

Ju'i cringed, her brown ears falling low as the recording began to play. A hundred overlapping conversations quickly tapered and went silent as everyone in the crowded ballroom listened, hanging on every word. Surely, they had all heard the tape a hundred times before, but still ... every ambassador, every translator, every waitress and security agent paused, listening to each desperate sob, each whispered prayer.

Ju'i hated this recording more than anything else in the galaxy. She hated how her voice sounded, how it captured her at the lowest moment in her life. But of course, despite how it reminded her of that awful day, for everyone else present, the day had been the start of a new era—the start of something so life changing...

"Please..." begged Ju'i's voice between sobs, "if you can hear me, please help. You've just... You gotta help us. There's ten thousand people here on board. Commissioner Sarsuk's shuttle has crashed into the gate. It's... It's totally destroyed. He's... He's probably dead, but now we're running on battery power."

Every head lowered. Every eye closed as the dignitaries listened. Ju'i was crying so hard that there weren't even any words on this part of the tape—just frightened sobs that seemed to last forever as she tried to regain her self-control.

"Oh, grandfathers please. Please ... if you can hear me. We have *ten thousand* on board: officers ... crew ... even little cubs. We have power to last a short while, but not long enough,,,"

Ju'i sighed in relief as the recording ended. Oh, many minutes of it continued—hours, really—but that first part, the part before anyone on the planet below had keyed up a transmitter and replied to her that had made history.

With a casual meter-and-a-half hop, Ambassador Jakari leapt up onto the empty dais. Ju'i excused herself, pushing between people so that she could leap up after her.

Jakari stood to one side of the podium, a flute of champagne in one paw, ears as wide and happy as they'd ever been. "And I'd like to thank each and every one of you," said Jakari in the geroo language. Ju'i stepped behind the microphone at the podium and dutifully translated the words into English. "For each of you ... for everyone to set aside your differences, to stop fighting for ... for perhaps the first time in your history, so that you could all come together, to work together, to help us."

The fluffy white geroo sniffled and dabbed at a tear. "Thank you," she said, and Ju'i translated. "For however long it might last... I propose a toast to peace!" She lifted her glass, and a hundred voices echoed her words in dozens of different languages.

The world was at peace for the moment. No one expected it to last, but to everyone's amazement, even Jordan and Israel had pulled back—though their armies remained massed at the border.

After a sip, Jakari raised her glass once more. “And I toast you humans, specifically. Only you would be crazy enough to bring fissile material up to us, to use the rocket you had hoped would carry you to the moon for the first time, to help us build a fission reactor... We love you all!”

The ambassador from the USSR—he wisely rushed up the stairs to the podium instead of trying to leap up—shouted his own toast over the crowded room, “And here’s to the geroo! The only people crazy enough to bleed off all that waste heat by lowering a thread of thermal superconductor out a window so that the earth’s upper atmosphere could keep them from roasting to death!”

A laugh and a cheer went up from everyone. Ju’i smiled, content to stand by without the focus being on her any longer.

The geroo solution to the heat problem endlessly amused the earthlings. To her people, it hadn’t been that big a deal, but then again, they had modern computers. It wasn’t all that difficult for them to program an orbit just at the atmosphere’s edge. If the humans had needed to do such a thing, they’d have their test pilots try to do it manually—not too high where there wasn’t enough air to suck away the heat, not too low where the friction would actually heat the ship more rather than cool it off.

Eventually, she and Jakari hopped back down from the dais and into an exuberant crowd that felt more compressed than any rush hour walk to work had ever been back aboard the *White Flower II*. Ju’i tried to translate, but everyone was drinking hard, talking over one another, and so few of the words were even in English—the only Earth language she knew. This didn’t seem to bother anyone but her. Jakari was laughing, drinking, and speaking with the ambassador to Nigeria as if they both understood what the other was saying.

“You look very tired,” said a voice from behind her in strongly accented but clear English. Ju’i turned toward the ambassador. The nametag on his jacket read Yukio, Japan and also some characters she didn’t recognize. Ju’i turned back toward Jakari to translate, but by then, so many humans had inserted themselves between her and her boss that there was no way Jakari would hear her.

She turned back to Ambassador Yukio to apologize for not being able to deliver his words, but he was quick to apologize as well, “No, I mean you, Ju’i. You look very tired.”

She lowered her ears and eyes. “I don’t like hearing the recording of our first contact,” she explained. “I don’t like remembering that day. Everyone around me, all the officers, they all kept calm trying to deal with the crisis, but I just fell apart. I couldn’t stop crying. They had to wait for me to get a hold of myself, just to translate their message to you.”

“I understand,” said the human, “but on the other hand, it’s possible that your tears, your desperation, was *why* everyone set aside their differences and worked together to save you. Had you remained calm and cool, I think everyone would have still helped, but I doubt the help would have come soon enough to save your crew.”

“Perhaps,” whispered Ju’i, her eyes lowered, her voice lost in the din.

There was a momentary pause as a worker with a silver tray squeezed by them. The ambassador snatched a champagne flute from the tray and offered it to the geroo. “This is the time for celebration! Not a time to be sad,” he said.

She raised her paws, declining the drink with both palms. “No, no, no. I’m not allowed.”

“What?” he said in surprise. “Ambassador Jakari doesn’t allow you to drink?”

“No, it’s not that,” laughed Ju’i, reflexively her belly with a paw. Then, she lowered her voice and cupped the other paw around her muzzle before explaining, “I’m pregnant.”

His eyes opened wide, and he opened his mouth to shout, “You’re pregnant?” or something like humans always do, but she covered his lips with her pads, shushing him.

“Are you keeping this a secret?” he asked, his eyebrows doing something odd, his forehead scrunching. “This is something to celebrate, not hide away!”

“It is!” she agreed with a nod. “My mate and I celebrate it every day. We celebrate our good fortune, but today is a day for celebrating our people working together. My new family’s happiness shouldn’t be the focus.”

With a nod, Ambassador Yukio signaled that he understood.

He chuckled to himself and shook his head. “I keep forgetting the two of you are female,” he said quietly.

To Ju’i, this seemed like the most ridiculous thing to say. Her and Jakari were the only people present whose bodies *weren’t* covered in clothing! Only now, months after first contact had she felt comfortable differentiating human males from human females. Most adults were easy to tell apart, though their cubs were far trickier.

But in a way, she understood. All the other ambassadors were male, all the government leaders, the engineers, the astronauts, the security agents, everyone they ever interacted with—males, every last one of them. In fact, apart from the geroo, the only other females in the ballroom were serving trays of drinks and canapés.

The geroo snapped her fingers. “Japan! I read about that country.”

His face lit up in a creepy, human way—his flat teeth showing and eyes squinting closed as if preparing to attack. She backed off slightly, but he asked, “Yes? What did you read?”

She stepped closer once more. “It was about things to see and try if one was ever in Japan.”

“Yes?”

“Um...” she said, trying to remember. “Sushi, sake, and cherry blossoms?”

“Yes!” said the ambassador, grinning even harder. “Those are three of the many wonderful things about my country. In fact, I would very much love for you and your husband to come and see Japan someday.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Ju’i. “I’m really not in a position to set Ambassador Jakari’s itinerary—”

“No, no,” he said, shaking his head. “As much as I would love to gain favor with the ambassador, I just mean you. You should come and take a vacation to Japan. Allow me to show you our hospitality.”

“A ... vacation?”

“Yes... Where you go somewhere beautiful and see the sights?”

Ju’i stared at the human for a very long time before her ears finally lifted into a smile. “That sounds ... nice. I’d like that.”