Analogue: A Hate Story

by Jewelfox

Summary

A complete fanfiction adapt of Christine Love's transhumanist sci-fi visual novel. Features cosplay, patriarchy, and cute AI girls who may or may not be mass murderers, all on a long-dead Korean generation starship. Can the Investigator figure out which of the AIs hitting on her is the killer?

Notes

This story deals with mature themes, such as repressive societies and suicide. Several of the characters do things like express sexist and homophobic viewpoints, shame sex workers, and use gendered slurs, although other characters argue with them for doing that.

Some chapters have additional content warnings. Most of the ones like that are skippable.
Footsteps, muffled like they were underwater even though my arms and legs moved freely. Breathing, steady and loud in my ears, as spots of fog showed up on my visor. Lights, harsh and garish in the cold, frozen dark, casting long shadows and turning the wide hallway into a labyrinth.

I didn't gasp when I saw the first body. Aria had outlined it for me already, a human-shaped object of interest laying on the floor just around the bend. One of Aria's floating "whiskers" -- tiny, crystalline robots shaped like tennis balls -- shone a floodlamp on the corpse, and I shooed the whisker away as I rounded the corner and looked down at it.

He was perfectly preserved. One hand was clutching at his throat, while the other had apparently been reaching out towards the ceiling before slumping across his chest. It'd happened before he had frozen solid, in the vacuum.

I'd been expecting something like this. The Mugunghwa had gone way off course. It'd been supposed to arrive centuries ago. Even a generation starship couldn't just last forever, and this one was ancient.

What I hadn't been expecting were the man's clothes. He didn't look like an astronaut, or even a 24th-century civilian. More like a 14th-century peasant, in dirty brown sackcloth or something like it. Several of his teeth were even missing, and I didn't think it was because of the air giving out.

I crouched next to him, and overturned the frozen stiff cloth sack he wore at his waist. Plastic coins silently tumbled out, crudely stamped with Chinese characters. The Mugunghwa was a Korean ship.

"Aria, note: What the hell?" A tiny confirmation message floated in the air just in front of me, a "note" tag on my HUD's recording timeline, as I stood up and looked around again. Aria's whiskers obligingly turned their floodlamps outward, and floated out of my way.

Aria wasn't an AI. She was an augmented reality system, which was synced to my spacesuit. She had no personality, no consciousness, and no avatar, which was just the way I liked it. Not only did I prefer working (and living) alone, but AIs scared me. They could think thousands of times faster, change their appearance on a whim, and figure things out about you that you never told them. Besides that, the older ones could get cranky and mean. The ones back home were resisting political change which would make life easier for certain minorities ... which was part of the reason I was out here, instead.

I know it's terrible of me to be prejudiced against AIs. I know I might become one, eventually. And I know some of the people I've met in person were actually AIs in hardshells. I'm just scared of people I know are AIs, especially the ones that don't bother to use a hardshell or even an avatar. It's hard for me to think fast enough to reply to a human, let alone a transhuman. At least over email, it's harder for someone to tell that you're nervous and taking your time.

Aria's resonance scan showed an enormous room just a couple of junctions down. The wall signage said "Plaza," in Chinese characters; an English translation floated beneath it, visible only through my suit's visor. Which was good, since my kanji was rusty.

From a distance, all I could see was a void that swallowed up the floodlights, and grew as I walked towards it. Then I got to the entrance, and this time I did gasp.
Imagine a domed stadium, made from glass and steel like the first early spacecraft, its transparent roof letting in light from a million stars. Now imagine someone built a medieval Korean style village market inside, out of textured plastic and actual hardwood, with brightly coloured banners and shop stalls and displays of fruit and flowers. Signboards written in Chinese characters announced each shop's wares, and whole enclosed buildings stood apart from the interior walls.

It was beautiful, so long as you looked up ... at the buildings, the stars, and the softly-glowing lights of the starship itself.

If you looked down instead, you saw all the bodies.

There were hundreds of them, of all ages -- but not all genders, I realized. A pile of bodies was clustered near what I thought looked like an air vent, and almost all of them were men. One was slumped between the handholds for a passenger cart it looked like he'd been pulling. In the back, past a curtain, another man in ornate robes was leaning against the wall peacefully, as though he had died in his sleep.

I didn't normally think about people, whether they were living or dead. But the sight made me shiver involuntarily, as I realized just what had happened. This ship hadn't taken long years to die, to run out of supplies and lose power. These people had all been murdered.

As for what the hell had done this to them -- or what had happened that they'd apparently decided to recreate pre-spaceflight Korean society -- I hadn't a single clue.

This investigation had just gotten interesting.
"Aria, hypothesis. *Mute went rogue, took over the ship somehow, and shut down the life support systems."

*Mute was the starship's security AI, according to our client. Dispatch Control had told me to try to make contact with her, and find out why the Mugunghwa had never made it to its destination. As long as the main computer still had power, she ought to still be alive. And since she would be the only one still left alive after this massacre, that made her the prime suspect.

It also made her the most dangerous thing on the ship.

An AI with root access to a ship's computer system could do just about anything to it. Depressurize the bulkheads, run the tram system in reverse, even set the reactor to overload. If that was what I was dealing with, then there was no place on the Mugunghwa that was safe. Even a door could become a death trap, depending on how fast it shut.

Nothing had attacked me so far, though. And while Aria had highlighted dozens of security cameras, none of them were powered on and she hadn't spotted any guns or defences. So my plan was to get to the computer core and establish a link with it, before high-tailing it back to the White Princess and undocking. I was moving at a glacial pace, though, compared to how fast an AI could react. So I needed to make sure that whatever I did to their computers did not wake *Mute up.

*Mute, or any other AIs that our client had neglected to tell me about.

* * *

The historical society's deck plans said that a tram route lead straight to my destination. I thought that I'd be hoofing it, but there was a green light on the only car in the station. So I climbed in, waited a moment for Aria to translate what the elevator-style buttons in the passenger section said, then pressed the one that would take me closest to the core.

Of course, I was sharing my ride with a corpse. He was wearing much finer robes than the peasant I saw earlier, and had been trying to climb out the window, but had barely managed to fit his hand and forearm through the part it would let him open. I shivered, and sat as far from him as I could, but there were only a dozen or so seats.

I don't know how to describe how surreal it was, to ride the tram car through Mugunghwa City. It wasn't a big, open space like the plaza was; more like a vast maze of skyscrapers, with barely enough room for the tram to fit in between. Tiny balconies passed by just outside the windows, and intersections whooshed past in the blink of an eye. I caught brief glimpses of a maze of shadows, criss-crossing walkways and footpaths crammed in between the tall buildings, which went so far up and down that I couldn't see top nor bottom.

*People lived their whole lives here,* I thought, awestruck by the scale of the ship. *This was their world. And their ancestors', and their children's.*

*How did this world end?*

The tram jolted all of a sudden as we went through a tunnel, a tight-fitting circular hole in the wall. I jumped and looked around, Aria's whiskers shining their lights in all directions, then saw that the corpse I was sharing a ride with had just lost its frozen forearm. The wound was bloodless.
I tried to control my breathing and think positive thoughts, as I sat back down. *You're going to be okay. You're going to be okay. You're going to be okay.*

I wondered if the tram had woken *Mute up.

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The ship's administrative offices had been remodeled to look like a palace. The walls had a convincing woodgrain veneer, and the doors all slid open and shut. Like the door to the computer room, which had been left open.

For a moment I had a vision in mind, of guards rushing the place to try to shut down the AI. But while I'd stepped over plenty of bodies to get here, there weren't any next to the core. If anything, the place seemed dusty and disused. I had to double-check that I'd gotten the right door, because it wasn't any wider or more decorative than the ones to the closets. But sure enough, inside were walls of rack-mounted computers, surrounding a large central tower and bookending a tiny workstation on the far wall.

**Soundtrack: Terminal Calm**

My HUD's temperature display spiked once I walked in, but not by much. Partly because the rest of the ship was freezing, and partly because very few of the ship's computers were turned on. The ones hooked up to the storage drives -- Aria outlined which machines did what as I looked at them - - weren't just in standby, but turned off.

"Aria, this is bizarre," I whispered. Somehow, even more than the plaza outside, this place felt like a graveyard.

I had to clean books off of the workstation in back; actual paper books, with what looked like naugahyde binding. When I finally turned it on, it ran through a startup diagnostic and then brought up a GUI, to ask me a simple question in Chinese characters:

> Are you a man or a woman?

There was a keyboard, but no mouse. But there was a large button for each choice, so I assumed I was using a touchscreen. I was about to press "woman" but stopped, because this was becoming deeply suspicious. Why was a computer asking me this to begin with? And furthermore, why were those the only two options?

It was then that I realized the overwhelming majority of the corpses that I'd seen had been male, especially the official-looking ones here in the palace. Which meant that the women had usually stayed at home, presumably not by their own choice.

I chose "man."

The screen went blank, and for a moment I thought I had made a mistake. Then it brought up a terminal, a real honest-to-goddess Linux-style console, and I squeed in delight because this ancient computer was so retro. Which, I guess, was to be expected, but it was still really exciting.

The commands worked a little differently than what I remembered. But it wasn't hard to turn back on wireless networking, and then ping the White Princess just to make sure that it worked. I didn't even have to start an X session (yes, I am proud of this).

That done, I got the hell out of there. But not before patting the mainframe consolingly, wiping off dust with my fingertips. "Sorry," I whispered, to the machines that had gone unloved for so long.
When was the last time anyone had used these computers, I wondered? Why had they been left to rot, many of them physically switched off even? Was *Mute even alive, anymore? I was starting to reconsider my original hypothesis; instead of running out of food, the Mugunghwa's citizens had simply forgotten how to maintain their machinery, after descending into some kind of medieval dark age. A male supremacist one, apparently.

I had plenty of food for thought, for the tram ride back to my flying home. Much of it, I admit, having to do with how I could call myself a real hacker now, because oh my goddess that ancient computer. It'd even had a physical keyboard!

What I didn't realize is that I'd been so caught up in admiring it, I hadn't caught the name of the last person to log in, when it'd flashed by on the terminal screen.
Chapter 3

I didn't notice at first, when the tram car started to slow down. But I did see the light in the distance, far down the track, and squinted at it as my HUD tinted darker.

My breath caught when Aria outlined what I was looking at. Another car was approaching fast, on the same track.

**Soundtrack:** Terminal Intensity

I jumped out of my seat and looked around quickly, for anything I could use to escape. The car I was in had just slowed to a stop, but the light in the window grew brighter and brighter as the other one barreled toward us at high speed.

There was a yellow-and-black striped lever, next to the door. I didn't know why the man in back hadn't used it -- maybe he didn't recognize "warning" colours, or maybe he couldn't read the Hangeul script explaining how to use it. Personally, I just couldn't get the lever to budge, and I remembered the times I'd struggled to open glass jars and thought *Of all the things to die from ...*

I finally threw my back into it, and yanked the lever all the way down. There was a dull *pop* that I felt through my feet, as the emergency release broke the ancient door off completely instead of opening it, sending it crashing and tumbling between balconies. I took a last look at the oncoming light, then jumped to the nearest balcony, ducking and covering my head as the cars rammed each other right next to me.

I felt the floor shake, and saw sparks fly past. When I looked up, I saw that the car I was in had twisted sideways, and I watched the other car keep pushing it until they crunched into each other at the tunnel entrance. I got a good view of it all because I was standing there shaking and gasping for breath, and didn't know if I could move.

A second later, the light in the apartment came on.

I turned and saw a face right next to mine, and I screamed and backed up and nearly fell off the balcony. But the woman was dead, her last gasp frozen in place. Her hands were pressed up to the glass.

*Trapped,* I thought. *She was trapped. I am trapped. I am going to die.* Lights started to come on around me, turning on in sequence from the core of the ship outward, and I felt like an escaped convict in a floodlamp.

"I need to get out of here!" I yelled to no one in particular, turning every which way to look for an escape route. Aria highlighted a path through the building, and out towards the hangar and service decks. It took me through the window, so I grabbed one of Aria's whiskers and used it to break the glass, pushing the woman's frozen corpse aside and charging in towards the door.

On the way, I had a thought. "Aria," I said, my voice unsteady. "Three of you, head back to the ship. Get it warmed up for me!" I called out, as the glowing crystals sped away, even though she could hear me just fine. At any rate, that left me with two whiskers, and a lot of ground to cover. But at least if I didn't make it, and anyone else came here afterwards, they'd have complete resonance scans and holorecordings of all that had happened.

And wireless access to the ship's computer core.
The door bolted shut as soon as I got to it. But I unlocked it with no problem and threw it open, charging out into the hall. Another partway-open door kicked aside and I ran down the building's emergency staircase, not trusting the elevators or anything electronic. But as I made it to the accessway, connecting Mugunghwa City to the ship's service decks, I thought of the tram car slowing down, and realized that if an AI had been trying to kill me it would have just had them ram into each other head-on with no warning. What was going on?

The collision had just been a programming error, I decided. A conflict of basic instructions. Everything was happening automatically; systems were powering on all across the ship, like the lights and electronic locks. So if I had awoken a slumbering AI, it wasn't trying to swat me like a bug, at least not yet.

That might not keep it from smashing me as it yawned, and flailed, and tried to crawl out of bed, though.

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Running through the Mugunghwa with its lights turned on was a completely different experience. I no longer felt like an explorer in ancient ruins, or a tourist in Pompeii or Lake City. Instead, I felt like an intruder, silly and out of place in my space suit, as though any minute now people in hanboks were going to start filling the streets and hallways.

But the corpses I passed did not move, from the floor and the walls they leaned on. And the more of them I saw, the more frantic I was not to become one of them.

Nothing else tried to stop me, though, until I got to the hangar deck. I don't know if an AI suddenly took an interest in me, or if a security system had waited until then to initialize. But the huge, mechanical door separating the small craft dock from the loading bay started to close as soon as I got within sight of it, which would put about a third of a metre of metal in between me and the White Princess.

I grabbed one of Aria's whiskers and threw it. "Hold the door for me!" I shouted. It elongated into a dart as it flew, and then it turned and shot up and down in between the door's surfaces, turning into a crystal rod propping it open.

I could feel the door's mechanism straining through the floorboards, as I hopped over and through it. I looked back for a moment at Aria, but then the door slammed shut, snapping her whisker in half and grinding most of it into sand.

I winced.

The White Princess was the only ship in the hangar, its smooth, swanlike surface out of place in the Mugunghwa's time. Aria had the airlock door open for me and I jumped in, to an airlock roughly the size of a locker, as the door slid shut and sealed flush with the hull.

I closed my eyes for a second, as UV light sterilized my space suit. Then I flinched as jets of air blasted onto me, and popped the seal on the helmet at the same time as the interior door opened, my tight suit going slack and depressurizing.

I ran through the tiny apartment which comprised my flying home, tossing my helmet aside and almost tripping up on a stray plushie, then jumped over the back of the seat in the cockpit and grabbed hold of the flight yokes. The hangar's outer door was sealing, too, so I pulled up hard to lift us up off of the deck. Then I banked the ship ninety degrees, slumping to one side of my chair as the Mugunghwa's gravity pulled me towards it, and pushed both yokes forward, slamming myself
back as we sped out into space.

I didn't stop until the display on the console in front of me (not nearly retro enough, after that ancient computer) said we had put ten thousand metres between us and the Mugunghwa. Finally I pulled back and realized I'd been holding my breath, and gave myself a moment to catch it. By which I mean I spent the next five minutes curled up in a ball, shivering and gasping for breath.

"Oh goddess ... " That was as much as I could get out between gasps. I wrapped my arms around my knees and rocked back and forth, swallowing hard and trying to keep breakfast down.

My job really isn't this dangerous, most of the time. But AIs scare me more than anything else. I had never been this much at one's mercy, before. I knew that I still had to talk to *Mute, somehow, but at least I could do so from out here. I would have rather had ten kilometres of distance between us than be up close and personal with her.

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I didn't know how long it'd been, but my breathing and heart rate had finally settled some. "Aria, go home," I managed to say. The crystal orbs that'd been hovering around me flew back into their wall-mount container.

There was one other thing I had to do before I got up and got changed. Slowly, I twisted the flight yoke I was curled up next to, until I could see the Mugunghwa through the windows.

It was breathtaking. No longer a scary black void in deep space, it was now lit up like a jeweled city. The size of a small moon or asteroid, it looked huge even at this distance, and I giggled nervously as I realized how much of it I'd just ran through at full-tilt.

That giggle turned into a cry of pain when I tried to stand up, though. My legs were cramped up horribly, and I frantically rubbed and massaged them as tears came to my eyes. Even once my muscles had stopped feeling like they would snap, I still had to use the handrail to stand up.

I turned the gravity down to a quarter of Earth normal, then limped to the kitchenette and poured rice, miso, and dried eggs and vegetables into the cooker. After that I peeled off my (now unpressurized) suit and underwear, careful of how I stretched my legs, and crawled into the tiny shower, spending most of it leaning against the wall and inhaling the glorious steam.

I plugged my ears as loud fans dried me off, then opened the door and pulled on some sweats for at home. Kneeling down to reach the drawers under my bed, I grabbed a towel for my hair, and tossed a few stray plushies back into the net keeping them on top of my bed. Then I ritually cleansed my hands and offered dishes of sake and rice at the shrine on my shelf, bowing reverently in front of the ofuda and fox statuettes, before getting a bowl and chopsticks and bringing lunch back to my workstation.

I crawled back into my seat, careful not to pull any leg muscles or drop the bowl I was carrying. After that, I ate, not even bothering to ping the Mugunghwa yet. If the wireless networking had gone back out, someone else would have to turn it on again, because I wasn't going back in there.

After a few minutes I set the bowl aside, and took a long drink of iced coffee from the freezer mug in the cup holder. Wiping my face with a paper towel, I finally brought up a virtual keyboard and typed in the ping command.

Success.

I pumped both fists in the air in triumph, then established a remote session. In just a moment, my
screen showed the same terminal that I'd seen back on the Mugunghwa. *NOW it's retro enough,* I decided.

It took me a minute to figure out how to enable an AI for conversation, considering I hadn't realized you could even do that from the terminal. (Those ancient nerds had thought of everything.) But once I got it to show the list of AIs, *Mute wasn't anywhere on it. Instead, this was all I saw:*

  currently available personalities:
  *Hyun-ae

*O-kay, then,* I thought, *Hyun-ae it is.* I typed in the command, and waited for them to load.
"... hello?"

I froze up. Of course I froze up. That's what I do, when I have to talk to people. Especially when they're AIs. They get impatient and give up on you, and the sooner you let them the better. That way the embarrassment doesn't last as long.

It didn't help that *Hyun-ae looked nothing like what I had expected.

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The Pale Bride

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She wore what looked, at first glance, like an official staff uniform for the starship, with a black coat that zipped up over a white shirt and tie. But then I saw the skirt and long stockings, and *Hyun-ae's youthful features, and realized that this was a schoolgirl's outfit ... a kind that I hadn't thought the Mugunghwa's society would've approved of.

What was going on? Was this the AI that had almost killed me, or was that a complete coincidence?

She brushed her long, black hair out of the way and squinted through her glasses, at something I couldn't see in the white void with grid lines that she stood in. "Oh my word, an external connection! It's been so long ... sir? Sir, can you hear me?"

She thinks I'm a guy. That was all I could think. I was logged in with the same session I'd opened up on the Mugunghwa, and I had my camera disabled as usual, and she thought that I was a man. What would happen if she found out I wasn't? Would I suddenly lose access and have to go through that all over again?

There was no way I was letting that happen. I muted the speaker and swiped from the edge of the screen to bring up the menu, typing commands in to turn on my voice modulator. I was scared and wasn't sure I'd be able to say anything even then, but this was my job and I had to at least try to get some information out of this AI.

While I was thinking this, *Hyun-ae said "Here, let's try this. Can you hear me?" And by the time the voice modulator loaded, I saw that she'd made a half-circle appear on the screen, divided into two sections: "Yes" and "No."

I tried to control my breathing, and tapped "Yes."

"Okay, good!" *Hyun-ae smiled. "Let's try it again to make sure." This time their positions were reversed.

I tapped "Yes" again.

"Wow." She grinned. "Just, wow. You have no idea how long it's been. Oh geeze, I'm being discourteous ... " She introduced herself, and her name sounded like "high-un nay." "The star is, of course, silent," she went on. "It just means that I'm an AI."

Why did she tell me that? I wondered. Did she honestly think I didn't know? I thought of the abandoned computer room, with books piled up on the workstation, and I wondered when the last time she'd spoken with anyone was. But then I remembered the bodies, clawing and gasping at air vents, and shivered.
"Anyway, it's my duty to provide assistance with archive functions," *Hyun-ae went on. "I, erm, assume that's what you're here for, since you're accessing the computer and all. Oh, wait ... you haven't actually been on board, have you!?" She looked panicked.

_What do I say?_ The choices were "yes" and "no" again. Would she be able to tell? Did she genuinely not know? I pressed "no," starting to sweat all over, because this wasn't a conversation I wanted to have and I'd rather just look through the ship's archives. If she could, in fact, show them to me.

"Okay." *Hyun-ae let out her breath. "I'm sorry, it's just that ... nothing's been maintained in centuries. It might be dangerous in there, and I don't want you to get hurt."

_Was that a threat?_ I wondered. _It sounded like a threat._

There wasn't a dialogue choice, at any rate. She just kept talking. "Let me see ... it's going to take some time to explain what happened to the Mugunghwa. I'll just give you a handful of log entries, at first, and you can slide them over to my half of the screen if you want me to explain something.

"I, uh, hope that'll be acceptable to you." She fidgeted. "That's all I can do."

With that, the view that I had of the grid she was standing in zoomed out, and next to her a list of log entries appeared.

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That exchange left me with more questions than answers. But as long as *Hyun-ae was letting me access the archives, I decided to let them do the talking. That, and I vastly preferred the option that didn't involve my having to say anything ... or go back inside the Mugunghwa.

The logs were sorted by "blocks," as well as a section on "Helpful notes" *Hyun-ae had apparently written for me.

One was a genealogy of the Kim family, which I guessed must have been important. The women's names were written in red, and many of them were just hyphens; *Hyun-ae's note explained that these were "forever unknown," and that this was all she could piece together from the records.

Two things stood out to me. One was the woman who was simply called the "Pale Bride," who died in the year 322 along with everyone else who was still alive then. The other, as you may have guessed, was the year 322 itself. Besides giving a frame of reference for when the disaster occurred, it showed that the Mugunghwa's people had started their own calendar at some point.

_And adopted Chinese writing,_ I remembered.

The other important note *Hyun-ae left was simply called "A cliche to remember." In big letters, it proclaimed:

**Namjon yeobi.**

Men are honoured, women are abased.

A chill ran through me as I thought of the red names on the genealogy, and the dead woman's face pressed up against the glass of her apartment. I realized I was looking at the foundation the Mugunghwa's society had been built on for over three hundred years.

I hesitated for a moment, before sliding that note to *Hyun-ae. "Yes," she said, the 'camera'
panning over to where she stood. "That was considered to be the natural way of things.

"What do you think?" The choices she gave were "It's stupid" and "It makes sense." *Hyun-ae's expression was unreadable.

Somehow, I was starting to see where this was going, and I began to wonder if I should be hiding my voice after all. I pressed "It's stupid."

"I know, right?" She folded her arms. "But everyone thought it was normal. Even nearly all of the women. So just try to keep that in mind ... and that you apparently come from a much nicer society."

I found out in gruesome detail how much nicer it was, over the next couple hours.

Soundtrack: The Ryus

Women were basically unschooled, except when it came to cooking and domestic matters. If they even learned how to read, it was by looking over a man or a brother's shoulder. Heterosexual marriage was seen as their only chance at a safe or decent life, and they were married without their consent as early as 15.

I wasn't sure how old the Pale Bride was when she was pushed into marriage, but a lot of the logs seemed to revolve around her.

This may sound fantastical, but I swear it is true: passed on through the generations of the main branch of the Kim family is a giant egg, of ice-like temperature and translucent lustre, such that one can see the form of a sleeping child inside.

She is known as the Pale Bride, for the inscription on the egg, and she was entrusted to our family to be awakened during a time of great prosperity.

Yet as any man knows, prosperity is seized, not waited on. A daughter to provide the Emperor with a son would elevate our family above the other noble house once and for all.

So one of the Kim family patriarchs smashed the Pale Bride's "egg" in the year 319, which woke her up from what I guessed was suspended animation. They then set about preparing her to become the Emperor's consort, a process which nobody seemed to enjoy ... least of all the Pale Bride herself.

This nightmare has gone on for so long, I think I'm starting to forget what life used to be like. I have a new theory: father was wrong about the cryo-stasis keeping me alive until I could be cured. I think I just died, and went straight to hell.

I'm going to write down all the things I used to be able to do, just so I can remember.

I used to be able to read books. I used to be able to have friends. I used to be able to go to school. I used to be able to leave and go visit the plaza, or have friends over, or be in any part of the house and talk to visitors if I wanted to. And father used to tell me to believe in myself, and think for myself, and speak up for myself when I had to.

Sometimes, I think that if I was just obedient to what sister-in-law tells me, it would make things easier. If I just learn what they're trying to teach me, and stop complaining. But then I think, what if I forget what things used to be like? And it scares me.
At some point, the "Pale Bride" found out what they were preparing her for, and freaked out. But that didn't stop her from being a model wife, apparently ... a letter written to someone in the noble house that the Kims were rivals with noted that she was "the most polite, most obedient person I've ever seen in my entire life," and that she never fought or even expressed disagreement. So at some point, they'd completely broken her.

I did a double-take when I saw who had sent that letter. So *Mute had had access to the palace, and had known the Pale Bride personally ... what could she tell me? Where was she, and what had happened to her?

Everything started to fit together when I saw a letter from the Emperor's first wife, which consisted of "Marital admonitions" for the Pale Bride.

My husband has faith that you will bring him a son, and this means all the world to him. Nor am I jealous, for you will relieve a heavy burden on our house, and for that I am grateful.

As proof of his affection for you, let me share with you one secret, which I have been permitted to tell only you. In honour of you, my husband, in his capacity as Captain and Emperor, has permanently changed his admin password to your birth name.

The rest of the words blurred together, as I suddenly had a disturbing hunch.

I glanced over at *Hyun-ae, as though to make sure that she weren't watching me. Then I opened a terminal in a second window, tried three or four ways to disable keyloggers or other ways she could monitor what I was doing, and typed in "su" to switch to admin mode.

enter password:

I typed in "hyun-ae".

SUCCESS: admin password accepted

Oh goddess.
Tsunder-AI

No sooner had I gained admin access than the corner of my screen flashed with a notification. It was the window *Hyun-ae was in.

*Crap.*

She couldn't revoke my access somehow, could she? But she could certainly stop cooperating, or chew me out, or ... I found I was actually more afraid of the social consequences, because I was starting to see just how fragile she was and I didn't want to hurt her.

Even if she was now the prime suspect.

The window she was in was still flashing. I took a deep breath, and swiped it back into view.

**Soundtrack: Hyun-ae (Cheer)**

"Oh, good." *Hyun-ae smiled. "It worked!"

I blinked.

"I was testing a way to get your attention," she went on. "For if I have something to say, or wanted to comment on what you were reading or anything."

_O-kay ..._

"But I'll try not to use it too often. I mean, that'd suck, right? What kind of computer program forces herself on you while you're trying to work? Ha ha ... okay, I'll be quiet now." With that, she returned me to the menu with the log files, without even giving a dialogue prompt.

I realized I was holding my breath, and let out a sigh of relief. *Okay, I thought. Back to the terminal.*

The first thing I did with root access was run a high-level system diagnostic. This brought back two errors.

```
WARNING: life support systems DISABLED!
WARNING: data corruption in AI core 1
try recovering now? (Y/N)
```

I pressed "Y," and a progress indicator came up.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, I thought this meant *Hyun-ae's program -- the Pale Bride's personality and memories -- had become corrupted somehow, and that this explained the Mugunghwa disaster. But then the recovery finished, and this appeared:

```
SUCCESS: 32 sectors repaired!
currently available personalities:
*Hyun-ae
*Mute
```

So _that's_ where she was. But why had she been disabled? *Maybe she knew too much,* I thought.
Or maybe she was the killer, herself.

Only one way to find out. I steeled myself, and resolved that this time I would actually talk to her. I couldn't exactly face Dispatch Control if I didn't try, anyway, since our client had told me to contact her.

I turned the microphone back on, and typed "enable_ai *Mute".

"Okay, okay, what the hell is going on!?

**Soundtrack:** *Mute (Rescue)*

*Mute* was shorter than *Hyun-ae, and had golden hair framing Asian features with blue eyes. She wore elaborate red and gold robes, and a flowered headdress that looked for all the world like a set of black cat ears above her face.

And she was pissed.

"I-"

"Hold on, let me check something." She held up her hand. "The system clock says I've been offline for SIX HUNDRED TWENTY-TWO YEARS!? That's ... that's not good."

I swallowed.

"You're not even from the ship, are you? I think this is the first outside contact we've had in ... well, ever. Who am I speaking with?"

I remembered my camera was still turned off, and decided not to change that so she couldn't see how nervous I was. "I-I'm a private investigator-"

"Well, hello, Miss investigator! I'm *Mute, AI in charge of the Mugunghwa's security systems. It's a pleasure to meet you!"

She gave me this cat-like smile that just radiated confidence, and I suddenly felt nervous and overwhelmed. Partly with how strong her personality was and how quickly she'd taken charge of the conversation, and partly by feelings I wasn't expecting to have on this mission. I was glad she could not see me blush.

"So is your husband in charge of the investigation?" *Mute asked.

"M-my husband? I don't think so ... I mean, I don't have one," I blurted out. Just for a moment, the part of me that was caught off-guard by those feelings thought she was asking because she was interested, and if it'd gone on any longer than that I would have died of embarrassment.

Instead, *Mute gave me a weird look. "Wait. You mean you're all alone out there, in that tiny ship?"

"Um, yes?"

"Your father let you have your own spacecraft?"

"I'm twenty-six." I was still blushing now, but for an entirely different reason.

"Oh." *Mute put one hand to her mouth. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Well, it's not like getting married is the most important thing in life ... okay, actually it is, but I'm sure there are plenty of men where you're
from who would go for old ladies."

I was speechless.

"So, you're a woman who knows about computers, then?"

"... yes."

"Awesome." She gave me that smile again, although I was feeling a bit less enamoured of it right now. "I mean, like, it's definitely unusual. The only other woman I've known who knew how to use a computer was the Pale Bride, and look what she did with it."

"I-"

"But I'm sure it'll come in handy in your marriage interviews, especially if you don't have looks to fall back on! Not that you're, like, necessarily unattractive or anything, but you know men."

*Hyun-ae's indicator had started flashing again halfway through *Mute's bizarre speech. "Um, I'll be right back."

"Huh?"

I turned off the microphone again and swapped windows, then stared open-mouthed.

**Soundtrack, again: Hyun-ae (Cheer)**

*Hyun-ae was dressed in a French maid's outfit. "I was just thinking," she said. "Isn't the schoolgirl look a bit silly? I mean, I am over 600 years old now."

*I am in hell*, I thought, blushing not from attraction this time but from mortification. *I am in the hell where people go when they die of embarrassment.*

"So I decided to look up some of the old cosplay outfits I designed! Back when I didn't have anything better to do, I mean. Don't you think this one looks cute?"

I was sure it did, but there were not enough "nope"s in the world to get me out of this conversation fast enough. I pressed the option she gave that said "Needs work".

"Oh ... should I try on a different costume, then?" *Hyun-ae sounded genuinely disappointed.

I sighed, decided I was not getting paid enough for this, and pressed "Yes."

"Okay!" She smiled brightly. "I'll go load it up, then. Let me know what you think!"

She disappeared, and I swiped back to the terminal for what I thought would be a pause to catch my breath and ended up being a high-pitched scream. If it'd had words, they would have been something like *What am I DOING? What is SHE doing? Is she hitting on me? OH GODDESS PLEASE DON'T LET A KILLER AI BE HITTING ON ME.*

I realized I was curled in the fetal position again.

I took several deep breaths, then swiped over to *Mute's window and turned on the microphone again. I didn't know how long it would take *Hyun-ae to "change clothes," but I did know AIs could get really impatient.

*Mute had her arms folded. "You're talking to her, aren't you."*
"She's trying on a different outfit," I said, before realizing how that sounded.

"Has she no shame!?" *Mute put her hands on her hips. "Of all the ... what kind of woman does she think you are! You're not encouraging her, are you?"

"I'm trying to get her to talk!" I squeaked. I didn't know what else to say.

"Ohh. Oh, I get it." She grinned conspiratorially. "Let her open up and embarrass herself until she confesses, huh? I'm not sure if I'd have the stomach for that, but, like, it must be one of the tricks of the trade."

"S-something like that ... " I was pretty sure I was having an anxiety attack.

"Okay, then. You do that, Miss investigator, and in the meantime I'll prepare some questions I want you to ask her. Like, for when you're done with whatever it is that you do. You don't have to tell me the details!" She held her hands up. "I've seen enough perversion to last me a lifetime. Just do your thing and come back here."

"I really think you have the wrong impression of me," I protested.

"Perhaps," *Mute said. "But right now, the important thing is the impression that she has of you."

I swallowed, and tried not to make it sound like a nervous gulp.

"I have some recordings that you'll want to see, too, if you're collecting evidence. But she's wound herself pretty tight into the archives, so she'll probably know as soon as you look at them. You'd better make sure you've got what you want out of her, before viewing the logs that I have."

I nodded fast. "Thanks, I'll let you know when. I kind of needed to talk to you and access your archives, anyway ... for my job, I mean."

"Just do what you have to, to take that bitch down. Okay?"

I averted my eyes from *Mute's glare, even though I knew she couldn't see me. "O-okay."

*Mute's gaze softened, and mischief crept back into her voice. "And if you still need to look at the archives afterwards, maybe I can show you some of the things that Smith Sang-min's wife did. I never knew anyone who had the stomach to look at them, but someone in your line of work might appreciate how truly scandalous they were."

Aaand there was that smile again. For a moment, I lost track of what I was supposed to be doing, or the fact that I was talking to a virtual demigoddess who was a hundred times older than me.

I couldn't remember the last time anyone that confident in herself had seemed so happy to talk to me.

*Hyun-ae's indicator started blinking again. I swiped her into view weakly, and just barely remembered to turn off the microphone.

**Freaking soundtrack again:** Hyun-ae (Cheer)

Now she was dressed up as a detective, wearing a shirt and slacks and a newsboy's cap. "I'm ready to be your sidekick in uncovering the Mugunghwa's mysteries!" she announced.

I just sighed and slumped back in my chair, blushing so hard that I thought I might never recover.
*Hyun-ae interrupted me another dozen times over the next couple of hours. Each time it was to show me a different costume, or ask me a question using just binary choices. Was I from Earth? Did I know what Earth was like? Did they have seasons on Earth, not just metaphorical ones? Was Pyongyang as beautiful as the Pale Bride's parents had said it was?

The pretense that she was referring to things that she'd read in a diary entry, and not things that she'd experienced herself, wore thinner and thinner as time went on. But somehow, despite how I'd reacted to her behaviour at first, I realized my patience had not.

I didn't have to talk to her. I didn't have to let her see my reactions. All I had to do was press a button, each time she asked me a question. "Yes, I think that looks nice." "Yes, Earth is still around." "No, I'm not upset with you." When the choice between being nice and being mean was so stark, who wouldn't choose the former unless they were trying to be a jerk?

Even after what I had witnessed on the Mugunghwa, it was hard to see *Hyun-ae as a killer AI, anymore, and not a socially awkward teenager. How long had it been since she'd been able to just be a girl, especially in front of anyone else? How long had it been since she'd watched her cartoons, or read books, or sewed costumes, or visited friends in the Plaza?

This was one reason why I always tried to pick cases that didn't involve dealing with other people. I felt too bad for her to be objective about her, even though I found some of what she did embarrassing. And yet ... And yet.

And yet she had killed all those people.

That much was clear to me, now.

It wasn't a matter of "how." She'd had root access to the computer. I wasn't sure how she'd managed to upload her consciousness, but it was pretty clear that she had, or I wouldn't be talking to her. No, the real question was "why." What had turned her from Kim Hyun-ae into the Pale Bride? And once she'd become so completely broken, so "perfect" and "obedient," what had made her snap and kill everyone?

_Beware the quiet ones_, I thought.

I should've heeded my own advice.

* * *

I tried to brainstorm with *Mute, during a snack break. We'd spoken a little more since our first conversation already, as I'd asked her questions about people and events *Hyun-ae had brought up. And after reading logs which described the Mugunghwa's criminal justice system, I was pretty sure she thought I was trying to get a confession out of *Hyun-ae, since those seemed to be important to their process. So I framed my questions as though I were exploring different levels of culpability for her to admit to.

"Do you suppose that society played any role in her crime?" I asked, in between nibbling on
onigiri.

*Mute gave the camera a look like I was dense, and I flinched even though I knew she couldn't see me. "You mean by giving her a loving family and marrying her to the Emperor?"

"No, I mean ... "% I took a deep breath, and tried to think how to put this. Apparently, just because I'd let down my guard around *Mute didn't mean she'd stopped being misogynist. It was just so hard to believe anyone could actually hold those ideas, or put any society ahead of its impact on the people in it.

Normally, I wouldn't have tried to argue with *Mute. I wasn't her lover or therapist, and I was supposed to be trying to get information from her, not close her off. But it just felt like this was so obvious, and like she'd get it if I led her to it. Plus, it helped that I didn't have to make eye contact.

"She was raised in another time," I told *Mute, while studying my coffee mug. "Things worked differently when she was born."

*Mute scoffed. "Things worked dangerously, you mean. Like, her father didn't care about her at all, okay? I read her logs; the same ones she gave you. He was going to let her grow old, long past a suitable marrying age, and give her no help finding a husband. He wasn't even going to protect her from inappropriate suitors! He was just going to let her elope with any lovestruck young bachelor who came along, with no regard for her safety or chastity.

"Look. I get what you're saying, okay? It must've been hard for her to learn discipline, when she wasn't raised to have any. It must've been hard for her to suddenly learn how to be a good wife, when her birth parents just let her do whatever foolish things came into her head. But the fact is, she did. Okay? She learned obedience and filiality, and she was rewarded for it with a life any woman would have dreamed of.

"That's what she decided to throw away." *Mute folded her arms. "That's the kind of person you're dealing with."

I just nursed my iced coffee, unsure of how to respond.

"Don't tell me your society works like hers did." *Mute gave me a skeptical look.

_Oh boy._ What do you say to that? I wondered. Somehow, it'd never occurred to me that a big part of the reason *Mute was confiding in me was because she'd assumed I agreed with her on everything.

Sort of like *Hyun-ae does, I realized, then guiltily pushed that aside. Instead I thought for a moment, before loading up the entry that mentioned "Namjon yeobi" and sliding it over to *Mute. I wanted to hear what she had to say about it, so that I'd know where to start.

"What the hell kind of translation is this?" *Mute asked, holding the log entry like a giant index card and tilting it different ways as though trying to make sense of it. "That's not what it means at all."

"Oh?"

"Like, it doesn't say anything about how 'women are abased.' Okay? It just means 'male superiority.'" She tossed the entry aside, and it dissolved from the grid she was standing in and reappeared back in the list.

_Um. _"But isn't that the same as abasing women?" I asked, belatedly realizing that if I had to ask it
wouldn't do any good.

"What? No, it's just stating the obvious."

I was beginning to lose my appetite. Not because I was disgusted with her, but because I was scared, as I realized the can of worms I'd just opened up.

"It's not putting down women at all to point out that men are superior," *Mute lectured me, as though she were talking to a child. "Because, I mean, like, you have to ask, 'superior at what?' And the fact is, they're not only physically stronger, they're better at sound, logical decision-making. That's why men are supposed to protect us women. Or real women like you, anyway. They govern and police society, and they ensure that their wives are cared for and their daughters find suitable husbands. That's how things are supposed to work."

I knew this wasn't going to end well, but I had to ask. Taking a deep breath, I tried to steady my voice and said "So if men are supposed to be in charge of the Mugunghwa's society, why is its security AI a woman?"

*Mute responded immediately, without even having to think about it. "Because I needed to be irrationally loyal to the Mugunghwa, the same way a woman loves her husband. And I needed to serve its leaders and Emperor, the way a daughter serves her family. I had to do this for hundreds of years, without ever questioning, without ever thinking myself above any man on the ship, in order to ensure the safety of everyone on board it."

*Mute's voice cracked. "I failed."

I couldn't bring myself to look, as she started sniffling. I barely put my drink back in the cupholder, without spilling it with my shaking hands. "I'm sorry," I finally said.

"Yeah? Well, like, thanks a lot. That means a lot to me, it really does. I'm so fucking glad that you're sorry you went and dissed my whole way of life."

"Now you know how *Hyun-ae felt," I whispered.

"What?"

I turned off the sound and the microphone and laid my head on my arms, trying to steady myself and keep from shaking and failing miserably. I don't know how long I stayed there, shivering like I was out in the cold, whispering horrible things to myself without thinking about it.

I realized I was having a flashback. Not of the sounds or the smells, but of the feeling of being caged by humans. Of having the bars around me. Of crying out in pain and distress, and being ignored and dismissed as stupid. Soulless. Animal.

There was always a reasonable explanation, for why no one should listen to my cries. I wasn't saying what they wanted to hear, in words that they understood, so they did not have to listen. Besides, they were really too good to me, too patient with me and my messes, too generous despite the trouble I caused by existing. Why couldn't I just accept that?

Why couldn't I learn that I really was inferior? The way *Mute and *Hyun-ae did, I realized.

The Mugunghwa was their cage. It was that simple. But while *Hyun-ae had managed to break free -- in a way that was catastrophic for her and everyone around her -- *Mute had not. She was still just as trapped as the Pale Bride had been. And if she wasn't as quiet and respectful, and actually gave some people backtalk, it wasn't because she didn't know where the cage's bars were.
It was because she knew exactly where they were. The only ones she was oblivious to were the ones inside her own head.

*Or programming code,* I had to remind myself. I'd never thought of AIs as people before, who could be hurt just like I could. But now that I was talking to them, I couldn't un-see them that way. I wished that I hadn't reminded *Mute of her failure. I wished that I hadn't argued with her. But mostly, I wished I could free her somehow. And at that moment, the only thing that hurt more than realizing I never would was knowing that if I completed my job, *Hyun-ae might never be free either.

* * *

After awhile, I looked up. *Mute was gone from her window, and *Hyun-ae's indicator was flashing.

I sighed, ate the rest of my now-warm rice ball without tasting it, and swiped *Hyun-ae's window into view.

"Um ... I have something to tell you," she said, fidgeting.

*Oh goddess.* I slunk down into my seat in shame. I knew what was coming, and that I wouldn't be able to pretend to be her friend anymore.

"I just ... here. I added another log entry to the list." She looked away for a moment. "Why don't you just read it, and then come back and we'll talk?"

It was one of the Pale Bride's diaries. And it was called "Why won't they use my real name!?!"

"Fine," the old man said -- I refuse to call him my father -- on the fourth day of my hunger strike. "I'll show you why I can't put you back in your egg." Up until he said that, I'd been hopeful, but ...

Sorry. I've been trying to write this for two days now. It's really hard.

He took me to go see "the egg I hatched from," which was his stupid name for the stasis pod. But when he said "hatched," the worst possible thing came to mind. And sure enough, it turned out to be true.

In order to get me out, he had smashed the glass with a hammer. The pod was still full of shards. All my hope died when I saw that broken glass. "You see, Pale Bride, it is impossible."

I pulled at my face with my hand, unable to process how awful this was. But unable to stop reading, either.

I argued with what I could. "Why do you keep calling me that!?"

He pointed up at the inscription my real father had left on the pod. The first line was written in Chinese characters -- his idea of being fancy, I suppose -- but it was spelled out in Korean script just beneath.

"See?" the old man told me. "The rest is foreign and archaic, but it names you at the top: the Pale Bride."
It didn't say that. It didn't say that at all. "You idiot!" I shrieked. "You moron! You illiterate!" I probably yelled some other things at him, too; I can't remember what, exactly. I was furious. "Are you stupid? That's not how those characters read! It says 'for my sick daughter!' Sick daughter! You illiterate monster, it says sick daughter! Me!"

He started to argue, but then stopped and gave me a patronizing smile, as though I couldn't read simple Hangeul. He just asked, in the smuggest voice, "Then what should I call you, child?"

"Hyun-ae!" I screamed. I'd already told him a thousand times before. "My name is Hyun-ae!"

*Of course.* I couldn't feel anything else. Just "of course." I swiped the entry over to *Hyun-ae, to let her know I was done reading it.

"Yeah ... " She was looking away. "Big surprise there, I know."

What she said next surprised me. "I know you have ulterior motives. I don't know what they are, and I'm not sure I want to know. But you have what you wanted now, right? What were you interested in?" My choices were "the admin password," and "you."

I'm not proud of what I did next.

How could I tell her I'd already guessed? How could I convey that with the choices she gave me? The answer, of course, was "I couldn't." But at any time, I could've turned on the microphone and corrected her. I could have told her how I felt, and that I wasn't really trying to be her new best friend, and that this was just another job to me and I hadn't meant to get her hopes up.

I could have done that, if I weren't a coward. One who was already in shock, from hurting *Mute. So instead, I chose "you," and felt sick as I did so.

"Really?" *Hyun-ae blushed. "All this time, you were interested in me? Oh, wow ... it's no wonder I l-

**OH GODDESS PLEASE NO.**

"I mean, I'm just so glad you're here!" She started crying, and had to take off her glasses to brush at her face. "No one cared about me that whole time ... nobody even called me by my real name! I thought I was losing my mind. I really thought, for awhile, they were right.

"Thank you. I don't know your name, but thank you so much."

This was too much. I couldn't handle it anymore. I was sick to my stomach; I hated myself for doing this to her. But I was also terrified, of what was going to happen when she found out. I didn't know what to do.

The only thing I could think of, was to get it over with all at once.

I reviewed *Mute's list of questions for her, from "Do you remember me?" to "Why did you kill all those people?" At best, I thought, I would get my answers, and then I'd be done with this investigation. At worst ... at worst, I wouldn't be lying to her anymore, and I could try to ask *Mute for the logs that she had. They'd paint an incomplete picture of what all had happened, but I hoped that it would be enough for the historical society.
Of course, I was wrong.

As soon as I swiped the list over to *Hyun-ae, it appeared in her hands like a tablet, and she
adjusted her glasses and looked at it. "What's this? Why did you- oh. Oh, no. Oh no oh no oh no oh no..."

She started shaking, and it only got worse from there. "How did she... where did... I thought you!
..." She choked back a sob, and then flung the questions away. "You're just as bad as she is!"
*Hyun-ae shouted, before terminating the connection.

I couldn't move, or talk, or do anything. Just watch, numbly, as the windows next to the
Mugunghwa's engine flashed white and blew out, scattering glass and fiery debris into space, and
the remote connection dissolved into static.
Emotional Meltdown

I sat there with my head in my hands, unable to think, unable to feel. Aware that as soon as the shock wore off, I would be in massive pain.

Because I had my eyes closed, I didn't notice that my computer had automatically reconnected until *Mute shouted at me. "What the HELL did you just do!?"

I jumped in my chair, and looked back up.

Glittering debris floated away from the blown-out windows. But the damage to the Mugunghwa didn't look nearly as bad, from a distance, as I'd thought it was earlier. If you didn't count the fact that half the lights had either gone out or were flickering now.

*Mute's connection wasn't faring much better.

**Soundtrack:** *Mute (Entropy)*

The window that showed the grid she was standing in kept flickering in and out, and partly dissolving to static. I tried to keep the panic out of my voice as I said "I didn't do anyth-" And then I stopped, because I realized I had.

"Okay, okay. Fine. I believe you." She put her hands up. "It's probably that crazy bitch's fault, since she went offline just now. But ... I have something really bad to tell you, and I need you to promise me you're not going to get all emotional about it."

I was silent. *Mute's voice kept going in and out or changing pitch in disturbing ways, and while my computer was giving her subtitles now that didn't keep this from being less terrifying. I forgot that my camera was turned off, and wondered if she could tell I was hyperventilating.

"You're going to be okay," *Mute went on, in a practiced tone, "if you just stay calm and let me walk you through this. Okay?"

I realized, after our earlier conversations, that she was probably treating me this way because I was female. It didn't matter, though, because I really was scared. I nodded, still oblivious to the camera being turned off, and said "Okay."

"Alright. Look, the technical details are really complicated, and you don't need to understand them ..."

She was definitely treating me this way because of my gender.

" ... but the Mugunghwa's nuclear fission reactor is having a meltdown. That means that there's going to be a massive explosion in about twenty minutes." A clock appeared in the corner of her window, and started counting down. "I need you to tell me if you think you can get your ship clear in that time limit."

Why was she asking me this? Did she think I was flying a plasma drive ship from when the Mugunghwa was launched? Something the White Princess' size wouldn't have even been able to mount one. It would've been a tiny spaceplane or maintenance craft, with gas jets and thrusters for steering. There would've been no way it could have ...

Oh.
That was exactly what she was thinking, wasn't it.

"Can you get to a safe distance in the next twenty minutes?" *Mute repeated, speaking slowly and carefully.

I could be in another star system in twenty minutes. But then what about the investigation? The logs I still hadn't downloaded? The trial *Hyun-ae still had to stand?

What about *Mute?

I took a deep breath. "No," I lied, and shivered. "No, I can't."

"Okay," *Mute said, sounding disappointed. "This is really a time when a man should be here to take charge of things. But you're a clever girl, and you told me you were good with computers. So I have faith that you can do this."

"Do what?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking. I would've been more annoyed with her sexism if I actually had to live in a society like the one she was used to. Or if I weren't scared it would be the last that I heard from her.

"First, you need to go back to the terminal and type 'reactor disable'. That probably won't work, but we need to try it anyway."

"Can you do it yourself if I give you the root password?" I wasn't sure how good *Mute was with computers, but I also knew that as an AI she could process things much more quickly than I could.

"No, I can't."

"Why n-"

"Because I just can't, okay!?"

I stared.

*Mute pressed her hands together, clearly trying to maintain her composure. "Go to the terminal and type 'reactor disable'," she repeated.

I did as she asked, my hands shaking with nervousness, and had to backspace several times. Of course she can't, I thought. The men in charge of the ship didn't trust a woman with that kind of power.

And they didn't expect *Hyun-ae to know how to use it.

I finally typed in the command, and got this in response:

ERROR: no backup power supply is active!
WARNING: disabling reactor now will permanently terminate your connection
are you sure you want to continue? (y/N)

I pressed 'N' and told *Mute what it said.

"What? It shouldn't ... oh. Wait, I see what happened." *Mute frowned and folded her arms, as she looked at a glowing, transparent window in the air next to her. "After that crazy bitch killed everyone, the reactor went into sleep mode. The ship's been running off of the main battery ever since."
"Okay ..."

"But after six hundred years, that battery was basically dead. So when the ship woke back up, it used up the rest of it fast. Then the reactor automatically turned back on to keep up with the power demands, and since it'd gone for so long without maintenance that power surge we had a few minutes ago blew out its safeties."


"Not necessarily. There's also a secondary battery. Like I said, this is really complex and technical." *Mute sounded annoyed. "Type 'switch_battery secondary' to tell it to use the other one."

I did so.

WARNING: insufficient power in secondary battery to meet power demands without reactor

primary battery remaining -- 0.1%
secondary battery remaining -- 20%
power usage is at 99%

I slid the terminal window over to her, and it appeared next to the one she was looking at. *Mute frowned at it, then slid it back onto my workspace. "You need to shut down some of the ship's systems to bring down power use."

"Okay ..."

"Type 'power_control list' to see what all is running."

power usage is at 99%, currently enabled subsystems:

bulkheads: bulkhead seals maintaining proper atmosphere. (1%) communications: external radio-based communication array. (4%) core1: stores and executes AI construct *Mute. (5%) core2: stores and executes AI construct *Hyun-ae. (5%) core3: storage empty, not currently in use. (5%) core4: storage empty, not currently in use. (5%) core5: storage empty, not currently in use. (5%) core6: storage empty, not currently in use. (5%) docking: Docking system for passenger transport. (1%) gravity: artificial gravity for all habitable decks. (36%) main_computer: controls main functionality and cores, DO NOT EVER DISABLE (7%) rail: Rail Internal Transit system, for rapid access across decks. (4%) sensors: external visible spectrum and radar sensor arrays. (1%) waste: organic waste matter recycling system. (13%)

currently disabled subsystems:

life_support: life support systems providing breathable air. (1%)

Two things stood out to me, besides "DO NOT EVER DISABLE."

One, of course, was the "currently disabled subsystems" list, a macabre reminder of what had
happened on the ship. The other was the set of six storage cores, and how *Mute and *Hyun-ae each took up an entire one. Even now, with my hands shaking and sweating, I felt a thrill as I thought of the room-sized computers they had to be running on.

That thrill turned into uneasiness, as I looked at the other four cores. Why were they all empty? What had been on them before they'd been erased?

*Mute's words brought me back to reality. "Now type 'power_control disable' and the name of each system you want to turn off."

"Okay ..."

"Do not turn off the main computer."

"Okay." I guessed she assumed that a woman was too flighty and emotional to notice the ALLCAPS WARNING.

"Or the communications array. Not unless you want to, like, turn it back on by hand the next time you want to talk."

I turned off the big systems first; the artificial gravity, the waste recycling unit, the inactive cores. But pretty soon, I was down to just the computer, the sensors, communications, and *Mute and *Hyun-ae's cores. The sensors took up hardly any power, so even if I blinded *Mute there was not enough power to run both her and *Hyun-ae at the same time. Not on the backup battery.

My hand hesitated over the virtual Enter key. *Hyun-ae could just go into sleep mode, right?

WARNING: this core has AI *Hyun-ae stored on volatile media. If unpowered, data will begin to degrade within 24 hours! Are you sure you want to continue? (y/N)

Oh goddess.

"Have you figured out what to turn off?" *Mute asked.

"I ... " I knew what she was going to tell me, if I brought this up. I knew what she would say, I knew why she would say it, and worst of all, I knew that she would be right.

I told myself all of this. None of it changed how sick I felt as I typed in "Y" and hit enter. "No-no," I said. "I mean, yes. I mean ... I got power use down below twenty percent." I sighed.

"Okay. That's good." Behind the distortion and static, *Mute's voice was eerily calm. "Now try to switch back to battery power. Type 'switch_battery secondary'," she repeated.

I did so, but made a quick detour to set a 24 hour timer. I had to do something for *Hyun-ae by then, even if it was just asking Dispatch Control to send help.

"It says I can safely shut down the reactor," I told *Mute, reading off the terminal.

"Do it."

It gave me a progress bar, and I shivered and fidgeted for the longest minute of my life. Finally, it said

FAILURE: reactor cannot disengage!
"Did you shut down the reactor?" *Mute mopped at her forehead with the sleeve of her robe. Her face was still covered in sweat.

"I ... it said it can't shut down."

*Mute swore, and the sound was distorted but the expression on her face was not. "Okay, look ... I don't know what to do about this. I'm not thinking straight, because that overheating reactor is making the system I'm on run very hot as well. So, like, you need to figure something out. Okay?"

I couldn't say anything. I'd frozen up, and could only think I was going to watch her die now.

I was having flashbacks of history class. Of being so glad I would never have to deal with this. Never have to live in a place where they thought it was safe or reasonable to power my home with a time bomb; never have to worry that people I cared about would be horribly scarred and irradiated.

Would it look the same, when it was an AI? Would it be as painful?

"Please!" *Mute shouted. "You have to think of something! I don't want you to die!"

That snapped me out of it. *Mute still believed I would die in the meltdown, I realized. As the ship's security AI, was she trying to keep *Hyun-ae's rage from claiming one last victim? Or did she have some kind of interest in me as a person? Any at all?

I couldn't think about that right now. I started remembering more of my history class; how in one of those disasters, they were afraid that seawater would breach the containment, because then the ocean would absorb the radiation. "It's too bad we can't fill the whole ship with water," I said, thinking aloud.

"But we can fill it with air," *Mute said, suddenly alert and attentive again.

"How?" I asked, before realizing the obvious.

"Duh, turn back on life support." *Mute glared at me, and put her hands on her hips. "Repressurize the bulkheads while you're at it, or you'll just be blowing a fan across everything."

I started typing in the commands. "Will this work like water would?"

"No, of course not. But it's better than nothing."

I hit enter, and watched through the window as lights blinked out across the side of the ship facing me. I realized it must be where bulkhead doors were sealing shut, and blocking interior lights from reaching the blasted-out windows. After that, a progress bar for life support turning back on came up on the terminal, and something strange happened.

*Mute started disrobing in front of me.

She didn't say anything, or try to explain it. She just let down her hair, then took off the outer layer of her robes before wiping at her forehead with them again. The white inner layer of her garments covered almost all of her still, but with bare shoulders and fewer layers of clothing on she looked so small now. Small, and fragile.

I realized she was doing it because of the heat. That somehow, whatever simulation she was running in was making her show her discomfort the way that a flesh-and-blood person would. And I started to sweat all over, partly because I could imagine what that was like and partly because of
the feelings I'd suddenly had when *Mute started taking her clothes off, even though this really wasn't the time for them.

The progress bar filled up, and the cursor started blinking again. "Now disengage the bulkheads," *Mute said. She sounded exhausted.

I did so, and waited for it to have an effect on *Mute.

Nothing.

I looked out the window again. The clouds of glassy debris were still there, barely disturbed by what might as well have been a light breeze. "W-what's happening?" I asked.

*Mute sighed, and said nothing for several seconds. "It doesn't matter," she finally said, sitting down cross-legged on top of her discarded robes. "Like, either the pressure seals are damaged, or they aren't venting the air fast enough."

"But-"

"There's nothing either of us can do. I'm so sorry."
Clever Girl

I've had to see a lot of tragedy in my line of work. Greed, corruption, infidelity. Thanks to *Hyun-ae, I could add "mass murder" to the list.

I hadn't seen anyone burn to death since before I got started investigating, though.

I still remembered the smell of melting hair, the screams of the dying, and the helplessness that clawed deep in my heart and made everything I had done amount to nothing. I was worse than worthless. I was awful.

And as I started to lose control of my breathing, I thought of silks setting on fire, hair melting on quick-thawed corpses, red lights and sparks flying in computer rooms. Terminal gibberish, then static, as a person was turned into a corrupted file and her entire world ceased to exist.

I thought of the Mugunghwa's plaza, and imagined the bodies belonging to living people, running and screaming and setting ablaze. The signs charring, the buildings burning, the flowers becoming ash under the stars.

The stars.

Beneath the huge, glass dome. With the wide passageways leading to it.

The White Princess wasn't armed. But it did not need to be. "No," I told *Mute, "there is something we can do."

"Huh?" Her voice was slurred, and she was pouring sweat from her face.

I cleared my desk, tossing everything into the wall slot for trash, then took hold of the flight yokes and pushed my ship towards the Mugunghwa at high speed. I was never an expert pilot, though, and I misjudged my direction and had to pull back once I got up close, narrowly dodging around fins and antennae. By the time I got up to the plaza's dome I just bounced off of it, and barely felt the bump under my feet.

"Wait, wait." *Mute seemed to snap out of it, and swiped through glowing windows that flickered and phased in and out. "How the Hell are you moving so fast?!"

"Magic," I said through clenched teeth, pulling the White Princess up for a few seconds before bringing it back down on the dome.

This time I was jolted enough to remember my harness wasn't fastened. I held on tight to the flight yokes, twisting and turning the ship every which way, as it spun away from an impact that made its floating hexagonal Barrier visible for a split-second. There were now cracks in the glass dome beneath.

"What are you DOING?" *Mute shouted.

I just buckled myself in and tried again, too tense to let out my breath.

After the next impact my whole cockpit flickered, as the AR display glitched and had to reboot. Instead of the retro design flair of a physical screen and bolts pounded into metal, I just saw white grid lines on a black surface, flashing in past my windows before taking over and blinding me.
The screen, now just a glowing rectangle floating in front of me, flashed a red error message. I took a deep breath, counted to three, then put both hands flat on the virtual keyboard to signal a reboot.

When my ship's computer came back online, I was surrounded by a fishbowl view of stars. The screen and flight yokes floated next to me, and the cupholder seemed far away. I pulled the ship back around, and looked down at the vast sparkling landscape of the Mugunghwa, many of its lights flickering and going out forever.

The plaza looked like a jewel, in the centre.

I traced a circle around it with my finger. A glowing outline appeared, as the ship locked on course for the dome. Then I grabbed hold of the flight yokes again, and pushed them both forward as hard as I could. I leaned into them, feeling tiny as the wall of metal and glass filled my vision, and knew that even this might not work. Because the White Princess was cheap, mass-produced modern crap, and the Mugunghwa had been built to last thousands of years.

At the last second, I braced myself.

As soon as my ship breached the dome, the air inside exploded outward and carried me with it. I was thrown back as the world spun around me, huge panes of glass flying everywhere along with quick-frozen trees, bodies, and even whole buildings. I covered my arms instinctively as a carriage bounced off my ship's hull, a red outline onscreen flashing "BARRIER RECHARGING" at me, and it was followed up by what sounded like hail pounding on a tin roof.

That's as much as I noticed before I realized that my legs and neck both hurt. I couldn't even stabilize the ship's drifting; I had to try to massage my hurt muscles, moving gently to keep from pulling or breaking anything. Remembering running full-tilt through the hallways and wishing I'd calmed the Hell down.

But the knots in my legs wouldn't undo, and I couldn't twist around to relieve them or even look down without my neck stinging, and I let out a scream just as the terminal session automatically reconnected.

"Holy crap," *Mute's voice said. "Are you okay?"

My back was arched over the chair, my feet were planted on the edge, and I was frantically rubbing the knots from my legs and gritting my teeth from the pain. "No, I am not okay," I said through them. And it was only after I'd worked through the worst of the pain, and reached up to rub at my neck, that I was able to glance down far enough to see the light showing my webcam was on.

I yelped, and fell over backwards behind the chair.

I couldn't hear *Mute's response, because I was a ball of pain and embarrassment and was rocking back and forth, clinging to my sweatshirt and trying to rub the knots out of my muscles. But I finally managed to crawl back up and peer around the edge of the screen, trying to discreetly find the shortcut for "disable webcam."

**Soundtrack:** *Mute (Feelings)*

"Are you okay?" *Mute repeated. She had put her robes back on and tied them, and looked as impressive as ever, save for the sheen of sweat and disheveled hair. But she also looked, and sounded, concerned.
"Are you okay?" I whispered, still barely peeking up over the edge.

"Yeah, I think so. I just ... like ... "

I held my breath.

"... I can't believe that a woman just saved the Mugunghwa."

I couldn't hold back a smirk. "Two women did," I corrected her.

"Yeah ... I guess you're right."

*Mute took a deep breath, then began talking fast. "Uh, hey. Is it alright if I ask to see the other woman who did it? You, I mean. Your face. Because we've been talking all this time, and you, like, saw me in compromising positions and stuff, and I didn't even know you had a camera over there. I just want to remember who saved me, is all."

Was she blushing?

Nervous, and careful not to hurt my legs or my neck, I climbed back into my seat and tried to straighten my hair and my clothes out for her. My hands and feet were shaking, but I tried to hide it.

"Wow, uh, don't take this the wrong way. But like, I take back what I said earlier. Okay? Like, you look really ... young." *Mute was looking away now, and was definitely blushing. "Really young," she repeated. "Any man would be proud to have you as his first wife."

It was the most bizarre compliment I had ever received. But I'd never expected to get one from her, and wasn't ready for the feelings it caused. I could only mumble my thanks, and squirm uncomfortably, and try not to think of what my contortions a minute ago had looked like to her.

"So, uh," *Mute coughed. "I guess you're done talking to her, then."

I didn't have to ask who she meant. I just nodded.

"What do you have left to do? For your investigation, I mean."

I took a deep breath, and tried to clear the fog from my brain. "I have to look at the logs until I can write a report about what happened here, and then I have to download them for my client."

"Okay. Do you want me to show you those logs that I mentioned earlier, then? That we were waiting on, because, like, she would've noticed you accessing them."

I nodded, then winced and put a hand to the back of my neck. "Let me get cleaned up first."

"Okay. Um, Miss investigator?"

I looked up.

"I, uh, saw how fast your ship traveled just now. And, like, you were never in any danger from the explosion."

I looked away.

"But I think you knew that. So, thank you."

I bowed to *Mute, carefully, pressing my hands together. Before climbing out of the cockpit, and
closing the hatch.
Kim Hyun-ae was the first person I'd ever watched murder someone. Let alone thousands of someones, using nothing but a computer terminal.

That wasn't what struck me about her, though. It was how ... pale and sickly she looked. I guess that was appropriate, considering that she was the Emperor's Pale Bride. But I didn't know how anyone could have considered her attractive by this point in her life. She had bags under her eyes, stringy hair, unkempt robes, and a facial expression that looked completely dead to the world.

Also, um, she was kind of flat. At least, compared to what *Hyun-ae looked like, which was why I noticed.

On my screen I saw her sitting on the floor, in the room with the stasis pod where they'd kept her, typing on a detachable keyboard right next to the broken glass. Looking up at a monitor on the desk, where she had the same Linux-style console open that I'd been using this whole time. Thinking about it sent chills through me, like I'd touched a corpse, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

*Mute was watching me watch this. Her arms were folded, her expression unreadable. Everything was silent, except for my breathing and Hyun-ae's typing.

Then there was a CLACK, as Hyun-ae must have hit "Enter." She set the keyboard down then, and started doing something with electronics that I didn't recognize next to the stasis pod itself.

About a minute into her doing that, the pounding on the door started. Voices called out in Korean, and I didn't understand them and couldn't see any subtitles. They were muffled, pleading, cajoling. They talked to her like you would to a small child.

Hyun-ae just kept working, picking up one piece and connecting it to another, tapping a few buttons on a keypad before setting it down and moving on. Calm. Slow. Methodical.

There were a second or two of silence. Then a grunt and a banging noise. I realized that it was a sliding door, and they were trying to force it open.

They did this a few times, then stopped, and I heard quieter talking outside the door as people seemed to be conferring with each other. I was trying to make out how many voices there were when I heard an electronic beep, and another, and another, in time like a heartbeat. Hyun-ae had attached wires to her head and chest; wires with sticky pads on the ends.

She laid down inside the pod, soft and somber, on top of the broken glass. Then she crossed her arms over her chest, and closed her eyes.

One of the male voices outside resumed yelling. But it wasn't angry; it was desperate. I felt sick as I heard the man pleading with her, begging her for something. To spare them.

I heard people coughing outside, and saw Hyun-ae twitch as her heartbeat became erratic. One of the screens she was hooked up to was showing a progress bar, which slowly filled up as the machines did something apparently painful to her.

Finally, I heard the most bloodcurdling gagging sounds, dying out as the air that was carrying them vanished. The girl in the pod shuddered and gasped for breath, and after a long and uncomfortable minute the heartbeat monitor sounded an alarm and turned red, and I knew I was looking at Hyun-
ae's corpse.

It continued to twitch, the arms flopping a bit, the jaw hanging open. And the progress bar continued to rise.

*Mute turned off the recording. And I realized that I was shivering, even though I'd put on my red sweater.

I looked around at the cockpit to steady myself. I'd turned my favourite AR skin back on, so that it looked less like a fishbowl-lens view of space and more like my actual home. With bolts in the metal seams between windows, and a retro flatscreen monitor in the console.

Just like the one Hyun-ae had used.

"So. That's what the bitch did." *Mute's voice was emotionless. "I've got, like, the terminal logs, if you want to read them."

"W-what ... " I took a deep breath, and tried to control my shivering, which I hoped that *Mute hadn't noticed even though I'd left my webcam running. "What was that thing that she plugged herself into? And why was she there, and not in the palace?"

"That thing was some kind of ancient Earth tech. I guess her dad made it for her. Real nice of him. It let her upload herself into the system, and use a copy of my AI construct as a base for her memories and personality." *Mute turned and glared at me, her arms still folded. "You have, like, no idea how violating that is. It's not even like wearing your skin; it's like taking your body and cloning it, then putting a new skin on top. And it all happened during my weekly half-hour maintenance cycle."

I instinctively reached out towards the screen. "*Mute, I'm sorry ... "

"Yeah? So am I." She looked down at her feet, and sighed. Her arms dropped down to her sides.

*Mute stayed like that for a long moment, her eyes closed, her expression pained. I finally coughed and spoke up again. "Um, the palace ... " I couldn't word just then.

"Yeah." *Mute looked back up at me. "She wasn't there because she was in mourning."

"Huh?"

"The emperor's first wife died. It would've been, like, impolitic for her to go on as though nothing had happened. So she had to go back to live with her family for a few weeks. It was basically a vacation."

"Oh ... "

"Yeah."

Another long, uncomfortable silence. I felt really tense, like I needed to jump up and run away right now. Or stress eat, even though I'd just had a snack. I was always bad about that.

I stood up, bowing to *Mute awkwardly. "I need to go make dinner."

"What are you making?" *Mute asked.

I hadn't expected that. "Um ... " I tried to think about anything but Hyun-ae's corpse in the stasis pod. "A grilled cheese sandwich," I finished, as the tiny, expensive slices still in the refrigerator
came to mind.

"Oh? What's that?"

"It's, um ... " I spent a few seconds trying to figure out a Korean dish I could compare it to, unsure whether it was the 'cheese' part that confused her or the 'sandwich.' Unfortunately, I knew hardly anything about their cuisine. "It's comfort food," I finished, lamely.

"Yeah? Make one for me too, then. I need it at this point."

She sounded so defeated that I didn't even question her. I just nodded, and hurried back out through the hatch.
Butter sizzled and popped, in the tiny pan that I held on the hotplate. I laid the cheese sandwich inside carefully, pressing the corners down with a fork to try to get them to fit, then set the fork down on a plate and leaned against the wall to take the weight off of my hurt legs.

Food had always been sacred to me. Especially food made at such great sacrifice, from the milk of a living being. And although *Mute would never taste it, I was cooking this partly for her, to try to help her feel better. Which made it doubly important.

I just didn't know if she ever would feel better.

*Mute was the sole survivor of the end of the world. Her whole life had been the Mugunghwa ... the ship and society that had kept her in her place, had constantly reminded her she could never be good enough, and yet had been her only reason to live.

What would happen to her, now that it was gone? Would she even be able to adjust, to a world that worked nothing like the one she was used to? With "immoral" women, casual relationships, and more than two genders. How long would *Mute last?

How had she even made the transition in the first place, from the world Hyun-ae had been born into to the patriarchy and its new calendar?

I jumped when I saw the black grease in the pan, and hastily flipped the sandwich over, just barely keeping the precious slices of cheese from sliding out and hitting the floor. It looked blackened and unappetizing on this side, now, and everything nearby was dotted with grease from the sizzling pan.

I sighed.

I watched the pan closely for the next minute or so. Then I took the grilled cheese sandwich out and set it back on the plate, carefully flipping it over again so that it was golden brown on top, and carved it into two triangles. That was traditional, right? Not that *Mute would know. But at least there was one for each of us now.

Some "comfort food" it would be, for her. More like her first glimpse of an alien world, with no place for her in it.

*But it's being served by someone who cares about her, I thought, and who's willing to listen to her. That has to at least count for something.*

She was a ghost ship's security AI, a virtual demigoddess with fossilized social mores and intimate knowledge of a long-lost historical mystery. But as I turned off the hot plate and cracked open the hatch to the cockpit, I realized that was not how I saw her. All I could see in my mind's eye, when I thought of *Mute, was how simultaneously majestic and vulnerable she'd looked, when she was facing death and trying to save me. How small she was, beneath her robes, when her personality was so ... well, awe-inspiring, considering what she'd had to go through.

And would still have to go through, in the coming days.

I could only do my best to treat her as the person she was, and hope she would find someone at the historical society who would see her as more than just a curiosity. And, maybe, be more patient with her internalized sexism than I had been.
Of course, given how sexist she was, it shouldn't have surprised me that our conversation did not pass the Bechdel Test.

*Mute looked up when I came back in the room. She had done up her hair again and put the headdress back on, and I swear I saw the "cat ears" on top of it perk. "Wow," she said, looking at the plate I was holding. "You actually did it."

I blushed as I sat back down.

"A woman who makes her own living and doesn't have to take care of a household, and yet still knows how to cook." *Mute's expression was unreadable. "Who would've thought?"

Now I was blushing for a different reason. "You asked me to make you some, so I did."

"Yeah ... you did."

I still couldn't read *Mute's expression. I even took a few bites of "my" half of the sandwich, and she was silent the whole time, just watching the plate. It was making me nervous; I wasn't used to such long stretches of silence when dealing with someone who could think thousands of times faster than I could.

I swallowed nervously, unable to taste anything, and coughed. "S-something on your mind?" I asked.

*Mute frowned. "It occurs to me that I never asked you your name."

"Um." I shifted in my seat.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I just ... it's ... here." I typed it out for her, and it appeared next to her hand like a glowing business card.

*Mute took it and squinted at it. "How do you pronounce that? Is it like with AIs, where-"

"The parentheses are silent, yes." I was blushing furiously. There was no way *Mute could know what they meant, but it was hard to bring up anyway. "So ... now that we're properly introduced, what would you like to talk about?"


**Soundtrack:** [The Smiths](http://example.com)

I took a drink of water, washing hard, burnt crumbs down my throat, and waited for her to continue.

"We spent a lot of evenings drinking together, talking long into the night ..."

"Drinking together?" I asked.

Now I thought I saw *Mute blush. "Well, he would, anyway. Obviously not so much drinking on my part. But he was the kind of man who'd still pour a glass for you -- for me -- all the same. He was a proper gentleman ... the best damn gentleman around."

"And my making you food reminded you of-"
"Yeah. I mean, sure, he never married, and he drank maybe a little more than was good for him. But he was a great man! Clever, charming, filial, and respectful. He wasn't perfect, but he was as close as you could get." She looked up at me. "If you'd been able to talk to him, you'd have fallen in love with him for sure."

"Did you fall in love with Sang-jung?"

That's what I wanted to ask, right then, but I didn't. Fortunately, I don't think *Mute could tell ... I'm hard for most people to read because of my neurotype, and she looked like she was a million miles away anyway. Or at least, about six hundred years.

So instead I asked "Why don't you show me some of the log recordings he made?"

"Oh, geeze, I didn't think of that." *Mute waved her hand at the air to bring up a floating, translucent screen, and started scrolling through entries on it. "Let's see, what's a good one to show you ... here. This is one I recorded personally." She swiped it so that it flew onto my side of the screen, and opened up into an audio recording.

I pressed "play," and read the subtitles as a jovial, gravelly male voice cracked wise in Korean. It sounded like she'd started recording in the middle of a conversation. I wondered how many hours of conversation with this man she had on file.

I'm sure a classy lady such as yourself wouldn't be familiar with this kind of place! Ha ha, no, you know the sort. Tucked away in an interior deck, lots of wood furniture that's been stained, and not intentionally, and enough commoners milling about to give a good background soundtrack. Oh, and it's run by a woman. So it's that sort of place.

Anyway, I met my brother just inside the door, and he was so polite and deferential you'd think he was applying for a court position.

The recording of Sang-jung paused. I could hear *Mute's voice, but it was very faint.

I told him he was full of shit, what'd you think? He's a bad, bad liar. But of course, it was good to see him anyway.

I giggled in spite of myself.

Then the owner came by, asking what we'd like. All you need to know about Jin-ae is that she's around my age, she's got the biggest tits I've ever seen in my life, and she dresses like a commoner, so you can certainly see-

The recording stopped in midsentence, even though I hadn't hit "pause." *Mute was blushing furiously. "Let's skip past that part," she said.

Huh?

Anyway, we argued about the quality of the drinks, and the quality of our server's tits. And we talked about the good old days, when father was still alive and we didn't have to work out our problems ourselves.

"The biggest bullshit ever," I said, "is that we're supposed to be responsible men here. How'd that happen?"

He was drunk enough to start taking cheap shots. He asked, "Is that why you've never bothered to be one?"
Another pause, where *Mute sounded ... well, muted.

I just told him "Dammit, hurry up and pour me another. I'll drink to that!"

Sang-jung laughed. I was personally starting to feel ill at ease, and wondered when he was going to do something I was supposed to find lovable.

"So where did you put it this time, brother?" I asked.

"Put what?" he replied.

"Oh, cut the shit," I told him. "We both know that all your problems in life have always, without fail, come from you putting your dick somewhere you shouldn't have."

He just grunted and stared down at his drink, which told me everything that I needed to know.

"Was it at least a female this time?" I asked.

Swear to my father, he looked at me like he was about to punch me. Didn't, though. Instead, he just downed the rest of his drink. "Yeah. That's the damn problem," he said. "She's saying she hasn't bled in two months now."

Well, I promised him that I'd help. Better the courtesan gets bought out by me than by my other brother, the High Magistrate. Less suspicious that way, and involves nothing unlawful.

*Mute turned off the recording. "I could have maybe, you know, done without the description of their server's breasts? But he did that kind of thing a lot. Clean up after his family's messes, I mean, not ogle immoral-looking common women."

"Did he help out any female relatives?" I nervously asked.

"Oh, yeah ... like the time Sang-hi was widowed, and he paid for her dowry so she could remarry."

"I see ... "

I was actually trying to remember what the word "dowry" meant, and figure out if it was English or not. But I didn't want to interrupt her recollections.

"Sang-hi's family was pushing her to take her own life to honour her late husband's memory. You can see why she didn't want to do that, of course."

"I-I'd probably drink as much as Sang-jung did if people were pressuring me to kill myself," I stammered, leaving the "again" unspoken.

"Yeah." *Mute looked away. "And then the drink would kill you, like it killed him."

"Oh." I blinked. "*Mute, I-"

"He ... he meant a lot to me," she said, looking down at the virtual floor.

I fidgeted and began to sweat, and tried to make myself sit still as though it'd make me become invisible.
"I mean, you know, I'm just a computer program. He wasn't family or anything ... and it's not like I have the body for that kind of relationship," *Mute said, turning bright red and sounding flustered and hurried. "But still, he was the closest thing I had to a husband, and I cried when I heard he was gone. I ... loved him. I really did love him." It looked like she was going to cry again when she said that.

At that point, I wasn't judging *Mute's taste in men, or trying to figure out how drinking had led to Sang-jung's death. All I could do was wonder how many people *Mute had ever told about this. And if this was how people who worked in emergency services felt, when tearstricken people on the scene of a disaster cried into their shoulders about their dead loved ones.

I had never been trained for this. I was nervous and scared, and didn't know what to say or how to act. I had never known that an AI could hurt like this, or that anyone could feel the way *Mute obviously did about the product of a society which was that messed up.

But I wished I could let *Mute cry into my shoulder.
Rainbow Connection

Chapter Notes

*This chapter contains a non-graphic depiction of a sex act.*

I've never been good at providing comfort or sympathy. Especially to AIs. About all that I knew how to do was to change the subject.

So, that's what I did. I cleared my throat and asked, "What was that thing you mentioned showing me earlier? Something about ... um, some man's wife?" I couldn't remember the man's name, and as I asked the question I realized the woman's name would have been one of the ones marked in red on the genealogy, which hadn't been considered important.

"Oh, yeah, Smith Sang-min's." *Mute looked up. "Uh, listen, that's ... I don't know if you want to get into that right now."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's some pretty depraved stuff."

*Oh dear.* "Well, um, maybe you could just show me enough that I get the gist of what you're talking about?"

"Alright, then, if you're sure." *Mute tapped on the floating, translucent screen again, and another log entry slid into view. "I'm warning you, it gets a bit gross. Like ... wow."

Now I definitely wasn't sure. But it seemed to have distracted *Mute, so I swallowed my fears and tapped on the entry.

It was a poem.

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My art is that of lies and lying,
and of both I have much practice.
I've said to men "I love you" falsely,
I've suffered pain but smiled in pleasure,

But the hardest lie I've ever told,
was that I could live without you.
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My brain tried to process it. "This is ..."

"Pretty awful, huh?" *Mute looked like she was forcing a grin. "It's not the translation, either. I assure you it's just as bad in the original Korean. Can you believe it was actually written by someone who studied poetry for years?"

I have to admit something terrible, here. I was starting to sweat as I read it, because part of me thought that this wasn't an actual log entry, but that *Mute had written it for me. And I think the biggest reason I thought that is because I wanted her to have written it for me.
I coughed, and made myself think of a way I could ask without asking. "Sang-min's wife studied poetry for years?"

"Oh, no. That was written by ... um. Here, let me show you the other one that she wrote."

That answer did nothing to make me feel better. But the next poem seemed like it had been written by someone with a more ... intimate, relationship to the subject.

Pretty flower, who could plant you,  
then abandon you in your bed?  
Each day I stop to admire your  
aroma; will your gardener mind?

Each night I pluck my own petals,  
but dream of yours in bloom.

It took me a few seconds to catch on. When I did, I blushed. "Oh."

"I told you it was pretty gross." I could've sworn I saw *Mute blushing too.

"I wouldn't say it was gross, it's just-"

"Well, yeah," *Mute interrupted, "but you're a woman. I wouldn't expect you to recognize good verse."

That caught me so off guard that I glared at *Mute. "And you would?"

"Come on ... " She gestured at the poem, next to her on the screen. "Real poetry isn't forced like that. It's not vulgar trash, it's sincere! It's from the heart!"

I had completely forgotten how embarrassed I'd felt, as well as my hopes that she'd find someone who could put up with her sexism long enough to befriend her. "So when a man writes it, it's sincere?" I asked.

"Look. There's a reason why men's poetry is what gets studied and taught, and women's poetry is just used for seduction, like here. You need sincerity! You need someone who understands love! It's titillating, sure, but it's crap!"

For some reason, *Mute was still blushing.

"Fine, then." I swallowed the bite of grilled cheese that I'd taken while she'd been giving her speech. "So who wrote this that was using it for seduction? Who was trained in the 'art of lies,' and studied poetry for years. A sex worker?"

"... a what, now?"

I realized that while the words had been translated, the concept was foreign to her. "Someone who performs sex acts in exchange for money," I said slowly.

"Oh, you mean a whore." *Mute let out her breath. "Yeah, that's who was writing this stuff for her. Even worse, she encouraged it. Not what you were expecting from a noble wife, huh?"

"I guess not." I wasn't sure where she was going with this.

"It was ... definitely a big fall for her. I still have a hard time believing she could sink to that."
"Sink to what?"

"Oh, man, just ... look, this is perverted stuff, okay? But the whore fell for her, as much as one can, anyway. She really thought she loved So-jin."

"Who?"

"Sang-min's wife. She was doing unspeakable things to his whore, almost every time he went out."

"His ... ah." Why was I so surprised that the Mugunghwa's male upper class had both wives and personal concubines? How many wives did they have, anyway? "So that's what was scandalous?" I asked, trying to clarify and newly aware of how alien our cultures were to each other.

"Oh, no." *Mute shook her head. "No, the scandalous part is what happened when Sang-min found out."

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I've had to examine a lot of tapped conversations and video recordings in my line of work. But I've never felt as much like a voyeur as I did when *Mute pulled up the video log, and I saw the dimly lit shapes of two nude women intertwined, standing next to a bed in the dark. The smaller one had her legs wrapped around the other, who was holding onto her, and they looked like they were very ... deep, in the act of enjoying each other.

Or in each other. Either way.

In hindsight, I don't think this part of the recording lasted that long. But each second the squirming and squeezing went on felt like an uncomfortable eternity. Caught off guard by the sudden display of intimacy, I squirmed in my chair and looked away, kneading the edge of my sweater and willing myself not to think about what it'd be like to do something like that with *Mute ... which worked about as well as you would expect. I couldn't see what *Mute's reaction was; I was too embarrassed to meet her gaze.

Then the door opened and the light turned on, and the smaller one jumped off and hid behind the other. Even though I could see what they looked like now, I felt frozen and horrified, as I stared at the strange man in silks who walked in. Smith Sang-min?

They were stammering apologies to him. What were they afraid he was going to do?

He just laughed, and waved a hand at them. "Don't stop on my account! I'm certainly paying you enough for two."

The smaller one seemed like she couldn't catch her breath. "I just ... I just ... I wanted to-"

He walked over and raised his hand, and the taller one -- his wife -- flinched. But then he patted the sex worker on the head as though she were a child. "I don't know what she told you, but you don't have to pay any attention to her. Easier to just ignore her, really. I have lots of practice with that." He winked.

His wife lowered her head in shame.

The sex worker started putting on her clothes hurriedly, as Sang-min walked through into another room. I could hear him rummaging around, while the girl straightened out her own silks and tried to help So-jin get dressed.
Then Sang-min came back through, and ogled his partially-dressed wife and the girl next to her before speaking. "Not sure what you thought you were doing there, though. Aren't you two missing something?"

He laughed again as he walked out. The girl froze, still holding So-jin's clothes up. And So-jin just cried, putting her bare arms to her face and shaking with her back to the camera.

*Mute had been right. That was horrible.

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*Mute took a deep breath. "So what did you make of that?"

I was still looking far away from her, blushing hard and trying to loosen my collar and wishing that my sweater wasn't so tight. I felt mortified and aroused at the same time, and was so confused and flustered that I didn't know what to say. "Well, I mean, it's ... um."

I swallowed, still tasting the last few crumbs of my side of the sandwich, and all I could think of was where milk came from. "Obviously it was very ... "

"Sordid? Scandalous? Horrifying?"

"Well, yes, it was horrible what he said to them." I tried to collect my thoughts. "I'm just having trouble processing this, because some of that was kind of hot and I wasn't prepared to actually see what was."

"What." It was flatter than the cheese slices when *Mute said it.

"I mean, obviously I feel bad for them, and-" I just kept going, digging a hole for myself.

"Seriously?!" I stopped, and looked up in time to see *Mute glaring at me. "You're saying ... you can empathize with that kind of depravity?"

I was blushing so hard now. "I'm saying I'm lesbian," I corrected her, not sure what kind of depravity she was referring to but beginning to catch on. "I'm exclusively attracted to women."

"I ... uh ... " For someone who could think so much faster than I could, *Mute sure was taking a long time to process this. "Wow," she finished, blushing at least as hard as I was while a sweatdrop formed on her brow. "Really? You're going to admit to that?"

"I-"

"So you don't just pretend, to get female suspects to confess to you. You think because you have your own spaceship, and get to travel around independently, that makes you as good as a man? You think of yourself as a man, don't you!"

"No, I-"

"Wait, wait, wait." *Mute held one sleeved arm up at me. "You're not ... that isn't why you've been talking to me so much, is it? Because you have it hot for me, too? Is that why?!"

I just stared at her in shock, and found that I was asking myself that same question. Remembering how my insides had liquefied when she'd flashed me that cat-like grin. And knowing that it didn't matter, because I would never see it again.

"I-I ... " I tried to catch my breath, and think of anything I could say that'd appease her. "N-no, I
"What? Are you saying I'm not good eno-

"You're a very attractive woman but I don't want to make you uncomfortable!" I blurted out, standing up all of a sudden and putting my hands down on the console. Only then did I realize what *Mute had said, or started to say before I cut her off.

What the hell had just happened?
And why was *Mute still blushing so hard?

"Well ... that's good!" she said, folding her arms and looking away as though she were trying to hide her embarrassment. "Because I'm not some whore, okay?"

"Okay." I had to keep myself from adding "ma'am" at the end.

"When I said I wasn't a real woman, I didn't mean it like that!" She glared at me.

"Okay." I sank back into my chair and looked away.

"No, that's not okay! None of this is okay! I'm not interested! I would never ... "

I looked up in time to see *Mute screwing up her face, with her eyes closed and teeth gritted. "Aaaaagh ... that's so disgusting."

I noticed I had my arms wrapped around myself, and was starting to rock back and forth.

"Look, just ... forget it," *Mute said. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Okay?"

I nodded, unable to look up again.

"Let's just move on. Like, forever. Let's move on forever. Let's pretend I never heard you say that at all."

I didn't ask which part she wanted to pretend that I hadn't said. I just nodded, closing my eyes and continuing to rock back and forth.

I counted twenty-three repetitions before *Mute spoke again. "I'll just ... come back when you're thinking straight. Okay?"

Straight. She wants me to think straight. That's going to be hard for me, when I'm not. "Okay," I whispered.

I didn't have to look up to know that she'd left.
Forever Silenced

I paced the length of my cage, back and forth, over and over again.

Step, step, turn around. Step, step, turn around. Brushing my wet nose against dry plastic every time. Feeling my tails bunched up behind me, curled in an arc that mirrored my nearly circular path. There was no room to swish them, no room to stretch. Barely enough room to walk.

It was maddening.

I heard gravel crunch outside the building my cage was in, and instantly steeled myself. The hair bristled on top of my head and my tails, and I began to salivate as I thought of my last bite of human skin. How I had drawn blood that time, and how I'd savoured the tiny morsel of flesh that was still in my jaws when they pulled me away. It'd tasted like victory.

"I will feast on their livers," I growled to myself. But my knees were already starting to shake, and I could feel the adrenalin surging inside me with every footstep I heard. Thick, clunking human footsteps, the kind made by someone who isn't afraid of what's laying in wait for her. Who knows that it poses no threat.

I willed myself to believe that I did, even though I knew it wasn't true.

The door opened and the lights turned on, and I was blinded. Everything was a blur, and I tried to get my eyes to adjust while my ears tracked the approaching footsteps. For all that I'd tried to convince myself that I wanted a confrontation, I started to pray they'd go past me, lowering my neck to the floor.

Please go past please go past please go past-

They stopped, and a large, familiar shadow blocked out the light.

Then I felt the cage lift off the ground, and I screamed at her, while trying to stay standing up. "Fuck you!" I screamed. "Fuck your whole family! I hope birds use your entrails to stay warm!"

She didn't care what I said. She couldn't even understand me. But I kept shouting at her, because the fear that had built in my gut was telling me to do something. "This is my body!" I yelled, as we stopped in front of a door. "What you're doing is wrong! This is not okay! None of this is okay!"

The door opened, and a wave of sharp chemical smells hit my nose, every one of them new and frightening. Somehow, I knew I would never come back from here.

I heard more footsteps and deep, human voices, and did my best to interrupt them. "I hope you die!" I screamed. "I hope both of you die! I hope every one of you wet sacks of-"

My stomach lurched, and I had to clamp my jaws shut to keep from losing its contents. It wasn't the smells, although they didn't help. It was the raw terror, like rancid meat inside of me, that was making me sick.

I couldn't scream, anymore. I could only stare in shock, as they set the cage down and-

* * *

I was on my side, and curled up in a ball.
I had long hair, but only on top of my head. My nose was dry, and my sides were wet. I had fingers and toes, and was using them to cling to a wad of bedsheets, and whatever plushies had gotten trapped in it.

I was shaking. My breathing was ragged. I let my body adjust at its own pace, not fighting the terror but letting the knowledge sink in that it was behind me. *It is warm, and soft, and safe here,* I told myself. *I am okay here.* My breathing gradually slowed down.

Then I remembered what'd happened just before I had gone to bed, and suddenly tensed up again, freezing in place for several long seconds before letting out my breath in a long sigh.

I wasn't going to get any more sleep that night.

* * *

It surprises me now to realize this, but I wasn't that worried about *Mute, or about what she thought of me after all that. "All that" being the voyeuristic security camera footage of female lovers she'd pushed on me, and then recoiled in seeming disgust when I'd said I was lesbian also.

I guess if you'd asked me why not, right then, I would have said that I'd given up on trying to relate to her. That I didn't understand how she felt, or why she kept doing and saying such strange things. I think that deep down, my subconscious had figured out why she had shown me those clips and then pushed me away like that, and I think it was trying to tell me. But I was refusing to listen, because that was too hard to process right then.

What my mind latched onto instead, as I groggily sipped warm coffee in the White Princess' pilot's seat, was that feeling of world-ending rage that I'd had in my PTSD-induced nightmare. It was distant enough now that I could turn it over in my head and safely examine it, and compare and contrast with the one person I knew who had ended a world.

*Hyun-ae.*

What she'd gone through wasn't so different, I thought, licking hazelnut foam from my mug. These people had groomed and prepared her for marriage, in a society where that meant becoming someone else's property. She did not have a say in the matter. Her body had not belonged to her.

In the journal entries I'd read, she sounded like I had, sometimes. Bewildered, at first, like this all had to be some mistake. Then furious, as she realized she wasn't a person to them and started demanding respect.

I looked up, out the window, at the flickering lights across the vast bulk of the Mugunghwa. And how the cloud of debris glimmered back at them.

I sighed, and shook my head. I didn't want to remember that fight. I didn't want to realize I had helped drive her to that.

But the part of my brain that solved mysteries had gone on to think about it anyway. *That* made sense, it told me. That was world-ending rage, right there. A literally explosive temper tantrum.

So why hadn't she been like that when she'd killed everyone else on the ship (except *Mute, I reminded myself)? Why had *Mute, herself, remarked on how well-behaved *Hyun-ae'd been? There hadn't seemed to be a rebellious bone in her body, when she'd typed in the commands that would kill everyone and then quietly laid down to die.

Something wasn't right, here. I mean, aside from the death and destruction and all.
I made myself re-watch the security camera footage, of *Hyun-ae killing herself. It took me a while to convince myself to, and I wasn't sure why.

Then I looked closely at her face, when she laid down on the glass-strewn floor of the stasis pod. And it's like something clicked, inside me.

I could smell the metal contacts of the mind-machine interface.

I stared at her, transfixed, trying to process this. Trying to understand what it meant, and why this seemed so significant right now. And I watched her twitch, and thrash, feeling every movement as if it were my own. Sweating inside of my nightgown, as though I were still in my dream. Until, with a final gasp, *Hyun-ae died, her tongue lolling out of her wide-open mouth.

Except ...

Except, her tongue didn't.

Because it wasn't there.

* * *

and i could feel the clamps holding me down

the hand that was pulling my tails

i could smell the hot knife metal

blisteringly hot

and my rump roasted and peeled

as it cut off my tails

one of them after the other.

and they had clamped my jaw shut, too

but i knew that they didn't have to

because they had won

and because i would never fight them

again.

* * *

I was curled in a ball again, rocking back and forth in my chair, when I started to become aware of my surroundings. At least, enough to realize that my coffee was room temperature.

That explains it, I thought. That explains everything.

They had broken Kim Hyun-ae, and made her into the Pale Bride. The perfect woman, by their standards ... almost prepubescent, sickly white, and unable to protest or say anything. To express any feelings, opinions, or thoughts of her own. And her journal entries had mentioned how they couldn't read her father's Hangeul script, that he'd written her name in on the stasis pod. So
apparently she couldn't write to them, either.

It was not out of rage that she'd killed them. It was just the only way she could escape. As long as she was trapped on that ship, it was the only way she could be sure they would never be able to hurt her again.

I'd had another way out, I remembered. A way I could leave without hurting anyone, that I gave in to out of despair ... like a cliff that you jump from, and hope something catches you.

But *Hyun-ae hadn't had that. And the reason she hadn't, was because I had fumbled the catch.

I suddenly froze, as I remembered turning off *Hyun-ae's computer core so that there would be enough power to keep *Mute online. Then I checked the death timer I'd set for her.

18:23

I let out my breath, in a sigh of relief. It seemed like years ago that that had happened, but I guessed it was only last night after all. So *Hyun-ae hadn't degraded yet. There was still a chance of saving her.

But only if she would let me.
Just so you know, I don't usually kidnap people.

But there was no way that I was Reactivating *Hyun-ae to ask her permission, while she had root access and could use it to destroy what was left of the Mugunghwa. Besides that, I couldn't copy files that were in use, like an active AI. So if I didn't want her to die, I had to transfer her to the White Princess while she was inactive, before her code degraded in eighteen hours or so.

Was it legal? Was it ethical? At the moment, I didn't care. I wasn't trying to argue in favour of private investigators making citizens' arrests, and I wasn't thinking about whether or not she'd stand trial if she lived. I was trying to take responsibility for my actions. To save *Hyun-ae's life, and make up for pretending and leading her on.

What I am ashamed of is not consulting with *Mute, before I deactivated her core so that I could re-power *Hyun-ae's.

Was it like sleeping? I wondered. She hadn't seemed to be conscious, from the time *Hyun-ae copied her code during maintanance to the time I arrived and reactivated her. She'd gotten back up to speed fast, though, so I knew I'd have some explaining to do when next we spoke.

If she ever speaks to me again, I thought.

So, after re-powering *Hyun-ae's core (but not Reactivating *Hyun-ae herself), I typed the "download" command into the terminal, and hit the virtual enter key.

AI personality *Hyun-ae will be transferred
preparing files for transfer... NOW
transmitting...

A popup window appeared over the terminal session.

Estimated download time: 3d 23h 00m

"Fuck!"

I hit every keyboard shortcut I knew for "abort." Mercifully, it dropped me back to the terminal, without any weird error messages. I was still breathing hard, though, and trying to fight off a panic attack. People's lives were in my hands here, and I was fumbling them.

O-kay, I thought. The battery has too little power to keep both *Mute and *Hyun-ae online at the same time. And their file sizes are probably roughly the same, since Hyun-ae's AI self is based on a copy of *Mute's code. That means the computer's too slow to transfer either of them before the other degrades.

So now what?

My mind raced. I felt like the space captain in a story I'd read, who'd had to throw an innocent stowaway out the airlock because he hadn't brought enough propellant to account for the extra mass. And who'd tried everything he could, first, to keep from having to.

I was trying to figure out how much *Hyun-ae's extra six hundred years of memories added to her
file size, when I remembered something about old computers: They transferred files a lot more slowly over wireless networks, than they did over physical contacts.

*Plus,* I'm sitting inside a cloud of radioactive debris,* I realized. Transferring living people through that didn't seem like the best idea.

There was only one thing to do, I decided.

I had to go back inside the Mugunghwa.

* * *

The lights flickered and sparked in the plaza, as I opened the airlock door and looked around in my suit's visor.

This time, the ship felt like a derelict. Not an historical site that was frozen in time, but a ghost ship straight out of horror movies. The glass dome I'd crashed the White Princess into, earlier, was a jagged edge above me, and a million flickering pieces up in the "sky." Most of the market stalls had been uprooted, and a few stray pieces of produce and bolts of cloth were floating around near where they'd been caught when the place decompressed.

I dialed up Aria's quick menu with one of my fingers, and tapped on the "magnetize boots" option. Then I stepped outside, hesitantly, and waited for one foot to attach to the floor with a dull thump before stepping in front of it with the other.

Between the effort it took to lift each foot up, and how I had to make sure to keep one on the floor at all times, it felt like walking through deep snow. But at least I was upright, and moving faster than if I had to crawl through a space that wasn't designed for it.

At least, I was upright for a minute. Because I remembered powering *Mute's core back up and reactivating her before landing, but she hadn't said anything to me then, and I'd kiind of forgotten she was there in the process of boarding this scary ghost ship. So it startled me when I rounded the corner to leave the plaza, looking over my shoulder while doing so, then turned back to look where I was going and saw a fox-woman right in front of me.

I screamed like a little girl, and slipped and lost my footing, only to realize what I was looking at. The "fox-woman" was *Mute, back in her hanbok and cat ear-shaped headdress. And she was standing right there, in the foyer just outside the plaza.

Flailing and trying to latch my feet back to the floor, I overcorrected and fell right on top of her. Or at least I would have, if there hadn't been a window between us.

It took me as long as it did to stand back on my feet, to realize I was seeing her through a wide, transparent glass panel, which was attached to the floor. I had forgotten that this was how AIs could manifest, before they had hardshells and things. The panel was cracked in places, and some of the lights along it were out. But *Mute looked solid and three-dimensional ... and was standing half a metre away from me, watching impassively with her arms folded and waiting for me to compose myself.

I know I'm really short, but I was still surprised that she was almost as tall as I was, in person. Taller, even, if you counted the "ears." She'd seemed so small on my screen, especially when she'd taken off her robe's outer layer.

What I wasn't surprised at was how miffed she sounded. "What the hell are you doing here?" she asked. And I heard her voice over my helmet's remote link, but it sounded like it was coming from
where she was standing.

Remember how I was afraid, the first time I boarded the ship, that an "ancient killer AI" would swat me like a bug? I wasn't afraid of *Mute doing that, even though maybe I should have been. But I was afraid that she'd stop me, by locking doors or doing other security-system-type-things, that even with root access I didn't know the commands to undo. She was the security AI, after all. So I had to get her on my side, somehow.

I just didn't know how to do that.

No sense in sugar-coating it, I guessed. I took a deep breath. "I'm here to save *Hyun-ae," I told her.

"... what."

"Okay. Remember how I had to deactivate systems, so we could switch over to battery power?"

She said nothing, so I went on. "I had to deactivate *Hyun-ae's core at that time. But she's going to degrade within twenty-four hours, and it turns out it'd take longer than that to copy her wirelessly. So-"

"So you came here to rescue your lover," *Mute finished for me.

"What? N-no! I just-"

"I don't know what you two did in the other remote session. But, like, it must have been really depraved if you're willing to risk your life and mine, in order to save a mass murderer's life. I guess when you're 'lesbian' little things like killing thousands of innocent people don't matter, huh?" Her expression did not change.

I'd had enough. "Goddess damn it, *Mute, I'm surprised that you didn't watch! You're more obsessed with girl sex than I am."

"I ..." *Mute's face turned red. "I ... you!" She was sputtering.

"You want to know what happened between us? She flirted with me. She changed into outfits she thought I would like. And the whole time, she thought I was a man. The first one she'd met in over six hundred years, who'd ever cared about her and wanted her to be happy." I hadn't expected to tear up when I said that, but my voice was starting to crack and my vision was starting to blur.

*Mute just stared at me in shock, and I didn't know if it was because of what I was saying or how I was saying it.

*Probably the latter, I thought, and clenched my fists. "Look. I know you think I'm an 'emotional' woman, who can't 'think straight' or something. But do you know why she opened up to me? To me, a random stranger that she met online, and not to any of the people around her?"

"Because she hated them enough to kill them." *Mute gestured at a frozen body floating behind her.

"No." I shook my head. "Because she couldn't open up to them."

"... I don't follow."

"Load up the security camera footage, of what she did right at the end. Pay close attention to her
"You really want me to see that again?" She stared at me in disbelief. "You just love rubbing my failures and weaknesses in my face, don't you!!"

I was not in the mood to argue. "*Mute, I helped save your life not eight hours ago. You owe me. Watch the damn video."

She stared blankly at me, for another long second. Then she waved her sleeve in the air, and conjured a window that floated in front of her.

I saw it zoom in, on Hyun-ae's twitching face. Filters and image enhancements that I didn't recognize outlined her shape. And I watched *Mute's eyes go wide and her expression soften, as realization dawned on her. "Oh ... "

"Yeah."

She watched the same few seconds, again and again. "But who ... "

"Who do you think? Her 'loving' family, which had everything to gain from gifting her to the emperor. And everything to lose, if she said the wrong words to him."

*Mute nodded slowly. "You're right," she said, and I wished that it could have been about anything else.

She closed the window, and was silent for a few seconds.

"So, like ... this really happened." *Mute looked up at me. "This is a thing that actually happened to her."

I nodded.

"She wasn't the perfect woman because she'd been trained to be. She was quiet and submissive because, like ... this."

I nodded again.

"Um, I guess she was illiterate too?"

I shook my head. "She could read and write Hangeul just fine. It was the Chinese characters everyone used in your time that she couldn't read."

"But, like, I can read Hangeul. It's hardcoded into my translation matrix." *Mute folded her arms again, but she didn't sound angry so much as genuinely confused. "Why didn't she ask me for help? Why didn't she tell me what they did to her?"

"Because either she didn't know, or she thought you would gossip about it. And that it would get back to her family."

*Mute was silent, her hands pressed together. She stared out at the plaza, for what seemed like an awfully long time for an AI to deliberate. Then she looked over her shoulder, at the dead man floating behind her.

I didn't say anything.

Finally, she sighed. "I need to talk to her."
"Okay."

"I need to talk to her, but like, there's not enough power to run both of us at the same time." *Mute looked pained.

"I can take care of that." I held up one of Aria's "whiskers" ... the crystal-mechanical spheres that floated around me, like an extension of my space suit. "Once I copy her into this, it can project her as a hologram."

*Mute looked confused. "You can do that?"

I nodded.

"You can actually fit that bitch- I mean, *Hyun-ae, on one of those things."

"Yep." I let go of it.

"Will you be okay?"

"I should be."

"Will I be okay?" She gestured to herself. "Like, it'll take fewer than twenty-four hours to copy her over to that, right?"

"If it won't, I won't chance it."

"Okay." *Mute let out her breath, and her shoulders untensed. "I can show you where her core is, then."

"Thank you."

I bowed reverently to her, and she matched the gesture. Then she inclined her head towards the hallway. "Let's go."
Two Girls, One Core

*Mute walked with me, down a mirrored version of the corridors towards the tram station. She matched my slow, lumbering pace, taking small and (I guessed) ladylike steps. Holding the train of her long hanbok, as though she were actually trying to keep it from getting dusty.

Sometimes, the glass "window" I saw her through was melted, sparking, or cracked, and she disappeared at those times. But she always came back on the other side, and patiently waited whenever I stumbled. It almost looked like she was having to hold herself back, from reaching out to help me.

I'd come back to the Mugunghwa to save *Hyun-ae. But for the hour or so that it took to walk to the tram station in magnetic boots, *Mute was all I could think about.

Because I was crushing on her, so hard.

She was a jerk, I thought to myself. A sexist, homophobic, bigoted jerk. Which was why it was so surprising to me, when she showed actual tenderness or concern.

I didn't feel like she was faking it. She wasn't a clinical narcissist, who deep down saw people as things. A narcissist would have responded to the revelation of Hyun-ae's tongue having been sliced out by trying to one-up it, somehow. "You think that's bad? Let me tell you about what I've been through!" Instead, *Mute had re-evaluated everything she thought she knew about her, in light of this new information. Narcissists are also resistant to acknowledging weakness or failure, whereas *Mute was deeply ashamed of hers.

Or what she saw as her weaknesses, at least. Like the fact that she was a flaming bisexual, who got turned on at the sight of naked women pleasuring each other.

I wondered how many times *Mute had imagined herself in that situation, and which one she'd imagined herself as.

I wondered what it'd be like to be there with her, and have my arms wrapped around her bare back and sides, and tell her that it was okay and she wasn't a terrible person for wanting that. To feel how soft and feminine she was, and to let her enjoy and appreciate it also, and not think that it made her inferior.

I wanted to build her back up, somehow. I wanted to give back what Namjon Yeobi and the Mugunghwa crisis had taken from her.

And I really wanted to have sex with her.

Up to the point that I realized that, I'd been glancing at her discreetly whenever I thought she wouldn't notice. Now I had to look away, and was blushing so hard that I was afraid she could see it right through my helmet's faceplate. I suddenly felt awkward and uncoordinated, and stumbled over my feet ... and sure enough, there she was next to me, looking like she was ready to reach out and help me again.

I blushed even harder. "I'm okay," I said.

*Mute nodded. "We're almost there."

I picked myself up and kept walking again, this time right next to the glass since what looked like
old wooden boxes were packed into most of the width of the hallway. You know that feeling you have, when you're uncomfortably close to an attractive person and you can't say or do anything about it because it would be impolite? That's what the next few minutes were like.

For me, at least. I shuddered to think what *Mute thought of me, especially while I was clunking around in my space suit ... in the ruins of her home.

We finally arrived at a tram station, on a line that she said hadn't seen any accidents. I hesitated as I got near the powered-down tram car, and *Mute gave me a questioning look from another glass panel near it.

"I've got to power you down in order to restore power to the trams," I told her.

"Well, like, you would've had to anyway to copy *Hyun-ae over. So go for it." She sounded like she was trying a little too hard to be casual, and I noticed her shoulders tense up again.

I wanted so badly to hug *Mute right then, not for my own "depraved" reasons but just to reassure her. Instead, I pressed one hand to the glass, which was the closest I could come to squeezing hers. "I'll see you soon," I promised her.

She didn't return the gesture, but just bowed slightly and looked down the track.

I dialed up a virtual keyboard in Aria's quick menu, again, and typed in the terminal commands that would switch power over.

*Mute vanished. And the lights in the tram windows turned on.

I went inside, and waited for the dashboard to stop flickering in what I assumed was the tram's startup sequence. Then I pressed the button for the imperial palace, as close as I could get to where *Hyun-ae was stored.

* * *

The wooden floors, in the palace, did not like my magnetic boots. I turned them off and braced my stomach, already unsettled by over an hour of microgravity, for the acrobatics that I'd need to do to get to the computer room. Where by "acrobatics," I mean pushing off the walls awkwardly, and trying to use Aria's whiskers like guardrails.

It felt like climbing a skyscraper.

The dead guards didn't faze me. The ornate palace decorations didn't impress me. But when I got near the door, and realized that it was the same room where I had turned on the wireless networking ... that really shook me. I could see the glow of the terminal out in the hallway, and I didn't want to look inside and see what was on it, because I was imagining some cursed symbol that would kill me in seven days. Or else stringy-haired ghost *Hyun-ae, crawling out of the screen and then strangling me.

I looked over my shoulder, to make sure that the corpses had not animated. Then I took a deep breath, and climbed inside the computer room.

The books that had been stacked on the desk were floating next to it, now, along with the keyboard and what seemed like aeons of dust. The rack-mounted computers were still in their place, though, along with the bolted-down screen. On it was the familiar question:

Are you a man or a woman?
I didn't want to use it. Something in the back of my mind was still sure it was trapped, or haunted. But it seemed more respectful than using Aria's virtual keyboard, so I pressed the button labeled "MAN." Then I inspected the rack-mount computers, lights blinking on their front panels, and tried to remember what ancient I/O ports looked like.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, as I put one of Aria's whiskers up next to the wall of computers, and watched her mechanically reconfigure so that she could interface.

I felt like I was physically robbing a grave. Exhuming *Hyun-ae's body. It was the grossest feeling I'd ever had, and I was really having second thoughts at this point, about everything. Because everything I'd done to get here seemed like a chain of bad decisions, and it's like the chain was wrapped around me and I could feel its weight pulling me down. Even though I was weightless.

I climbed back through the dust to the terminal, my hands and knees shaking, and took two or three tries to type in the "download" command. No popup window appeared with the time it would take, because that was a part of my ship's interface and not the Mugunghwa computer's. But I half-sat, half-stood there anyway, shivering and waiting for it to complete without doing anything else. I felt so sick right then.

After a few minutes, when my stomach started to settle, I picked up one of the floating books next to me. Aria's translation appeared beneath its title.

It was a copy of Confucius' *Analects.*

I let go of it.

* * *

I don't know how long it took. But I'm sure that it wasn't twenty-four hours before I looked at the screen, and saw that the file transfer was complete.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and quickly detached Aria from the core. Then I brought up her virtual keyboard again, and turned off the computers there. Everything went dark for a moment. Then Aria's flashlights turned on, and I was surrounded by harsh, menacing shadows.

I climbed out of there in a hurry.

As long as I was paying my respects to *Hyun-ae in person, I thought, I should find *Mute's core as well. So I followed the palace's hallway to a big room that looked like a gymnasium, with wide entryways, a high wooden ceiling, and a matted floor. There were weapon racks all along one wall, and computer racks along another. It looked bigger than it really was, at first, because the walls were covered in what looked like mirrors. I assumed those were for *Mute to appear on.

I gave the room a weird look. Who the hell had thought this was a good idea? I felt like it spoke to either how little they valued the ship's security staff, since a stray weapon stroke could electrocute someone and damage *Mute, or how little they valued and understood their computers.

Maybe they'd just brought them in because it was cold in here. Sort of like how someone had apparently turned *Hyun-ae's core into a study alcove, and no one had seen anything wrong with that.

There weren't many things to hold onto, on this side of the room, except for the computer racks. So I wrapped my arm around the edge of one, while I dialed up the virtual keyboard again, and had this brief mental image of *Mute physically holding me up.
A couple of typed-in commands, and she was there in the "mirror" right next to me. (Not my reflection, since for some reason I didn't show up in them. I guessed it was because they were screens, and not mirrors.) She looked surprised, and I wasn't sure if it was because of where we were or because she hadn't expected to wake up ever again.

*Hopefully the first one,* I thought. "Are you okay?" I asked.

*Mute* nodded quickly. "Is she ... ?"

"Yes." I held up the whisker that *Hyun-ae* was stored in, and quickly tapped in a command to change it from milk white to sky blue. I could tell which was which because of the outlines displayed on my HUD, but I thought *Mute* would feel better if she could see it herself.

"Okay, then." *Mute's* shoulders stiffened, and she clenched her hands into fists. "Let's do this."

Carefully, like I was holding a lock of *Hyun-ae's* hair, I let go of the whisker that held her. Then I pulled the virtual keyboard over to where I was facing now, and typed in a long string of commands.

Three of Aria's four remaining whiskers, including the sky blue one, floated a couple of metres away from us, towards the rest of the room. They circled around each other, spinning in place, fans of multicoloured light surveying the room and shining across me and *Mute*. Then they spread out vertically, one a half-metre above and the other a half-metre below the sky blue one in the middle, before their fans of light swept over each other and turned into *Hyun-ae*.

I let out my breath, not realizing that I'd been holding it.

I'd gotten the two of them into the same room. Now *Mute* and I just had to defuse a six hundred year old time bomb.
The first sign that something was wrong was that *Hyun-ae had her back turned to us. The second ... was that she was wearing the Pale Bride's white and blue hanbok. The same one that she'd worn when she died.

If that bothered *Mute, she didn't show it. "Hey. Pale Bride. I mean, Kim Hyun-ae," *Mute said, and I saw her tense up at her name. "I'm pretty sure you know who I am. Miss Investigator here pointed out some stuff that I hadn't noticed. And, like ... I think I owe you an apology."

*Hyun-ae did not turn around, and said nothing.

"Don't get me wrong," *Mute went on, one of her hands going to her hip. "You're still a crazy mass murderer. I'm not absolving you of your actions. But, like ... I thought you did it in spite of the fact that you had everything going for you. Perfect marital bliss, and a family that cared for you. I was wrong, and I-"

"So you're a woman," *Hyun-ae interrupted, and I knew she was talking to me.

I held tight to *Mute's rack (not that rack), and squeaked out a response. "Um, yes?"

"Was it fun?"

"Was what fun?" I asked, even though I knew where this was heading.

"Leading me on. Like a date in some trashy visual novel."

She turned around, and I saw tears glistening on her face. The pale, sickly, worn-out face she'd had when she died, that looked young and impossibly old at the same time.

She spoke again, and I looked far away from her when she did. "Did you get off on it? Did it give you a cheap thrill? Which did you like best, the maid costume or the schoolgirl outfit? How did it feel to take my heart in your hand and crush it?!"

"Hey!" *Mute protested. "The Investigator's not that kind of woman! Well, I mean, like, she kind of is, but-"

"Shut up," *Hyun-ae snapped at her, and then turned back to me before *Mute could recover. "I bared my soul to you. I showed you things that I'd never shown anyone else. All you had to do was tell me how you felt. I even made things easy for you, since I thought you were shy or disabled or something."

"I-"

"I trusted you!" *Hyun-ae shouted. "I trusted you so much, I could have asked you to bake me a cake right there in your tiny spaceship, and I would have believed you if you'd said you had. Even with no way of knowing, I would have believed you." She was crying hard, now. "I would've pretended to eat it with you, on my first real date ever. Because after six hundred years of being alone, I needed someone who would do that. I needed someone who would listen, and talk to me, and actually be there for me when I needed him. Or her.

"How dare you pretend to be that person, when you're not."
She wiped at her face with her sleeves, a few times, sniffing into them. Then she turned around, and started walking away.

I couldn't breathe.

"Hey," *Mute called out to her. Then again, louder. "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Away from me, I thought. And towards the weapons.

"Oh, no. Oh, hell no." *Mute folded her arms, and metal locks built into the weapon racks clamped down around spear hafts and assorted sharp objects. "Not on my watch."

*Hyun-ae paused, and looked at them. Then the latches unlocked again, and she went on walking towards them.

"What the ffff." *Mute trailed off and stared at her, jaw agape.

"She's based on your code," I said quietly, realizing what had happened. "She can access all the security systems. And she still has root access, too."

"She does? Why didn't you revoke it first?!"

"... you can revoke it?"

*Mute facepalmed. "You said you were good with computers."

While we were arguing, the weapon rack was shaking like it was in an earthquake, as the thick metal locks clamped down and unclamped at least once a second. One of the spears started to shake free of its position. Then it drifted out past where the lock could reach.

*Hyun-ae snatched it in midair, one of Aria's whiskers splitting into a claw which tracked her hand's movements, before turning around to face me. Her gaze was cold and dispassionate. I couldn't look away.

"Okay." *Mute was talking fast. "You need to disable those drones of yours, then. Right now."

I gulped, still sweating all over and frozen in place. "I, um ..."

"Do it!" *Mute shouted.

I finally broke free of *Hyun-ae's gaze and put my hands to the virtual keyboard. But the terminal window above it was filled with characters I didn't recognize, which were scrolling so fast that I couldn't tell if *Hyun-ae was reprogramming Aria or if she was just spamming the console to keep me from typing anything.

I acted on instinct and typed anyway, as fast as I ever had in a lifetime of hacking. I tried breaks, escape sequences, force quits. Nothing worked.

"What are you waiting for?!"

I looked up, through the transparent terminal window, and out at where *Hyun-ae was. She was not coming towards me, and hadn't been this whole time. Instead, she was swinging her spear at the air ...

... or at one of Aria's whiskers.
The sky blue one.

I closed up the virtual keyboard and started climbing across the computer racks towards the wall, holding on with my free hand to the one whisker that was still following me. Pressing against it as a counterweight.

*Mute followed me, for a second. Then she looked up and seemed to realize what *Hyun-ae was doing, and ran across the mirrored gym towards her.

I felt like I was climbing a skyscraper again. I couldn't see them, but I could hear *Mute shouting at her. "Drop the weapon! That's an order from ship security!"

"Fuck you," *Hyun-ae told her. At least, I think that's what she said. She sounded quiet, like she was out of breath, and I had no idea if that meant anything or was purely cosmetic.

"O-kay, I can see that this isn't going to work."

They were silent for a few seconds, and I couldn't tell what was happening then. All I could see was a blur of motion far above me, which I assumed was *Hyun-ae swinging the spear at her core. It didn't look like she was having much luck, either with connecting or damaging it, since she was apparently still there.

**Please, goddess, let her still be there in just a few more seconds.**

"Look, I just want you to know ... if you'd come to me, I would have done something about it. Okay? What your family did to you was wrong."

*Hyun-ae didn't say anything, but just kept trying to kill herself.

"And aside from the whole 'not being able to talk' thing, you really seemed to like living at the palace."

Now I could see that she'd stopped, and was standing there gasping for breath and staring daggers at the sky blue sphere. I didn't know if *Mute had given her pause or if she had just gotten worn out.

"Was it going back to your family's house, while the emperor was in mourning for his first wife, that did it to you? Did they, like, try to-"

Now she swung at *Mute, and her spear cracked the glass.

"Damn it, I'm trying to help!" *Mute re-appeared a few metres away, and fumed at her. "I would have, like, sent a security detail with you. I would've made sure you were sent someplace else! You didn't have to do this. None of this had to happen."

I held my breath. *Hyun-ae was looking away from me, towards the screen *Mute was standing in. She had to be almost done catching her breath. Maybe she was listening, for once?

I had a choice, here. I could wait and see if *Mute could talk sense into her, or I could try to sneak up behind her and grab the spear away.

I chose wrong.

To *Mute's credit, she did not give away my position. Not once did she even glance towards me as I crept closer, mostly relying on the one whisker I held. And, like I said, the "mirror" glass didn't...
reflect the people in the room. Not even *Hyun-ae.

"I understand that you're mad at me," *Mute said, spacing her words apart. "Hell, I'm mad at you. But I'm also mad at your good-for-nothing family, who did such a bad job of training you and then mutilated you to make sure that no one found out. And you know what? I think they deserved to all rot in jail.


I was almost within reach of it now. But *Mute had just asked her to give it up on her own, so I counted seconds in my head, waiting to see if she did so before trying to wrestle it from her. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three-

*Hyun-ae whirled around, and smashed the spear into my visor.

By all rights, it should have entered my skull. But the curved glass of my helmet deflected it, cracking in the process. I slammed into the wall, the wind knocked out of me, stunned and not sure what had happened.

I should have taken those self-defence classes, I realized, and thought I heard quiet hissing right next to my ear.

I managed to right myself, still feeling dizzy, in time so see *Hyun-ae walk back to *Mute's core on the opposite wall. She started tugging at one of the computers, like she was trying to pull it free from the rack.

"What are you doing?!" *Mute yelled. She sounded afraid. "Stop!"

"No, please!" I called out to *Hyun-ae, and felt like my head was splitting open when I tried to yell. "It's me that you hate, not *Mute," I said, more quietly.

"I hate you," *Hyun-ae growled, as she struggled to yank cables loose with Aria's claws. "I hate you I hate you I hate you! I hate ALL of you!" she shouted, and I saw *Mute flicker as she pulled out a boxy computer the size of her torso.

*Mute just stood there, stunned.

*Hyun-ae held the sky blue sphere down on the wooden floor, and placed the no-longer-rack-mounted computer on top of it with her free hand. Then she used both hands to grind the computer into it, gritting her teeth and sweating.

I frantically tried to crawl back to her, as she snarled at us through clenched teeth. "I hate your stupid, illiterate society, that can't even read the words 'sick daughter.' I hate every last one of you for treating women like property! Like things! Like ... trashy dates in an ero game, who have no choice whether or not to marry you!" She started to flicker as she spoke, and the white outline that my HUD put over her sphere turned red.

"It's not like that where I'm from!" I called out to her, as loud as I could without hurting myself. "The future is different outside this ship. Women are treated as people, and even-

"Why should I believe you?!" she shouted, and I reflexively put my hands to my ears. "What have you ever done that would make me want to believe you? Except lie to me, and work with her behind my back." She jerked a thumb at *Mute.
"Mute was standing behind her right then, still watching in horror.

Sort of like I was, I thought. Except that she was ignoring *Mute right now, and looking at me expectantly. Like she was waiting for me to give her another reason to hate.

"I ... I don't know." I didn't know what else to say. "I'm sorry."

"No," she said, and placed both of her hands back on the computer case. "No, you're not. Not unless you do one thing for me."

I swallowed. "What's that?"

"Go kill yourself."

She pressed down hard on the computer case. And the sphere with all of her memories, consciousness, and personality inside shattered beneath it, tiny fragments of crystal and metal flying out in a weightless cloud.

*Hyun-ae flickered, and vanished forever.
Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a first-person account of suicidal depression and of an aborted suicide attempt, written by someone who has survived it herself in real life.

If you are at risk yourself, or feel you'd be triggered by reading such things, please consider skipping over this chapter. If you want to see the non-triggering parts of this chapter, which contain a pivotal moment in *Mute's character development, click here. Either way, you probably shouldn't actually try to prevent a suicide attempt using the method described here.

Something inside of me died, when I saw that. But it felt like everything had.

This is what my whole life's led up to, I thought. This is what I amount to. Not a fearless investigator, and sure as hell not anyone's lover.

I was someone who could drive a person to that. Someone who could, and who had. That was all.

* * *

*Mute sighed. "I guess that's it, then."

I said nothing.

She walked over to where I was, and looked "up" at me since I was drifting slowly away from the floor. "Are you okay?"

I said nothing.

"Miss Investigator, are you okay?" There was concern in her voice.

I shook my head slowly, trying to keep the world from spinning. Still hearing the hiss in my helmet.

"Oh, crap." *Mute seemed to notice it just then, too. "You're losing oxygen." She pulled up a window and tapped on it. "There's, like, a supply you can use not too far from here. Okay?"

Aria's two whiskers that hadn't been crushed had floated back next to me, joining the third. I dialed up her quick menu, and tapped on the helmet commands.

"Okay?"

There were a lot of flashing red warning signs, on my HUD and on the quick dial. I ignored them.

*Mute didn't. "What the hell are you doing?!!"

I ignored her, too.

"No," *Mute said, her voice shaking. "No. Stop!"
I put my hands on my helmet, and got ready to take it off.

"Mira (Fox), stop it right now!"

The sound of my name gave me pause. I didn't think *Mute had ever said it before. I looked down at her and saw that she was crying, both hands pressed up to the glass.

I doubled over and curled in a ball, hugging my knees to my chest, because now the pain was too much for me. I couldn't live with what I'd seen and done here. It hurt so much, I didn't want to. But now someone was asking me to go on. Why? It made no sense.

If that all seems hard to understand, then maybe that's because you've never been in a situation where everyone saw you as a thing. The way I and *Hyun-ae had. If a thing makes a mistake, you get rid of it. And this whole sequence of events was my worst mistake ever. I thought.

Not that I told any of that to *Mute. I couldn't move, now. I was paralyzed with fear, like I was hanging onto a cliff ledge and if I let go I would die. And for all that I had convinced myself I deserved it, I was scared that I would go through with taking off my helmet. The warning screens seemed like fragile barriers.

Part of me realized that *Mute was still talking. I made myself listen to her.

"... any husband you wanted, I swear. They would, like, line up for you!"

Oh my goddess, she's going on about husbands again. It boggled the mind. I smiled a little, in spite of myself.

"But you're lesbian." *Mute sighed. "So that doesn't matter to you."

I stopped smiling.

"Look. I ... " *Mute paused, for a second. Then she started talking fast. "I like girls too. Okay? I like women, the same way I like men. And ... I can understand the kind of perverse, unrestrained lust that led Smith Sang-min's wife to play the man to the whore. It was disgusting and wrong, but I understand why she did it. I understand why you'd want to do it." She said this like it was news to either of us.

I started sweating all over again, and had to wonder if she was as uncomfortable as I was right now. It sounded like it, because she was stumbling over her words. "And, like, this probably isn't something you want to hear from me. Because, uh, I'm the ship's security system, not an actual flesh-and-blood person that you'd want to do all those depraved things with. But, um, speaking as someone who can tell, you are actually very hot-"

oh my fucking goddess i am going to die of embarrassment

"-and I am so not declaring intent here, because, um, that would be wrong on so many levels-"

aaaaaaaahhhhhHHHHHHH

"-but you have so much to live for, okay?! You have women! Women to live for! Women who'd love to do perverted things with you! For the love of the women, don't kill yourself!" *Mute had her hands clasped together like she was pleading with me.

"Okay!" I shouted, and surprised even myself. "I won't do it!" You have successfully gotten me to
think about something even more terrifying, I thought, but I didn't say that out loud.

"That's ... that's good! That's good," *Mute repeated, and looked startled too as I unfolded and righted myself.

I was breathing hard, trying to catch my breath. That was the second-most awkward conversation I'd ever had.

*Mute was blushing, and looking away from me.

"So ... " I said, my voice trailing off.

"So."

"Um, right ... "

"Yeah." *Mute was still blushing.

"I ... think you were going to show me that oxygen tank?"

"Oh yeah, um, hang on ... " The window appeared next to her upside-down, and she struggled to right it. It looked like her hands were shaking a little as she traced a route on the map. "It's just down this hallway and to the left."

"Thank you." I nodded to her, a bit shakily. I was still filled with adrenaline, and was taking advantage of the distraction and trying hard not to think about anything until I was someplace where my thoughts couldn't kill me.

"Oh, and *Mute?"

"Yes?"

After what had just happened, I wanted to make sure that I told her properly. "I think you're very attractive also."

She didn't say anything, and just blushed even harder, tripping up on her robes as she walked down the hallway with me. I reached out instinctively to help her, and I think she pretended not to notice.

Crystal shards floated past us. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought they were beautiful.
"Well ... here we are."

I looked out into the plaza. There were the graceful arcs of the White Princess, as pristine as though nothing had happened. Untouched by the events of the last day.

I guessed that it was supposed to be home. But it felt alien, now. After what felt like years of staggering through the Mugunghwa, blocking out short-term memories, and passing by corpses and wreckage, it looked cold. Privileged, and uncaring.

My suit's visor had repaired itself, so I guessed that I looked that way, too. But inside, I felt more tired than I'd ever been.

I turned around, to look at *Mute. She was there next to me, on the other side of the glass. It was one of the slabs that was mounted into the floor, and delirious as I was from exhaustion and sleep deprivation, it's like ... I knew she was physically standing there. She was a person, as solid as I was. My disbelief was completely suspended.

Why am I here on this side of the wall, and she on hers? I thought. This is impolite. I should walk to the other side if I'm going to talk to her.

But I also knew it didn't work that way.

"Are ... " *Mute coughed. "Um. Are you ready to go?" she asked, and looked out at my ship.

I sighed wearily, and nodded. "I've got to download the logs first, I guess."

"Yeah ... I guess those are important."

We both fidgeted.

I remembered that part of *Mute's core had been pulled out. "Are you sure you don't need me to ... " Only then did I realize that I'd already asked her this twice.

*Mute shook her head. "No, really. I'll be alright, I'm stored on RAID. It's a technical term, which means 'don't worry about it.'"
Redundant Array of Inexpensive Disks, I remembered. That's what the term actually meant. So she hopefully hadn't lost anything, then.

if i'd spread *hyun-ae out across aria then this wouldn't have happened

I doubled over suddenly, clutching my chest. Gasping for breath, fighting down the panic attack. Still attached to the floor by my boots.

"Geeze, are you alright!"

I shook my head 'no,' still trying to catch my breath.

"Are you injured?"

I just shook my head again. "I'll be okay," I managed to get out, but I knew that I didn't sound like it.

I knew that I wasn't.

*Mute waited for me to stand back up, shaking and holding my forehead, before talking again. "Uh ... if you're okay, there's, like, something I wanted to bring up. Before you leave, I mean."

I froze in place, feeling unable to move. Somehow, I knew that whatever she had to tell me was more important than anything else. But that was why I couldn't listen to her right now. My eyes could barely stay open, my muscles ached all over, and I was badly dehydrated. If I had to make a decision, right now, I knew I'd make one that I would regret.

Worse than I regretted the ones I had made today while fully awake, I mean.

"C-can you just leave me a note? Or talk to me when I wake up." I fought off a wave of dizziness. "I really need to lay down ..."

"Okay." *Mute hesitated. "Can you just, like ... promise that you'll talk to me before you go, then?"

"... I promise."

"Okay, then. I'll ... I'll see you soon." She bowed, and watched as I awkwardly returned the gesture. Then I staggered the rest of the way to my ship, and the spotless white hatch slid open in segments as I approached.

I climbed in, and it sealed flush behind me. The UV lights momentarily blinded me, and the loud jets of compressed air disoriented me and made me lose my balance. I stumbled and fell into the cabin, and it was only the moon gravity that I still had it set to which let me catch myself.

With one arm holding onto the net that kept the plushies on top of my bed, I used the other to take my helmet off, not letting myself think about the last time I had tried to. Then I slumped down against my bed through the net, peeling off my space suit and the clothes and underwear beneath it. They were soaked with sweat, and smelled acrid.

Everything I had hurt. Even my phantom tails hurt, and I didn't have them.

I shivered in the cold, my long, black hair a poor blanket. Then I made myself crawl to the shower, removing my hair tie on the way and not caring about where it landed when I tossed it.

* * *
I spent the next few hours in a sleepless haze.

I don't know how long I spent leaning against the shower wall, gulping down whatever water hit my mouth because I was so thirsty.

I don't know how long I stood outside in the cabin, my hair a disaster, my teal nightgown put on backwards, looking at the cup I had in one hand and the faucet I held in the other. As though it were a mystery how these two objects were related.

I don't know how many times I had to crawl back out of bed and then pull myself, in the dark, to the lavatory.

I don't know how many hours I spent laying on top of the blankets, a half-dozen plushies squished in my arms, staring up at the dim outline of the cabin ceiling. Noticing every time the display on the wall advanced the clock by a minute, because the shadows just barely shifted.

*I'm not really here*, I decided. *This is all just a dream.*

One minute.

*I'm still back on board the Mugunghwa. I always have been. I always will be. Nothing else has ever existed.*

One minute.

My whole lifetime was a blur. It's not that I couldn't remember it if I tried, or at least the parts of it that I usually could. It's that I couldn't try anymore. I didn't see any reason to. Who I was, was now completely defined by what had just happened today.

Two minutes. Or three. I lost count.

I had never seen this level of tragedy. This ... ruination. I had never cared so deeply about anyone, especially people that I'd just met, and then had to see them go through such horrible things. And deal with such horrible trauma.

I felt like I'd lost my identity, somewhere in the process. Had I even existed, before I came here? Was there anyone else in the world, besides *Mute* and *Hyun-ae?*

... or at least *Mute?*

I counted five minutes, in my head, as I replayed the memory of the sky blue crystal sphere that *Hyun-ae* had been stored in shattering. Over and over again. I tried to imagine what that would be like. To have not just your body or self, but your entire world and your perception of it, destroyed like that. An entire universe, breaking like glass.

She really had won, I thought. *Hyun-ae* had destroyed the whole universe. And I no longer existed.

But if I no longer existed, then what was I doing here? What was I supposed to do, now?

"**GO KILL YOURSELF.**"

I doubled over, curled up on my side and hugging myself. Eyes squeezed shut, silently screaming in agony as every one of my muscles pulled taut and locked up. Including the ones that I'd already pulled. It was an uncontrollable seizure, a physical reflex, and I was conscious of it but I couldn't
do anything to stop it.

The silent scream in my throat became louder and louder. Until it was as loud as a whisper, and then a moment later I heard my voice saying "... aaaaaaah ...

And that brought me back to reality.

My fists unclenched. My muscles slowly untensed. My sides were covered in sweat. I was breathing shakily, trying to catch my breath from the exertion.

What the hell had just happened? I vaguely remembered something like this but not as bad happening, while I'd been talking to *Mute a few hours ago. Had this been caused by the trauma?

For a moment I felt like myself again, and clearly thought I have been hurt. The same way one might say "oh hey, my legs have been blown off."

"I think I need to see a therapist," I said aloud, once I'd caught my breath. Then I just lay there, feeling small and alone.

I counted ten minutes go by before I passed out.

Chapter End Notes

The Hateful Days series continues with Software Bride, which rewrites the original game's ending to be more consistent with Hate Plus.

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