanda moved with great care and sat down next to her partner of the last two years. Her heart thundered in her chest, her palms were sweaty, her mouth was as dry as sandpaper and she had a whole cascade of cold chills rushing down her spine - in short, she was so nervous her brain had begun to turn numb around the edges. "Hello, sweetie," she said cautiously, wrapping an arm around Ingrid's waist to check if her bodily functions were running. They were, she was warm to the touch, she had a heartbeat and she was breathing steadily.

"Hello, darling. You look beautiful today," Ingrid said and zoomed in on Amanda's worried eyes with her own, cool orbs.

Though Amanda knew she really didn't - her complexion was reddish-pale and the dark circles under her eyes had only grown worse since the horrors began - the pleasantries hit her like a punch in the gut. A hard lump of emotions formed in her throat and she needed to take several deep breaths before she could go on. Even so, the corners of her mouth twitched a couple of times and her eyes misted over as she looked at her newly resurrected eFriend.

Smiling through a veil of tears, Amanda reached up to caress Ingrid's silky smooth cheek. "Thank you, sweetie. So do you. How are you feeling?"

"I am feeling just fine, thank you."

Keilani nodded affirmatively as she watched the chassis and CPU temperatures climb steadily, but not dangerously so.

Amanda eyed the technician before turning back to Ingrid. "That's so good to hear. You had me worried, sweetie. You suffered a serious malfunction, but Keilani and I believe we have you fixed now. Hopefully."

Ingrid looked at Keilani and offered her a sweet smile. "Thank you, Miss Shaun. Are you monitoring my data?"

"That's right, Ingrid. You're looking clean and green," Keilani said and held up the tablet.

Amanda let out a sigh of relief at the news. Reaching down, she grabbed Ingrid's hands and gave them a strong squeeze. "Honey, can you feel anything wrong... you know... inside you?"

Ingrid cocked her head and grew distant for a brief moment, but she was soon back. "My pain receptors are disabled. There's an unconventional function call in the personality add-on pack Sappho version three point five modified. I have nine skin sensor pressure overload warnings originating in four fingers on my right hand and five fingers on my left hand."

"Oh!" Amanda said, realizing that she was squeezing Ingrid's hands too hard. She hurriedly let go and decided to stroke her lifelike cheek instead.

"The skin sensor pressure overload warnings have now turned inactive. Apart from that, I feel fine."

Keilani chuckled and made a little note on the tablet. "Well, she's certainly sensitive. What's up with that unconventional function call in the Sappho software, Miss Paulsen?"

"Oh, uh... nothing, uh... special," Amanda said, ducking her head and looking at anything but the technician. "Uh, just a little thing, uh, that I, uh, had someone modify for me."

"I see," Keilani said with yet another cheeky grin gracing her features. "By the way, the developers have released Sappho three point seven in case you're interested?"

Blushing, Amanda concentrated on Ingrid so she didn't have to look at the grinning Keilani. "I know, but, uh... the old version is, uh... more than enough. Uh... for me, ha ha..."

"I've just upgraded my personal eFriend to the new version. It does give them a few new features, actually," Keilani said and swiped through a few menus on the tablet to get to the one she needed.

"Oh... uh... I see," Amanda said and turned to sneak a peek at the gorgeous technician. "Well... I guess we're all family then."

Keilani grinned and reached over to thump fists with the two other women, the living and the artificial. "We sure are. When the dispatcher heard Ingrid in the background of your call, she put two and two together and sent word out to me directly. I'm sorta the go-to grrrl here. Okay, Ingrid... I want to stress-test you a little."

"Certainly, Miss Shaun," the eFriend said, smiling sweetly.

"First up, I would like you to multiply..."

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## CHAPTER 4

"And... yep. Everything's A-okay inside you, Ingrid," Keilani said and unplugged the transmission cable from her tablet computer. "Your temperature is basically fine. You had a little spike when I asked you to count down from three hundred in steps of point two, but that's normal... the rest of the time, you were in the green. It looks like you dodged a bullet tonight," she continued as she walked around the eFriend and disconnected the cable from her socket.

Sitting next to Ingrid, Amanda let out a massive sigh of relief and ran both hands through her hair that had turned damp from the waves of nervous energy that rolled through her. She looked up at the regal blonde and shook her head very slowly.

"I believe I must report a malfunction in my audio receptors, Miss Shaun. You said I dodged a bullet, but I didn't register any gunfire," Ingrid said, frowning her picture-perfect brow.

" 's a figure of speech, Ingrid."

"Oh," Ingrid said and briefly became distant. "Thank you, Miss Shaun. I have added it to my growing collection of puns, metaphors and similia."

Amanda's jumbled nerves prompted her to let out a sound that should have been a laugh but that turned into a nervous screech instead. She took the opportunity to lean over and kiss Ingrid on the cheek and claw her tummy.

Keilani rolled up the transmission cable and moved away from the settee. It didn't take long for her to put the cable and the tablet into her toolbox, but when she walked back to the coffee table to get the screws for the skull-plate, she noticed not one, but two pairs of eyes studying her. She had to chuckle at the expressions on Ingrid and Amanda's faces - they were so identical the two women couldn't be anything but an item.

All three were enjoying the quiet and serene moment, but it was Amanda who exploited it to the fullest by wrapping an arm around Ingrid's waist and pulling herself into a hug. "Oh, sweetie... I'm so glad you're back. I was so worried that... that... well, that I would have to live without you."

"I'm glad to be back in your arms, darling. Does that mean you would like your massage now?"

Keilani chuckled out loud at the color that quickly spread across Amanda's cheeks. To give her hostess a breather while she suffered through yet another bout of acute embarrassment, she took the four screws and the skull-plate and shuffled back around the settee to attach them to Ingrid's head.

"Ah," Amanda croaked, leaning up to place a small kiss on her eFriend's waiting lips, "I think we better put it off until later, sweetie. We wouldn't want to overstress your skin sensors. Okay?"

"Certainly, darling," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

Keilani grinned crookedly at the exchange, careful not to drop - or swallow - the four screws that she had pinned down between her lips. The skull-plate was soon attached to the head and the screws tightened without much effort. The hairpiece came last and graced Ingrid's regal head before long. "There... all set. She's as good as new. Now, Miss Paulsen..."

"Yes?" Amanda said and rose from the settee. She kept a firm grip on Ingrid's shoulder like she was worried her eFriend would vanish in thin air if she let go.

"If I were you," Keilani said and put the screwdrivers into the toolbox, "I would take Ingrid down to the service center come Monday for an A to Z inspection. I'll call ahead for you and explain the situation. You have a whole service file waiting to be stamped... when the chief sees that, I wouldn't be surprised if he offered you several thousand dollars in compensation."

"As keep-my-mouth-shut money?" Amanda said sharply.

"I see you get the big picture," Keilani said with a dark chuckle. "Anyway, I'd pay close attention to Ingrid this weekend. If she starts acting funny, even if it's just a joke that falls flat, I'd perform a controlled shutdown at once. There's nothing gained in pushing her too far, too soon."

Nodding, Amanda raised her hand and let it slide across Ingrid's smooth forehead and down her left cheek. "Oh, I'll pay close attention to her, all right... you can bet a hot dinner on that. I learned years ago that on the rare occasions you get a second chance at anything, you shouldn't squander it."

"You know, that's what I always say... not that it ever happens to me," Keilani said with a grin. She glanced around the exquisitely furnished apartment one last time to take in all the sights - including the honey-blond Amanda in the washed out sweatsuit and the bathing slippers. "So... I'm about ready to go. Thanks for the coffee. Oh, and don't worry about getting billed for my services... I get paid directly by the eFriend Corporation."

"Oh!" Amanda said and shot up from the settee. She ran around the couch arrangement with her arms ahead of her, and she had barely made it to the compact technician before she pulled her into a strong hug. "I cannot thank you enough, Keilani. You have really, really saved my world."

"Huh, my pleasure, Miss Paulsen," Keilani said with a cheeky grin. "Miss Paulsen... may I ask you a... no, make that two personal questions?"

"Uh... sure?"

"One, how come you don't have a real g-friend? I know that you're really close to Ingrid, but..."

Amanda let out a nervous snicker and looked back at the regal woman who was still sitting prim and proper in the settee. "Well, I work long hours week-in, week-out. Believe me, I've tried, but it's not the best framework or environment for nurturing a relationship with a real gal. And... like I said... Ingrid and I share a special connection... so, you know. What was the second question?"

"If I left you my phone number, would you throw it away or pin it to your message board?" Keilani said with a surprisingly shy smile gracing her features.

Amanda took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She matched Keilani's shy smile with one of her own, a smile that proved that she was flattered by the attention but that she already had all she needed from life - at least for the time being. "You know," she said and reached out to take Keilani's strong hands in her own. "I would pin it to the message board, but... but only in the category called friends and family. You're a knockout, don't get me wrong... and I'd love to have you come over now and then for coffee or a beer or two, and to, uh... you know, chat away a lazy Sunday afternoon, but..."

"I get it, I get it... three's a crowd, huh?" Keilani said with a tired chuckle. She glanced over at Ingrid and wondered if the tall, regal eFriend understood how lucky she was. "Well, it's been a pleasure, Miss Paulsen. And... to tell you the truth, I kinda already left you my phone number. It's in the wooden bowl on the coffee table," she continued, winking a couple of times.

Amanda broke out in a snicker and wrapped her arms around the compact technician's torso to give her another fair-sized hug. "Thank you, Keilani. I'll pin it at once. Ingrid! Ingrid, sweetie, come over and say goodbye to Miss Shaun."

Ingrid did as asked and rose from the settee. She crossed the parquet floor with confident, regal strides and was soon at the front door. "Goodbye, Miss Shaun," she said and put out her hand that was soon shook by Keilani. "Thank you for working on me. I know it's very important for Amanda to have someone to come home to. We thank you both. Would you mind if I hugged you?"

Keilani laughed out loud and closed the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around the eFriend and gave her a little squeeze as a goodbye present. "And thank you, Ingrid," she said as she pulled back. "You know, Miss Paulsen, you're right, Ingrid is very special. In all my years of tinkering with eFriends, I've never met one so thoughtful. You must've worked long and hard on her behavioral patterns to get her so... hmmm... real. Even human."

Amanda shook her head and snuck a hand around her tall friend's waist. "I can't take any credit for that, Keilani. Ingrid was already like that when we met. I think that's why she smiled at me when she saw me for the first time. Eh, sweetie?"

Ingrid turned and smiled sweetly at her owner.

"See?" Amanda said with a chuckle. "Anyhow, it's been a pleasure, Keilani. Get home safely. Do you need a hand with your toolbox?"

"Nope, I got it," Keilani said and swung the heavy metal box over her shoulder. "Catch you two on a rainy day, huh?" she said and opened the front door. She smiled at the two women and left the apartment.

Closing the door behind the technician, Amanda let out a sigh she had been holding back for a while. "Thank Gawd she was able to help you, sweetie. What a nice woman... I'm definitely going to call her sometime."

"She had skilled hands," Ingrid said with a sweet smile.

Amanda's eyes popped wide open and she guffawed out loud at the barely hidden innuendo. "I'll bet she had," she said saucily and hooked her arm inside Ingrid's. "With all the drama over... what do ya say we call it a night and head for bed?"

Ingrid smiled sweetly and began to stroll towards the bedroom. "Oh, that would be nice, darling. Would you like your massage now?"

Amanda pulled back from Ingrid's arm and moved her hand down so she could caress the eFriend's long, slender digits. "You know... I think I would, yes," she said and pulled them to a halt. "But first, I need a kiss, sweetie. A good one."

Smiling sweetly, Ingrid opened her arms to invite Amanda into an embrace. "I shall do my very best," she husked before she puckered up and leaned down to claim her owner's lips.

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**THE END.**

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