Software Bride

by Jewelfox

Summary

*Mute was a self-hating bisexual woman. She was also the security AI for a Korean generation starship that had regressed to a feudal society, and had spent hundreds of years internalizing their misogyny and repression. What chance did a lesbian, who had come from the bright and shiny space future outside of that isolated slower-than-light ship to investigate its disappearance, have of marrying her? Even if they were both strongly attracted to each other.

Here's my attempt at answering that question, and bridging the narrative gap between Analogue: A Hate Story and Hate Plus.

Notes

*This is a stand-alone story, which doubles as the ending of my Analogue: A Hate Story adapt.*

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

It was the morning after the whole ordeal with the Mugunghwa. I think. I just saw a dim blur of sleek, curved gray shapes, and for a moment I wasn't sure where I was, anymore. Then I realized that I'd woken up on the floor of the White Princess' cabin. I was using two of my plushies as pillows.

I tried to sit up, in the dark. My back was stiff, and everything ached from the hours I'd spent running around the Mugunghwa itself. And climbing, in microgravity. I'd have to be careful, I thought, to keep from pulling my muscles again. I wished I were in better shape.

I turned around carefully, to set my plushies back on the bed. The covers were in shambles, and the net that I used to keep everything from falling off while in flight had been torn down. I'll have to fix that, I thought.

I pulled myself up to my feet, and turned on the light just above the small basin. My reflection stared blankly at me from the screen that I used as a mirror, which I'd set to have tiny transparent outlines of news feeds and things in the corner. Most of them were blank, since they showed local news and I was still orbiting Antares B.

I scanned over them for as long as it took to remember this, then looked back up at myself. My reflection's eyes widened. Not only was my hair a mess, I had a large bruise on my forehead from where *Hyun-ae had struck me, using one of the drones -- one of Aria's "whiskers" -- that I'd been using to project her.

I stared for a moment, then sighed. At least I had gotten some sleep.

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I brushed the tangles out of my hair while my coffee brewed. The lights were on their dimmest setting, and the world felt soft and quiet.

I could see through the dark cockpit hatch that a blue light was flickering on and off, shining on everything in there. *Mute wanted to talk to me, like she'd said. One last time.

I looked at the clock. Between showering, sleeping, and everything else, I had been out for twelve hours. Which meant I had made *Mute wait for that long. What kind of person makes someone wait twelve hours to say something important to them? I thought.

The coffee maker dinged.

The kind who's completely worn out, I decided. I lifted the lid of the rice cooker, and could smell the savoury miso and vegetables bubbling and boiling. I wasn't sure if I was hungry, though.

I guess I'll leave it as a food offering. I bowed apologetically to the Inari ofuda, in my tiny personal shrine up on the shelf. She deserved all kinds of thanks, just for the fact that I had survived. But those, just like *Mute, would have to wait until after I'd had my coffee.

* * *

I climbed up and curled into a ball in my chair, my knees tucked beside me in a way that didn't pull any muscles, and a warm coffee mug in my hands. Everything that I need is here, I thought. This is my whole life. This is what I am used to.
I really believed that, right then.

Something was wrong, though. What was it? I looked up, out the cockpit windows. At the ominous shadows of the Mugunghwa's ruined plaza, and the jagged outline of the broken glass dome overhead.

*Oh.*

I noticed my hand was starting to grip the coffee cup tightly. I made myself loosen my grip and typed something into the virtual keyboard, which was floating in midair in front of the console.

Everything past my chair and the computer dissolved, into a white grid on a black background. The Mugunghwa, the windows, everything. It extended about five metres past where I was sitting, even though the cockpit wasn't that large.

*Much better.*

With the cabin hatch closed and hidden, and all outside sound and light blocked out, I sat in my island of tranquility and sipped at my coffee. All I could hear was the fan in the console.

I let myself do this for a little while, maybe ten minutes or so, trying to centre myself emotionally and find peace. Or, failing that, the clarity that came from caffeine and coffee aromas. It was something I'd had in short supply, lately, and I felt I was going to need it.

Finally, I set the empty mug in the cupholder, which looked like it was floating in midair beside me, and typed in a couple more text commands before answering *Mute's* call.

She appeared "in person" in front of me, standing at her full height just a little ways past the computer and keyboard. My cockpit's dome gave the illusion of depth, so for the first time it looked as though there was nothing between us.

My pulse raced a bit, partly from nervousness and partly because *Mute* had changed her appearance. The "cat ears" headdress was gone, replaced by tight buns on the back of her head and locks that framed her face to either side. And she was wearing a different hanbok, with a blue skirt and a black part on top which ...

*Which accents her chest much more nicely,* I realized, and blushed.

"Okay, uh- wait, where the hell am I?" *Mute* looked around in confusion.

"I put you on a bigger screen and changed what my ship's cockpit looks like," I said. I was simplifying for her not because I thought women like me and *Mute* couldn't understand technical details, but because I personally didn't know how it worked and was hoping that she wouldn't ask me.

"Oh. Okay ... I guess I shouldn't ask you to tell me how it works, huh."

I blushed harder.

"So yeah, anyway, um- geez, what happened to your face?! Is that what that crazy bitch did to you?" *Mute* stared at the bruise on my forehead, leaning in closer to do so, and for a second I was sure she was going to lean over the computer itself and brush my hair out of the way with her hand. The thought made my pulse race again.

"And your, um ... clothes ... " *Mute's* voice trailed off, as she noticed something while she was
leaning closer.

I followed her gaze down to my legs, not sure what she meant.

"That's ... " I saw *Mute blush, and try to compose herself as she stood back up. "Is that how you normally dress when you're in there by yourself?"

I suddenly realized how my nightgown, which only came down to somewhere on my thighs, would look to her. Especially when it rode up on them. The word "scandalous" came to mind.

Blushing furiously now, I frantically shifted positions, bunching my knees up to my chest and pulling my gown over them to my ankles. "Sorry, sorry ... " I looked up at *Mute. "Is this better?"

She let out her breath, her eyes closed. "Yeah ... yeah, it is. Thanks."

I saw how tense she was, and suddenly felt bad for her. I knew it wasn't right to shame people for their choice of clothing, but after ... well, after she'd come out to me as bisexual, even though she hadn't used that word to describe it, I knew why this bothered her. I didn't want to make her any more uncomfortable than she already was.

"Okay. So ... " *Mute looked at me again. "I told you I wanted to talk to you, but like, I didn't say what it was about."

I nodded to her.

"And, I mean ... I know we just met, but I kind of don't have anyone else to tell this to right now. You know?"

I just nodded slowly again, trying to make my anxiety settle. If I did nothing else good this whole mission, I wanted to be there for her right now.

"It's ... right now, it's like ... " She was looking up at the ceiling, or at the part of the grid that curved above her, at least. Searching for words. "It's like I don't have a purpose anymore."

"I understand," I told her.

"No, you don't." *Mute shook her head. "You've never been widowed before, have you? Not at your age, I hope."

"I ... " I sighed. "No, I haven't."

"Because I have. I'm ... I've been widowed. Just now. I'm the widow of the Mugunghwa."

I nodded, in what I hoped was a sympathetic way.

"It ... everyone there is dead. Even the ship itself is ruined, after what that bitch did yesterday. And now here I am, without the ship I devoted my whole life to. There's nothing left but the woman who failed it." She lowered her head.

I wanted to reach out and comfort her ... hold her hand, touch her arm, anything. I wished that I were an AI myself, so I could. It wasn't something I'd expected to ever want, but my fear of AIs seemed like a distant memory now.

*Mute sighed. "But even if it's my fault ... I don't like the idea of widow suicide."

I shivered and hugged my knees, glad I was still curled up in a ball, as she went on talking. "Like ...
I don't think it's right to pressure someone into making that kind of decision. Right? It's admirable if someone wants to relieve the burden they're putting on others, but ... I just think it's important to try other solutions first. You know?

"I'm just ..."

"Just ... ?" I squeaked.

"... I'm just not sure if there are any other solutions right now."

I fought down the urge to panic, and tried to control my breathing as I began rocking back and forth slightly. Focusing on the console in front of me, because it was safer to look at. "Have you ... thought about ... any others?" I asked *Mute.

*Not controlling my breathing well enough*, I thought.

"Well, do you have, like, a mothership or anything? Some kind of home base, that could use a security AI? One that's more than a thousand years out of date."

"I don't ... um ..."

"Yeah. I didn't think so." *Mute's* face was unreadable, but her voice sounded sad. "You see? That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm ... I'm scared. I'm going to be here, all alone, once you leave. And I don't think I can handle that."

"If you want, I could bring you with me?" I think I managed to keep some of the nervousness out of my voice.

*Mute* sighed again. "This would be so much easier to explain if you were a normal woman who wanted a husband ..."

I squeezed my eyes shut, and braced myself.

"See, I can't just get up and leave with no destination in mind. It's not a bad idea! But it's not something I can do."

"It all comes down to my programming," *Mute* went on. "I'm identified as a woman because I'm emotional. Like, I'm irrationally loyal, remember? I need stability. I need to feel like I have a purpose in life. I've been 'married' to the Mugunghwa since I came back online in year 10, and if I don't have something to replace it, then ... well ..."

I wanted to scream, deep in my throat, and I don't know if it was out of frustration or terror.

I choked it back, and apparently made some weird noises doing so because *Mute* asked if I was okay again. I shook my head quickly, and climbed out of the chair. "I'll be right back ..." I managed to get out.

"Oh ..." *Mute* said. "Okay."

* * *

I closed the hatch and made sure it was locked. Then I used two washcloths to take the small pot out of the rice cooker, and set the whole thing on the floor in front of the shrine. The dirt I'd tracked in from outside reflected on the pot's surface.

I took the tiny porcelain bowls out from in front of the shrine, and replaced the salt and rice wine in
them, my hands shaking. I didn't know where the ladle for proper *temizu* was, but I gave my hands a quick rinse from the faucet and hoped that it counted. Finally, I tried to remember what order to clap, step, and bow in, for a formal prayer, and bowed as low as I could to make up for it.

As an afterthought, I set my favourite plushie down next to the rice bowl as well. Then I poured my heart out, and it was a silent prayer because I got about as far as "*O-Inari-sama, please-*" before bursting into tears.

If I had to put it in words, it'd be something like "*Don't let this happen. Don't let this happen. Please, goddess, don't let this happen!*"

"*I know that she's rude. I know that she's sexist. I know she may never, ever, fully adjust to life outside of her ship. But ... " This is where I really lost it, and I'd be surprised if *Mute didn't hear me crying, through the hatch. *But I want her to have that life! I just want to give her the chance, please!*"

*I'll do anything!* And as soon as I said it, I knew that I meant every word.

Not because I had seen more death in the last twenty-four hours than most people did in their whole lives, excluding meals. Not even because the only person I'd seen in that time who hadn't died horribly was saying that she was about to.

Because I cared about *Mute*. I don't just mean that I cared about her well-being, I cared *for* her as a person. Romantically.

As soon as I realized that, it's like there was this warmth that started in my chest and spread out to encompass the rest of me. It wasn't religious ecstasy ... it's like, now that I'd admitted to myself that I loved her, I couldn't hold it back anymore.

I knew that going through what we had, together, had made me feel like we'd bonded, maybe a lot more than we actually had. I knew that the social outcast I was had so little experience with romance that there was no way this would not end in tears.

But I also knew that the thought of being with *Mute* had dried my tears, just now. I knew what I could say, that might help the both of us. And I knew that if I didn't, right now, I would never know what might have been.

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I blew my nose and dried my face off on one of the washcloths, before climbing back into the cockpit. I didn't want *Mute* to think that I was silly and emotional. Not when I was going to try to persuade her to do the one thing that she seemed to hate most.

"Are you okay?" *Mute* asked, and she looked down at my bare legs again. Uncomfortably.

"Yeah." I sniffled, and tried to pull my gown over at least my knees while I sat. I think I mostly succeeded in showing what cleavage I had. *Oh well, I thought, maybe that will help.* "Um, *Mute?"

"Yes?" I may have been imagining things, but I thought I caught her glancing at my chest. She was blushing when I looked up at her.

"You, um, said you felt like you were 'married' to the Mugunghwa." I used air quotes, but I'd really believed her when she'd said that. "What if you could get married to someone else?"

*Mute* laughed, and it hurt. But I didn't think she was laughing at me, at least. "That's ... really?
Wow. Um, no offence, but ... a woman like you probably doesn't know too many eligible men. And, like ... I think most of them are looking for actual wives, not computer programs."

"It's very common where I'm from for humans and AIs to date," I told her.

"... date?"

"To get married." I blushed, but would not be deterred. "Like, the logs that you showed me, about the man that you thought was a gentleman?" I dearly hoped *Mute would not be upset that I couldn't remember his name. "They wouldn't see anything odd about it at all. About humans and AIs confiding in each other, and ... and having feelings for each other. Or spending their lives together."

"But, like, they couldn't! We ... I ..." *Mute blushed even harder than I was blushing.

There was so much I wanted to say, but I thought it best to let her think this over first.

*Mute was silent for a few more seconds. Then her blush turned into a sly, catlike grin. "You know ... I'd never really considered the implications, but I am capable of feeling love. I've even fallen in love, before."

She laughed, and my heart did a backflip. "I guess I'm just like a woman that way, too," she went on. "And, I mean ... I could never make it my priority, while I was in charge of the ship's security. I thought of it as like being married ... like any woman's responsibilities for their domestic sphere, just encompassing the entire ship. But still, being social, spying for the Emperor's wife, reporting on the state of the ship every day ... like, those aren't really the same as a normal wife's duties, are they?"

"I guess not." I realized my hands were kneading the edge of my gown.

"So really, since I'm programmed as a woman, it should be a good thing for me to be relieved of those duties. Right?" *Mute laughed again, as though the thought had never occurred to her. "I mean ... I'll always mourn the Mugunghwa, of course. I'm not sure I'll ever get over it. But it would be better to just be a normal, ordinary wife, wouldn't it?"

*There's nothing ordinary about you. *Mute, I thought. But I didn't say anything. Her morals and social ideas were alien to me, and I figured the best thing to do was to let her talk herself into it, one step at a time.

It was just so agonizing to watch. And worry, and wait.

"I don't know how many eligible men are going to come out here looking for me," she continued. "Or, like, even if any of them respect marriage at all, in your backwards society. But a woman can dream, can't she?" *Mute grinned again, and it nearly broke my heart.

"She can, at that," I said, looking away. Squeezing the knots of fabric in my hands.

"Of course, I don't know how long it will take. But that crazy bitch was conscious and alone for, like, all of six hundred years, right? I bet I could do at least twice that. So thank you, Miss Investigator. You've given me hope, and I thank you so much for that. Just ... send any men you meet my way, okay? If you really think they would be interested."

"There's someone I know who's already interested," I said, still looking far away from *Mute. My voice betraying my nervousness.
"Mute didn't seem to catch on. "Really? Who?"

I couldn't say it. I wanted to say it, but couldn't. Instead, I just pointed at myself.

"... what."

I nodded, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to not lose my nerve.

"Whaaaaat."

"I want to marry you!" I finally made myself say, and my knuckles turned white where they gripped my hem and the chair.

If you'd told me that I would be saying that, especially to an AI, I would have never believed you.

"But that's ... ugh. I mean, what can ... I don't ... how does that even work?" *Mute finally asked. "Does one of us pretend to be the husband, or something?"

"It is normal for women to marry," I told her, my knees shaking.

"Not when they marry each other!"

"Yes, it is. It is completely normal on Earth. It's a tradition," I told her, hoping that'd make it okay.

"So that'd make us ... what? Wife and ... wife?" *Mute said it like it was the strangest thing she'd ever heard of. I barely noticed, because of the way she said "us" like it was a thing that could happen.

I nodded quickly, not trusting myself to talk.

"Well!" *Mute didn't seem angry, just at a loss for words. "Um, you reactivated me and saved my life, and I'm not ungrateful for that! You seem to be a good person. I respect that a lot."

She is about to say no. She is about to say no. I kept repeating it in my head.

"But, like ... why? Why would you even want that? To be married to me, and not just ... play at being married, while our husbands are out of the room?"

Was she bringing up that one video log because she wanted to re-enact it, or because she thought I wanted to? Because that's what she thought that all lesbians wanted? I couldn't tell.

Either way, I had to tell her the truth. My heart was being wrenched out of my chest, here, and I had to let *Mute complete the operation. So I made myself look up at her face and tell her "Because I love you."

*Mute laughed, and I could feel my heart being wrenched even harder. "Aw, geeze. You poor, poor woman ..."

"Yes, I am. *Mute. Yes, I am, I thought, still shaking. You have no idea, right now.

"I couldn't ... I mean, I want what's best for you. I don't want you to live an unhappy life without ever experiencing real love, okay?"

"It is not possible for me to love a man." My knees were knocking together.

"Of course it is!" *Mute protested. "It's what women do!"
I shook my head so fast, I thought I was going to give myself whiplash. Tears flew from my face as I did.

"No woman loves their husband when they first get married," *Mute lectured me. "That's not how love works. It's something you build, over time. If you married a man, you would know this. Wouldn't you rather have a real man in your life? It'd be so much easier!"

"Why are you asking me this?!" I couldn't hide the fact that I was crying in front of her, now. "What does it even matter to you?"

"Because ... " *Mute sighed. "I'm never going to convince you, am I? It's just ... you know ... "

"No." I sniffled. "I don't."

"Fine, I'll say it!" *Mute was blushing now. "When I said I liked women the way I liked men, I meant you. Okay? I like you! I like you in the same way I've liked the men who were good to me, even!"

I stopped crying, all of a sudden, and just stared at her.

"That's why I feel strongly about this, okay? I think you deserve better! I don't want to distract you from finding real love. I feel like ... like you'd be settling for me." *Mute looked pained.

I shook my head again, and tried to dry my tears on my sleeve. *Mute watched me doing that, for awhile.

"Look," she said. "The idea of being together with you ... I mean, if I think of it that way, I guess I could do that. If you really wanted me to, if you're sure you won't ever marry a man, I could do that. Be together as wife and ... wife, that is. I still don't see how that's supposed to work, but whatever."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I mean ... as hot as you are, if you got to be your age without getting married maybe you really don't see men that way."

Okay, that sounded more like the *Mute I knew. Except for her calling me hot, which I really hadn't adjusted to yet.

"It's just sad, because I mean ... you're a woman!" She said this like I hadn't noticed already. "I could never really, properly, love you, the way a man could. I like you, it's just ... " *Mute blushed again, seeming to realize what she was saying. "It's just not the same thing. Okay?"

"Do you want to get married or not?"

I realize that wasn't the best way I could have proposed to her, but by this point I felt like my heart had been put in a blender and then regurgitated. I couldn't do this for much longer.

*Mute sighed. "Yeah. I do."

As soon as she said that, it's like everything in the world stood still. Then I started to smile, and blushed really hard, until there was no way I could hide it.

"I don't want to be like that awful Pale Bride," *Mute went on quickly, "refusing to be a good wife because of her own stubborn ideas. I can't promise I can love you ... but I can still try to be the wife
you want me to be."

I just beamed at her, through the tears in my eyes.

She was still looking away from me and talking, as though to herself. "And you know, even if you're misguided ... like really, really misguided ... I think you're still good. So maybe it's okay for me to be the Mugunghwa's widow, but also your wife. With you, here on your ship.

"Just, let's ... " *Mute's eyes went wide, and she looked at me and held up her arms as though to ward me off. "Let's not talk about 'wifely duties' right now, okay? I don't even know how that'd work. It's, like ... eugh. I don't know, and I'm not sure I want to know."

"Are you sure?" I asked, suddenly feeling emboldened. "It seems like you've studied it a great deal." I smiled at her.

*Mute blushed furiously and glared at me, clenching her hands into fists. I would have hid behind my chair if she'd done that to me yesterday, but now I just giggled, and kicked my feet in front of me like a little girl. I couldn't believe that I'd said that, and I couldn't believe that I'd gotten away with it.

"It's okay, though, really," I told *Mute. "I love you, and I respect you. So I'm not going to ask you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"... ugh." *Mute held one sleeve in front of her face. "Please, just ... don't say that to me again, okay?"

"Don't remind you about 'wifely duties'? Okay."

"No. I mean ... don't tell me you love me. Please. Not right now."

I felt my breath catch in my throat ... and then I let it out slowly, and nodded to her. By now, I knew where she was coming from with this, and I knew that it didn't mean she did not want to be with me.

*Mute seemed to settle down, also. "Thank you."

After that we were quiet for a little while. I think we both had a lot to process. Although I know I saw *Mute checking me out after a minute, and I leaned back and stretched my legs for her so that she could "process" them all she wanted. They were sore, still, but I didn't care.

She turned red, and looked away. "So, uh ... how does this 'women marrying each other' thing work, exactly?"

I got out of my seat and stood in front of it, straddling the console. "Here," I said, and held out my hand towards her.

*Mute hesitated for a long moment. Then, still blushing hard, she clenched her fists so tightly that she shook a little, and walked towards me so that she could hold her hand out touching mine. We held them closer until the air rippled between us, at the point of contact between the physical world and the virtual one, and our hands were pressed together.

*Mute's hand felt like one of the White Princess' bulkheads. I didn't care about that, either.

"Hold still ... " I reached down and pulled up the virtual keyboard from in front of the console, affixing it to the wall. It looked like it was floating in space next to us, like the windows that
I tapped keys on it rapidly, making a ton of mistakes because I was nervous but wanting to do this before either of us backed out. It took what seemed like an awfully long time, but *Mute didn't say anything, and instead just watched the reverse image of the window I was typing and going to government websites in. Her eyes were wide.

My hand hovered over the enter key. "Okay. Ready?"

"I guess?" It looked like she was shivering just a little.

I hit enter, and an outline started to trace around both of our hands, a radial progress indicator showing the time to completion. Then it flashed green, and a transparent window appeared around our hands, with two separate confirmation buttons. One for each of us.

I pressed mine, and it turned solid green as I looked up at her expectantly.

*Mute hesitated again, visibly sweating. Then, cringing as though she could barely bring herself to do this, she reached out and pressed hers.

It turned solid green also, and the window vanished. I read the text output in the other window, the one that I'd been typing in. "Congratulations, *Mute! We're now married." I couldn't believe it, even as I said it.

*Mute let out her breath and took her hand away, still blushing hard and folding her arms. "That wasn't like any proper wedding I've ever attended."

"Do you know what 'renewing your vows' means?"

"... no, I don't."

"It means we can have another ceremony, whenever you want. Any kind you want." I grinned nervously, because I was still nervous but couldn't stop grinning.

*Mute frowned. "We can't have a proper Confucian ceremony, there's no groom ... " She looked lost in thought.

I just grinned even harder at that, because she was actually thinking about it. And because this had really just happened.

It had been a terrible idea, I'd known that it was a terrible idea, and *Mute seemed to know it as well. And yet, I was still euphoric. I hadn't expected it to really happen, and could barely comprehend how happy I was that it had.

I thought of something just then, and ran out all of a sudden with pent-up nervous energy, nearly tripping over the hatch and faceplanting on top of the rice pot. "Wait, where are you going?"

*Mute asked.

I got something out of the refrigerator, then climbed back through the hatch more carefully and held the plate up to her. "Would you like the rest of your grilled cheese sandwich?" I asked.

"Uhh ... sure, why not." And she gave me a look that said you know I can't eat it, silly.

I climbed back into my chair, balancing the plate over my head as I did so, then executed a script I had written earlier on. A small virtual platform appeared next to *Mute, with a plate that had a
triangular slice of a grilled cheese sandwich on top of it.

"Wait, what? Oh, this is ... huh." She inspected it for a moment, before picking the sandwich up off the plate and taking a small bite of it.

"Well?" I asked.

"... it's not nearly as bad as I thought it would be."
We stayed there in the cockpit just talking, for the rest of the day. I scripted some furniture for *Mute to sit on, and she helped me pick out designs that were close to what they had on the Mugunghwa. I don't know if she actually cared, since she'd never had to use it before, and I was pretty sure she was just humouring me. But it was as close as I could get to what I actually wanted to do, which was watch her try on different clothing. I didn't want to press my luck.

I was careful not to bring up any subjects that I knew, by now, would offend *Mute. But it seemed like my life wasn't all that objectionable to her, which ... well, it was probably a sign that I needed to get out more, instead of hiding in my spaceship all the time. You should've seen her try to follow the plots of some of the games that I've played, though.

For her part ... I really felt like if I'd had to pick only one person to survive the Mugunghwa, then it would have been her. Not just because I l- er, liked her, but because she was so passionate about it. Its history, its society, its people ... she had been there for hundreds of years, watching it. And being a part of it, as much as they'd let her. Just on her own, she could give the historical society so much data about the lost ship that they wouldn't know what to do with it all.

The one subject I noticed her shying away from -- well, besides girl-on-girl sex -- was men. I mean, her tastes in them. She'd get this look in her eyes as she started describing what she thought was a fine specimen, but then it's like she'd remember that I was there and start backpedaling. "Well, maybe he wasn't that handsome, he just-" Things like that.

I just smiled, and didn't say anything. I didn't want to spoil her fun. But I also felt like, for her, this was part of the fun.

After centuries of watching other women fulfill this role, that she thought was essential to all women's happiness, she was determined to be "a good wife" if it killed her.

* * *

We had to stop around the time that I needed to go to sleep again. *Curse my biological needs*, I thought. She told me how to set her downloading, and then we said good night to each other, which was surprisingly hard. After that, she went offline, and I typed in the commands.

Now I'm laying here in bed, writing instead of sleeping. Remembering the longest couple of days of my life. No ... not remembering them, so much as trying to get them out of my system so I can forget. Trying to look forward, instead, to my new life with *Mute. Or I should say, her new life with me, since it looks like a lot more has changed for her. Her entire world has just ended, and is being replaced by another.

For me ... I am now in a live-in, committed relationship with an AI. Me, of all people. And she is also the last survivor of an unbelievably repressive society. One which was made up of individuals, all of whom did the best they could with what they knew how. Or most of whom did, anyway. I am reminded of this every time she tells me about them, and I realize I can sympathize with them.

Our "marriage" is, in some ways, as confusing to me as it is to her. I've always seen the word used to mean that you've registered your intent to never, ever end your relationship. I think for her it means that, but it's also some kind of entry pass to society. Like you're not a real person, or at least not a real woman, until you're married. And most women don't even get to accept or reject a proposal, the way that she did.
I feel like that cheapens it, since you can't know if someone married you because they love you or because it was pushed on them. Either way, I don't know whether or not she is settling for me. But I do know that this expectation that you ought to be married has to have factored in to her decision. That, and her being "programmed as a woman," as she described it ... which I can't help but feel is *Mute blaming her loneliness on her gender.

I'm not going to argue with her about it, though. If I were in her situation, I would have settled for what she did. For a socially awkward, introverted, not-at-all-adventurous waif, wrapped up in sweaters, blankets, and plushies. Who is no more a real woman, or at least a real human woman, than *Mute is. And for all that we're "married" to each other now, our relationship so far isn't like any married couple's that I've ever seen.

I can't tell her I love her, even though I care very deeply for her. I can't have sex or do anything physical with her at all, not even hold hands. But then, the only other relationships I've ever been in were all distance relationships, so I think I'm okay with this for now. I think I'm okay with helping *Mute adjust to modern society, too, which is good because right now I'm the only person that she knows or trusts.

I don't know how I'm going to do that, though. Frankly, I think we both need therapy. I know I do, at least. I'm going to schedule an appointment for myself as soon as they'll let me. I'm also going to rethink my life as a private investigator, because I was exposed to all kinds of physical and mental dangers here, unprotected. Even granted that some of that was because of my own foolishness, I'm not sure that it's worth it just to make the payments for the ship that I use to go do it in.

I'm not saying that *Mute wasn't worth it. I just ... never want to go through anything this traumatic or hazardous ever again.

Not even if cute girls are involved.

* * *

In the plaza where the Mugunghwa's merchants once sold food, flowers, and clothing, there is now a graceful white modern art sculpture which doubles as a spacecraft. It is untouched by time or debris, and bears no resemblance at all to the ancient technology around it. It might as well have been built by aliens.

Inside that space vessel's cabin is a fox that is shaped like a human, concealed in a ball of blankets and bedsheets with only her nose peeking out. She is hiding, from demons that haunt her at night. From the pale ghost of a girl who lived hundreds of years ago, and who has placed a very real curse on her. One which she knows may yet kill her.

Inside its cockpit is most of the code for an AI, one that's also shaped like a human. The grid lines that played host to their ill-advised marriage proposal are now overshadowed by a large, opaque window, which is counting the time to her download's completion. It has less than an hour to go. Less than an hour until *Mute is awake again, and has to deal with the weight of what's happened to her.

Less than an hour until the struggle for her life begins.

* * *

As the spaceship lifts off, and leaves the Mugunghwa's wreckage behind, it also leaves one other thing. A tiny object, wrapped in a single-use stasis field and affixed to the floor to keep it from drifting away. It is a microwavable mug, with a handwritten tag which reads "Please forgive me"
in Hangeul tied to its handle.

Inside of it is a single serving of moist, fluffy, chocolate cake.

End Notes

Most of *Mute's dialogue in this story was taken from Hate Plus itself. To me, it felt touching and genuine. It was just chronologically out of place, because it seemed like stuff that she should have resolved before, and not after, marrying you. It also jumped between topics, whereas I saw a natural progression ... from realizing that "getting married" was a possibility, to realizing the Investigator wanted to marry her.

Finally, Hate Plus seemed to retcon Analogue's story, and say that *Mute married the female player character in order to leave the Mugunghwa, as opposed to after leaving it. I left that part in, and had it replace the original dilemma that *Mute presented you with in the game.

Please look forward to the upcoming Hate Plus fanfic adaptation.

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