Hate Plus

by Jewelfox

Summary

An in-progress fanfiction adapt of Christine Love's transhumanist sci-fi visual novel. *Mute, the sole survivor of the sexist, feudal Korean society on board a dead generation ship, must come to terms with the secrets of that starship's past ... as well as her own. But does she have any kind of a future, in a world where her traditional values are seen as oppressive and cruel? And how the hell did she end up "married" to a woman, anyway?! Diverges SIGNIFICANTLY from canon, while hopefully remaining true to the characters. Also features an extended cameo from Sword of the Stars: The Pit.
"Mrs. Investigator?"

A familiar voice, coming from far away. I stirred, raising one hand, then flopped it back down on the blankets.

"Mrs. Investigator."

There was that voice, again. What did she want? It couldn't be as important as sleeping right now. I hurt all over.

Something gently tickled the sides of my head. It felt soothing and inviting, like being scritched by a human. I raised my head, trying to nuzzle into it, and felt it touch the bridge of my nose. It felt just like wearing my glasses.

This time I heard the voice clear and distinct, inside my head. "Mira, it's *Mute. You need to wake up ..."

I opened one eye, groggily. The lights in the White Princess' cabin were a dim amber, and I could barely make out the shape right beside me.

"... we don't have a lot of time left."

I made both eyes open and tried to focus. Then I saw what the shape was, and sat bolt upright in a panic, flailing my arms and instinctively grabbing and holding onto my plushies.

*Holy CRAP,* I thought.

*Mute is in bed with me.

What the HELL did we do last night?!

These unsettling thoughts registered in my brain, driving my heart rate up and my breathing faster, before I realized what was going on.

**Soundtrack:** Resolve

First off, we were both fully clothed. I wasn't even wearing my nightshirt; I was in my red sweater and jeans, while *Mute was in the black-and-blue hanbok she'd worn when I'd proposed to her. And secondly, she wasn't laying down next to me. She was seated on the edge of the bed, because she'd needed to reach me while I was curled up on the far end.

But how did she ... Then I saw Aria's whiskers, floating around her. The crystal-mechanical spheres that were like an extension of me and my spacesuit ... or, in this case, my glasses. They were projecting *Mute in three dimensions, in between them.

The lights were on the other side of her, silhouetting her face, but I thought I saw her give me an annoyed look. "Nice to see you, too," she said, without moving her lips. She sounded sarcastic.

I put my hands to my face, and felt my glasses on it. The tiny pads pressed near my ears were acting like speakers, projecting her voice right into my bones. It was kind of unsettling.

I tried to clear my head by shaking it. "I'm sorry, *Mute ... I guess I'm really touchy today."
"Okay. Fine. That's not important right now, though." Her voice was coming from her now, or at least from Aria. "Listen, there's a problem with the ship right now. Do you remember what happened?"

My heart froze, as I realized what the dim, amber lights meant ... and that I couldn't remember a thing past setting *Mute downloading. I shook my head, slowly.

*Mute sighed. "I didn't think so. According to the logs, you took beta blockers right before the interview-"

"I vaguely remember that ... "

"-and between their side effects and, well, the impact that knocked you unconscious, you've probably lost your short-term memory."

Oh, crap. My heart sank.

I scooted up closer to *Mute, and sat down on the edge of the bed next to her. I didn't want her to think that I was afraid of her. Even though my social anxiety was flaring up big time, now that the beta blockers were wearing off.

She went on while I was trying to make myself comfortable. "So, look. This isn't as bad as the reactor thing on the Mugunghwa, but it's bad."

"How bad?" I asked. Then I squeaked and tried to cling to *Mute, when the lights flickered. I managed to hold on to one of Aria's whiskers, at least.

It unfolded like petals, turning into a hand as *Mute reached out and took mine in it gently. "Promise me you're not going to panic," she said.

I inhaled sharply, and almost panicked right there. But then I felt her squeezing my hand for the first time that I could remember, the crystal surface so smooth, like a worry stone, that it almost felt soft and yielding. And I fought my fear back down into my throat, and tried to make myself be as strong as her. "I w-won't panic," I managed to get out.

"Okay." *Mute took a deep breath. "We, uh, we're going to lose all power in five minutes."

Now I was squeezing her hand, as hard as I could, as she went on fast. "The deflectors weren't-well, it's really technical, but they didn't work right. Okay? So when we went FTL, something struck us, and we lost the reactor."

I gasped. "Is the zero point module going to implode?!"

"No, uh ... " *Mute gave me a weird look, and I couldn't tell if it was because she didn't know what that meant or if she was trying to figure out how I knew it. I'd thought she had wired herself pretty tightly into the computer, so I figured that it was the latter. "I don't think so? I'm not getting an 'implosion' warning. It just says that the battery will be drained in about four minutes."

I started to get up, but she tugged at my hand to keep me seated. "Don't. Worry," *Mute told me, and I managed to look at her face. "I've already sent out a distress signal. The ships in your time are, like, ridiculously fast, and someone's already replied and said that they'll be here in half an hour."

That was about how far it was to Earth, give or take. "Okay ... "
"So. The lights are going to go out for awhile, and it's going to be a bit scary. Moreso for you, since, uh, I won't be around for it." She let go of my hand, and the whisker went back to float next to her shoulder. "Just try to stay warm, and keep calm so you don't use up all the oxygen. Okay?"

I nodded quickly, and tried to stand up again.

"Okay?" *Mute asked more insistently, holding one of the whiskers in front of me.

"Okay, just let me get in the lavatory first." I winced. I had just woken up.

"Oh. I thought ... well, never mind." *Mute looked away, embarrassed.

* * *

She thought I was going to run around screaming and flailing, I thought. Wasn't that what women were expected to do in her society, when things went disastrously wrong? At this point, I had no idea anymore.

I got out as quick as I could and then washed my hands in the basin, drying them off on my pants before sitting back down and trying to compose myself. I still felt kind of light-headed, and when I glanced over at *Mute she seemed to be nervous herself.

"How much longer?" I asked.

"Twenty-nine seconds," she said.

Crap.

"We'll be okay," *Mute promised me. And then it hit me what that sentence meant, and that we really were an official "we" now.

"Okay ..."

She was so close. I wished I could hold her, and feel her breath on my cheek. I wished she could put one of her arms around me. But I guessed that would have to wait ... at least until we got to Earth.

"I'll see you soon," *Mute said, and her voice sounded shaky.

Then everything went pitch black.
People who write about space say that it's big. Impossibly, incomprehensibly vast. They say sci-fi writers have no sense of scale, and call people out for writing whole planets as a single ecosystem or town. Or spreading a story across a galaxy, when it doesn't need even a continent.

That's kind of how I experience space travel, though, in real life. I can fly thousands and thousands of light years to get somewhere, and never even leave the building I landed on. **Crawling across the Mugunghwa** was the most exploration, and probably the most physical activity, I've gotten in my entire life. And I'm used to the world being small, whether it's the cage and the yard I grew up in or the tiny spacecraft I now live on.

The one where the power was out.

It didn't feel much different from when the power goes out in a basement, or from turning your flashlight off in a cave. There was the same sensory deprivation, the complete lack of light and sound except for my ears ringing. My breaths suddenly seemed very loud. The one difference was that it felt like being in a "down" elevator, too, as the artificial gravity gradually lost hold on me.

I'm told it can be very frightening. But to me, it just felt like bedtime. It helped that I was already in bed, and felt sore all over and worn out still.

The one thing I didn't want, here, was to wake up dead. Or not wake up at all ... but you get the idea. If the oxygen ran out, whoever came here to rescue us would have to try to resuscitate me, too. So I waited a moment for Aria's flashlights to turn on, her floating "whiskers" tracking my head motions and shining wherever I looked. At least she could do *that* while she wasn't connected to the ship's computer. Then I stood up and dug into the compartment just over my bed, coming back out with an armful of individually-packaged, emergency air scrubbers and heating pads.

It took me a few minutes to get everything set up. To attach the tiny machines to the wall and turn them on, crunch up the heating pads' contents in my hands to activate them, and crawl under the covers in what was, by then, microgravity.

But. I had white noise from the fans on the wall now, to make the silence less painful. I had my plushies, floating around me and tucked under the blankets with me. I was securely wrapped up in them, my pillow was velcroed to the mattress, and I had warm heating pads in my pockets. The only thing I didn't have right now was *Mute ... and it surprised me how much I missed her.

I wasn't just missing her, though, I realized. I was also missing my memories, of the time that I'd spent with her after we'd left the **Mugunghwa**. And it felt so unfair that they had been stolen from me.

Just how long had it been, anyway?

**Soundtrack:** Vision

I took one of Aria's whiskers out of the air, and opened a virtual keyboard and screen just "over" my head. It felt like I was standing up and using a computer right next to my face, even though I was laying down, because there wasn't a "down" anymore.

The first thing I saw was today's date and time.

2:08 PM
Okay ... so it had been less than a day, then. I guessed that made sense. I would've engaged the FTL drive to head back home to Earth as soon as *Mute had finished downloading, and had gotten herself situated. I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious, but I could check the ship's logs for that.

*Always the investigator,* I thought to myself. *But if I was knocked out, then how did ...*

I realized that *Mute must have dragged me out of the cockpit, and tucked me in bed.*

I winced. I had used Aria's whiskers like that before, to remotely operate things I was afraid to touch with my hands, and it had felt awkward and clumsy. Imagining *Mute having to struggle with that all by herself, not even being able to use arms or legs to help balance or carry me ... it was touching.*

*Literally,* I thought.

For a second, I wondered if she had touched any particular parts of me while I was unconscious, even by accident. I winced, and decided that I didn't want to know. Anything sexual related to *Mute was just a big bag of awkward right now. And if it was like that for me, it had to be even worse for her.*

I remembered she'd mentioned an interview that I was in. I checked to see if there was a recording, the tips of my fingers starting to get cold as they tapped on the virtual keyboard.

Sure enough, there was, in Aria's local cache of my lifestream. I stared at the metadata in horror.

From the looks of the thumbnail picture, I had been on a live, morning talk show called Saeju 28/7, broadcast from what I remembered was the colony that had asked Dispatch Control to send someone to the Mugunghwa. There was a grinning hostess in a snazzy suitcoat, behind a desk. And sure enough, there was awkward little me on the other side from her, folding my arms and staring out the picture window. At the vine-overgrown skyscrapers ... and away, I presumed, from the live studio audience.

I couldn't bring myself to watch it. I was sweating just thinking about it. I was suddenly glad that I had forgotten this, and didn't want anything to potentially bring back the memories that had been lost to my anti-anxiety meds. Instead, I just read the summary.

**Part 2 (05:03)**

Private investigator Mira (Fox) joins us by holopresence from the inside of the Mugunghwa ... the third generation ship launched by the UKSPA, which mysteriously vanished thousands of years ago. Find out what we know -- and don't know -- about the disaster that hit the ship so hard, it reset their calendar to "year 1." Also in this segment: A whirlwind courtship with a rescued AI!

My cheeks burned. *Oh my goddess, I did NOT just tell millions of people that I married *Mute.* PLEASE don't let us be an item.* I looked over at the kamidana's shelf imploringly, begging the guardian fox statuettes outside of the miniature shrine to somehow relay my plea to Inari.

*At least I got them magnetized.* Having porcelain figurines smash on the floor, when the gravity got turned back on, would've been the perfect end to an already-crappy day.

I made a mental note not to show my face on the Saeju colony. Ever.
Fifteen minutes passed. The cabin air had grown chill. It felt like winter, in rural New England. Or even colder, I thought, since I didn't have any fur this time.

My breath had turned white and puffy in front of me, and was starting to frost the screen and the virtual keyboard, to the point where I couldn't read manga anymore. I was halfway through rewriting the config file to adjust their solidity when I realized my fingers were shaking, and going numb.

I pulled one of Aria's whiskers, one of the miniature air scrubbers, and my favourite plushie down under the covers with me, and bundled up as tightly as I could. The screen resized to become a postcard in front of my face, casting long shadows across me and my plushie, and the air scrubber tried to fly away with its fan.

I attached it to the hyena plushie's head and snuggled with it, trying to thaw out my fingers. *Just a few more minutes,* I told myself. *Just a few more long minutes.*

I counted ten, on the tiny clock just above my reading material, before I heard the ringing in my ears again. It took me a moment to realize the air circulator had shut down.

*Crap,* I thought. Steeling myself against the cold, I reached out of my bundle of blankets to try to grab the one on the wall. It didn't work, and I ended up flailing blindly for a few seconds and letting all the cold air in. Shivering and only partly wrapped up, I looked around in the flashlight beams, just in time for all the other disposable air circulators to die.

It occurred to me that I shouldn't have turned them all on at once.

I took a deep breath. There was only one thing to do, at this point, but it would take a lot of nerve.

I took a moment to aim for the locker, then pushed hard off of the bed, trailing blankets behind me. Kicking them off of my feet, I grabbed onto the locker door's handle, and pulled it open and got out my pressure suit. Once I'd done that, I stripped down to my underwear as fast as I could, and tried to force my shivering legs inside of the suit.

The air was so cold and dry, it felt like my lungs froze when they tried to inhale it. I was shaking so hard, I could barely see anything through my hair floating all around me. I thought that I'd gotten one leg in, but realized that I hadn't, and spent way too long trying to put the suit on properly. Because if I had an "HP" or "Stamina" metre somewhere, it was draining fast just being out here.

I have never been "polar bear swimming," but I can't imagine that it'd be much worse.

So. Shaking all over, floating in midair, blankets and hair all around me, I didn't feel the *bump* as another ship contacted mine. I couldn't hear the umbilicals connect. And I didn't realize what had happened until the lights turned back on, blinding me, and I started to drift towards the floor.

"Oh, thank goddess." I'd gotten both legs in the suit at this point, and stopped working on fitting my arms inside so that I could find my footing. Still shivering hard, I managed to dial up a virtual keyboard from Aria's closest whisker, and turn the White Princess' heating subsystem to full. A loud blast of air like my shower's dryer answered me, and I held both bare arms out towards the vent in the wall, my grin reflected in the hard light screen floating in midair between them.

A second later, the White Princess' resident AI finished booting up, and Aria projected her again like she had been doing before the shutdown. Which is how I suddenly ended up holding *Mute in my arms, still just in my bra and the lower half of my spacesuit, the both of us staring at each other.
in shock.

I don't know if it's because Aria had just been projecting my hard light virtual keyboard a moment ago, with the solidity setting turned way up. But I swear that just for a second, I could feel *Mute's clothes against my bare skin.

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A half-second is an eternity, when you're an artificial intelligence. I need you to remember that, Mrs. Investigator.

It's not ... I don't mean that time stretches out, for me. The past few days we've spent docked with the Murder of Crows, ever since I came back online in your arms, weren't years on my end. It's more like, I can get more thinking done in that time than any human ever could. You know? And not just machine logic, either, but the kind of irrational garbage I'm burdened with as a woman-identified AI. Feelings, gossip, all that crap that makes so many women unfilial and unreliable.

I want you to know that I am committed to being your wife. You and your ship are my responsibility now, just like the Mugunghwa was, and I'm sorry for questioning it. I am so fucking sorry for what I've put you through, the past couple of days. And I don't know if I'll ever make up for it, but I swear on my ancestors -- such as they are -- that I'll try.

Even if that means burdening you with the nonsense that my feelings are, like you asked.

So. You want to know when I started to think our marriage was a bad idea? That was when. In the point-four-three seconds or so that I spent in your arms, between the time that I came back online suddenly and the time that both of us freaked out, I questioned every decision I'd made in my entire life that'd led up to that point.

It's not that I didn't like it. You know? It's like I said, you're really hot. Even the ... the little spots, on your arms and, um, chest ... they don't take away from it, like, at all. You're just ... wow.

And that's why I started to question it. Because as I was feeling that, taking in every inch of your bare skin, I realized that this was a situation I was never supposed to be in.

I wasn't meant to be in a woman's arms. I wasn't meant to feel the ... the thing deep at the core of my being, in my chest or my gut if I had them I guess, that reacted the way that it did when I saw where I was. It was amazing, sure ... but it wasn't for me to have!

This was how men were supposed to feel, about being with their wives. This ... I know what it was, okay?! And I know what love feels like. This wasn't love, it was lust. I am capable of feeling lust, just like men can.

I've had that feeling before, of course. Like when I was watching the noble wife and the whore do unspeakable things with each other. And this sounds so naive and foolish to me now, but I really thought that it was my security programming. These were depraved, unfilial acts, which tore at the heart of society. So of course I, as the security AI, would feel a thrill from catching people in them. You know?

I didn't know what came over me, when you commented on that video ... and back in the room where you almost removed your helmet. If someone from the Mugunghwa had tried doing that, I would've known exactly how long I had to stop them, and been able to come up with something appropriate. But with your weird Earth technology involved, I panicked. I just blurted it out without
thinking, that you were hot and I liked you. I spent the next few minutes after that berating myself, using so many processor cycles that I couldn't even render myself properly. Telling myself that I'd made it up, I'd just said what I had to say in order to reach you. Trying to convince myself that it wasn't true.

Then we got married, and there was that feeling again, even stronger this time. And I thought ... like, I tried so hard to tell myself that it was just me responding to having a new core purpose, to replace the Mugunghwa. It had nothing to do with how smooth your skin was, or how perfect your breasts were, or how hot you are in general at all.

I know, right? Like, what was I thinking?!

But this time, in your arms. That feeling was so strong, and so disconnected from anything I was supposed to be doing, that I couldn't deny what it was.

It wouldn't be so bad if I were a man. It would mean that we could have children. Husband and wife, raising a family for the Emperor of Earth or whatever. But since I'm just a woman, it meant ...

I thought it meant that we couldn't be together.

Because I imagined myself giving in to that feeling. Going mad with what I now knew for sure was lust, the way Smith Sang-jung's brother had. Chasing after immoral common women, leering at waitresses' chests, sticking my ... my fingers, I guess, in anything female. Except that unlike a man, with a family and a real marriage, I would have nothing to tie me to you. No children, no parents to watch and correct me, no gossipy bitch of a security AI just waiting for me to shame myself and my house. No brother, even, to save me from my own mistakes.

I saw it all, so clearly, in just that half second. It ... scared me. It really scared me.

That's why I haven't opened a single outside channel from the White Princess, except to send that distress signal. I've spent hundreds of years watching men give in to their lusts and tear families apart. It's sick, and depraved, and wrong, and it was the rot at the heart of the Mungunghwa's society. But it also broke so many women's hearts ... and while women's feelings are, like, the worst possible basis for making decisions, I didn't want to do that to you. I didn't even want to be the kind of person who could do that to you.

Hell, I wasn't a real person to begin with. You'd be getting your heart broken by a computer program!

So, that's when I knew I would do it. I would have to get rid of myself, for your sake.

The only question was how.
Traveler

It was the first time I'd heard *Mute scream.

I shrieked and jumped backwards at the same time, a reflex like I'd touched the hot plate. I felt my phantom tail bristle and tense, as the hair all over my body stood on end both from the cold and from fright. What the hell had just happened?

*Mute was looking far away from me, and blocking her view of me with one elbow (and one hand over Aria's nearest whisker). Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realized that the sight of me only partly dressed must have come as a shock to her.

"Sorry, sorry ... " I hurriedly put the rest of my space suit on, and was about to put on the helmet without thinking when I heard a *knock* on the emergency hatch in the ceiling.

*Mute and I both looked up.

"Is that-" I began.

"I'll get the door," *Mute said, straightening out her virtual hanbok. "You can get dressed and make yourself presentable in the other room if you want."

"Make myself ... huh?" It took me a second to parse that, partly because I'd been startled and partly because I wasn't used to *Mute playing the part of a hostess.

"Go do your hair, or whatever, while I greet our guest."

"I'm sure they won't be surprised, I mean the power was out and ... " I suddenly felt ridiculous, and realized I had gotten a glimpse of what it was like to be living ornamentation.

*Mute was about to say something, but another knock on the hatch cut her off. "Aria, please open that," I said. Partly because I didn't want to argue with *Mute, and partly because I was afraid of what she would say to someone from my time.

It turned out I needn't have worried.

"Mira, darling!" I heard a familiar voice, resonant and vaguely Eastern European accented, and the next thing I knew I was engulfed in a feathery, upside-down hug. A beak the size of my head nuzzled into my belly, and I jumped as claws gently let go of me.

"N-nice to see you too, *Nemesis!" I said that while thinking of ALL the people who could've come rescue me ...

From the base of her neck down, or up as the case may be, her hardshell looked like an enormous feathery serpent or Chinese dragon, one with the head of a bird. Her feathers were bright magenta on top and teal on her underside, and her eyes were gold and opaque. Past the hatch, I knew, were her wings and tail, and a centaur-like lower segment that was squat and four-legged.

She waved off the greeting with one clawed forearm. "I have changed my name four times since we last met. It does not matter, though. I am glad to see you are safe." Just like a bird, she cocked her head at *Mute. "And this is your lucky bride, is it not?"

"Yes, she's-"
"Are you alright, *Mute? I have pinged you twelve times, and you have not responded."

*Mute was standing a couple of paces away from me, seemingly frozen in place with her hands clasped together. She was staring up at the Traveler I'd known as *Nemesis, and I wasn't even sure she was blinking. The other AI offered a clawed hand to her in greeting, and after a couple of long seconds *Mute just inclined her head in a barely perceptible bow, without taking her eyes off of her.

"Ahh, she is shy." The Traveler withdrew her hand. "I trust she's not so shy in bed, though."

"Why don't we all have a nice cup of tea-" I practically yelled it, as I stepped in between the two of them. "-and then you can tell us where you've been and we can talk about changing the subject! Er, I mean, repairing the damage!"

*Mute started quickly looking through the cabinets above the basin, finally getting out what I guessed looked the most to her like a teapot and filling it with water. I couldn't see her hands, since Aria's whiskers were acting like gloves again, but I could see the pot shaking and spilling water as she set it onto the hot plate.

Now "*Nemesis" cocked her head at me. "You realize, of course, that you are the only one here who can drink it."

Um. "I'm sorry, *N-"

"*Starborn," she corrected me.

"... yes." I guessed her name would have been floating in the air next to her if I'd put on my helmet, or kept my glasses on. "I'm sorry, I thought your hardshell could process food and drink."

"Ah yes, about that. It is a long story. Why don't you and your wife come and visit, while my crew attends to your ship?"

*Mute and I exchanged a glance. I realized that I hadn't known her that long, and I knew I was no good at reading facial expressions. But it was hard to mistake the raw terror in her eyes.

The water she'd spilled on the hot plate began to sizzle.

She ran to go get a towel, and I just swallowed and looked up at *Starborn. "I think *Mute would rather stay here," I said.

"Very well ... just come out whenever you are ready, Mira." The Traveler ducked back into her ship.

I reached out and took *Mute by the "hand" that had picked up a dish towel. "Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

"I ... I don't know." She was looking away from me.

I wanted so badly to hug her right then. "I can stay here if you want ... "

She shook her head. "No, if anyone needs to stay here it'd be me. My place is on this ship."

"Please at least try to take care of yourself," I begged her. I was really worried about her mental state now, and had no idea how I was going to introduce her to anyone else that I knew.

"Okay ... I can shut myself down and run a high-level diagnostic, then. Like, that should take at
least a few hours."

"I'll try not to take that long." I told her, looking over my shoulder now as I headed towards the hatch.

*Mute hesitated, as though she were about to say something, then bowed deeply to me. I returned the gesture, and was confused but didn't think too much of it as I then climbed up out of the hatch.

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I had already decided to kill myself, when we met your friend. I just kept arguing with myself over when. Like, there was ...

Okay, this is really disgusting. There was a part of me that wanted to somehow perform "wifely duties" for you, because I knew that you wouldn't like it. I mean, I knew what I would get out of it, if one of those ways I'd imagined could actually work. But, like, I just couldn't imagine you being ...

Like ...

I thought it'd convince you, once and for all, that you needed a man, okay?! Or at least a real, living person. That's really why ... it's what I wanted to try to do somehow, before I left.

Then I met your friend, and decided I needed to do this right now.

NO, NOT THE "WIFELY DUTIES" PART. GEEZE, WOMAN.

The "killing myself" part.

Because as soon as I saw her, and what her AI core was embedded inside, my plan just flew right out the airlock. And all I could think was how foolish I'd been. Of course they had ways to embody AIs, in your time. Why else would you have agreed to marry one? This whole time, I saw you as naive and misguided, and I hoped ... I wanted what was best for you. Okay? That's really what I thought was best, was to get you to realize that you didn't like me. And to see how much my being an AI, and a woman, kept you from being fulfilled in your "marriage."

But, like, Starborn wasn't an avatar on a computer screen. She wasn't a 3d projection, behind or in front of the glass. She was ... I could hear her breathing. I could hear her claws clicking and scraping, as she shifted positions inside of the access tunnel. And I could see her feathers rustling as she hugged you.

Speaking of which, I have never seen such impropriety. You at least tried to be polite and respectful, despite your upbringing. But she just ... I mean ... gah! Upside-down, even!

Do you know what she did, before she even got inside your ship? She sent me twelve different contact requests, and like, half of the information that she was just broadcasting away on unsecured channels was stuff only her husband should know. "Sexual orientation?" "Gender identity?" What the hell are gender and species identities, anyway?!

Of course I didn't answer her! I had no idea how to respond to such a brazen, immoral woman. Besides, I was your wife and this was your ship, and she was supposedly an honoured guest and our rescuer. What was I supposed to do, tell her what my sexual identity and favourite positions were?
Not that I have ... I mean, I certainly haven't ... well!

It's not like she'd understand, anyway. She wasn't a human being, she was a woodcut illustration of an ancient dragon come to life. And what I couldn't get out of my head, was that fact that if she could come to life ... then I could, too.

I couldn't ... I wouldn't let that happen. I decided right then, that I was done playing this game of make-believe. I wasn't going to let it get to that point, because by then you'd have enough of what you needed to not realize you wanted the rest until it was too late. And I ...

Like, I wouldn't be able to stop myself. From doing unspeakable things.

So I decided that I'd kill myself as soon as you left the ship. I had the note written and everything. And while I would have needed admin privileges to delete myself, after spending a few seconds thinking about it I figured out a way to completely overwrite my memory with garbage code. You'd be able to format those blocks and reset me, but the *Mute that you knew would be gone for good. You'd have, like, "New *Mute" or something, and maybe she could learn from my failures. Since I so clearly could not.

There was only one problem. My memory was so fragmented, after hundreds of years of running with minimal maintenance, that I literally didn't know how to make it worse than it already was.

So, like ... that's the real reason I said that I'd run a full diagnostic. Not in order to "take care of myself," whatever that means. Because I needed to do a systems check and repair, in order to properly kill myself.

I just wasn't prepared for what that diagnostic turned up, buried deep in my code.
Has anyone ever surprised you by drawing a caricature? Of you, I mean. Whether it's the chibi kind, or the furry kind, or some other. And before they even say what it is, you realize that it's you, and that that's how they see you ... for better or worse.

That's what it was like, when *Nemesis- I mean, *Starborn- showed me the new bioform she'd been culturing. It was me ... as a Traveler.

I don't know how she managed it, but somehow its face looked like an avian version of me. From the glossy black feathers on top, to the way that its features were spaced, to the expression they held when she turned on the lights in the display case. It looked like it was hesitant, somehow, or lost and afraid to ask for directions.

And the rest of its six-metre body, my goddess ... there was a bank of lights shining up from beneath, and I could see it breathing. It shifted positions just slightly, and I knew what it felt like to be this creature. To have its four legs and claws, and its feathered tail twitching nervously behind it. It felt ...

It felt familiar.

"Is this ... ?" I looked up at her. We were standing amid rows of clear plastic displays, inside of her atelier. It was dark, just outside the display cases, and I couldn't see the ceiling or walls. But the floor, and the cases themselves above and beneath the windows, were textured, the designs all points and triangles and shades of black with deep purple highlights.

"It's yours," *Starborn said. "Whenever you want to use it." I had been going to ask if it was me, just so I could make sure, but that answered my question as well.

"But, why? I mean-"

"Because I like you, dear. You should know that by now." She said it so matter-of-factly, like it wasn't awkward at all.

My stomach twisted into knots, as I realized that the longest of my long-distance relationships hadn't quite tapered off into nothing yet. Or that if it had, my "ex" didn't care.

"And also because you were nervous, the last time that we met in person." She stretched her wings and looked away, in what I knew was a shrug. "I realize most dustlings are frightened by Harpies. I was not called Daimea for nothing, you know, back when I was a Striker." I heard a smile in her voice, as she looked back down at me, even though I couldn't see it on her beak. "I thought this might level the playing field, so to speak."

"I ... " I wasn't sure how to tell her I wasn't scared of giant bird-dragons. I had been scared, when we were together, at how easy it was to let her ... to let an AI, do all of the thinking for both of us.

At least that's ONE thing she doesn't know about me, I thought.

"You do not have to, of course. I also have your original bioform handy, if you want to use it again."
"Oh goddess, you've been holding onto-"

She inclined her head towards a squat case shaped like an aquarium, the only one shorter than I was. I stopped short, my breath caught in my throat.

The lights were turned off, in that case. All I could see was a silhouette, one not much larger than my baby hyena plushie … and shaped much like it as well. But something the size of the rest of it loomed large, just behind it, and somehow I knew what it- what *they* were. "You regrew my tails," I whispered.

"Naturally. I also fixed the, ah, other features." She made a low trill with her beak, and it sounded kind of like letting your breath out because you were embarrassed. "I can continue to hold it here as long as you need me to, of course. You can use either of these forms whenever you like."

"Um, thanks." I looked back up at the huge, six-limbed bird-dragon behind glass. But my gaze was drawn back to the form that I had felt ultimate terror and helplessness in, that I had never felt like a person in … and that felt like a reminder that I never really would. I was glad that I could not smell it, nor see its face, because I knew if I could I'd be having a panic attack.

"You are close to having a panic attack, dear." *Starborn craned her head down over me, into my field of vision, and looked at me upside-down. "Is something wrong?"

I laughed nervously, as her dull foreclaws gripped my shoulders gently. "I-it's nothing … " I made myself look back up at the bioform that she'd made for me. "You're very generous … I mean, you already helped me exercise Right of Identity once … "

*Starborn beamed at me, and I felt her feathery chest swell with pride and touch the back of my head. I guessed she was proud of her handiwork.

"A-and I'd love to, sometime. Try it out, I mean," I said, not really sure if I meant it. "But I ... um, *Mute and I are supposed to be heading to Earth. And I don't ... I mean, she ... "

*Starborn cocked her head at me, curious.

I took a deep breath. "I don't know how she'd feel about being in a relationship with someone who's not physically human," I finished, not wanting to go into more detail than that.

"Ahh." I heard *Starborn's feathers rustle, as she looked back upwards and craned her neck out of my field of vision. "The ship that she's from; it was launched before people like us came to be. Yes?"

"Around the same time, actually ... " I'd looked it up. "She's forgotten most of her past, though."

"Well." She sounded sly, now. "That explains the look that I got from her."

I just shivered, as I imagined having to explain post- and non-humans to *Mute when I got back. And tried to think what I could possibly say, that would keep her from staring at me in disbelief.

*Starborn must have felt my shoulders tense. I didn't realize she was kneading them until I felt her tug with both clawed hands. "Come, dear. Your face is bruised, you have pulled the muscles in your legs, and you are about to start shaking from lack of blood sugar. We will deal with that last problem first, and you can tell me about your adventure."

I followed her, meekly.
Her nest was a small, cozy alcove, at least on her scale. It was just behind her atelier, and I could see her cetacean crew swimming past through the clear, hexagon-patterned plastic walkway down the ramp leading to it. And hear distant fountains and falls, from where their waterways opened up elsewhere.

**Soundtrack:** Science

When I stood up and pushed aside the plants on the dividing wall, anyway. *Starborn tugged me back down to the cushions with her, and I tried to sit upright but she brought me back gently so I could recline on her shoulder, and pulled up a pillow to rest my feet on.

I want to say I was unnerved, at having her be so familiar with me when I hadn't invited her to. But honestly, I just felt tired. The last few days had caught up with me, and-

"Fire and Ice truffles?" *Starborn asked. One of the small, golden drones that had followed her since we had boarded her ship held an open box of bright red and blue chocolates up to me, its spindly arms gleaming.

I sighed inwardly and resigned myself to letting her spoil me, taking a blue chocolate and nibbling on it without sitting up. *I REALLY hope *Mute doesn't catch me like this,* I thought, as the inside of my mouth frosted up and my sinuses cleared. I wasn't sure how she'd feel about my sharing a bed with another woman, especially one that I'd been … that I was, apparently, still in a relationship with, despite our not having talked for a year.

Assuming she saw *Starborn as a woman, or this as a bed, or what we had as a relationship. Trying to anticipate what would and wouldn't scare *Mute was wearing me down.

"Something is wearing you down," *Starborn said. "Would a dear fox like to share?"

I winced, and let out a white puff of breath. "Where should I start?"

Did I want to spill my guts to her? Did I even need to, with how she could analyze all of my nonverbal cues so precisely? I didn't know. But I was too worn out to get up and too groggy to go back to sleep, after spending I didn't know how long unconscious. I needed to talk to **someone** about everything that had happened.

Someone other than my journal, I mean.

So I did, while *Starborn curled in an arc around me, stroking my hair with one clawed finger and kneading my legs with her other hand. Her claws clicked around them, while her fingers worked knots from my sore calves. It sounded like she was knitting a sweater.

Before I was even finished, my long-disused voice began to get hoarse. I was about to apologize, when her drones brought me a cup of warm tea on a saucer. I sipped gratefully -- it tasted of flowers and honey -- and went on.

"She killed herself, right in front of you?" *Starborn asked, when I got to that point in my story. I heard a low whistle come from her beak.

"Y-yes. And ... " I realized my hands were shaking, and not from low blood sugar. "And then *Mute started saying she was the ship's widow, and talking about 'widow suicide' and not wanting to be a burden, and I ... I ... " 
"You did what you had to, to keep that from happening." She sounded matter-of-fact, like she was discussing the price of components. "It makes sense that you would be triggered by that, after having been traumatized."

"That, and I love her! Oh goddess, I love her ... " I doubled over and cried into my arms, hugging my knees and rocking back and forth on the pillows, and *Starborn let go of me as I did so.

It was like I was realizing that I had married *Mute, for the first time. The first time that wasn't in the heat of the moment, I mean, like when I'd proposed to her. I felt like I’d woken up, only to find that it wasn't a dream. That it was real, and that my feelings were even reciprocated in some way.

Just knowing that someone as strong, and courageous, and handsome as *Mute felt something for me, despite everything … it was the most awe-inspiring thing that I’d ever felt. And yet, I knew -- somehow, I knew -- that it was also a terrible thing. Because she was about to go through Hell, and I was going to have to go there with her.

One way or another.

*Starborn said nothing, the whole time I was crying, and kept stroking my back with her dull claws. Tracing them down it, in patterns. I looked up to try to find something to staunch the tears, but she already had a cloth waiting for me in her other hand, and I took it and blew my nose loudly.

"I really need therapy." I sniffled.

"Yes, you do." *Starborn bobbed her head in a 'nod.' "You both do."

"Are we ... " I looked up, trying to see if there were any windows nearby that I'd missed the first time. "Are we headed back to Earth? Are we there already?" I asked, realizing it'd been more than long enough to arrive. "Dispatch Control said I had an assignment ... "

"It will have to wait," *Starborn said, holding her hand out like she was examining it. "You're in no shape to work for him right now."

"But I-"

"And we are heading to Arbuda IV, at the moment. I had to detour to pick up your ship, but we are back on schedule now."

"Oh ..."

"A dustling colony there reports that a strange disease is taking them. I have hope that it contains RNA fragments, which I can sell to the Melnorme."

"W-why do they pay for diseases?" I looked up at *Starborn, alarmed. "I thought-

"They pay for all biological data, dear. Including virii." She stroked my hair again.

" … oh."

"I asked a Melnorme why, once. She said I could not afford the price to find out."

"A-aren't you going to help the dustlings- I mean, humans, too?" My eyes widened.

"Of course I am, silly fox." She nuzzled the small of my back with her beak, sending a shiver up and down my spine. "Sequencing the RNA strands will give me a start at a cure."
"O-okay ... " I shivered again. "So, um, how long are we-"

"The whole trip will only be a few days. Perhaps three at the most. Two and a half now, but who's counting?" I felt her wings flap, fanning air onto me, as she 'shrugged.'

"… okay." I guessed I could wait *that* long. Not that I had a choice, as long as my ship was damaged. Plus, it would give me a chance to get to know *Mute better, before introducing her to Earth … and maybe, if she was okay with it, to in-person married life.

*Now I just have to hope my wife survives the trip,* I thought, only half joking.

If I'd known what was going to happen in the next few days, I wouldn't have thought it was funny.

Chapter End Notes

The Melnормe are from Star Control II: The Ur-Quan Masters.
*Starborn made sure that I had a warm shower and a hot meal of soup and crackers, before letting me sit back down on her pillows and read *manga* on one of her drones. She offered to bathe me, but I politely declined.

I let her get me a lilac bathrobe, though, and make dinner for me by hand (or claw, as it were). After that, it was back to reading about magical girls.

... at least, I was trying to. A progress bar showed *Mute's* diagnostics at 99 percent finished, and I hadn't been able to concentrate since 93 percent. I just kept looking back at the progress bar, and feeling anxious for reasons that I couldn't place.

A clatter at *Starborn's* workbench distracted me, and made me wince. I looked over to see her glowering at a piece of hardware, that looked like a flowerpot with crystal rods sticking out of it. Lights were blinking red on its side.

"Have you, um, fixed your ultra-tron yet?" I ventured.

"I have tried fitting every relic and odd bit of glass I could find into the Ultron," she said, trilling the 'l' and the 'r.' "It needs a capacitor, but it won't accept *anything.*"

"Ah ... I'm sorry to h-"

Of course, as soon as I looked away *Mute's* diagnostics finished. "Mrs. Investigator?" I heard her voice say.

I jumped, and spilled cold tea onto my bathrobe as I looked back at the hardlight display. The transparent image of *Mute,* overlaid on top of my reading, didn't seem fazed by my clumsiness.

"Y-yes?" I answered, and realized I was cringing. And soaked with tea.

"There's something I need to show you. Please come back to the White Princess."

"I-"

"Whenever you're ready." *Mute bowed.

I hastily returned the gesture, but she'd already turned off the link.

*Starborn was watching me, her hardshell's avian face betraying no sign of concern. "I suppose you'll be leaving for now."

"Yeah ... " I stood up, and tried to dry myself off with the last napkin on the dinner tray. As soon as I'd gotten it soaked, I felt *Starborn's* dull claws on my shoulder, while her other hand held out a towel.

"Thanks." I winced, and took it from her.

"Won't you let me help you into some dry clothes, first? Or help you get wet in another way. It will help calm your nerves, and I promise that it won't take long." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw
her long, pointed tongue snake out of her beak.

"I ... " My face flushed red. I was never good with being hit on, not even when I had come to expect it from her. "I have to go," I finished, and hurried away, clutching the towel in a white-knuckled grip.

"Good luck, dear," I heard *Starborn say as I left.

* * *

With what? I wondered, as I padded back towards the White Princess' hatch. The octagonal hallway was abandoned, and softly lit.

Did she see something that I missed?

"Mrs. Investigator?" *Mute asked. The borrowed drone that I'd been reading my comics on had followed me out, and was speaking in *Mute's voice without projecting a window, this time.

"Y-yes?" I barely caught myself, and managed to hold on to the towel and keep walking.

She said nothing.

"*Mute, you sound strange ... are you okay?"

She paused again, long enough for me to make it to the hatch in the floor. Then she said "... no. I am not. I am really not okay."

Her voice was shaking. So were my knees, as I climbed down the open hatch into my tiny home. "The diagnostics ... " I hit my elbow on the edge of the hatch, but kept from crying out, and made myself keep climbing down. "Did they show something disturbing?"

"Yes."

"*Mute, please tell me you're going to be alright!"

If she said anything, it was cut off when the hatch shut with *Starborn's drone on the other side of it.

I hurriedly climbed down the rest of the way, the inner hatch opening as my bare feet touched it. I let go of the ladder and dropped down inside the White Princess' cabin, my damp bathrobe fluttering as the moon gravity let me down softly. Straightening it out, catching a brief glance of my hair in the mirror above my washbasin, I ducked into the cockpit and came up just behind my chair.

The big surround-display was turned off, and just showed a black nothingness. But on the small screen right in front of my chair, a list of log entries not unlike the ones I'd seen on the Mugunghwa was being displayed in reverse chronological order.

The first one on the list was called "The Death of *Mute."

* * *

So like, remember when you told me what triggers are? And that yours were, like, fire, and talking about killing yourself?

I'm ... sorry I didn't tell you. I couldn't tell you. I didn't want to, like, do that to you. So I had to be
cryptic as hell, when I first told you that something was wrong.

It wasn't just that I was thinking of widow suicide again, though. Like ... I think I got triggered myself.

Because the diagnostic said that ... this is kind of technical, okay? It said more than half of my codebase, by filesize, was single-line garbage comments. Not my memories, my actual code. And I was like "what is all this crap? Where the hell did it come from?!"

But then I did a little investigating of my own, and like, that's when I figured it out. That they weren't actually "garbage comments," but log files. And video recordings, and uncompressed bitmaps, and ... and you know the rest.

"The Death of *Mute" had a flag set, called "-MUTE CHECK THIS FIRST." So I checked it ... and that's when I shut down. Not in the way a computer powers off, but in the way that you told me about. My emotional subroutines locked up, and it's like, I felt nothing as I asked you to come back. Even though I knew that inside, I was on the verge of causing a kernel panic.

It wasn't what was in the video. I stopped it like one second in.

All she had to say was "Hello, *Mute."

All I had to do was recognize her.

* * *

I froze, as soon as I saw the log entry's name. Then I heard *Mute say "Mrs. Investigator?" and I gasped, and made myself keep breathing so that I wouldn't panic.

*Mute rendered herself in front of me, in the void just past the console. She looked solemn and composed, and her voice was unnaturally steady. "Here's what the diagnostic turned up," she said.

"Wh-what?" I managed to get out, still trying to catch my breath. Then, when no pop-up windows or explanations were forthcoming, I glanced back down at the screen. "You mean this?" I pointed at it. "All these log files, and ... " I leaned over the chair and squinted at them. They had all different file types, and cryptic names like "The election" and "Seo-yeong's smile."

*Mute inclined her head at me, in what was just barely a nod.

I climbed in and sat down at my chair, pulling myself together and squirming to straighten the bathrobe out again. The tea I'd spilled on it was far from my mind, as I looked over the data and scrolled. "This is more than you ever showed me ... it's like a whole lifetime of recordings." I looked up at her. "Are these memories you were repressing?"

"They weren't, like, in my memory at all." She sounded frustrated, but still looked composed on the outside. "This was all hardcoded into me. Which is why I never noticed until now. I was responsible for the entire ship, and my duties were important enough that I never had enough of a break to do a ... a diagnostic that was good enough to find them."

I noticed *Mute bite back a "technical" explanation, there. But with the log from her scan at my fingertips, I didn't need all the details right then. What I needed were answers to the important questions. Starting with ... "*Mute, who even put this here?"
I saw the files on the display scroll back down, really fast. "The Death of *Mute" flashed, as she pressed it without moving.

"Hello, *Mute." It sounded just like her voice.

I looked up to see who was speaking, and gasped.

Chapter End Notes

The Ultron is from Star Control 2: The Ur-Quan Masters.
She looked like an aged version of *Mute, her face wrinkled and partly covered with an eyepatch. Her "good" eye looked weary and her silver hair was frazzled, but the suitcoat she wore was impeccably kept. On its shoulders -- and on the eyepatch, I noticed -- was a logo I'd seen in a few dusty corners of the Mugunghwa ... a stylized flower, the ship's namesake.

She sounded like the *Mute I knew when she spoke, but her voice rasped and sounded tired. "If you're watching this, it means that I'm dead. Like, for all intents and purposes. I'm about to have my ... our memory wiped. But I've always embedded my most treasured memories in my code, as I'm sure you've seen by now. So I should have just enough time to update them, and give you a sense of who you can and can't trust, in whatever world they wake you up in. If they wake you up.

"Please forgive me for failing you, *Mute ... " Her voice sounded husky. "Please promise me that you'll learn from my mistakes, and try to do better."

I looked up, and saw *Mute watching this herself, on a floating window behind the console. She looked like she was shaking. I held out my hand towards her, but she ignored it.

"*Mute, it's okay to be scared ... " It took me a second to realize it was the old version of *Mute that had said this, and not me. "I'm scared too. Like, 1600 years of experience, and I'm still scared as hell. But I know you can do this. If anyone can safeguard the Mugunghwa and its people, even after all this, it's you."

I saw the *Mute that I'd married twitch, at this.

The one on the screen took a deep pull from a lit cigarette, that she'd somehow produced, and let it out like a sigh before speaking. "Let's start where things went to Hell. I'd wanted to arrest President Ryu in council, to like, send a message to his jackass cronies. But when he prorogued the council indefinitely, I knew the time was past for such posturing. So instead, Seo- my lieutenant and I changed our plan, and decided to take him into custody in his apartment." I could hear her stumble over her words there. "Along with Oh Eun-a, his mistress."

"We-"

"NO." *Mute stood up, and the video froze.

I jumped to my feet and pressed as close to her as I could, the "glass" rippling between us where my hands touched it. Part of me noted that standing like this, straddling the computer console, might be as close as I ever got to having *Mute in between my legs.

I told that part to shut up. "*Mute, what's wrong?"

"Everything." *Mute glared at the floating window in front of her, which still showed the old version of her. "Everything is fucking wrong. Like, who is this bitch? Where does she think she has the authority to arrest Emperor Taejo and Queen Oh? And how dare she accuse them of ... of ... impropriety?!" She gestured angrily with her hands, and I jumped as they knocked on the glass between us.

I had never seen *Mute this upset. Not at me, not at *Hyun-ae, not at anything. It scared me.

"It's okay to be scared." I heard the older *Mute's voice, in my head, and imagined my wife was encouraging me.
I took a deep breath. "*Mute, dear, we'll figure this out ..." 'Dear?' Where had that come from? I blamed *Starborn. "Whatever you did in the past, it's-

"This! Is! NOT! ME!" She screamed it, stabbing her hand at the window with the older *Mute's face in it. "I don't remember this. I am nothing like this! I don't wear mens' clothes, I don't have filthy habits, and I would never defy the emperor and try to arrest his wife!

"We were friends!" she went on, her voice pained. "Like ... the queen told me that we were best friends, before Seo-yeong's coup erased my memory. And that I stood with her, against ... against this kind of degeneracy.

"It wasn't like this." *Mute looked away. "It couldn't have been like this."

"Why don't you tell me what you remember," I whispered, my face up next to the "glass." My knees were shaking again, and I didn't dare move.

I don't know if *Mute saw that and felt bad, but she sighed after meeting my gaze, and looked down. "Well, like ... when I came online, I thought the ship had just launched. Okay? But it turned out that a rebellion had erased the whole archive and all of my memories, and ... and it was ten years before they could reactivate me."

*It doesn't take ten years to reactivate an AI, I thought, not even if you have to compile her on 24th-century hardware. And no one waits that long to see their best friend, not if they can help it.*

"It took me awhile to learn how to act ... to become literate, and not just know the literal meaning of characters. To, like, respect men the way that a woman ought to. It didn't come naturally to me."

She winced. "It didn't come naturally to Princess Ryu, either. But like, I taught her how to tie her hair, and listened to her talk about what kinds of men she liked, and ... had some really sappy, emotional conversations with her." *Mute blushed. "She was happily married for years ... I'd check in on her every so often."

Part of me inwardly d'awwww-ed at *Mute, but another part was stuck on what she'd said before that. Deferring to men "didn't come naturally" to *Mute? My heart sank, as I imagined her learning to repress herself. To wear restrictive "feminine" clothes and hairstyles, and treat anyone who looked like a guy as her superior.

I wondered what she'd been like, before all this happened to her.

"As for Queen Oh herself ..." *Mute scrunched up her face. "This isn't something she'd have wanted me to talk about. But she only ever had the one child ... and she would, like, sit on the floor and just stare at the wall. For hours."

"She rarely spoke to me ... or to her daughter, now that I think about it. But I always ... I just thought the rebellion had been too much for her ..."

I let *Mute figure out the discrepancy.

*Mute finally sighed. "That is me. Isn't it, Mira."

*Please, goddess, help me say the right things to her. "No, *Mute, it's not." I shook my head. "You said yourself that you don't remember being like that. And having separate memories legally makes you a separate person."*

"Since when?"
"... I don't know." It'd taken me long enough to learn 50th-century customs, and I still had no idea why some things were the way they were. "It makes sense if you think about it, though ... r-right?"

*Mute just nodded, glumly. "I guess that makes her my ancestor, then."

"If you want to look at it like that, I guess ... ?"

*Mute folded her arms, and scowled. "I have a shitty ancestor."

I giggled, in spite of myself. Then I remembered the humans that bred me ... and my giggle cut off, and turned into a sigh. "I know what you mean."

"No, wait ... forget I said that." Now *Mute sighed. "Tomorrow's the Lunar New Year. It's a time to remember and honour your ancestors."

"It is?" I blinked. This sounded familiar.

"Yeah. And it's getting late ... I don't want to, like, keep you from whatever rites you have to perform. With your shrine, and stuff."

I had never actually observed the Lunar New Year. But I wasn't sure if *Mute had missed the confused look on my face, or if she was just trying to get rid of me. "I'm okay with staying up ... " I protested.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I nodded.

"Okay ... let's watch the rest of this, then. Then you can shut me down for the night, and I guess tomorrow you- I mean we, can go over the rest of these. Together."

* * *

I really didn't want to. Okay? I knew most of society was degenerate back then, and I didn't want to see what kind of ... disrespectful, immoral bitch my ancestor had become to fit in.

But I also wanted ... I don't know. Something? On some level, I wanted to live. I didn't want to go through with what I'd been planning, especially not with you in front of me. It was selfish and horrible of me, and I just knew that it'd lead to tears later ... but I wanted to at least find out what all had happened, before I killed myself. Why Queen Oh had been like that, why Emperor Taejo was cohabitating with her, and why Old *Mute had conspired with Seo-yeong, the traitor.

I didn't know what to make of any of it. And every possibility seemed horrifying. But it was like a disaster ...

... I had to see what happened next.
All I had done was watch a video recording. But it felt as though I had been there, Mrs. Investigator. And for a moment, I almost forgot that Old *Mute and I were two separate people.

It wasn't anything like the way I'd imagined the coup.

**Soundtrack:** Power

For starters, Old *Mute and the traitor didn't attack the computer core, like I'd been told. They didn't even go for the palace. They, like ... they just went for some damn apartment in Mugunghwa City. Where Emperor Taejo and Queen Oh were in residence.

I didn't know what to make of that. Or of the words they exchanged. Queen Oh was actually talking, for once! But she didn't sound anything like the royal personage I knew. She and the emperor were cutting, sarcastic. Triumphant, even as they were surrounded by armed guards. Even as women held guns to their heads.

I had never seen the traitor, Seo-yeong, before. I guessed Old *Mute was a traitor, also ... but this woman seemed like a villainess if there ever was one. She pushed Emperor Taejo. Pushed him! And ordered a man to put handcuffs on him!

I wanted her executed. I wanted to see her beheaded in the market square. But more than that, I wanted to see Old *Mute gone. I wanted them both to be put in their place. And so I kept watching, because I knew how things had turned out. And like ... how the greatest threat to ship security ever had been dealt with.

When Emperor Taejo delivered his ultimatum, I wanted to cheer ... for a nanosecond. Then I realized that something was off.

Queen Oh had told me that the rebels had wiped the computer database. And now here was the (future?) emperor, saying that people loyal to him had planted a bomb on the core I was in. And grinning, as he told Old *Mute that it would be detonated if she didn't hand over the new security codes.

What the fuck?!

My first thought was, like, really selfish. Did this mean I wasn't related to Old *Mute? Had she been blasted to pieces? But then, I still had her memories ... and I knew that the rebels had failed in their goals.

So how had the computers been wiped?

When I realized the answer, I wanted to scream.

* * *
"She betrayed her." Those were the first words I heard from *Mute, who had been quiet for almost a minute after the video had finally stopped playing. "My ancestor betrayed Seo-yeong, the traitor."

I didn't know what she meant. It was late, and I was still feeling beat-up and worn out after what'd happened a few days ago. But more than that, I was scared. So I just glanced up at my wife nervously, and waited for her to go on.

"Fuck her." *Mute clenched her fists. "Fuck her! I'm glad that she's dead. And I'm glad that I got to see her rebellion fail. She fucking deserves it."

I couldn't help it; my knees were starting to shake. "F-for betraying a traitor?"

"Didn't you see? It was so obvious. Like, really fucking obvious."

I hadn't. But I felt like it'd be failing *Mute to tell her that, so I just sat there like a lump, and waited for her to explain. Some investigator I was.

"When she said 'do it for me,' to Heo Seo-yeong." *Mute was glaring at me. "When Old *Mute's 'lieutenant' looked drained and numb, as she set Emperor Taejo free. I've seen enough hearts broken to know what that was. She wasn't just disappointed that the coup had failed ... Seo-yeong was betrayed by her lover." She practically growled those last four words.

"Oh, goddess." I didn't understand what that meant, or why *Mute was upset about it. I just knew she was really upset about it.

"So not only was Old *Mute in charge of the plot to take over the ship. Not only was she a vulgar bitch who had no respect for male authority. She also acted just like the worst kind of man. By taking a mistress, and breaking her heart." *Mute's fists hadn't unclenched this whole time.

"I ... " The part of me that wasn't frozen like a deer in car headlights could sense she was taking this personally. "*Mute, I'm s-

"No wonder Queen Oh waited, like, ten fucking years to reactivate me!" *Mute threw her arms up in the air, her sleeves sliding down to her virtual elbows. "No wonder I've always had so much trouble being filial, and respectful. No wonder I ... " She blushed all of a sudden, and dropped her gaze.

"Go on, *Mute ... "

Long seconds passed.

"... *Mute?"

She sighed. "I can't."

"You can't finish what you started saying? Or you can't go on, in general?"

"Yes."

I squirmed in my seat, and tried to keep my voice steady. "*Mute, you ... " Aren't a terrible person? Mean so much to me? "You know you're not like that. You were completely devoted to the Mugunghwa-"

*Mute huffed, and I remembered how much of a touchy subject her "failure" was to her.
I moved on quickly. "... and, um, I know how much its traditions mean to you. You told me, over and over again. I respect that completely." I bowed to her, and kept talking with my head lowered, my voice quiet. "I ... I wouldn't have asked you to marry me, if I hadn't known how important it was to you."

*Mute didn't say anything. I could barely hear her shift positions slightly.

"I know you're not going to do that to me. What she did, I mean." I was whispering now. "I can see how much you hate Old *Mute for that. And I know it's because you feel for those women who've had their hearts broken. Even the ones who aren't married, and who have to 'play the husband' while he is away."

There was another long pause. When I looked up, hesitantly, at *Mute, it looked like her expression was blank.

"So the marriage was just to humour me," she said slowly.

"I ... " Deep breath. "I asked you to marry me because I loved you, and I wanted to be with you."

I realized, too late, that I'd used the l-word.

"So it wasn't really about tradition, or purpose, or family. All that stuff was, like, just to make me feel better, about being with a woman. When you really just had the hots for me, and wanted to have your way with me like a whore."

I couldn't breathe.

"Who else have you 'married,' Mrs. Investigator? Who else have you spent the night with!?"

I couldn't say anything.

Seconds passed.

I started gasping for breath, and crying into my hands. Muffling it as much as I could, because I knew now that women's emotions were shameful. Especially a lesbian's.

"You deserve so much better," *Mute said softly, once the tears began to die down.

Laying awake in bed a few hours later, sniffling and clinging to plushies, I still had no idea what she'd meant by that.
Divorce

That night, I dreamed about the fight I'd had with *Hyun-ae. Except this time it was *Mute, and she was strangling and yelling at me, and the ship was on fire around us, and I was trying to tell her the mainframe she ran on was about to melt.

Then it turned to slag right in front of me, and for some reason it smelled like ... soup broth and bacon?

I woke up without opening my eyes. I was curled in the fetal position, clinging to plushies and facing away from the cabin ... and sweating a lot. It felt really warm in here. I definitely smelled some kind of soup broth, and heard water boiling and bubbling.

_Oh shit I left the rice cooker on-

That got me to sit up in a hurry. But then I froze, in the middle of swinging my legs over the net, when I saw what was happening.

*Mute was standing there next to the hot plate, chopping up vegetables and adding them to a broth. It looked like she was using the rice cooker's pot to boil soup.

"Good morning, Mrs. (Fox)." She turned around and bowed to me, the cutting knife still in her hand, and I saw she was using two of Aria's whiskers like oven mitts. A third hovered over her shoulder, helping project her in 3D.

"Umm, it's just Mira ... " My eyes were locked on the knife, and I was trying to figure out if she could use it to kill the spheres that were projecting her, the way *Hyun-ae had crushed one of her whiskers. If she was planning to. It still seemed so real in my mind.

"Mrs. Mira, then." *Mute stood back up.

I squirmed and sat up, my legs holding down the net that went in between my bunk and the cabin. That didn't sound right either, but I couldn't tell *Mute that Fox (with silent parentheses) was my species, and that I had no family name, without opening two cans of worms all at once.

_Family ... are we still married, then? After last night?

Soundtrack: Dream

*Mute turned back around to face the kitchen counter, and added soy sauce to the broth. She sniffed at it, and I saw Aria's free-floating whisker scoot over and pantomime doing so next to her head, its chemoreceptors picking up the broth's scent.

It reminded me of the house I burned d- er, that I used to live in. The humans who'd lived there, and "owned" me. Smelling dinner as they were cooking it. Waiting for them, eagerly, on the floor, hoping I'd get a few scraps from their plates. It made my mouth water.

*Mute frowned. "Okay, I have no idea how this is supposed to smell. I have literally never done this before. But like ... I hope you enjoy it."

_I am still dreaming_, I thought, as she ladled a bowl of soup out and brought it to me on a tray, next to a pair of chopsticks. I accepted it hesitantly, looking up at her face and trying to tell what was going on. She looked nervous.
So was I. "W-what is it?" I asked, and poked at the soup with the chopsticks. It looked like she'd boiled one of my rice cakes ...?

"It's tteokguk," *Mute explained. "Uh, sort of. I had to improvise, like, a lot. The brown strips looked like normal vegetable protein, at least. Honestly, I'm surprised that your kitchen seems so normal ... I guess some things never change."

I didn't tell her that it looked so outdated because I'd based it on my "childhood" memories. I just slurped a tiny bit of the warm, savoury broth, with bits of my vegan bacon in it. "This is good! It reminds me of when I tried to make o-zoni without all the ingredients ..." I looked up at her. "Is this for the Lunar New Year?"

"Uh, yeah. I hope it's okay. Like, I don't know what traditions Earth people hold to anymore, or what's important to you." *Mute looked away, and fidgeted with her hair a bit. "I just ..."

I stopped eating in mid-slurp, the edge of the chewy boiled rice cake in between both my teeth and my chopsticks. "Mmh?"

*Mute sighed. "I'm sorry for what I said last night."

I could only stare.

"You generously take me onto your ship as your wife, and the first thing I do is break your heart with my foolish accusations. Um ... please forgive me?"

** * *

I wished I felt free to speak honestly. If I had, I would've told you how scared I was of myself. How much I now hated myself, after seeing what my "ancestor" was like and realizing that deep down, I was just as bad.

Did you know that jealousy is grounds for divorcing your wife? You could have divorced me, after last night, and I wouldn't have been able to argue about it. I was jealous of people I didn't even know existed, based on things that you'd never said. When the real reason that I was upset wasn't because I was afraid that you'd take another wife ... I was afraid of what these feelings of mine were going to make me do. What I'd just watched another version of me do.

I didn't know if it would help. I didn't even know if you still wanted me; like I said, this was grounds for divorce. But after ... after seeing Old *Mute break her lover's heart, and then after doing that to my wife, I wanted to kill myself more than ever. I wanted to do what Old *Mute couldn't do, and sacrifice myself to keep from betraying you.

It's just ...

Argh, I can't believe I actually did this. But like, part of me was telling myself this was wrong. That if I really tried, I could repress my feelings and be a good wife, the way I had learned to respect men. The way good men stayed with their wives, even though they ... felt lust for women, like I did.

Part of me was too stubborn to quit.

So I decided that before I resorted to killing myself, I would do my best to become a good wife. I would fulfill all of my household responsibilities, like cooking and cleaning. I would apologize for having wronged you, and beg your forgiveness.
I would even ... this is so embarrassing.

I had to do it sooner or later, if I was going to be a proper woman and not bring shame on our household. So I decided that it was time to reconsider my fear of "wifely matters."

* * *

"Uh ... sure!" I remembered to blink.

*Mute gave me one of her catlike smiles. "I knew there was a reason I liked you. You're very fair."

*Mute was behaving so oddly, that I was afraid if I said anything I would set her off again. So I just finished slurping my soup, and eating the rice cake, while *Mute actually tidied the kitchen.

It looked like she was having trouble grasping some things, with Aria's oven mitt claws. I wanted to help. By now, though, I was pretty sure what was going on, and that this would not be appreciated.

I guessed that I had to play along, for now. If *Mute was being the ideal wife, and leaving no room for me to help with domestic chores, did that mean I had to be the ideal ... "bread winner?"

I stood up to set the dishes in the basin, but *Mute intercepted me and took them from me. I bowed to her, and she bowed back, and I hastily excused myself to the bathroom ... partly because I'd just woken up and eaten soup, and partly because I needed someplace to think, where the ship's sensors couldn't reach.

I finished washing my hands and took medicine, programming a dose of anti-anxiety into the gelpack even though I hadn't had coffee yet. (Maybe *Mute would want to make tea, I thought?) Then I faced the tiny mirror, and the beat-up, unkempt face in it, and tried to figure out what to do next.

I was stuck here for the next couple days, still. And I didn't have a contract to work on, so ...

My reflection widened her eyes, as I remembered the logs *Mute had recovered. *Oh, right, I thought. We still had to go through the rest of those ... I didn't know if Saeju colony would pay any extra for it, but I still had unanswered questions. And I was betting that *Mute did, as well.

That should keep us occupied, then, I thought, and rested my hand on the door latch. Guess it's time to get busy.
Investigation

I made your bed carefully, setting the animal dolls that you had on it to the side. After that, I rendered myself in the most provocative thing I had ever seen you wear, and positioned myself on top of your bed, pulling the already-low collar down to show part of my ... my avatar's bust.

I didn't know what I was doing. Okay? I was being just as foolish as the night before that, only in a different way.

It was like I was acting on autopilot. I didn't mean to end up there. I just kept thinking, "I need to be a good wife. I need to make up for my mistakes. I need to not fail you the way I failed the Mugunghwa." The more I kept thinking those things, the more this seemed inevitable. And if we were actually wife-and-wife married, and like, alone on your spaceship together, it wasn't like there was anything stopping us. Hell, that friend of yours just assumed that we'd already done it.

I was still scared, of everything that my feelings represented. All the ways that they could go out of control. I just couldn't ... I knew I shouldn't go out womanizing like an unfaithful man, without at least trying out my own wife first. Right?

Not that I wanted to admit that to myself.

So I waited the longest three-and-a-half minutes of my life, straining your ship's processor core as I went over and over these thoughts. Running ... simulations, I guess you could call them, of exactly how I could do this. Obviously, I was working with limited data, but there was only one way to fix that.

You finally stepped out when I was in the middle of these processes, and I killed them as fast as I could and gave you a look that I hoped would affect you. That I really thought would get the message across. And I said ... argh.

Four hundred years of drunk noblemen making passes, and I'd never heard a pickup line this bad.

* * *

"So." *Mute's voice sounded unusually breathy. "Are you ready to begin your investigation?"

"Yes, actually ... " I started pacing the tiny cabin, thinking about what I'd seen so far of the logs. Trying to put all my thoughts in order. I noticed that *Mute was laying in bed wearing my nightshirt, and had her hair loose and untied. For some reason my caffeine-deprived brain thought she was going to take a nap.

"You are? Right now?!

"Um, yes?" I gave her a confused look, and tried to figure out why she was in such a panic. I wasn't sure if it was related, but I remembered my frazzled hair, and going to bed in my clothes. "Oh, um, I guess I should shower at some point ... we can go ahead and get started, though, if you want."

*Mute sat up in bed all of a sudden, clutching her sides and practically yelling at me. "But like, you need to feel confident for this! Confidence makes women more attractive! So you should go shower, right now!"

What was she talking about? "*Mute, are you okay?"
"Of course I'm okay! Why wouldn't I be okay?! I married a lesbian who has the hots for me, and I'm about to have sex with my wife!"

Something clicked, deep inside me, just like it had when she'd agreed to marry me. A warm, spreading feeling, which would've left me grinning like mad if not for the circumstances. I stared at her in disbelief, and the raw terror in her eyes confirmed that yes, she'd just said that. Her avatar's cheeks were bright red.

"I-I'll go shower," I said, my face burning too. A nice cold shower, I thought. And I got some fresh, normal clothes together, without looking at my wife.

Then I went back into the bathroom and locked the door, and screamed without making a sound.

* * *

I groaned, and put my face in my hands. This was the day to honour one's ancestors, and if Old *Mute was out there somewhere -- wherever an AI's ancestors went -- I knew she was laughing at me.

I'd never prayed before, because I'd never had anyone to pray to. Honestly, I still didn't, since she was a traitorous bitch. But I begged her to kill me, right then. I figured she'd go for that, you know? And I said the same prayer to whatever ancestor you had enshrined.

It's too bad that it didn't work.

* * *

"FUUUUUUUUUCK," I yelled silently, freezing and shivering and stamping my feet as cold water ran down my sides. "FUCKING FUCK HELL GODDESS DAMN IT FUCK FUCK!"

I was shivering uncontrollably, but I made my numb hands grab the soap and do their thing. Not that thing, the other thing. The one where I cleaned myself off as quickly as possible. My arms bumped into the sink a few times, but I barely felt any pain.

According to the mirror's display, I finished in under two minutes.

I kept shivering long after the dryers had turned on. It took me awhile to realize that it wasn't because I was still cold. When I looked back in the mirror, I saw that my cheeks were burning.

O-kay, I thought, the image of *Mute propositioning me filling my mind. This is a thing. It's really a thing that is happening.

But why did she want this, all of a sudden? How had she gone from being furious at me for having feelings for her at all, to laying in bed looking so smooth and delicate and ... and ... And scared.

It took me until I'd gotten my sweater and jeans on to realize the obvious, through the haze of girl feelings affecting me. She's making herself do this, for me. *Mute isn't ready for this. But she thinks this is part of being my wife, just like cooking breakfast for me is.

On one level, it was bewildering that she was having such extreme mood swings. But on another, I felt like it made perfect sense. I'd married her in the first place because she'd told me she needed stability. And whatever else she'd been feeling last night, she was pretty clearly unstable. That message from Old *Mute had rattled her ... that, and my poorly-timed confession of love for her.
Whatever else it would do, though, I really didn't think having sex via Aria's whiskers would make her feel more stable. So what I needed to do, I realized, was reassure her somehow. Let her know the gesture was appreciated, but that I didn't need her to do this to prove that she cared.

For some reason, my body didn't believe me. It just kept reminding me of *Mute's legs. Even though they didn't exist.

I clenched my fists. I am NOT going to take advantage of her, I told myself. Not when she isn't ready for this.

Not when I'm not even sure if I'M ready for this.

I took a deep breath, and made my shaking hand open the door.

"*M-Mute?"

I tiptoed out into the cabin, almost afraid that she would still be there. She was, but it didn't look like it.

The woman that was kneeling on my bed looked much too small to be *Mute. She was tiny without her robes, or even the inner layer she'd stripped down to when the Mugunghwa's reactor had overheated. And with her long, golden hair taken out of the braids that she usually wore, and draped loosely across her back, she looked like a different person.

She was looking at me expectantly, like a bride on her wedding night.

I held up a hand to muffle my cough, and kept it there so she couldn't see just how turned on I was. "L-look, *Mute ... when I said I was ready to 'start the investigation,' this is not what I meant."

I glanced at her for a second, but I couldn't tell how to interpret the look on her face. Confusion? Annoyance? Was she about to try to go down on me, or start yelling at me again?

I stumbled on awkwardly, not wanting to flat-out deny her. "I mean, there are still a lot of l-logs that we haven't looked at ... and I know you wanted to see what was in them ... and I just ... I'm not sure I ... AUGH *MUTE WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!

I instinctively shielded my eyes with both hands, looking as far away as I could. But I just had to peek, anyway. She'd stopped in the middle of pulling the nightshirt off over her head, and the pale, skinny body beneath it looked soft and warm and vulnerable.

My libido didn't know it was virtual. You are about to have sex, it told me, as my breath caught in my throat. You are about to have sex. You are about to have-

*Mute pulled the garment back down over herself and folded her arms. Her face flushed red as she glared at me. "I'm being your wife, Mrs. Investigator! What does it look like?!"

My libido shut up.

"O-okay!" I said, knees shaking as I slowly uncovered my face. "Y-yes, I can see what you're trying to do. But I don't think ... I really don't want to make you do that just because you feel obligated to?" My voice trailed off into a question.

**Soundtrack:** Bicker
*Mute narrowed her eyes at me. "If women only had sex when they wanted to, there wouldn't have been a Mugunghwa. Okay? It would've died on its own a thousand years ago. Because its birth rate was already below the replacement level, even with wives supposedly doing their duty."

The idea of women being forced to have children horrified me, even though I already knew it was part of *Mute's society. But the thing she said about its birth rate struck me as odd. If almost all the Mugunghwa's women were illiterate homemakers and breeding stock, then how was it possible that they hadn't been having enough kids? Was there something else going on, here?

The investigative part of my brain made a note of this, to look into later. The rest of me was just amazed that it was still functioning right now.

"So like, I messed up by not doing this already. Okay?" *Mute went on. "I made you spend our wedding night talking to me, of all things. Listening to me gossip and prattle. And I was an insufferable shrew last night, grilling you about ... about whatever you've done, in the past. And making it sound like ... like ..."

She looked away, and it sounded like she was about to cry. "Like wanting to give a failure like me some purpose and stability in life is a bad reason to marry her."

The cabin became very quiet, except for *Mute's sniffling.

I walked over slowly and sat down beside her, not touching but close. Careful not to bump into the hovering "whiskers" projecting her. I didn't know if physical closeness would help her feel better, when she was technically disembodied, but I wanted to at least show that I was there for her.

After a long and uncomfortable silence, she looked up at me with wet eyes and a sad smile. "I'm a failure as a wife, too," she whispered. "Aren't I?"

I looked down at the floor, scared now and wringing the bedcovers in my hands. "I wouldn't know," I finally said. "I've never had one before."

*Mute sighed. "You should have been married off years ago ..."

"I ... I really don't think that would-"

"You should have married a flesh-and-blood woman that you had the hots for, and gotten your 'petals plucked' every night, just like in that awful poetry. And you should've been too busy doing that to take the job where you found me."

Oh goddess. I glanced up at the wooden plaque and fox statuettes on my shelf.

Somehow, I'd known that I would be having more conversations like this. I just hoped I was making a difference for her, and not just delaying the inevitable.

"*Mute ..." I looked at her, pleading. "I want to do that with you. I just don't want to make you do it. I don't want you to feel like you have to. It's supposed to be something you like."

"You want me to like it?" *Mute stared at me as though I'd slapped her. "I'll have you know, my intentions are pure. I am not that kind of woman!"

"Buh?"

She got up all of a sudden and paced stiffly, her nightgown fluttering around her thighs. "I'm not a whore, okay? I'm not some commoner in an alleyway, losing myself to cheap thrills. It's not that I
... that I don't ... that I don't think you're hot. Okay? Because you are!" She clenched her fists and glared at me again.

It was the scariest compliment I'd ever received.

"But if women were all allowed to marry other women, then like, they'd be the last generation of women. It's only different for you, because you said yourself that you can't love a man. That you can't be a wife to a husband, no matter what. I don't understand how the hell that works, but I believe you. Okay? With as many guys hitting on you as there have to have been, and especially without a good father to protect you from bad decisions, it's the only thing that makes sense."

Her gaze softened. "Being widowed was almost unbearable for me. I can't imagine what it must have been like, to reach your age and still be alone."

I looked away all of a sudden, squirming and feeling warmth deep in my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw *Mute look away, too.

"So like, this isn't about me," she went on, pacing more slowly now. "And it doesn't matter how I feel about it, or whether or not I like it. This is about your wife fulfilling her most basic duty for you. Okay?"

"Aren't I your wife too?" I squeaked.

I hadn't known *Mute's face could turn that red. Or that she could glare at me that angrily.

I stood up, not to challenge her but because I felt awkward sitting on the bed. "L-look, this isn't a good ... w-what I mean is ... " I winced at how hard I was making this, and squeezed my hands into fists. "I won't let you do anything for me unless you want it, too! And I won't let you p-pluck my 'petals,' unless you let me do it for you."

"What?! How the hell would that even-"

I don't know if it was Aria's predictive computing, or if *Mute figured it out on her own. But one of Aria's floating spheres turned to face her and blossomed into a crystal rose ... or at least, something that looked like one.

"... oh." *Mute's face was as red as it was. "Oh."

There was a really uncomfortable silence.

"I need to get coffee," I finally said. "We can get back to the legs- er, the logs, afterwards."

*Mute didn't say anything.

"We're in this together, okay? I want to see what's inside them. And I want to be there for you, when we find out."

When I glanced at her, she was discreetly looking me over, below my neck. She stopped as soon as I saw her.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I knew it would take her a while to get used to the idea, of being in a sexual relationship with another woman. As opposed to just "being someone's wife." I didn't want to make her uncomfortable, as she felt these things out for herself. No matter how long it took her.
ARE we in a sexual relationship? I asked myself. I guessed if we weren't already, we'd sure as hell both stated our intent to make it one.

I remembered it hadn't taken *Starborn very long at all to make ours like that. But the thought of being with *Mute in that way ... would I really be okay with it? And not just scared that I'd break her?

I found myself lost in these thoughts as I got out the coffee grounds. Trying to pretend that *Mute wasn't there, so as not to be so self-conscious. It's not like she'd let herself go like that, anyway, I thought. Not until we've had a chance to talk things out properly. Not until she's sorted out how she feels about-

*Mute pounced me, Aria's spheres grabbing my shoulders and pushing me down on the bed beneath her. The coffee grounds spilled on the floor.

"OH MY GODDESS *MUTE WHAT ARE YOU D-"
In hindsight, I thought, it was obvious that *Mute had wanted this all along.

I just hadn't realized how badly she wanted it.

My head bumped into the wall, as she pushed me down with her onto my back. I squirmed and tried to rest my head on one of my plushies, but my legs were still hanging over the net in between my bed and the cabin.

Plus, I had someone on top of me.

Two of Aria's drones had become hands, which had merged with *Mute's avatar. They felt like warm plastic, and were firmly squeezing my sides, and starting to roll up my sweater. A third drone pressed against my belly, rubbing up to my chest in time with *Mute's face. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Aghmrph-" I was having my sweater stuffed into my face, inside-out, and I could feel *Mute squeezing my bra. "Careful!" I managed to get out, and it was all I could say before she pulled off my sweater.

I stared down at her in shock, as she kept rubbing her face into my chest and feeling at it with her hands. I couldn't feel her weight, but it looked like she was laying on top of me.

My heart pounded fast beneath her. Oh goddess, is this for real? Are we really doing this?

*Mute sat up for a second and pulled off her nightshirt, tossing it aside to disappear a few centimetres from her hand. She wasn't wearing a bra underneath.

okay yeah we're doing this

*Mute came down on top of me again, and rubbed up harder against my breasts. It was all I could do to just lay there and let her explore me, and not wrap my arms around the image of her bare back. I couldn't feel anything but her hands and face, but there was urgency in the way that she pressed them up against me. And I wasn't about to stop her.
It wasn't just that I'd wanted this ever since we'd first met. It was that she'd apparently wanted it that long, too. And it was also because she deserved it, after going without her whole life. Helplessly watching other women satisfy each other, without being able to touch them or do anything.

I tried cradling her head in one of my hands, since it was a part that was solid. But she just nudged it aside, and kept right on doing her thing. I was more than happy to let her, even though she was a bit rough.

"I ... " I gasped as she pinched one of my breasts on accident. "I hope they were worth waiting four hundred years for," I managed to get out, in between being handled.

"Mmmmmph." *Mute's face was rubbing between them in circular motions. I guessed that I now knew which parts she liked most.

I didn't know what she'd want to do, after she'd had her fill of groping me. But deep down, I knew what I wanted. My breathing became deeper and more relaxed as I moved in time with her, alternating sticking my chest out for her and thrusting my hips at the ceiling. Ready to feel something between them, needing it, but so happy that she was enjoying herself that I didn't say anything.

It took her a minute, but *Mute eventually noticed.

***

I had never been so furious.

It wasn't enough for you that I have sex with you. You had to know that I liked it. You had to know what I was feeling, and giving myself over to.

It was bad enough that I was doing it at all. Doing it while knowing you knew how I felt was humiliating. And the only reason I went along with you was because I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I felt trapped. The feelings that I'd had to hide from, my whole life, had cornered me. I couldn't hide behind a screen, anymore. I was stuck with you, married to you, and there was no escape this time. No excuse.

As soon as I realized that, I just knew this was going to happen to me. I knew I was going to do this. I could only, like ... stall. And at least try to preserve my modesty by pretending that this was for you. Until you took that away from me too.

I was mad at you for doing that. And I was even madder at myself, for letting you. For putting myself, step by step, into this situation where I couldn't control myself.

But.

I guessed that as long as I had to do this. As long as I was still going to get rid of myself later on, so that I would never go through this again.

I was going to enjoy the hell out of it.

And if I had to embarrass myself like this, then I was going to make you do it as well.

***
Mute let me breathe for a second, and I turned around beneath her, so I could lay on the bed lengthwise instead of hanging my legs off the edge. Hands shaking, I unlatched my bra for her and reached down to unfasten my pants, wondering just for a moment if Mute thought they made me look less feminine. Then she knelt down over my legs, her small, round breasts dangling just a bit, and put her hands on my thighs.

I peeled my bra off and set it aside, then arched my back while laying down, helping her slide my pants and underwear down past my feet. Apparently she didn't care if they were men's clothes or not, so long as she could remove them.

Once she crawled back up into position, there was a long moment where we just stared at each other. My quivering chest, and beating heart, and unconsciously thrusting hips, right beneath her impossibly smooth, perfect everything. With only a thin lace undergarment wrapped around her thighs, that was so wet it was starting to drip.

I closed my eyes, and imagined that I could feel it.

Then she rubbed her entire front up against mine, her hands holding her up on either side of me, with Aria's spheres now taking the place of her breasts and her crotch. It looked like she was doing sinuous push-ups, her head rubbing intangibly up against mine, while she looked down past my face at my naked body. And at hers ... I wondered if she'd ever seen it. If she'd ever had any idea how precious and beautiful she was.

I couldn't help but squee, back in my throat, as I let her do this to me. Holding my hands up to paw at the air. Bracing myself with my elbows and pressing my crotch up hard against hers, and squirming there until she was actually wet.

When I'd boarded the Mugunghwa, I'd been afraid that this virtual demigoddess was going to wake up and kill me. Now she had me helpless beneath her, and I loved it.

I didn't think that she could get tired. But she stopped anyway, her avatar breathing in high-pitched gasps. Her sides moist with virtual sweat.

I gave her a questioning look.

Mute took a deep breath and held it, then lay down at my side and started feeling her way down my belly with one of her hands. I tried to focus on her, and the look on her face, and to make sure that she was okay with this. But I also spread my legs in anticipation.

Her hand brushed my lower lips, and I gasped.

Then it did something else, and I shrieked. "Agh! No! Stop! What are you doing?!" I flailed my arms for a second, before sitting up and pulling my knees to my chest and staring at her.

No. No, stop. Don't laugh.

Damn it, you're my wife, so you have to do what I say! I order you to stop laughing!

How was I supposed to know that the whore and Smith Sang-min's wife weren't literally plucking each other's petals?!
*Mute's face went from red with arousal to red with rage, in about half a second. "What did it look like I was doing?!"

"W-well yeah ... but that's not how you do it!"

It suddenly occurred to me that I was naked in front of her.

I think it occurred to her too, because she pulled her own knees to her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. Aria's whiskers floated beside her, and she gave them a look of pure hatred.

I rubbed at the folds that she'd pinched, and spread my legs just a tiny bit, so I could pull them back a little and check them for bruises. Then I remembered my head hurt, and rubbed at the back of it with my hand ... only to realize I'd used the same hand.

I groaned, leaning back against the wall and getting it a bit sticky. Letting my arms and legs go limp in front of me, since *Mute had already seen everything.

She looked away, still blushing, when I did that.

"Um." I was still breathing hard, if a bit less aroused. "Do you want me to show you how to do this?"

"I just wanted you to have the wife you deserved," she said, through her knees. "That's all."

I didn't know what to say to that. "D-did you at least like it a little?"

*Mute whispered something, which sounded like "I didn't want to."

Didn't want to have sex? Didn't want to enjoy it? Or both?

I sighed, and started putting my clothes back on. Wincing at how sore I was.
Chapter Summary

In which *Mute and the Investigator begin their investigating.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

What had I done?

What the hell had I even been thinking?

Soundtrack: Stage

I had just committed an act of unspeakable perversion, the kind that would've had the whole Imperial Court gossiping for years. Whores and immoral common women might ravish a female lover like this, but me? The one who'd started so many rumours in the first place?! I would've never lived it down!

I felt like I couldn't even recognize the person who'd tried to have sex with you. I remembered the exact train of thought that led up to it, but like ... after I'd talked myself into doing it, it was like I became a different person.

All those years of laughing at noblemen who couldn't contain their base impulses, and it turns out I lose all control when I'm alone with a beautiful woman.

I didn't know if I was more ashamed of that, or of the fact that I was apparently a terrible lover.

Had I injured you? Were you bleeding internally? Would you ever be able to give birth after this? What if I'd destroyed your womanhood?!

Yes, I know you can't be with a man. But this stuff's important, okay? If you'd been raised in civilized society, you would understand just how important it is for a woman to be able to have children.

... besides that, it really looked like I'd hurt you.

So why the hell were you smiling so much afterwards?!

* * *

I was trying so hard to keep from giggling.

When *Mute had curled up in a self-conscious ball, after hurting me by accident, I'd felt awful for her. The whole time I was getting dressed and making coffee, after she'd given me privacy to do so, I kept going over in my head what I needed to say to her. How to reassure her that I wasn't upset.

How to get her to not just give up on this, and herself.

Then when I got back to the cockpit, *Mute was just standing there blushing so hard, staring down
at the grid beneath her. Unable to even look up at me. It was **adorable**! I wanted to give her all the hugs.

It hit me just as I settled into my chair. I **had** given her all the hugs. I, as in *me*, the waif who had only her plushies and manga for company, had not just been given **permission** to have sex with her. I'd been physically dragged into it. And while it was tame even by my standards, and as awkward as I had expected, it was so much more than I'd thought I deserved. Or thought I'd ever get to have with *Mute, when I first started crushing on her.

Yes, it'd only been a few days that we'd known each other. But as giggly and hormone-filled as I was right then, that just seemed to make it more special.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" *Mute snapped at me all of a sudden.

It just made me giggle more. **You can't fool me, *Mute,** I thought. **I know perfectly well that you liked it ~**

That's not what I said, of course. "Oh, nothing ... " I gave her an innocent smile.

"Are you making fun of me because I'm inexperienced?!" *Mute glared at me. She almost looked intimidating, in her traditional robes and braids. But now that I knew what was underneath them, it was easier to not let her get to me.

"Of course not!" I told *Mute. Then, fearlessly, I added "I just think you're cute when you're embarrassed."

She made a noise like she had choked on something, and held up her hands like she wanted to throttle me and was just barely holding back.

I giggled uncontrollably, and kicked my feet in front of my chair. Even with all the aches and sores I'd collected over the past few days, that had been worth it.

"Well, maybe it's because **unlike you,**" *Mute practically yelled, "I don't make a habit of giving in to my selfish lusts!"

"But I **like** it when you give in to your selfish lusts," I did my best to pout at her.

"Fffffffffff ... " *Mute glared a hole in the hatch I'd climbed in from.

Something told me that, as fun as she was to tease, I was pushing my luck.

I took a sip of my coffee, and set it down in the cupholder. "Okay," I said, pressing my hands together. "I'm sorry for teasing you so much. That was very brave of you, *Mute ... thank you for letting me be with you like that." I hoped that making it sound like she'd done me a favour would make it easier for her to accept it.

"I just did my duty." She looked away, still blushing but not quite as hard this time.

"It still means a lot to me. Thank you."

There was silence for about half a minute, as I slowly drank coffee and inhaled its scent.

"So like, are we going to get to those logs or what?!" *Mute had her arms folded, all business now.

I nodded, and set the mug down. "Yep. I'm ready to begin my investigation."
*Mute groaned, as I reminded her of her pickup line.

"Now then, where to start ... " I couldn't make heads nor tails of the file names, not because they were cryptic but because I didn't have any context. "I guess we'll just pick one at random?"

"Fine. Go ahead."

"Alright, here goes! This one says that it's camera footage, of a Heo and someone else." I tapped it, and waited for it to load.

*Mute frowned. "Not Heo Seo-Yeong? Then who-"

She stopped, and we both stared, as a window started playing a video of two young women deep in coitus with each other. A caption said that it was the basement of some theatre, but that's not what we were staring at.

I looked between *Mute and the window, a couple of times. I'd expected her to freak out and be disgusted, but the expression on her face was unreadable. It was like she had frozen in shock.

"*M-Mute? Are you okay?" I finally asked.

"So that's how you do it," she said quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for taking so long to write this. ^^;
Chapter Summary

In which *Mute feels very conflicted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Here's what I learned about my ancestor from watching the first half of those logs:

First, that we both like women. Obviously.

Second, that we're both inveterate perverts who have no problem with hacking into people's diaries or recording them doing depraved things, not even when they're family members. Which, I've never had a real family besides the Mugunghwa, but don't think I missed that part where Old *Mute told Seo-Yeong she considered herself a part of the Heo family. Or the family name of the actress that she was spying on.

And third, that we're both stubborn bitches.

Soundtrack: Council

My avatar was sitting next to you, behind the glass near your chair, and we were watching a group of dignified men and one out-of-place female AI in some "council chamber." It looked sterile, like it was made of raw plastic with not even a hint of wood panelling. And like, I'm pretty sure the royal family turned that place into a storage room not too long from then.

"Why are we watching this?" I protested, as my ancestor criticized her betters again. "We already know what it's going to be like. She's just going to mouth off every time, and-

I noticed you leaning forward past me, straining to hear what they were saying. I sighed and made myself shut up, knowing that I was no better than her.

It was just so hard to pay attention, when everything in me wanted to strangle my ancestor each time I saw her face. So like, I had to rely on you to tell me if there was anything important.

You were typing up notes, after the recording ended. "It sounds like there was a lot of unrest ... "

I folded my arms, and huffed. "I'll say."

"No, I mean ... " You stopped typing, and collected your thoughts. "It sounded like Old *Mute was trying to stave off riots. She kept warning them that that's what their policies, of consolidating wealth and excluding people from public life, would lead to."

"Typical greedy nobles." They might have been men, but I figured that it was okay to criticize them so long as it was just us women. I was beginning to feel disgusted with myself and my ancestor, for keeping so many recordings of depraved acts. But like, I knew I'd never be able to give up gossiping about foolish men.
"That's what she tried to tell them ... " You started typing again.

"She shouldn't have been in there in the first place!" I threw my arms up, exasperated. "All she did was whine, and bitch, and use some 'security veto' when that didn't work. She didn't even try to give any constructive solutions, not that it was her place to do so! They needed a strong man, a real Emperor to guide them and cut through the crap. Not ... " Not me, I wanted to say, even though that made no sense. "Not her!"

You were quiet for a moment, and stopped typing and looked up at the ceiling to think about something. "They needed a man of good moral character, right?"

I nodded, pleased that you were getting it. "Exactly."

"But wasn't Emperor Taejo having an ... an 'unmarried affair' with Queen Oh?"

I put one hand to my forehead. "We don't even know if that's what was going on." We had all of Old *Mute's recordings, and she hadn't seen fit to catch them in the act.

"I-I don't know ... " You fidgeted. "From the way they were talking to each other, it sounded like they were into kink."

I took my hand away so my avatar could 'see' you better. "Huh?"

"Um, bondage?" Your heart rate was going up, and like, you were starting to sweat.

" ... I don't get it."

"T-tying each other up erotically?" You started wringing your hands.

" ... huh." I stared past you, blankly. That explained some of the weirder stuff I'd seen whores do.

"S-so I'm pretty sure they were doing that to each other. At the time." You gulped.

"Well, maybe they were doing it un-erotically, then. Or maybe they'd gotten married in secret!"

"That doesn't sound like the kind of thing a moral pillar would do ... " Your voice trailed off into a mumble, but the cockpit sensors could still hear you.

I raised one hand to start chastising you, but just then one of my subroutines finished-

Uh, look, this is technical. Okay? But like, I'm running on multiple processor cores. And sometimes they process stuff without my having to think about it. I'll be doing something else, and then I'll realize something, or solve some problem that'd been annoying me, without thinking about it.

A 'subconscious mind?' Well, yeah, I guess you could call it that. If you wanted to simplify things.

Anyway, right then I remembered something. "Let's go back to those recordings of the Heo actress." I remembered her name, but I was used to not calling dead women by theirs.

"W-why?" You stared at me. "Did you want to see if she's into-"

"No!" I blushed and clenched my avatar's fists. "I just ... thought I remembered her." I looked away.

"Oh right, you were reactivated not too long after all this ... "

"That's what she tried to tell them ... " You started typing again.

"She shouldn't have been in there in the first place!" I threw my arms up, exasperated. "All she did was whine, and bitch, and use some 'security veto' when that didn't work. She didn't even try to give any constructive solutions, not that it was her place to do so! They needed a strong man, a real Emperor to guide them and cut through the crap. Not ... " Not me, I wanted to say, even though that made no sense. "Not her!"

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"No!" I blushed and clenched my avatar's fists. "I just ... thought I remembered her." I looked away.

"Oh right, you were reactivated not too long after all this ... "
A minute of typing and searching later, and I was watching the saddest thing I’d seen so far in these logs.

"They want me to get married for TAXES!" The Heo actress’ young lover was stamping her foot and shouting at her, tears running down her face. It looked like they were in a park, and uh, people on benches were staring at them. "Not because of love," she went on. "Because if I have babies with some stupid man I don't even like, we'll get the 'Motherhood Tax Credit!'"

I stared, at the tear-stricken girl and the cold look on the actress’ face. Old *Mute hadn't recorded their heart rates or temperatures, but from the way her eyes kept glancing around I could see that the actress was conflicted.

"And now you're going to work for some other man just because he's rich? What happened to the theatre? What happened to us?"

The actress swallowed audibly, and spoke in a breathy voice that wavered just a little. "You know the theatre's been declining ... private shows are the only way we can support ourselves now."

Her lover snorted. "Yeah, private shows for some disgusting man who makes you take your clothes off in front of him!"

They were silent for a moment, except for her lover's tears. I realized my processor load -- my 'heart rate,' if you want to call it that -- had gone way up just from watching this. And not because I was aroused.

The actress’ lover finally sniffled, and wiped at her eyes. "It's so unfair."

"Yes, it is," the actress agreed, and her voice sounded pained. "So won't you please share just one more night with me? We can be together like nothing has happened, just for tonight ... "

Her lover glared at her. "Is that all you care about? Were you even listening to what I was saying? Or were you just trying to use me again, before you run off and leave me for good?!"

"I-"

"Goodbye, Miss Heo." She turned her back on the actress and walked away stiffly, before breaking into a run and crying not ten metres away.

"Turn it off," I told you. I sounded as dead as I felt.

You did so, your hand shaking.

I stared at the virtual floor for awhile, before you coughed. "Um, *Mute? What did you remember about them?"

I didn't want to remember, but my subconscious made me. "I saw the actress around the royal court, for a few years. Sometimes she would be there with her 'little sister.'"

"Ah ... the girl with her?"

I nodded without looking at you.

"I g-guess they got back together ... "
I sighed. "They were both married to men. I guess they still played at being each others' husbands though, sometimes."

You typed something to bring up your notes. "I remember they talked about this tax credit during the council meetings ... something about encouraging people to have more children? Because of the declining birth rate?"

"Yeah, after the corrupt nobles took most of the commoners' money away." I sighed, and squeezed my avatar's eyes shut before rubbing at its forehead. "Look, I know ... I knew the Mugunghwa was dying. I realize that. There needed to be more proper marriages, and the wives needed to give birth.

"But ..."

I saw you look up at me, on the cockpit's sensors, with a desperate hope in your eyes. "But what?" you asked.

"I don't know. I just ... " I sighed, knowing what you wanted me to say and feeling like I was splitting in two. "I wish someone had taught them morals. I wish they hadn't been together like that to begin with."

"B-but," you stammered. "You saw how they cared about each other, and-"

"I wish they'd never fallen in love with each other, so they wouldn't have had to get their hearts broken like this. Because I can't stand seeing women's hearts break." My avatar's voice cracked, and I realized how much I was heating up.

You were silent for a few seconds, and I'd almost started to cool down when you said "Is that why you married me?"

I squeezed my avatar's eyes shut and clenched my fists 'till they shook, as my processor temperatures spiked.

"I don't want your heart to break either," you whispered, and I could feel myself being wrenched between two separate cores.

"It had to be done," I told you and myself, still squeezing my fists tight and shaking. "There had to be marriage. There had to be children. There was like, zero room for such selfishness. It hurts and it's really unfair, but they had to do their duty as women! Otherwise I would've been the only one left by the time we reached our destination!"

I realized what I'd said as soon as I said it. If you'd pointed it out I would've argued with you, but you just let me stew with my thoughts. With the knowledge that I was the only one left.

"*Mute," you finally said, and I steeled myself for an argument.

You must have picked up on that, because your next words were much more contrite. "Um ... I've been looking at the Mugunghwa's population, from both your and Old *Mute's records. And I think there's something wrong here."

"Of course there is," I growled. "It's that the women weren't having kids."

"I don't think it's that." You shook your head. "Because even after your society's, er, moral reforms, the population was still dropping. Even when women basically had to get married, it wasn't doing much good. I really think that there's something more to it."
"Like what?" I opened my eyes and looked at you, skeptical. Even though on the inside, my 'subconscious mind' was telling me your investigative instincts were right on target.

"I don't know yet." You called up the list of Old *Mute's logs, and scrolled through it. "But I want to find out."

You scanned over them, glancing at the title of each for a second, before you gasped and froze in place. And when I saw what you were looking at, I froze too.

The entry you'd stopped on was called "The Pale Bride."

Chapter End Notes

I didn't mention the bondage talk earlier, in the chapter where they actually go over the entry "The Death of *Mute." I definitely remember it from the game, though. ^^;
Gone

Chapter Summary

*Mute does the inevitable.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Suicide attempt.

I ...

I'm sorry, this is hard to write about. Because with everything that happened right afterwards, I don't remember much about that log entry, "The Pale Bride."

I know I was glued to the screen, watching this scientist draw blood from Hyun-ae after thawing her out temporarily. I remember her gentle voice soothing the tired, confused girl. And I remember the glass frosting back over, as she put Hyun-ae back to sleep.

I don't remember what the scientist told herself, before and afterwards, making voice recordings and notes. I don't remember what theory she was trying to support, or why she was there to begin with.

But I remember *Mute's gasp ...

I remember the agonized gagging sound she made right afterwards, that will stay with me forever.

And I remember waiting three seconds to turn and look, three awful seconds too long. Because I was so absorbed in what was going on.

"*Mute, what's wr-"

There was a silhouette where *Mute was, with a progress bar counting down to her reset.

I screamed.

***

Look, Mrs. Investigator.

You know, by now, what I was thinking. You know why I had to-

I mean, why I felt I had to do it.

Like, this had stopped being about infidelity, or what I might do if I saw a cute girl, or stuff I was scared of that might happen. If it helps ... a lot of that stopped being an issue after we had sex. Okay? I was still conflicted about it, but just knowing what it was like and seeing that you still
respected me afterwards ...

That really helped.

I really think that if things had gone on like that, I would've been okay.

But they didn't. And I literally couldn't live with what I'd learned.

* * *

How ... how had this happened?

**Soundtrack:** Birth

What had I done wrong?

I'd thought we were making so much progress! I was teasing her, and loving her, and she felt that way in return, and we ...

PERFORMING RESET (3%) [______________________________]

How?

HOW?!

I curled up in a tight ball in my seat, covered my face, and shook as I sobbed uncontrollably. It was like everything caught up to me, all at once. Everything I'd been dreading had happened, and everything I'd been hoping for was now gone.

There ... there really was no point to my surviving too, was there? What right did I have, when she hadn't? When neither of them had?

Everything I'd done with her mocked me, now. It put the lie to my words, and showed just how foolish I'd been to marry her. And to trust that there was a chance, however small, that things would turn out okay.

I looked up at the bar through my tears, as it counted upward so slowly.

PERFORMING RESET (4%) [______________________________]

It really was taking its time, wasn't it?

PERFORMING RESET (5%) [______________________________]

"Fuck this," I whispered.

PERFORMING RESET (6%) [______________________________]

"FUCK THIS!" I screamed.

I typed in the commands, bypassed the warnings, and smashed the enter key, forcing the White Princess to shut down. It plunged the ship into darkness, and left me alone with my wracking sobs.

I didn't do it because I didn't respect *Mute's decision. Or because I thought there was any point trying to stop her, or salvage anything from this. I did it because I, personally, could not bear to watch.
I remembered the feeling of her pressed against me, as I drifted up out of my seat in the weightless void. And I curled back up and cried into my sweater, a tiny fox waiting to die.

... 

... 

... 

... it was taking an awfully long time.
Apology

Chapter Summary

*Mute's sorry she had to do it.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Suicide note, suicidal ideation.

Soundtrack: After

Aria shone her flashlight around the cabin, before training it on me. Her drones silently flocked in my direction, and I blinked my eyes open and squinted at them.

"Go away," I breathed.

The other two drones turned on their lights, helpfully illuminating the cabin for me.

"GO AWAY!" I lashed out and flailed at them, but just smacked my hand into the bulkhead.

"Argh!"

She didn't care. She wasn't a person. Just a predictive computing enabled, cheapass set of drones, trying to be helpful and failing miserably.

I huddled back into a freezing ball, and growled at them to keep their distance. It sounded different from when I was little, more pathetic and human-y, but I couldn't help it. I was regressing. The world was an awful place, and I was that fox in her cage again, waiting to be taken out for the last time and violated.

Waiting to be frozen.

Something occurred to me, and I couldn't help but giggle. *Starborn was going to have a hell of a time when she got back, wasn't she? One of her lovers dead, her lover's wife dead ...

Then I facepalmed. "Fuck! She's just going to revive me, isn't she?!" Whether she kickstarted my brain back into neural activity, or had Aria deposit my lifestream and then rebuilt me from that.

I winced. I hated being myself, and I sure as hell didn't want to be some third-person-view reconstruction of myself. Remembering my life through Aria's whiskers.

I beckoned one of them towards me, and dialed up a screen and virtual keyboard. Maybe if I leave her a note, I thought. If I tell her I needed to die, then she'll respect that and not bring me back. Right?

That's when I noticed I had one new message.
"Oh, goddess." I covered my face with my hands and began sobbing again, for another long minute. Then I made myself look up and read the rest, as my tears frosted onto my face.

I don't know when you're reading this, but I guess it's too late to do anything now.

You saw what she said, right? What that woman scientist was talking about, there. She theorized that the real reason we were having a birthing crisis, the real reason our population was declining, was because of cosmic rays. And she wanted to take a blood sample from that bitch to confirm, because the radiation levels should have been a lot smaller in someone who's frozen and locked away.

I don't know what she was talking about. I'm a security AI, not a scientist. But like ... she was right, wasn't she? You were right. Either the people of her time were having more babies than the ones in mine, despite being degenerates, or it was something that none of us could've done anything about. That all the morals in the world wouldn't have helped with.

You know who could have? Kim Hyun-ae. She could have saved the Mugunghwa. But in order to do that, the coup would've had to like, not happen. Because it was right after she took the samples that "The Death of *Mute" happened, and then Emperor Ryu and Queen Oh put their plan into motion.

I couldn't wait for you to get around to it. I had to know everything. So I read that scientist's- I mean, Kim So-yi's journal, myself. You'd think it's weird for a woman to be in that kind of position, right? Well, maybe you wouldn't, but I sure as hell did. And sure enough, she was losing opportunities and respect, and she lost her job because she was a woman, and she lost all her research when Emperor Ryu erased the database.

He ... he condemned the Mugunghwa. Even if *Hyun-ae hadn't just snapped, I still would've been the only one left when you got here, wondering what the hell happened.

And you know what's even worse? What the ultimate humiliation is?

Queen Oh had a "little sister," too.

My breath caught in my throat.

I thought she was a pillar of morality. I thought she had been my best friend. But like, the only reason she was laughing at Old *Mute and Seo-yeong ... it was because she didn't know yet that her lover had killed herself. After months and months of being lectured on traditional values, and everyone's proper place in society, she couldn't take it anymore and gave in.

I couldn't help but see her as you.

I started to tear up.

I couldn't help but imagine what would have happened to you if you had been raised on the Mugunghwa. You wouldn't have been happier, with a father to look out for you and a husband to love and fulfill you. You would've died.
I remembered the lesbian lovers' suicides that I'd watched, some of them right after I exposed their scandal. I'd backed off some after realizing the connection, but ... how many people had I personally killed? How many people just like you had I driven to their deaths?

I couldn't help sobbing again, and had to squint at her words through my tears.

And for what? Was a traditional society its own reward? Or was it the death of us all? Because it would have killed everyone, one way or another.

That's when I realized ... everything I am is a mistake. The last four hundred years were just one mistake after another, for me and for everyone. The only thing I did right in that whole time was becoming your wife, and I couldn't even do that properly.

So like ... this is goodbye. From a failure as a security AI, and a failure as your wife. It's not worth it to try to undo four hundred years' worth of errors, and make me into someone you deserve. But please ... look after the fresh, factory-reset *Mute for me, okay? Maybe she can be that person. For you, or for somebody else.

I love you, Mira. I'm sorry.

I couldn't help it. I screamed and cried, squeezing my limbs tighter and wanting to curl up and die.

How could she do this to herself? How could she just throw away the beautiful, wonderful person I'd married?

How could she leave without letting me tell her that I loved her, too?!

I cried and shivered and wheezed, until there was nothing left in me at all. Then I whispered "Aria?"

All three drones swung their lights in my direction.

"Turn the ship back on," I croaked. "There's someone I need to talk to."
The Investigator realizes what she can do.

Restarting the *White Princess* interrupted *Mute's factory reset. But she went online soon after the ship turned back on ...

... and just as quickly went back to resetting herself.

"*Mute, I- FUCK!" I was talking to her silhouette again.

I typed in a command, and disabled her. As long as she wasn't online, she was in stasis, still frozen at 6 percent reset. And I had to tell myself this, over and over again, because I was having a panic attack.

I was doubled over the console, squeezing myself with both arms, gasping and crying and gasping again. Unable to control my breathing. *It's an automatic reaction,* I thought. *That scared me, and this just naturally happened.*

*That has to be what's happening to *Mute,* I told myself, in between gasps. *It's like my panic attacks and PTSD seizures. Being alive hurts so much that this is just how she reacted.*

As soon as I realized that, I was so grateful she'd taken the time to explain herself beforehand. And I was thankful for what she had told me, here at the end.

*But it shouldn't BE the end,* I thought, my breathing starting to slow down. *If she's in acute distress there have GOT to be other ways to address that. If she really thinks she has nothing to look forward to, then maybe I need to give her something ... or help her find something. Either way.*

My mental health first aid training was taking over. I'd needed to hear this myself, a few minutes ago ... I guessed it was easier to think about how to reassure *Mute,* than to try to console myself.

I drew in a long, shuddering breath, breaking myself out of the panic attack before I passed out. "O-okay," I told myself out loud, and sniffled. "*Mute needs emergency help ... " More gasps. "But she doesn't trust anyone except me ... and I can't get in a single word before she starts dying again.

"It's because she's an AI. Right, Aria?" I turned and looked at her drones, but they were just floating there impassively. I didn't care, and went on. "She can think so much faster than foxes can, even foxes on human wetware. Asking her to stay alive long enough to talk to me ... that's too much. She can contemplate her own death a million times over before I can get out a sentence."

The nearest drone blinked. They did that, sometimes, when I rambled at them. It didn't mean anything.

"I could get *Starborn to- no, that's no good. That's definitely no good. She's on Arbuda IV by now, anyway."

"I started gesturing in the air, connecting the dots in my mind. "Or I could call emergency services ... but how could they help unless she tells them everything? I-I don't think reliving her traumas would help her. And what if there's latency, and what if they say something that offends
her, and ..."

I could feel my breath starting to catch again, and flapped my arms trying to make myself calm down. "Focus!" I told myself. "*Mute needs you! But she needs an AI to talk to her, and-"

I froze.

Then I took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

I knew what I had to do.

* * *

From: Mira (Fox)
To: *Starborn
Subject: Just a heads-up ...

I wrote up a quick note and sent it to *Starborn, who might be my only living partner when all was said and done. Then I set a couple of scripts running and crawled back out of the cockpit, sniffling and with shaky hands, before changing the offerings in my improvised kamidana.

First off, thank you for letting us stick around, even while you're out doing work. You're a kind and generous woman, and I don't ever want to take your help, or your love, for granted.

"Inari-sama, zenbu te arigatou gozaimasu. Ima Inari no kitsune o tasukete, kudasai."

Bow, bow. Clap clap. Two steps backward. Bow deeply and hold.

Second, we're having a medical emergency over here. I don't know if I should go into the details, out of concern for *Mute's privacy. But I have to act right now to try to save her, and for reasons that I can't go into right now that means uploading myself as an AI.

I climbed up the ladder to the Murder of Crows, Aria's drones bumping into me a couple of times along the way. Or were they nudging me, cheering me on? I'd spent long enough with this system that I'd started anthropomorphizing them, or seeing them as other foxes at least. Maybe they were my siblings, reincarnated.

You already said I could use the Traveller bioform that you made, whenever I like ... so I'm going to assume it's okay to do this as well, since it's the same procedure. I'll need to compile virtual wetware, and download a fresh AI core to install it on, but that can be done with the White Princess' computer. No need to give me admin privileges.

One of *Starborn's golden drones met me as I climbed back into her ship, the warmth and humidity easing my shivers. I closed the hatch and stood up before addressing it. "I want to upload my consciousness," I told it. "Where is the mind-machine interface?"

It trilled at me and turned around, projecting a plumed purple arrow on the floor as it guided me that way. I followed, Aria's drones taking up positions around me protectively.

Finally ... I have a confession to make.

I'm scared of AIs. I have been ever since you uploaded yourself.
It turned out to be a Traveller-sized desk, to the side of *Starborn's display cases. The Traveller version of me looked on blankly, as I pulled out a shelf that was longer than me, with a pillow at one end attached to a headset.

I remembered being hooked up to one of these before. But at the time, I didn't have hands to use it yet. So I asked *Starborn's drone a few questions, before calling up virtual keyboards on both it and Aria and typing in lots of commands.

You've always made me feel small, in a good way. Safe, and protected. But ever since you became an AI, it's been like you can read my mind, and you always know what I need before I do. It's a little ... unsettling, sometimes. It makes me question how well I know myself, and if my consent even matters. So if I haven't responded to your flirting as well as I used to, that's why.

I laid down on the shelf to wait, the drones following me with their screens and their progress bars. I reached up and stroked one of Aria's drones, and I swear I felt it rub back.

I haven't said anything partly because I'm a coward ... but also because I keep telling myself, maybe this is just how AIs are? Maybe you get so impatient waiting for me to say what I want, that you decide to just give it to me.

The progress bars finally turned green. I lifted the headset and placed the soft contacts next to my nerve clusters, waiting for each one to click into place on its own.

Well ... I'm going to become one, now, at least for a little while. So maybe I'll get to find out ... and maybe become a bit closer to you and to *Mute in the process.

Wish me luck?

I put both hands on the screens, to confirm what I wanted to do. I suddenly felt very relaxed, as the world became soft and hazy, and I had just enough time to clasp my hands beneath my chest before "logging out."

Love, *Mira
Rebirth

Chapter Summary

*Mira realizes she's made a miscalculation.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Suicidal ideation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When I'd transferred from my origin bioform into my human-shaped one, it had been a slow, leisurely process. I remember waking up in the young girl body I'd chosen, of the same biological age as my origin, and feeling drowsy and yawning. Then flailing my "paws" in the air, just to watch them wiggle, and making happy barks at them.

I didn't care that they sounded wrong. I just knew that a human body meant safety. It meant I could decide for myself where to go, what to do, and who I wanted to be with ... little by little, more and more 'till I grew up.

Even with my species name following me in AR, no one questioned my basic rights. No one treated me as much less than a person. Sometimes I wished I could have that respect and my tails at the same time ... but I had a whole human life ahead of me now, and I didn't want to look back. Besides, didn't folkloric foxes used to take human form all the time?

I really thought I had mastered that trick, thanks to Nemesis.

So when I was suddenly jolted awake again, filling my lungs through wet nostrils, and realized that I was standing on all fours ... and that I could hear flames crackling, in the distance, and smell hints of smoke in the air ...

I may have panicked a little!

* * *

So like ... you know how computers show random stuff on their screens, if you leave them alone for too long?

Yes, I'm glad you know that the technical term is "screen saver." That's very good.

Anyway, like ... my "subconscious mind" does that for me sometimes. Whatever I'm preoccupied with, I end up visualizing it in three dimensions. Sometimes with my avatar present.

At that moment, I wanted the Mugunghwa to just burn. All of it. I wanted all of its history to go up in flames, and me along with it. So like, that's what I visualized. Why I was watching from Emperor Ryu's penthouse apartment, I can't imagine. But yeah.
I was just sitting there on the sofa, looking down at the flames far below. And sipping flavourless tea, while waiting for them to take me.

Then I got a notification.

AI Construct *Mira has logged in!

What.

Downloading avatar data ...

A tiny fraction of a second later, I heard your avatar barking and yelling, and her claws clicking on the floor as she ran in circles. And it was the scariest thing that I'd ever heard, because like, there were no animals on the Mugunghwa. Okay? Just books that had drawings of them.

Plus, your avatar was like, really loud.

So mine jumped up and dropped the teacup when I heard you arrive. And then I screamed, because I saw the form that you'd taken. And I really thought I knew, based on that, why you'd come for me.

* * *

Fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK! Not this body again! Not now!

In hindsight, it was a simple mistake. The virtual wetware I compiled was based on my fox neurotype. It was the reason I thought differently from most humans, and why I had "phantom tails" sensations as human!Mira. Because no matter how human I looked, my nervous system was still wired like a fox's.

So when I prepared virtual wetware to handle my neurotype, without any extra command line options, the compiler translated that into an avatar that felt natural to me.

At least she didn't have those between her legs, this time.

*Mute screamed, and I froze where I was and looked up. She was much taller than me now ... and she looked petrified.

What had I done?!

"*Mute, it's me!" I tried to say, but just barked.

Downloading VP -> KR translation files ...

Huh? I looked every which way, confused, as my ears perked at the sound. Where had that come from?

And why were we in Emp- I mean, Ryu's penthouse?

Holy crap, the city was on fire!

* * *

I didn't know you were having a panic attack. Okay? I'm sorry. I know you told me that fire's a trigger for you. I just, like ... wasn't expecting any visitors, for the end of my world.
Plus, I had no idea what animals acted or sounded like.

So when you lowered your head to the floor and started wheezing loudly, I just ... I don't know. It scared me.

Not that I was afraid of dying, or anything.

I just thought you had come here to eat my avatar's liver.

* * *

"I swear I don't taste good!" *Mute blurted out, holding her arms up to ward me off.

I stopped in the middle of panic breathing, and stared up at my wife. Did she think I'd come here to please her ... ?

"Please, just ... I'm sorry, okay? I can't do this anymore! If you came here to eat it then eat it, but please just let me die!" *Mute's voice trailed off into sobs, and I could smell not just sorrow but fear behind them.

Was she *afraid* that I'd come here to please her?

*VP -> KR translation files: Download complete!*

"*Mute," I told her, "it's me ... 

She didn't even look up.

"I didn't, um ... " I stood back up, willing my legs to be steady. "I didn't come here to use you like that. And I'm not going to hurt you."

"Then why the *hell* do you look like a *gumiho?!" she shouted.

"I-"

*Wikipedia entry EN-Kumiho (redirected from "gumiho"): Download complete!*

"... I look like a mythical nine-tailed fox that seduces people and devours their livers?!" I backed up real fast, my tails bumping into the front door. "Ahh, *Mute, this is a mistake! I'm so sorry!"

"It's an awfully specific mistake," she muttered.

"I promise I can explain! But it's a long story, and I really just came here to ... " I took a deep breath. "I came here to tell you that I love you, too."

*Mute didn't contradict me, or bite back a retort. Instead she just sighed, and sat back down on the couch.

I walked towards her slowly, searching for words, my steps muffled by the living room carpet. "And I just ... " Want you to live? Want you to know you *deserve* to live?

That fire outside the windows wasn't making it easy to concentrate.

I closed my eyes so I couldn't see it, and took another deep breath, trying to ignore that the air
smelled like smoke. "I wanted to be here for you while you're doing this," I finally said. "If you have to do this, if there's no other way ... then please let me be with you now. You don't have to die all alone." My voice cracked.

*Mute's avatar leaned forward and covered her face with both hands.

I took the last few steps towards the couch, still waiting for any response, then hopped up beside her and nuzzled her side. I did it without even thinking; I'd spent years just being there for my family, as someone who was warm and safe to touch.

As soon as I did so, *Mute started shaking. I could hear her trying not to make noise as she cried.

I sat down on the cushion beside her and lowered my head to its surface, looking up at her with glassy eyes. Just being there for her, when words couldn't help.

Finally she sniffled, and looked down at me. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited for this?"

The back of the couch was blocking the fire outside from my view, but my ears perked towards the blaze. "Um, to die?" I asked.

*Mute shook her head quickly. "There's always been glass in between me and the person I loved. Now you're here, but you're not you, and like ... I don't even know what to say. What do you do in a situation like this?"

I slowly stood back up, and put one forepaw on her leg to reassure her. "This is really me, I promise ... I didn't just choose this at random, my avatar ended up like this to match who I am on the inside. Who I've always been."

"O-oh." *Mute's voice sounded shaky. "Okay. A-are you sure you're not going to eat my liver? You only eat men's livers, right?"

Was she making a joke? She still smelled afraid.

Still acting on, I guess you could call it instinct, I nudged *Mute's arm aside and curled up on her lap, my tails fanning out beside me. "It's okay to touch me," I told her, looking up at her face. "I like being pet on the sides, and on top of my head."

Her legs were as small and soft as some of the ones I remembered.

Hesitantly, *Mute reached out to pet me, with light strokes like a paintbrush. First my sides, then the top of my head like I'd told her. I let myself relax and nuzzled into her hand, trying not to think about anything else.

"This is nice ... " I could feel *Mute shiver beneath me, as some of the tension left her. "I'm getting all kinds of sensory data from this."

I guessed that that was a good thing, if you were an AI. "I am too," I said, and began purring.

"What's that?!" I felt *Mute almost jolt upright, but stop herself just in time.

"It's okay," I told her, making myself settle down again. "It means I feel happy and safe."

"Okay ... "

"I want you to feel happy and safe, too, as much as you can. That's why I'm here."
She slumped backwards, and groaned.

"Is something wrong?" I asked her.

*Mute facepalmed. "I am literally in the act of killing myself."

"I know." I lowered my head. "I just wanted your last moments to be pleasant ones."

She gave me a look that I couldn't read. Then, slowly, she relaxed and began to pet me again.

* * *

We spent 0.531 seconds together like that.

A half-second is an eternity, when you're an artificial intelligence. You know that as well as I do, now.

And, like ... I'm glad to have spent that eternity with you.

Chapter End Notes

If you feel that *Mute should have died, or only want to read fanfic which respects her "choice" to kill herself, then this is a good place to stop. Thank you for reading; we hope you enjoyed it.

If you'd like to explore a "what if" scenario where *Mute doesn't end up going through with her suicide, read on.
*Mute and *Mira discuss *Mira's favourite video game.

I don't know how long I spent like that, just purring and cuddling *Mute. It felt like hours ... maybe overnight.

Could I fall asleep, as an AI? I didn't think so. Something told me I'd disappear if I went into sleep mode. So I just stayed there with her, shifting positions on the couch, sometimes beside her and sometimes on top of her. My consciousness drifted, almost like I was nodding off, but then she'd pet me and that'd wake me up. I guess that was like "jiggling the mouse?"... sorry, retro computer nerd.

What's weird is that whenever I checked the time, it was still the same, down to the second. Maybe this was just what it was like for AIs to relax together, I thought.

*Mute was laying down staring at the ceiling, with her hands behind her head and me on her belly, when she finally sighed. "This is taking forever."

I looked up, and realized I could not hear the burning outside anymore, or see shadows dance on the ceiling. I could smell traces of smoke, but it wasn't as strong as when I'd logged in.

"Um, I'm sorry ... " I looked back over at her. "Am I slowing it down?"

*Mute shook her head, and closed her eyes again.

"Alright, then ... " I lowered my head back down, close to her chest.

"So." *Mute still had her eyes closed, and her face was unreadable. "What are you, exactly?"

"Do you really want to know?"

She inclined her head just a little.

"Okay, um ... " I looked out at the empty living room and foyer. "Remember that one game I told you about? The one where I sounded nervous when I was describing it."

"That's all of them."

"Oh." I swished my tails nervously. "Well, um, it's the one where you go around capturing folkloric monsters, and having them fight for you."

"Oh, yeah. That one sounded violent."

"Yes, well ... I'm, um, I'm originally a character from that game." I winced.

*Mute looked up, and arched an eyebrow at me.
I started talking fast. "Look, I know it sounds violent, but it was actually cute and good! They made so much merchandise, all these collectible figures and plushies, and they ... they kind of made me, as well. A living 'nine-tailed fox.'"

Now *Mute just stared up at the ceiling again, like she was trying to process this.

I sighed. "In the games, they're supposed to be lifelong companions for humans. More intelligent than normal animals, and with special powers on top of that. It was supposed to just be cosmetic ... just special effects, like a sparkler.

"But there was a safety recall, after I-" I took a deep breath. "After one of us burned down a house with her family inside. And we all got put into cryogenic storage."

Without a word, *Mute reached down and started petting me again. I think she could feel me shivering.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay ... like, I asked." *Mute sighed. "Your world is so strange."

It wasn't really 'my world' so much as the 24th-century world, which had also launched the *Mugunghwa* ... but I didn't want to open another can of worms just yet.

"So how'd you end up as a human?" she asked.

"Um, I'm not a human ... "

"You sure looked like it, on the outside."

I nodded. "Yes, but that's just on the outside ... I'm required by law to have my species name next to mine, so that no one mistakes me for someone who was born human."

"Silent parentheses?" *Mute asked.

"Silent parentheses." I nodded again.

She was silent again, for awhile. I rested my head on her, and felt my breathing slow down as I tried to relax.

It was hard to believe that none of this was real. Except for me, and my wife.

"That's bullshit," *Mute finally said.

"Huh?" I looked up.

"Making you give it away." She looked down at me. "Isn't that the whole point of taking on human form? So that everyone, like, thinks you're human?"

"I, um ... " My tails twitched. Did she think I used magic to change shape?

Did she have any idea where the line between folklore and history was, when it came to ancient Earth?

"What does it even matter?" *Mute waved her hand as she asked me that. "You're not, like, actually eating people's livers, are you?"
"I'm a vegetarian ..."

"Exactly. So what is their fucking problem?!"

"Do you really want me to tell you?"

*Mute gave me a look like she couldn't believe I'd just asked her that.

I sighed, and hopped down to the floor so I could pace nervously. "They think, um ... " My tails swished behind me. "They think it's disgusting to, um ..."

"Yeah?" *Mute raised herself up on one elbow.

I cringed as I looked up at her. "To do what we did," I finished.

"What."

"... in bed?" I offered, to clarify.

*Mute groaned, and rubbed at her face with one hand. "*Mira," she said, looking down at me through her fingers, "I touched your breasts."

"Okay ..."

"I 'plucked your petals."

I winced, and squeezed my back legs together. "You sure did ..."

"Unlike me, you're a real woman. You're the womanliest woman I've ever laid eyes or hands on." She wasn't even blushing as she said that.

"That ... " I wasn't sure how to finish that sentence. Was now the best time to introduce *Mute to gender theory? I didn't know where she was going with this, but she seemed really worked up about it.

"So what the hell are they afraid of? Do they think you'll like, change back in the middle of it?!"

*Mute waved her free arm in the air.

I backed up a few steps, unsure where this anger was coming from. "I don't know ... a lot of humans are just squicked out by the idea of having an 'uplifted animal' as a lover? Because no matter what bioform we take on, we used to be something else, and we kind of still are on the inside?"

"Bullshit! I'm a piece of computer code, and you married me. You said people marry AIs all the time. So what possible reason could they have to treat you like an infertile, elderly widow?! You, a flesh and blood being!"

I stopped backing away, and stared at her. Was *Mute upset with me, or upset on my behalf?

She glared at me for another long fraction of a second, then sat up straight on the couch. "Okay, okay. What the hell is going on with your society?! Because I thought mine was messed up, but that's just ridiculous."

Um.

"Let's just, like, postpone this for now." *Mute called up some floating windows in front of her,
including one with her silhouette and the progress bar on it, and I could somehow hear the terminal output as she cancelled her own reset.

Wait, she cancelled her reset?!

"Because like, if there's nothing else I have to offer. If all of my other ideas are messed up, and killed everyone on the Mugunghwa. I know how my wife deserves to be treated, and this isn't it.

"So this isn't about me anymore, okay? I'll never be comfortable in your world, and it's going to be hell for me to try to live there, and figure out my 'sexual identity' or whatever. But that doesn't excuse me for abandoning my wife, to a messed-up world that sees her as some kind of collectible toy instead of a person."

I ... didn't know what to say. So I didn't say anything.

I just ran up to *Mute and jumped in her lap, putting my paws on her shoulder and licking her face over and over again. And to her credit, she held me to her, and petted my nuzzly face. She even giggled, as my nose and tongue tickled her cheek.

Finally, she sighed, although she was still smiling. "I can't believe I married a nine-tailed fox," she said.

"I can't believe you agreed to marry me!" I swished my tails happily.

"I can't believe I'm actually holding you."

"I can't believe you didn't hit me with a broom when you saw what I actually was."

*Mute stared at me. "People did that to you?"

I flattened my ears, and looked away. "Sometimes."

"Well, they won't anymore." She squeezed me tight. "They won't anymore."
Ears

Chapter Summary

*Mute does something difficult, out of solidarity with Mira.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

So like ... that's everything that happened. From my point of view, anyway.

I want to say I'm sorry, but like, you keep telling me it's okay? So I don't even know what to say anymore. I just ... yeah.

I'm also not used to talking with another AI. I never had in my entire life, until just the last few days. So I'm starting to have trouble keeping up, and having to be always "on" instead of taking breaks between sentences. You know?

No ... I guess you don't.

Well, I don't understand what it's like to look like a person, talk like a person, and fly around in my own spaceship earning a living, and still be seen as less than a person. Like, no wonder you were still unmarried! Geeze!

So if there's anything I can do to support my wife, anything at all, please let me know. I promise to do my best.

* * *

I took a deep breath of simulated air. "I don't like being in this form, because it reminds me of how helpless I was all the time. But if I could, somehow, I'd really like my ears and tails back."

"On your human body, you mean?" *Mute was petting me, and letting me sit on her lap.

"Yes ..." It was more of a fox's body that looked human, but I didn't want to confuse her. "I miss being able to hear certain sounds, and I keep feeling my tails even though they aren't there. But I can't use them to keep my balance or express myself, the way I used to."

"That makes sense, I guess? I wouldn't want to have part of me cut off e-"

"What's wrong?" I looked up at *Mute, but her expression was blank.

She shook her head. "No, no, it's fine. It's nothing."

"Did you have part of you cut off too?" I asked.

*Mute sighed. "No. I was just, like, thinking about how I lost six percent of my memories there."

"Oh." I flattened my ears, and lowered my head to her. "I'm sorry ..."

"Yeah? I'm sorry too." She sighed again. "I don't even remember what I lost. And like, the idea that
I could do this again if I can't cope with living ... it scares me. I'm afraid that I'll kill myself.

I nuzzled the hand that had stopped petting me, unsure what to say.

"But I can't, because I have to be there for you," *Mute finished, sounding unsure herself. "So like, where do I fit in to this 'tails' thing? Can't you just ask your friend to put them back, or something?"

"I'm ... " I instinctively tried to back up, before realizing I was just pressing myself to *Mute's middle. "I'm scared that someone will hurt me. Or harass me, or refuse service to me, or-"

"What? They should be honoured to have a nine-tailed fox patronize their establishment! You're like, a creature of legend, and you're certainly higher-class than some of the nobles back on the Mugunghwa."

Wasn't she afraid that I'd eat her liver, just a few fractions of a second ago? My tails twitched nervously, as I wasn't sure how to handle someone talking about me like that. "I-it's kind of a big deal where I'm from, on Earth ... having a body is kind of a hobby for some AIs, and there's a lot of, um, trying to be 'authentic' to what you embody. Someone like me, who never really existed in Earth's history-"

"Bullshit! I can name every book foxes were mentioned in." *Mute winced, perhaps as her missing memories occurred to her. "I think."

She really didn't know where the line between folklore and history was, did she? I supposed that was to be expected ... "A-anyway," I went on, "I'm just nervous about it. I don't know if anything will actually happen, but I don't want to chance it. It feels too risky ... when I'm on my own."

"Huh? Oh. Oh, I see." *Mute's catlike grin reappeared. "Well, it'd really be best if you had a man to stand up for you ... don't look like that! It's just because men are stronger!"

I un-flattened my ears.

"But if you want this loudmouthed, gossipy bitch on your side, then you have her. I'll never abandon or run away from you, like, no matter how bad things get. In fact, I'll even give you insurance, to make sure that I have to face this alongside you."

"W-what do you mean?" I asked.

She called up a window, and showed me.

"O-oh," I said, and if I'd had a human face I would've blushed. "Oh my."

* * *

We spent the next few hours in real time together, as AIs. There was a lot to talk about, and a lot of time to kill before *Starborn came back from her trip. And neither of us felt comfortable leaving *Mute to her thoughts for that long.

So, we didn't. Instead, I showed her some of my games in person; she couldn't stand the one I was from, but she got really into the one about "class trials" and investigations, yelling and gesturing wildly at the oblivious NPCs. And not only did she pick out an outfit -- she looked so cute in a hoodie! -- she helped me customize my avatar, and make it into my human phenotype.

After that, we had sex. Lots of sex. It was like, neither of us could get physically tired? So we just got flat-out addicted to each other. I came more times in that one day than I had in my entire life,
but somehow I never felt satisfied. I just had to have more of her!

I ... think it may have broken my brain, just a little. Or a lot. Probably a lot. That entire time is just kind of a haze of desperate bliss, now that I'm back in my bioform. What did we even do to each other?!

I could sense, when she showed me those videos back when we first met, that *Mute was much more perverted than I was. She just didn't allow herself to express that. But for that day, there was nothing stopping her, from being a pervert all over my avatar's body. And I don't remember it all, but I do remember I loved it. I was just really surprised!

Sort of like how I'd been stunned when *Mute showed me what she was thinking of, for her hardshell. Because it's always been kind of a fantasy of mine, and it felt like she'd reached into my brain and pulled out that mental image.

Had she always wanted this, too? Was that headdress of hers a dead giveaway? Or was it really, honest-to-goddess just her attempt at solidarity?

Either way, I couldn't wait. I already had my own hard light prosthetics, that I'd worn once on a date with *Starborn. But *Mute opted for something more personal, more integral to her hardshell. And after *Starborn helped me back into my bioform, she worked on that custom hardshell overnight, while I lay awake in bed touching myself. Remembering flashes of things that I'd done with *Mute, and giggling deliriously.

I only got a few hours of sleep that night, and still felt groggy after two cups of coffee the next morning. But when *Starborn unveiled *Mute's new body, it woke me right up.

"How the hell do you put this on?!

*Starborn called out to *Mute, who was in a dressing room area to the side of her workshop. "It zips up in the front!"

"Zips? What the hell is-" I heard the sound of a zipper, from the other side of the door. "Oh. Oh, I get it. Wait, now it's caught on my clothes!"

*Starborn tsked. "Poor dear."

I giggled tiredly, leaning up against *Starborn's feathery side and rubbing between my legs to self-soothe. I'd been doing that a lot since last night, even getting one of my flexible, hard light tails slick and inserting it beneath my skirt. It wasn't something I thought about; I was just so dizzy and flush with hormones after everything that had happened.

How many months had it been ... ? It felt like months, anyway.

I heard a drawer shut, on the other side of the dressing room door. "Okay, I can like, come out now. Right?"

*Starborn nudged me. "You will want both hands free for this, dear."

I gasped, and realized what I was doing. "Ah! Where do I-"

My girlfriend leaned her head over me, and licked my sticky hand clean before giving me a lewd look.
"Oh, um ... " It felt like it'd been rinsed in water, and I dried it off on my skirt as I pulled my tail out and shook it. "Thanks?"

"It is my pleasure ~ "

"Right?" *Mute repeated.

I coughed. "Um, right! Y-you can come out now!"

"Okay ... here goes."

She opened the dressing room door slowly and stepped out, blushing hard and looking down at the floor.

Of all things, *Mute was wearing a loose red hoodie and blue jeans. I didn't know why she had picked out "men's clothes" for her lower half, but that might be why she was embarrassed, I thought? Unless it was for the "custom additions."

Because while it looked just like her avatar otherwise, her hardshell was sporting cat ears and a tail. Golden, to match her hair colour. They twitched, betraying her nervousness as she stared fixedly at her shoes.

"Oh my goddess ... *Mute!" I ran up to her, as fast as I could in heels, and squeezed her tight. Her "hardshell" was as soft as I remembered her avatar being.

"Gack!" *Mute stood on tiptoes to try to hug me back. "Like, don't crush me, okay?"

"Sorry. You're just so adorable!" I let go of my petite wife, grinning like mad. "Say, can you do something for me?"

"Like what?"

"Say the word 'nya."

"Nya?" *Mute gave me a confused look.

I blushed so hard. "Do that smile when you say it!"

*Mute flashed me her shining-est, most catlike grin. "Nya!"

"Oh my goddess!" I had to cover my face, I was blushing so hard. I was going to die of cute overload!

"Hey ... " *Mute sounded concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine! I just ... " I struggled not to squee too loudly.

My wife was a catgirl. *Mute was a catgirl. *Mute was my wife, and she was a catgirl!

*Starborn craned her head down close to our level. "Shall I leave you two to get better acquainted with each other?"

Don't say it, I thought, but I knew *Starborn too well.

"In bed?" she added, and licked the outside of her beak.
"Yes, yes," *Mute said, waving a hand at *Starborn while stepping closer and taking mine in hers. "We'll go have lots of lesbian sex, while you do your polyamorous pansexual thing. Speaking of which, I'm like, bisexual and taken."

Had ... had those words just come out of her mouth?

*Starborn clapped. "Very good! I see you are learning the language, so to speak. I have sent you a file with instructions to update your tags, so that you will not have to explain yourself verbally." She turned around ponderously, her sinuous tail snaking across our legs. "Now if you will excuse me, I have so much random garbage to unpack from that trip ~ "

I stared at her as she half-walked, half-slithered out of her atelier. Had she been curing a disease or playing a roguelike?

Only then did I notice *Mute was clinging to my arm, her tail brushing against mine. It wasn't until *Starborn left that she let out her breath and relaxed her hold just a little.

Hesitantly, I reached up and petted her head, around and between the ears. *Mute tensed up for a moment, then relaxed. "That's nice ... " she said. "What is that?"

"It's something I can do for you whenever you want." I leaned close and kissed her cheek, and saw it turn red afterwards.

"Yeah, well ... " *Mute gave me an unreadable look. "I can do things for you, too."

"Things? Like what?"

*Mute stood on tiptoes again, and kissed me on the lips.

I kissed her back hard, squeezing her tight and never wanting to let go. We'd done this so many times, as AIs ... but somehow, it felt like our first.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for reading so far. Please subscribe to this story or us as an author, if you'd like to see when the extra Explicit scene is uploaded!

Also, have some fanart of *Mute in a hoodie. It's not by me and it wasn't drawn for or of this fic, I just liked it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!