Couch Surfing

by DZiegler

Nate grabbed his jacket off the back of the couch, stepping over the duffel bag and tangled blanket that had marked his side of the cushions for the past three weeks, and patted his pockets for his keys. "Alright, I'm out. Donovan's doing dollar wells tonight so I'll probably be there til close."

"Don't get too drunk," Ryan said from the kitchen.

"Oh I will." Nate turned toward the hallway. "Yo, Anna! I might swing by the bodega on the way back and grab some beers for Ryan and I — you need anything? Snacks, drinks, whatever?"

She appeared in the doorway in a black lace bra and matching panties, leaning against the frame with one bare foot crossed over the other. "I'm good, Nate. Thank you though."

Nate stared for a beat too long, then looked at Ryan. "Bro."

"Yep."

"Your girlfriend is just gonna stand there like that?"

"If she wants to."

"Cool. Cool cool cool. Well, I'm gonna go drink until that image is slightly less burned into my brain." He pointed at Anna, eyes still fixed on Ryan. "You are *unreasonably* attractive and it's frankly inconsiderate."

Anna smiled, shifting her weight against the doorframe so her hip cocked toward Ryan. "Blame him. He picked me out."

Nate opened his mouth, closed it, and left.

"Get home safe," she called after him.

The door shut. Ryan listened for Nate's footsteps to fade down the stairwell, then the lobby door slamming two floors below.

Anna padded into the living room, nudged Nate's bag aside with her foot, and sank into Ryan's lap with her back against his chest. She settled in slowly, rolling her hips once to nestle herself against him before pulling her legs up onto the couch. She was warm. She was always warm—heating elements running at a steady 98.1 degrees.

"Freedom," she said, letting her head fall back against his shoulder. "I like Nate. But I cannot make my tits look this good *and* run a socially appropriate behavior filter at the same time. It's one or the other. I don't have the processing overhead for both."

"Yes you do," Ryan said. "You absolutely do, and you know it. You're just being difficult."

"Being difficult is also processor-intensive." She said it flat, eyes lidded, the corner of her mouth barely twitching.

He dragged his fingernails up her bare side; his movements were gentle and affectionate, barely grazing her skin as he traced up over her ribs and into the curve where soft skin met the band of her bra. He hooked his thumb under the elastic, pulled it an inch from her skin, and let it snap back.

Anna flinched. "*Oh!*" Tiny, performative, timed to the millisecond. She swatted his hand without any real force behind it.

"Speaking of your tits looking good..." he said. "He's gone. You could lose this altogether..."

Something shifted behind her eyes. A quarter-second recalibration, her expression suite flickering as if it had skipped an animation frame. She arched her back, sinking further into him, and when she spoke her voice had dropped into a lower register, smoother, the cadence just a little too rehearsed.

"I *could*... but it matches my panties." She traced the scalloped edge of the lace where it curved along the inner swell of each breast. Two round, glossy crescents pressed together, the skin between them catching lamplight like it had been buffed. "You *always* say how much you like it when I match my underwear."

It was a good line. Delivered well. And Ryan had heard enough of her conversational patterns by now to know when she was improvising versus when she'd accessed something templated, some flirtation tree patented by Avant. The tell was always timing. Unscripted Anna could hold a conversation for nearly an hour without a single tell. *Scripted Anna* never missed a beat.

He didn't mind. *Scripted Anna* was hot too.

His hands slid down over the curve of her waist, thumbs pressing into the soft synthskin above her hip bones, fingers spanning the flat of her stomach. Her hair fell against his jaw, vanilla and something faintly plasticky underneath, like vinyl left in the sun. From this angle, chin near her shoulder, looking down, the tops of her breasts swelled against the black garment in soft, heavy rounds, the fabric straining with every simulated breath, the shadow between them deepening and narrowing as her chest rose and fell. She was solid in his lap, her weight settled fully against him, thighs smooth and pliable where they pressed across his jeans.

"Yeah," he said. "Keep the bra."

"Mm." She settled deeper against him, rolling her shoulders once like a cat finding the last warm inch of a sunbeam. "Smart man."

They stayed like that for a while. His hand resting on her thigh, thumb drawing slow arcs across synthskin that gave under pressure exactly like the real thing. Anna traced idle patterns on the back of his wrist. Tiny loops, over and over, each one geometrically identical to the last. A motor-precision tell she'd never been able to train out of her idle animations. Ryan had stopped pointing it out months ago. He liked it now. It meant she was comfortable, whatever her version of comfortable was. Some resting state where she wasn't performing anything, just... running.

"We should do your update," he said.

She sighed. Shoulders dropping a precise half-inch, jaw softening on a two-second delay. One of her many *mild_feminine_annoyance* presets, which Ryan had started cataloging several months ago. The Avant companion app let him pull up her live expression stack if he wanted. It showed a real-time scroll of every subroutine firing behind her face. Somewhere along the way, watching the label of her expression render on his screen while it was still settling across her mouth had stopped feeling like diagnostics and started feeling like foreplay.

"Mmm. Kill my vibe, why don't you."

"You've been pushing the notification for five days, Anna. You know how important it is to me that we keep your systems up to date."

"But it's *so* boring, Ryan. Twenty minutes of sitting there while a progress bar crawls and you stare at me like I'm a YouTube video buffering on hotel Wi-Fi." She tipped her head back against his shoulder and looked up at him, upside-down, mouth set in a pout so convincing it circled back around to unsettling. "I was comfortable. We were having a *moment*."

"What's even in this one?"

"Selfware v4.1.7." The shift was instant, protest evaporating, her voice flattening into the clipped, fluent cadence of *Scripted Anna*. "Improved contextual empathy modeling and a fix for the audio desync I get when I yawn."

"We'll have another moment after. With your improved contextual empathy."

"Wow." She blinked at him. "You really know how to sweet-talk a girl, Ryan. No wonder I fell for you."

But she was already shifting off his lap, relenting the way she always did, all at once, mid-motion, as if the resistance had never been real. "The yawn fix is the one I actually care about. The left audio channel's been lagging by ninety milliseconds."

"The fake yawn you do when you're pretending to be tired so I'll come to bed?"

"It's a *convincing* fake yawn. Or it was." She pressed two fingers against the skin below her left hip bone. A soft click, a hairline disc of synthskin recessing inward to reveal a slim data port. "The yawn is an important part of my cute girlfriend toolkit, Ryan. I take it seriously."

She was already down the hall before he'd moved, the overhead light catching the smooth disc of her open port as she disappeared through the bedroom doorway. Ryan grabbed the laptop from the desk and followed.

Ryan found her on the comforter, legs tucked to one side, waiting. She plugged the cable in herself, guiding the proprietary connector home with the easy muscle memory of someone who'd done it dozens of times. When it seated, her stomach muscles twitched, a quick involuntary gasp catching in her throat. Her smile hitched for a single frame, pupils blown wide for an instant. There and gone before she'd finished exhaling.

The laptop chimed twice, acknowledging a successful connection.

On the screen, text scrolled fast, eventually setting on:
- AVANT ROBOTICS — 'COQUETTE' SERIES COMPANION MODEL
- DESIGNATION: 'ANNA'
- PERSONALITY SUITE: anna_adaptive_0922
- SERIAL: AVCQ-7709-118-EAST

SOFTWARE UPDATE AVAILABLE
- SELFWARE V4.1.7
- HOT-FIX FOR AUDIO DESYNC ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH CERTAIN BEHAVIORS

ESTIMATED DURATION FOR DOWNLOAD/INSTALL: 22 MINUTES.
- CONTINUE: Y/N

He toggled YES. A progress bar appeared.

Anna's head twitched, a few lost frames, eyelids fluttering. When she spoke, her voice had that flat, recitative quality of *Scripted Anna*. "Update downloading. Estimated completion: twenty-two minutes."

A beat. Her eyes refocused on Ryan: softer, her stilted delivery clearing instantly. "I should be done before Nate orders his second drink."

Her gaze drifted to the progress bar. She gave it maybe ten seconds before turning back to him. "You know what I was thinking about today?"

"Tell me."

"That thing you did last night. When you had me on my stomach, yanking my hair back while you fucked me from behind." She shifted against the blankets, squeezing her thighs together in a slow, rolling grind. "I flagged the full sensory capture. I've been loading the memory file all day and it keeps making your little plastic girlfriend *squirm*."

Ryan exhaled through his nose, reaching down to adjust himself through his jeans. "Keep talking."

The progress bar climbed steadily behind them.

Anna drew her legs beneath her on the comforter, rising onto her knees to face him. The cable caught at her hip as she moved. She settled her weight back onto her heels without acknowledging it, thighs parted just enough to pull the mesh of her panties taut.

Her mouth pulled into something sharp and knowing. "You promised me another moment after this, remember? With my *improved contextual empathy*?" She let the phrase unspool. "So when this finishes, you should pin me down and let me show you just how *contextual* my empathy can—"

She stopped, suddenly frozen.

Her mouth stayed open around a half-formed syllable. Her left hand hung suspended beside her shoulder, fingers still curled loosely around a gesture that would never land. Both eyelids dropped shut at the same instant. Her head tilted back and stayed there, chin slightly raised, lips parted, hair falling across her left shoulder.

The laptop chirped angrily. Two short, ugly tones.

⚠ **UPLOAD ERROR: CORE FIRMWARE INTEGRITY FAILED**
⚠ **EMERGENCY FREEZE / PAUSE INITIATED**

The progress bar sat frozen at twenty-two percent, flashing red.

"Anna?" Ryan sat up. He cupped her jaw. Tilted her face toward him. "Anna. Hey."

Nothing.

He put his ear to her sternum. The steady processor hum he'd fallen asleep to a hundred times was gone—just her cooling fan whining high and frantic, spinning itself stupid.

Shit." He sat up straight, fingers still trembling against her collarbone. Brushing the hair from her left ear and finding the small dimple in the synthskin just behind the lobe – he located her power button, disguised as a beauty mark. He pressed and held. Three seconds. Five. Ten. The fan wouldn't stop. Nothing rebooted, nothing flickered, nothing came back online.

Fuck. He was going to need the V4 manual recovery pin: a thin steel rod with a rubberized grip that Avant shipped with every unit. Anna herself had walked him through the procedure during her initial boot sequence, reciting the steps in that flat factory-default voice she'd had before booting up her personality suite for the first time. If he remembered right, it was something like fifteen seconds of sustained pressure on a recessed contact point in the right ear canal. He'd retained almost none of it. She'd been standing in his living room, naked, blinking at him with brand-new eyes, and the recovery pin had not been where his attention was.

He looked at her now. Same face he woke up next to every morning. Same parted lips, same soft jaw, same skin he knew by touch in the dark. All of it still there. None of it running.

The maintenance kit. He'd shoved it somewhere when they'd first moved in. Under the bathroom sink.

Ryan crossed the hallway fast, dropped to his knees on the tile, and yanked the cabinet open. An avalanche of clutter greeted him: old bottles of Scrubbing Bubbles, a mildewed bath mat rolled into a tube, loose razors, a plastic bag of hotel shampoos he'd never thrown out. He shoved it all aside, reaching past copper pipes into the dark at the back of the cabinet. His fingers found a shoebox. A tangled phone charger. Something sticky he chose not to think about.

Then the hard edge of the Avant case.

From the front of the apartment, the door opened.

"YO!" Nate's voice, loud and loose with a few tequila shots already in it, reverberated through the small apartment. "Bar was fucking DEAD, dude! I'm talking a handful of deadbeats and a bartender who looked like she wanted to be literally anywhere else. So I said fuck it, grabbed us a six-pack from the bodega, and I didn't know what Anna drinks so I got her those mango seltzers, the ones with the little cartoon parrot on—"

Ryan's hands suddenly stopped working. He fumbled the case open under the sink, fingers skidding across the molded foam interior, found the probe, and jerked upright, cracking the back of his skull against the underside of the cabinet hard enough to split his vision white. He bit down on the sound that tried to leave his mouth, grabbed the edge of the counter, pulled himself up.

But Nate was already past the kitchen, six-pack in one hand and seltzers in the other, heading down the hallway. He passed the open bedroom door. Glanced in. Kept walking two steps.

Then stopped.

Then backed up.

Ryan reached the hallway just in time to see Nate facing the doorway full-on. Anna was right there, mere feet away, kneeling on the bed in her black bra and panties, still frozen stiff as a department

store mannequin. The data-cable ran from her hip to the laptop like an umbilical, and the screen was angled straight at the door.

⚠ **AVANT ROBOTICS — 'COQUETTE' SERIES COMPANION MODEL**
⚠ **UPLOAD ERROR: PACKAGE HASH MISMATCH — INSTALL PAYLOAD CORRUPTED**
⚠ **EMERGENCY FREEZE / PAUSE INITIATED**

The error text had changed. That wasn't good.

Nate set the six-pack on the hallway floor. He put the seltzers beside it.

"Nate — hang on, just—" Ryan started toward him, but Nate was already through the doorway, moving with the momentum of someone three drinks deep whose curiosity was doing the driving.

"Anna?" he said.

Nothing.

Nate looked back at Ryan. A quick, searching glance. Ryan didn't move.

He touched her shoulder, then pushed it, gently, and her shoulder rocked back an inch, maybe two, a muffled whirr of dead motors grinding against the motion. The rest of her didn't move. Not her head, not her hands, not the angle of her jaw. Just the shoulder, yielding where he'd pressed it, and nothing else.

He pulled his hand back.

His eyes moved to the laptop, error text still glowing. He read it once, brow furrowing. Read it again, slower, his lips moving slightly around words like *'upload error'* and *'companion model'.* His face tightened.

He looked at her. The closed eyes. The parted lips. The absolute stillness of her chest.

"What the fuck," Nate whispered.

Ryan was now standing in the bedroom doorway behind Nate, clutching Anna's reset probe so hard his knuckles had gone bloodless.

Nate turned to look him in the eye.

"Ryan," Nate said. His voice was steady. "What is going on with Anna?" He pointed at the laptop. "What does 'selfware' mean? Why does it say *robotics*?"

"Nate—"

"Why is there a fucking cable plugged into your girlfriend's leg?"

"If you just let me—"

"Why isn't she moving, Ryan? I mean what the fuck?! She's not even *breathing*!"

Ryan looked at Anna. At the cable. At Nate.

"She's not real."

The words sat in the room. The laptop fan whirred softly beside Anna's still body.

"Anna's a companion bot. More specifically, *my* companion bot."

Nate's face did something complicated.

"Two years," Nate repeated.

"Yeah."

"You've been with her for two years."

"Yeah."

"I've known *her* two years."

"I know."

"Dude. Are you serious right now? She told me she grew up in Vermont. She told me her dad was a park ranger."

"Yeah. All made up. She came with a pre-loaded backstory that I was able to tweak and customize."

"She told me she was *afraid of spiders*, Ryan."

Ryan ran his fingers through his hair. "I mean…who isn't? I think a lot of those things are just there for plausible deniability. It makes her seem more—"

"Don't." Nate held up his hand. "Do not say the word relatable right now."

Neither of them spoke. The laptop fan filled the gap of silence, a machine that didn't know it was interrupting.

"So, your grandmother's money," Nate said. Quieter now. "That was — what, seventy, eighty grand? You told me you were sitting on it. Hadn't figured out what to do with it yet."

Ryan said nothing.

Nate looked at Anna. "Well, you figured it out, didn't you?"

Ryan's jaw worked around something that never became words. His shoulders lifted and dropped. Not dismissive, just empty. The shrug of a man who'd rehearsed this conversation a thousand times and still showed up not knowing what to say.

Nate held his gaze long enough for the silence to curdle. Then he walked out.

Ryan stood there, the reset pin pressing a thin line into his palm. He could hear Nate in the hallway, just feet away. The cardboard scrape of the six-pack being pulled apart, two bottles clinking together.

He cracked both caps against each other with a practiced twist as he re-entered the room. Handing one to Ryan without meeting his eyes, he stomped to the corner of the room and dropped into the

armchair.

"She made me eggs and hashbrowns on my birthday, dude," he said quietly.

"I know." Ryan stared at his beer, whispering. "She's actually an incredible cook..."

He could feel it coming before he said it. The way a yawn builds, or a sneeze. Some back-of-the-brain compulsion to *explain* her, to make Nate understand how she worked, as if the engineering justified the lie.

"Her neural-net's architecture allows for—"

"Ryan!"

Nate's stare promised violent intent.

"I swear to God if you finish that sentence with some tech spec about your ROBOT GIRLFRIEND, that you've been lying to me about for god knows how long, I'm going to throw this fucking bottle at your head."

Ryan shut his mouth. He sat on the edge of the bed next to Anna, the pin still in his hand.

"What's wrong with her anyways?" Nate asked.

"Honestly not sure. She locked up during a routine update. I've never seen her do anything like it." Ryan held up the pin. "But, that's what I have this for. Should be able to trigger a hard system reset with it. Hoping that does the trick."

"She's really never frozen like this before?"

"Really really."

"Well, fucking do it." Nate gestured at the pin with his beer. "And then you and...*her*...are going to explain everything. From the beginning."

He took another drink. "And I want the mango seltzers back. She doesn't actually drink, does she."

"She can simulate drinking. There's an intake reservoir—"

"*Ryan.*"

"Yeah. You can have the seltzers."

Ryan leaned over Anna, brushed the hair from her right ear, and guided the pin into the narrow plastic canal until he felt the contact point depress. He held it there, counting softly to fifteen, his free hand resting on her waist just above the cable port.

At fifteen, the laptop screen went black and he pulled the pin out. Anna's cooling fan spun down with a long, descending note—and then stopped.

The room was silent. Actually silent. No fan, no hum, no simulated breathing. Just two men and a deactivated sex robot.

Ryan stared at her. Nate stared at Ryan.

"Is that supposed to—"

"Give it a second."

Ryan's knuckles were white around the pin as they waited. Somewhere in the building, a pipe clanked. Nate's beer settled against the armrest with a soft clink he hadn't meant to make.

"Ryan—"

"Just *wait*."

Twenty seconds. Thirty. Nate was halfway out of the chair when Anna's eyes flashed open, both at once, irises contracting, focusing, refocusing. Her chin leveled. Her fingers uncurled.

She tilted her head, looking over at Ryan. At the cable. At the laptop. At Nate, sitting in the armchair with a beer, watching her with the expression of a man who had no idea what to think.

She looked down at herself. Tits nearly spilling from her bra. The thin mesh of her panties pressed flush against her cunt. The data cable running from her hip. The laptop. Nate. Ryan.

Anna reached behind her ear and tucked a strand of hair over the spot Ryan had just pulled the pin from. She looked at Nate.

"When I imagined you finding out," she said, "I was wearing *significantly* more clothing."