

Warning, this chapter includes the second person, topless waitresses, ironic reveals, resets, rollbacks, coffee, anger, justice, mercy, vengeance, truth, confrontations, further hard decisions, mysterious benefactors, opportunities, and a bright light shining in from the future.

Girlfriend with Testing Device

- A Smutty Fanfiction, of Sorts -

= Part 25 – Ever Onwards=

By Razmagurk

We arrived at the coffee shop not long after. We'd have gotten there sooner but I'd stopped to swap back a few more people along the way.

It was weirdly cold out as we met up with Emma. Then again, maybe the chill wasn't in the air. I'd be lying, Frank, if I said I wasn't scared. I could see you sitting at the table through the window, your brown fur shining as you petted and stroked your machine.

Can you blame me for being afraid, despite all you'd done? You represented this whole other world of shifting realities that we're all just completely oblivious to. How was I supposed to believe anything was real knowing about the iceberg you sat upon? Were you even what you seemed to be? I tried to take a mental inventory of you, tried to picture how all your features added up: your fur, your tail, your ears, your boobs. Were you more than just some weirdly hot guy? What wasn't I seeing?

Regardless. I knew what you could do. You terrified me.

"Ellen?" asked Emma.

"Huh?"

"Are we going in, or..?"

"Right. Sorry."

I took a deep breath. I had to stop and work up the courage to go any farther. I had to resist the urge to turn and run, to just get as far away from you as I could. Not that that would have stopped you.

You were surprised to see us - to see me. You smiled. You were even more surprised to see the device. You thought I wasn't going to pull it off.

"Everyone," I said, once we'd all taken seats around the table, "this is Frank."

"Oooh, he's cute." hummed Emma.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you all. I've heard so much about you." You had a smile like a tiger before a feast of mice. "I must say, Ellen, I'm impressed."

“Frank is the one who gave me the device,” I said, in response to the blank looks on everyone’s faces. What little color remained in Elizabeth’s drained completely as she realized what that meant. “He’s here to take it back.”

“What?” gasped Elizabeth. “You can’t!” She stood up, slamming her hands down on the table. You didn’t even flinch. “We need it!” she pleaded “I... I made so many mistakes that still need fixing. Please! You can’t take it from us now!” I was surprised. I thought there was no fight left in her.

“I believe you’ll find that I can.” your grin turned into a tight-lipped smile. “Ellen signed a contract. She got it for one week, then we get it back. This is the easy way. I don’t know how Ellen managed to get the device away from you, Elizabeth, but you should consider yourself lucky that she got to you before we did. You don’t want to see the hard way.”

It took Elizabeth a moment to process the implied threat. She sat back down.

The waitress arrived with our coffee. She was still shirtless from last night.

“Sorry, what is this all about?” intruded Emma.

“Oh, right, none of you were here for the start of all this, were you?” your grin returned. “Just over a week ago, the company I work for gave Ellen here the E-model of a prototype device capable of obviously swapping traits between two or more parties so that she could test it out and see how it handled in a real-life use case. She’s had quite the adventure since then.”

Emma laughed.

“Emma,” I said, “I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true.”

“No no, I totally believe you. I’m just surprised.”

“What?”

“The things you were saying yesterday, Ellen? All the weirdness? I looked into it. This matches all of the crazy stuff I’ve been finding.”

“Oh?” you raised an eyebrow. “You’ve heard of us?”

“Rumors. Stories. Frequently with a cautionary bent.” She raised an eyebrow right back. Was she flirting with you or trying to call you out? “The internet is a big place if you know where to look.”

Everything went silent as the two of you locked eyes. I was shocked she could be so bold. Didn’t she realize what you could do? I could only imagine how your company dealt with rumors and leaks like that. You could do more than just silence a person -- you could make it so that they never existed.

“Well then,” You surprised me by laughing. “Sounds like our PR department hasn’t been doing their job. I wouldn’t buy too seriously into what you read on the internet if I were you. Trust me, as someone who

deals with this sort of thing all the time, things are almost never as bad as the reports make them seem. Besides, most stories are cautionary if you know where to look.”

“So hold on, if you gave Ellen one of these weird box things,” Emma replied, “what does all this have to do with the rest of us? Why are we here?”

“My job involves getting a report from any device users. Usually that means just the person we gave the thing to, but sometimes other people get their hands on the thing and we like to try to document their experience as well. It’s good data.”

“Wait, you mean...” gears were turning over in her brain.

“That’s right.” You took a sip of your coffee. “Since all four of you have used the prototype at some point, I want to get complete reports from each of you.”

“How come I don’t remember any of this?”

You and I both turned to look accusingly at Elizabeth.

“Hey, that was self defense.” she held up her hands. “She tried to tackle me!”

I scowled.

“Besides,” she continued. “I knew she wasn’t supposed to have it, she’d obviously stolen it or something. I made her forget all about it, that’s all. It wasn’t... *malicious*. You’d have done the same thing if you’d caught up with her first.”

“Hold on, hold on,” you said, digging a hand into your mewling machine and pulling out a long slick tentacle. “I bet this is a great story. I want this on the record.”

“Look, I already told you,” Emma slid back in her chair. “I don’t remember anything.”

“That’s fine,” you said, offering the tentacle, “I’ll roll you back to before your first contact with the prototype. Let’s start from there, shall we?”

Emma grabbed the slimy thing curiously. “What is thi-”

Zzzzttttt

She blinked several times as she stared at the thing in her hand, then her eyes traveled up along the length of her arm towards her body. She held out a hand and looked at it back to front.

“Oh wow.” she said. “That is so trippy.”

“Shall we begin?” you asked. You were trying to hide it but I could hear the excitement in your voice.

"Uh, I guess." she nodded as she looked around, giving each of us a long discerning scan. I wondered what we looked like to her. How did she remember us?

"Tell me about the first time you saw the device."

"Um." she stopped to think, then frowned. "Okay, so, looking back at it all, I'm sure it looks pretty bad. But you gotta understand..."

Emma told her tale: her flirtations at the mall trying to pick up two cute strangers, her orgy at the party, finding the device, all the chaos that followed.

Seeing someone get rolled forward as they told their story was strange. The machine made a tinny little zzzzttttt noise in emulation of the device whenever there was a change, but it was far from the smooth instantaneous process I'd remembered from my own time holding the tentacle. There was a moment each time where Emma would just sort of pause and roll her eyes up before continuing on as though nothing had happened.

When it was over Emma just sat there, one hand clutching her head as she let the weight of what had happened wash over her, listening back in her own mind to the story she had just told. It was a surreal experience to have said all these things, to remember remembering them, but to not have them be a part of your reality.

"I can't believe it." she said. "This whole time I've been walking around with a fucked-up body without realizing? Oh my god, everything that's happened, I can't believe..."

You scooped the tentacle out of the way and put her cup down in front of her. She took a drink as the last few gears clicked into place.

"Oh my god, Sam!" she screamed, rising up to her feet as she pointed one hand accusingly at Elizabeth. "You bitch! What the hell did you do to her? him? To us!?"

"I... I'm sorry." Elizabeth whimpered. "I was jealous! Sam was this great guy and I'd always had a thing for him and I saw that you had him and I just..." Evan gave her a sad little frown as she tried to collect herself. "Sam was this completely unobtainable figure. No matter how many girls tried no one could land him because he was waiting for this perfect girl. And then you - you, who had nothing that I didn't - you managed to get your hands on him? Why? Why you and not me? I was so angry, so jealous... I needed - wanted - to tear him down... to make him something I wouldn't be upset to lose."

"So if you couldn't have him, no one could?" Emma spat. "Maybe you should focus on building yourself up rather than trying to break other people down, you bitch!"

"It's okay though," I interrupted. "We swapped him back. Everything's alright now."

"You did." she was shaking. "You did. But that doesn't forgive what she's done."

"No..." said Elizabeth. "You're right. It doesn't."

"You stole her strength! You stole her intellect! Her passion!" Emma rose to her feet and started advancing towards Elizabeth. "You stole her whole fucking life away from her. For fucks sake, you even made her incontinent? Are you a fucking child? Do you have any idea what it's like, in my mind right now? Seeing her scarred like that? Seeing the man I love reduced to an invalid? Worse, knowing that neither of us even realized anything was even the matter?"

I expected Elizabeth to get indignant, to stand up for herself and get angry in kind, but there was only a quiver of tension in her palm, a faint whisp of a fist.

Evan stood up and interposed himself before the advancing girl. He gave her a cautioning glance. Evan wouldn't hurt a fly, but Emma didn't know that.

"You're right." Elizabeth croaked. "It was a terrible thing. An awful horrible thing, but I've regretted it and hurt because of it and I'm - I'm trying to be better now."

"You think that gets you out of it!?" I'd never seen Emma so furious.

She hesitated in her advance as she considered Evan, then she lunged sideways towards the table and grabbed the device. I stumbled to my feet in surprise.

You deep drink from your cup. You were enjoying this.

Before any of us could react, Emma had taken several steps back and had the device pointed at us. None of us could get to her in the time it would take her to press that button. She swept her aim over each of us until finally she had the thing aimed dead square at Elizabeth.

"I should turn you into a worm for what you've done." She adjusted the dials.

"Emma, please, don't!" said Evan, reaching out an arm. "Think about what you're doing."

"Listen." I said, "I understand. I have just as much hate for Elizabeth as you do - hell, probably a lot more. And you're right, she's scum. She doesn't deserve an ounce of forgiveness. But whatever you're thinking, you don't need to do it. She's not worth it. You can be a bigger person than her."

"Elles..."

"Fuck that." Emma spat. "I want you to suffer, you bitch."

She pressed the button but before she could release it, you flicked a switch on your machine.

I looked down at the coffee before me. I was seated again. We all were. Fresh cups in our hands. Elizabeth's eyes were dry. Emma had her head down on the table, cradled in her arms, her eyes closed. She was snoring gently. A small wet patch of drool had formed on her sleeve.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Elizabeth, first of us to break the confused silence.

"I think that's about enough of that drama, don't you?" you smiled. "You have a bad habit of pissing people off, don't you, Elizabeth?" you laughed. "I can't wait to hear your side of the story. Would you like to go next?"

Elizabeth and Evan looked at each other. Her eyes had gone cold with fright. She shook her head ever so slightly. Evan nodded and smiled, squeezing her hand.

"I'll go." he said, reaching for the tentacle.

"No... wait..." she gripped his hand tighter. "I don't want to lose you."

"I'll still be me, Elizabeth."

"No, you won't. Evan, if you go back to the way you were, you won't love me anymore, you won't care about me. You'll hate me, just like everybody else. I don't know if I can bear that."

"I could never hate you, Elizabeth." His eyes softened. "And I'm sorry I have to do this, I'm sorry I have to hurt you like this. I want to love you forever, but... but this isn't real, baby. We have to fix it. That doesn't mean though that I won't cherish the time we spent together, or that I have to stop caring for you. Be the sort of person I would care about. Be that person I know you can be. You said, earlier, that you never had a chance to earn my love? Here it is."

"I love you, Evan."

"I love you too, Elizabeth."

He held her one last time. They kissed. It was sweet and pure and full of emotion. I felt sick watching it, but I'd put up with it for Evan's sake.

When they were done, he sat down at the machine and grabbed hold of the tentacle.

"Ready?" you asked.

"Where do we begin?"

Zzzzttttt

Evan looked up hesitantly at Elizabeth. His sweet face was crossed with an apologetic frown. Gone was the warmth and love from his eyes. She sobbed.

"Evan?" I asked, hope rising in my voice as I rose to my feet.

"Baby?" a smile broke across his face like a sunrise as he turned to me.

My heart stopped. I hesitated, still not believing it. He stood up and held out his arms. I ran to him and embraced him as tight as I could.

“Evan, I’ve missed you so much!”

“I know baby, I’m so sorry.”

I don’t know how long we held each other, tears flowing down my face as my heart overflowed. Neither of us wanted to let go.

“Baby?” he said, finally, half laughing.

“Yeah?” I pulled my head back to look into his shining eyes.

“Have I really been in a girl’s body this whole time?” He smiled up at me. His smile, his perfect, radiant smile.

I just laughed and nodded. He laughed too. “It’s a long story.” I said.

“I bet it is.” you said. “I hate to interrupt this little moment, but I am very eager to hear it.”

Reluctantly, Evan stepped away. The weight of him pulling away was like the tides flowing out. I felt like I was losing him all over again.

“Wait...” I said. Now it was my turn to choke up.

“It’ll be okay, baby.” he clutched the tentacle. “Don’t blame yourself. We’ll get through this.”

“Alright Evan, think back. I want you to tell me about the first time you saw the device.”

“Uh,” he said, wracking his brain. Let’s see... it was at the bar, I guess? I remember thinking the bar was crowded for a Thursday...”

Evan told his story. It was one of hope, romance, and optimism, tainted by a suite of oblivious betrayals from those he trusted most. A boy who wanted the girl he loved to be happy, dragged along on an adventure that would change him forever. It was hard to hear, harder still to know I had been there, doing those things to him. I sat and I listened as he was ripped from me, as Elizabeth took him and abused him, how he struggled with the woman he loved suddenly acting so different, the confusion as I confronted him, and all of the pain in his heart as he had to make that final terrible decision.

When it was over, he looked down at the table, his expression a cold and distant facade over a sea of swirling emotions.

“Evan?” Elizabeth probed.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth. I’m so sorry. It’s my fault you had to take such extreme action, my fault that you felt you had to steal me like you did. I see that now. I should have been more cognizant of your feelings... I should have paid more attention, and spoken to you about things. I never wanted to break your heart. I wish I could rip myself in two and give myself wholly to each of you, but you... you both deserve more than that.”

You held up a finger, Frank, as though you were going to interject, as though you were going to offer just that, but you decided against it.

"I love you, Elizabeth," his face melted just slightly as he looked up at her. "I love you more than anything. But I see now what you did. Taking me like that, it was cruel, Elizabeth, so cruel, to Ellen and to myself. We trusted you." He quavered.

"I'm sorry, Evan, I'm so sorry."

"I know. I know you are. This pain, this betrayal, it all feels so fresh to me, but no matter how much it hurts, I can see that you've already begun to heal from it, haven't you? I can see it in you. You've regretted it, hurt from it, learned from it, and as bad as it is, you've already been better because of it." he smiled sadly. "Elizabeth, baby, I want you to know that I forgive you."

"What?" I cried.

"Evan... thank you." fresh tears welled up in Elizabeth's eyes. "To know that you don't hate me. To know that someone - to know that you - can see that. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

"Frank, please." I begged. "I can't take another minute of this. Do for Evan what you did for me. Roll him back to how he was before all this began. Undo all the stupid swaps we made to him. Bring him back to me."

"It's Evan's decision." you said, turning to him.

"Evan?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ellen, but I don't want to go back to that."

"What?" my heart leapt up into my throat.

"If you change me back, I'll be a stranger in my own life. I... I want you to leave me like I was." He looked down at his body. "Isn't it so weird? I know logically that this is a girl's body, but I just can't make my brain recognize it as such." He laughed. "If you're going to roll me back, roll me back to how I was before the party. Can you do that, Frank?"

"But what about all those things Elizabeth did at the strip club?" I cried, "What about all those things I did?"

"Honestly... Ellen, I kind of liked some of the things Elizabeth did at the strip club. And I'm not just saying that because I care for her. This me that I am now? This notion of masculinity that I feel? It won't let me be happy with who I am. All I can feel is disgust knowing that this whole time I've been oblivious to my own femininity, knowing now that I've been weak and soft and that I like girly things..." he sighed. "I don't want to live with that bearing down on me. I want to like who I am. And, well," he gestured down at his giggling nubile flesh, "the me that I was then would love the me that I am now."

“How can you say that, Evan?” I pleaded, “After everything? After all the trouble we caused, all the bits of you that we stole or gave away, how can you possibly want any of that? Don’t you want to be free of all this? I’m sorry, but I just can’t look at it and see this as anything but the swaps influencing your decisions.”

He gave me a small sad look, then smiled gently. “That’s fine. I understand. Frank can roll me back to the way I was originally. I’ll tell you the same thing.”

He grabbed hold of the tentacle once more and glanced over at you. You shrugged and flipped a switch.

Zzzzttttt

“Evan?”

He looked up, his smile brightening as he saw me.

“I’m sorry baby, but I... I need to think this all over. Just, give me a few minutes okay?”

I nodded.

He sat there for quite some time, looking down occasionally at his body or at one of us. Whatever was going through his head, it was a big decision. When he finally looked ready to speak, his eyes were set and determined.

“Baby,” he began, “what the other me said – felt – about choking under his own masculinity? I... I understand. I empathize. What I’m feeling right now? It’s not disgust the way he had felt it, but I don’t think I can be comfortable like this. I don’t want to be trapped in a girl’s body for the rest of my life.

“Evan, I’m sorry, we never got a chance to change you back.”

“No, don’t apologize. The time it would have taken to fix me? Who knows how many others you got a chance to fix because of it. Honestly, I’m thinking it may be for the best. The more I think about it the more I keep coming around to the same conclusion. The other me was right. I may not want to be a girl, but I think I want to want to.”

“Huh?”

“I keep thinking back to everything that happened. Do you remember when I was on stage dancing? In that moment I think I felt more alive than I ever had before. And yes, I know, I had stolen that happiness from someone else, but that doesn't change how fun it was.”

“Fun?”

“I know, I know. It’s selfish, but looking back at it all, all that stuff? Makeup and boys and flirting and being hot? Honestly, baby, I had way more fun doing that sort of thing than I ever did as my old boring self.”

“You’re not boring!” I slapped a hand down on the table. “Not to me.”

“Okay, maybe not boring, but that feeling I had when my makeup was just, perfectly on point? Or when I saw a new sale? That feeling of being the center of attention in a room full of hungry men? Those were good feelings. Sure, who I am now is a little put off by it all, but that doesn’t mean they felt any less good. And you know what? I’m not afraid to say it. I enjoyed being a girl. Inside, where it counted. I enjoyed being soft and vulnerable and strong all at the same time, and I enjoyed it way more than I ever did actually being a guy. Artificial or not, I was more passionate about those things than anything in my own life. I even enjoyed dressing like a total slut,” he laughed, “especially for you.”

I blushed as I looked down at the tight white shirt that did nothing to conceal the jiggling mounds beneath, his short little tartan skirt that only barely hid the swell of his ass, or the heels so high I was amazed he could even stand. I bit my lip as my dick stirred. Yeah, okay, my sex drive certainly liked him dressing like a total slut too.

“Besides.” he sighed. “I don’t want to be a stranger in my own life. If the world is going to see and remember me as being a certain way,” he gestured down at his body. “I want to match up to that. Roll me forward to the day of the party. Make me a hot girl again. It’s silly of me, isn’t it? But that’s the me I want to be.”

“Evan...” I ran up and took him in my arms.

“I’m sorry, baby, this is selfish of me, isn’t it?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Just, surprising. I think after all you’ve been through, you deserve to have some agency over your body for a change.”

“I’ll still be me. Just... through a different lens.”

“I know.” I squeezed him tighter. “It took me a long time to figure that out. Back when we were on our way to the party, I had been so concerned with fixing you that I think I had lost sight of that. I know better now.”

“Thank you, baby.” he leaned forward and kissed me. We lingered long and slow. God, I’d missed the way he kissed.

I pulled away as he clutched once more on the tentacle. I wasn’t sure if I could be touching him when it happened.

Zzzzttttt

“Oh wow.” He held a hand up to steady himself, then looked down at his body. “That is so weird.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“I am. Thank you, baby. It’s perfect.” he laughed. “I’m already excited for all the shopping we’ll have to do to find stuff that’ll fit you.” He paused for a moment then looked down at his body, running a hand

along his hip experimentally. "I still can't believe I've had a girl's body this whole time. It's so ironic, knowing it's the body I'd wanted and that I just can't see it."

I looked over at the device. Was I really considering this?

"Take my awareness." I said.

"What?"

"Take my awareness of how you look."

"I... what? I couldn't."

"No, listen. Slut's body is biphilic - like, annoyingly so - but I'm... I prefer guys. If you want to stay this way, I want to keep seeing you as a guy. Most importantly though, I want you to be happy, Evan. I've made so many stupid changes to you. I want you to be well and truly happy in the body you end up with." I grabbed the device off the table and held it out for him to put his hand on. "Let me do this for you."

Zzzzttttt

He couldn't stop grinning as he took stock of what he now saw as his bombshell female form. He ran a hand along his midriff and then up his body, stopping just short of clutching at his jiggling peaks.

Even knowing what was happening, it was uncanny. I hadn't taken my eyes off him for an instant and his body hadn't change at all, yet suddenly I went from recognizing his body as female to it being unmistakably male.

I slid my gaze across him, cataloguing his every component. I knew, intellectually, that these were all very feminine parts, and yet my brain just couldn't look at them and not think 'hot guy'. Muscles that had been lithe, tight and feminine now seemed big, imposing, and masculine. It felt like the reference file in my brain was pointing to the wrong place. It was so bad I was starting to second guess myself. Had I swapped the wrong thing? Had I somehow turned him into a guy?

He was still wearing the skirt, of course, and the skin-tight t-shirt that showed off every inch of him and his quivering hard pecs. Still, it looked surprisingly good on him. I could get used to dating a boy dressed like that. I guess I'd have to. The alternative was swapping our wardrobe back, and that would leave him without an outlet for his tastes in fashion and me with way too many slutty clothes.

"I hope you're happy like this, Evan."

"Me too, baby, me too."

We hugged again. I could feel the raw fire flowing through my body as my tits pressed against his bulging chest. Evan's body wasn't just masculine, it was stupidly hot.

“Okay, look.” you said, “this is all very sweet, but I’m not running a service here or anything. If you guys keep tampering with stuff last minute, I’m going to have to start charging you, but look, while you’re putting everything right, how about I help out with that whole relationship thing? The way it stands now, no one is going to remember you two ever being together.”

“Wait, you can do that?”

I thought back to all those photographs in my apartment that had once contained Evan and I, smiling and happy together. All those little moments that the world had forgotten. Sure, I didn’t *need* them back. As long as Evan and I both remembered them, that’s what counted. But it would be nice.

“I’m a professional.” you smiled. “I’ll swap your relationship back right up until the point Elizabeth made her swap. Everyone will think you guys took a break or something for the past week, then got back together.”

“Frank that’s...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. Emotion welled up within me.

Elizabeth sunk back in her chair.

“Elizabeth, I’m sorry.”

“It’s... it’s okay Evan. I understand.” she shook her head and tried to smile even as tears rolled down her eyes. “If you can forgive me after all I’ve done to you, you deserve to be happy. I hate it. I hate it so much, but it’s like you said, this is the right thing to do. Even if it’s all gone now. I’m just... I’m glad I got to have you.”

Frank grabbed the device and pointed it at us.

“Wait,” I said. “We need to be touching it or else we’ll be unaware.”

“What? Oh, no, I’ve turned that off, don’t even worry about it.”

“You can turn that off!?”

Zzzzttttt

“Like I said, I’m a professional.”

I blinked. Nothing felt different. I panicked and scanned my brain to try to piece together if anything was wrong. Evan and I had been together for years prior to Elizabeth stealing him with the device. Was that correct? Had it worked?

“Evan?” I looked over at him.

“It worked!” Evan held up his phone. His home screen was a picture of the two of us together, laughing at some amusement park. It had been one of our first dates. The ride we were about to get on had gotten stuck, stranding us alone at the apex of a drop for 20 minutes. We hadn’t minded.

"As far as anyone should be concerned you two broke up a week ago, but are now back together. Are we all happy?"

"Absolutely!" I nodded. I couldn't stop grinning.

"Great, because there's still one story left to hear."

"No... no..." Elizabeth seemed to shrink down in her seat. "I can't. Please. I don't want to face the things I've done."

"It'll be okay," coaxed Evan. "Just remember that it's all in the past. Consider it a confession, a chance to reflect and learn from your mistakes. You've already come so far."

"I regret so much," she grasped at the tentacle, squeezing it so tight it bulged.

"Let's start at the beginning, shall we?"

Zzzzt

"It was Saturday," she began. "I was at work. I'd been getting weird texts from Ellen all day..."

Elizabeth told her story. A tale of jealousy and corruption and power gone out of control.

I gritted my teeth. I had worried that hearing her story might in some small part sway me, that I might come to empathize with her or feel some sliver of forgiveness for her. I had been terrified that hearing her side of things might douse the still simmering shards of my anger. Hearing her speak though, hearing her recount how she ruined life after life for no reason beside her own petty vanity and vengeance, it made me realize how foolish those worries were. She was capricious and unthinking and she justified her every action with the flimsiest of excuses. Maybe it was because I knew all too well how close I had come to walking a similar path, but all I could feel was sick.

The sympathy was the worst part. She was right, we were friends once. We cared about each other. We had fun once, we were happy once. Then jealousy and malice had crept in. A part of me wondered if, if I had been a better friend for her, more cognizant and supportive of her, if I had realized her crush on me and addressed it, if I had known the pain she'd felt and tried to alleviate it... if maybe things wouldn't have turned out this way.

But I wasn't going to let that thinking hurt me. No, I wasn't going to let Elizabeth hurt me anymore. Not now and not ever again. Pain or not, what she did was inexcusable, and no matter how sympathetic she cast herself in the telling, no matter how genuine her change of heart. I would never allow myself to forgive her.

I looked down at my empty mug. The sky outside had gone cold and dark by the time Elizabeth had finished. Emma was still asleep.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," said Evan, holding her hand "I'm sorry, I know that was hard for you."

She had, at least, been telling the truth about swapping back whatever she could, though it was too little too late. Drunk on power, she had gone on a mad swapping spree that first night, and by the time she had come to regret what she'd done the madness had already spiraled out of control. It didn't matter to me though. I didn't care if her change of heart was real or not. There was no excusing what she had done.

"Now what?" She asked, quietly, half into her cup. She had no tears left to cry.

"Well see, that's a good question." you sighed, scratching behind your ear.

Her eyes shook as she looked at you, finally seeming to realize just how much trouble she was in.

"You've really gone above and beyond, you know that? We're going to have to bring a whole team in to fix what you've done," you sighed. "But, well, I'm not really authorized to handle that on my own." Your machine mewled as you poked at it. "I'll pass this up to my superiors and see what they want done. In the meantime, officially, this is the part where I say thank you to the client, erase their memories and awareness, and send them on their way, so I guess that's our next step. Thank you for your reports, ladies. There's a lot of really good data in here and we're going to be pouring over this for months."

"Wait, hold on," I cried. "After all this, you're just going to erase our memories?"

Elizabeth actually had the nerve to fucking smile.

"It's standard procedure, Ellen. It's in the contract. Hell, I even told you about it last time we met. It's nothing you need to worry about."

"You can't!"

"Ellen, come on, you should consider yourself lucky that you got this long. I've already done you a huge favor giving you a chance to fix things first."

"I refuse." I clenched a fist.

"Listen, I understand it's an uncomfortable proposition, but - "

"No," I growled, "you don't understand. If you erase our memories - if all this comes across as nothing more than a bad dream - it'll be as though none of this ever happened, right? I'll forget my hatred and Elizabeth and I will go back to being friends. She'll never pay for what she's done. I can't allow that. I *won't* forgive her."

"She's right," said Evan, "if you erase our memories... how are we supposed to learn from this? All of the good Elizabeth has learned, all the sorrow and regret, all gone. It'll be as though none of this had ever happened."

You looked at us surprised.

“Look, I understand that you’re upset, but you two more than anyone should know that your memories don’t make you who you are. Believe me when I tell you that I have a lot of experience with this. Evan, were you any less dedicated or devoted just because you remembered a different relationship? Ellen, I know you don’t like to think of how similar you and Slut were, but you were stuck leading a completely different life and even that didn’t change the heart of you. People are more than just their memories.

“My anger isn’t.” I swallowed. “My hatred isn’t. I don’t want to hate and not know that I am justified in that hatred. I don’t want forgiveness by omission.”

“Fine,” you sighed. “this is about justice? I thought you were better than that. You think she needs to be punished?” You thrust the device in my direction. “What would you do to her?”

I looked down at it, then over at her, or rather what was left of her. Just this morning she had seemed so imposing, so unassailable, but now this quivering thing before me was a pale reflection of her former self. My hands shook as I took the device.

What could I even do to her? My blood started pumping hot. If this was my one and only chance to dish some modicum of justice onto this... this monster... what did she deserve after all she’d done?

“Baby...” Evan put his hand over mine. “Please. Isn’t your hatred punishment enough?”

“How?” I turned to him. “How can you say that, Evan? After all she’s done! How can you forgive her?”

“Because after all she’s done is when she needs it the most. Because she could have turned the tables on you time and time again since you got the device back and she hasn’t. There’s good in her. I could see it then, and I can see it now. She just needs someone to bring it out.”

“Evan,” I quavered “I can’t. You’re the most important thing in the world to me and she took you from me. I can’t ever forgive her for that.”

“I know.” He put his other hand on mine. “You don’t have to forgive her. But you can show her mercy. You can give her a chance to be better.”

“She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Not yet.” he shook his head. “But one day, she might.”

The device was trembling in my hands as I looked from it to Elizabeth.

The blood pumping in my ears was deafening.

I lowered the device.

“Elles... thank you. I know nothing I could do will ever make up for what I’ve done, but I’m going to try. I promise. I’ll be the sort of person that deserves to be your friend. I’ll-”

"You shut the fuck up." I growled. "You're not even worth punishing. I hate you, Elizabeth. I hate you, and after all you've done, I should live the rest of my life stoking that hate, keeping the flames of this anger burning forever in the very depths of my soul. But you know what? You're not fucking worth it. I'm done with you. Do you hear me? I don't care what you do or where you go or what kind of bullshit redemption arc you think you're playing out. I am excising you from my heart and from my life. I don't ever want to see you again, do you hear me? You are done hurting me."

I put the device down on the table and turned to Evan. "There, are you happy?"

"Yes." He pulled me in for a hug. "and I think you will be too in the long run."

There was a hush that fell over the cafe as I sat back down, shaking.

Elizabeth looked like I'd taken what few fragments of her well-being she had managed to piece back together and thrown them right back on the floor. I didn't care.

"Alright." you said, breaking the silence. "I think that's my cue. We thank you all once again for your participation in our testing program and for your detailed reports. I'm going to put you to sleep and when you wake up, this whole week will seem like a blur."

"Wait-!"

You flipped a switch on your machine. The world lurched.

You and I were sitting at a different table. I had a fresh cup of coffee in front of me. I looked around in confusion. Evan and Elizabeth were hunched over at a neighboring table, sleeping alongside Emma.

"Well, okay," you leaned back in your seat grinning, "when *they* wake up, this will all be a blur. You, however - you I wanted to talk to a little bit more."

"What?"

"Well, with everything that was going on last time, you were in such a rush, we never really got to talk very much about the prototype. Plus, you haven't told me what happened. You won, obviously," you took a sip of your coffee and purred. "but I want all the tasty little details."

So I told you everything. From the moment I left to now. It was a story of chaos and heartbreak and triumph.

"You know what? I'm proud of you, Ellen. You stood up for what you believed in and you held firm where a lot of people would buckle. You've grown a lot as a person over the past week. Not everyone would be able to succeed the way you did, and trust me, not everyone prioritizes the wellbeing of others over their own like that when it comes time to swap back, either. "

"Thanks..." I said, looking down at Slut's body. "but at what cost? I had the perfect chance to change back and I let it go. Now I'm going to be stuck with this stupid oversexed body for the rest of my life."

"Hey," you shrugged, "life goes on. Honestly, after a few months you probably won't even notice. Who knows," you grinned and glanced down at my tits. "you might come to like it."

"I suppose your right." I sighed. "It's not like I'll remember them ever being any different, will I?"

"Well. Yes." You turned off your machine. "But also no."

I gave you a confused look as I reached for my coffee.

"Listen, Ellen, I understand that you getting your memory erased isn't quite the ending you had hoped for. Do you remember last night, how you asked if there was any other way? "

I stopped mid-sip. My breath caught in my throat.

"I was looking into it, and, well, there are a few 'extended effects trial' options that I was thinking I could wiggle you into. Basically, you'd be responsible for keeping an eye on all the swaps you made and reporting any interesting and novel interactions or bugs. It's temporary though - the longest option would be about a few months"

"A few months!?" I didn't know if what I was feeling was elation or despair.

"Well, hold on, let me finish."

My heart dropped.

"I was looking into those options - and those options are on the table, yes - but then I stumbled across something that might be a little more up your alley."

You teased me by taking a deep cupful, savoring the flavour and the look of nervous curiosity on my face.

"So, the organization that I work for. It turns out that we have a... well, let's just call it an internship program. I want to put you forward as a prospective candidate."

"You want to hire me!?"

"Well, not right away. You're still in school, after all. You'll have to finish your Ph.D before we snatch you up for real, but as a prospective member for the program, we'd try to keep you at a default aware state. Frankly, the more exposure you have to this sort of thing the easier it makes the whole hiring process, as you might imagine."

"I- I don't believe it."

"Well, its not all sunshine. We'll start you off small - you might have to work phone support a bit, get coffee, that sort of thing, but this saves us from having to swap a whole educational base on some other candidate. And hey, the pay isn't the best, but well," your naked tits bounced as you shrugged, "you can't beat the benefits."

“Wait, you do phone support?”

“As much as I hate to say it, we’re going to have to start to, if this whole test run is any indication.” You sighed. “Honestly, I have no idea how the higher ups are going to handle this whole fiasco. I’ll try to play it down, of course, but what if some other poor girl makes some mistakes and we need to swap things back for her or adjust her awareness or something like that? Good customer support is going to be important. And that’s assuming we actually get the thing out of the prototype stage -- there’s still the possibility that this whole project might get scrapped, and, well, honestly, a lot of the features just aren’t working the way we want them.”

“What features aren’t working right?”

“Well your device keeps overheating when you try to do tricky role swaps, for starters. It’s sort of a known issue with this run, but it’s something we’ve got to deal with.” You picked up the device in both hands and stared down at it, inspecting it and rotating it like it was a particularly tricky Rubik’s cube. “The current thinking amongst the R&D staff is that the reality obliviousness on this particular model is a little harsh. We’re thinking of maybe dialing it down a bit so that they’re a little more cognizant of their new parts, while still making them think it’s normal.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course! So like, with your model, if you swap some girl’s breasts onto a guy, he’ll still think he’s got a very masculine chest, and everyone else will agree. That’s, well, boring, right? We want to keep things more at a level where he’ll still realize he has boobs, and that that’s unusual for a guy, but that his specific case isn’t supernatural or impossible or anything, it’s just the way things are. We think that’ll make it a little more intuitive and a little more useful for, well, the kind of crazy plans a lot of our users tend to get up to.”

My jaw dropped. All the playing around I had done with the thing, all the little experiments I’d done to try to suss out its rules and logics and possibilities. I thought I had come to understand, perhaps better than anyone, how that thing worked and what it was capable of, and you meant to tell me that that was all just some kind of setting programmed into the stupid thing?

“Oh, oh!” You grinned excitedly. “We’re also planning on adding a bunch of extra little shortcut buttons. Not quite swaps, but like, just imagine, if you wanted to, say, perkify someone’s boobs, or enbiggen something! Right now, you have to find someone with just the right amount of perkiness and swap, right? Well what if there was a button that just did it for you?”

“Why would you ever need to do that?”

“Demographic testing assures us that boob size and perkiness are a huge priority.” you laughed. “We’re thinking of expanding the contextual element, as well. We’re seeing great things with Project Yarn Doll in that regard. Rather than being as close to a direct 1:1 swap of history, you can custom tailor the specific history of the swapped elements. It’s really opening up a lot of possibilities. We’ve already got a few people picked out for test runs on that. I’m really excited to see what happens with that one.”

"How would you even control something like that?"

"Same way you control the current one. You've just got to point it, think real hard about what you want, and press the button."

"What? No..." I furrowed my brow. "you've got to adjust the dials first."

"Ellen," you said, turning the thing to me. "None of these dials are labeled."

My head spun. I thought back to all the times I'd set the device, all the times I'd oh so carefully rotated those dumbthings until I had found exactly what I was looking for. He was right, I had just kept thinking about what I'd wanted until I had somehow known the thing was set right. How had I not realized that?

"It made me oblivious to its own controls? What about all the times it went off by accident? Or swapped the wrong thing, or the wrong person?"

"Well, it's not perfect. Sometimes people's minds wander as they're trying to use it, sometimes it has a hard time reading certain people, hell, sometimes it just has a mind of its own. We're working on it. It probably didn't help though that it kept getting dropped like that.

"Oh my god."

"If this is blowing your mind," you laughed. "your first day on the job is going to be fun."

"Why me?"

"Huh?"

"Why would you make me that offer? You said yourself that you can swap an education onto another candidate, right? Surely you could find someone else better qualified. Why would you pick me?"

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for a good story. A glimmer of hope in the darkest hour? The nascent power of true love? Swapped up boobs everywhere? It's exactly my sort of thing." You laughed fondly. "I didn't actually think you were going to come out of this one in one piece, to tell you the truth, but that didn't mean I wasn't rooting for you. I want your story to have a good ending." You seemed to catch the softness in your eyes then straightened up and cleared your throat. "This is all off the record, of course."

"Thank you." I was overflowing with gratitude.

"Oh, there is just one small thing I'd like in return."

"What?"

"I want you to let me know how it all works out, okay? With you and Evan, and with Elizabeth, and with your whole new life. We might be coworkers someday, don't keep me in the dark."

"Sure." I laughed. "I won't spare a single detail."

“Now then,” you started packing up your unconscious machine. “I should really be getting out of here. I needed to have this report in yesterday.” You glanced around conspiratorially. “Are there any last-minute swaps you wanted to make? Now that you really are off the record?”

I looked down at the device.

I looked around the room.

“Actually, Frank...” A mischievous smile crossed my lips. “I can think of a few things...”

To be continued in part 26 - After All