

Rrsh'Dhana's Diary

by

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Part 1

Quick note...

The dates are year/week/day, where the week is eight days, and numbering starts on 1. The year is usually 341 days, but they add an extra day every few years. If the first day of the year isn't the first of the week, they write a 0 in the week and continue the numbering of the days. No, there are no 'months' ... It would be most unusual for Rrsh'Dhana's people to have a calendar based on lunar cycles since their homeworld has two smaller moons with fast orbits. (approx. 15 and 18 days respectively) They use an octal number system, due to their '3-fingers-plus-thumb' hands, but for your convenience, all numbers have been translated to base 10.

The Winding trail. It's an ancient tradition among Rrsh'Dhana's people. It's not exactly a 'coming of age' ritual even though it's mostly young adults who experience it. It is a journey, both spiritual and physical, that they undertake to find their purpose in life. When they start out they're not allowed to bring more than they can comfortably carry (a remnant from ancient times when they roamed the steppes and forests), and the journey ends if they set foot on home ground. The trail is always begun alone, but is not always ended that way. In more recent times the customs have changed somewhat. Even if a credit disk is easy to carry, it shouldn't contain more than enough to buy food for maybe two eight-days when they set out. And for those who travel among the stars, the orbital station above the planet is considered home ground.

2374.13.2

Dad's IMPOSSIBLE! I'm not his little cub anymore! I'm an adult, I have my shuttle license, so why won't he let me start working as a pilot?

2374.14.6

Rehh'Sharan came by again. Why can't he understand that I don't want him as my mate? I don't care that he's from a very prestigious clan. I'd really like to skin that black-furred blob of lard with my claws, but the deviant would probably enjoy it.

2374.17.4

I did it! Dad is away on a business trip, and I used the opportunity to slip away. I'm writing this in my cabin on a spaceship heading for another star system. With my shuttle license I shouldn't have any problems getting a job there. I wish that I could have brought more than a few changes of clothes, my brushes, a few trinkets and my diary, but then again, that's the winding trail.

2374.19.5

Daddy should be back home now and has probably found my message. He'll be furious, but it's my right to follow the winding trail. I talked with the captain -- an imposing Mhargh -- today. After I explained my situation he promised not to reveal my passage to Daddy. I just know that he'll try to find me.

2374.23.2

Today we arrived at the Ph'Thak'Zhaa system. Tomorrow I'll go looking for work to pay my way onwards, but today is for sightseeing.

2374.23.2

What can I say? If you've seen one orbital, you've seen them all. It's bigger than the one back home, but it's still only a few wheels connected to a central hub. Every station is built that way. Who wants to spend all those credits on gravity systems when you can just spin the thing? There's a zero gravity gymnasium in the hub and a few extended-gravity ones in the outermost ring of the counter-rotating middle wheel. The gyms are all open free of charge to

Part 1

permanent and semi-permanent personnel. I'll try them out later. There's a large garden in the middle ring of the wheel I'm staying in. It was quite nice to walk there, smelling the plants and listening to the small animals after spending all that time on the ship. The shops on the parade walk look nice; beautiful bracelets, stunning clothes and enticing smells. I'll have to stay away from there if my credits are to last.

2374.23.4

How can anyone get enough experience as a shuttle pilot to get work if no one wants to hire an inexperienced pilot? There are several positions open, but the agents only ask for previous experience.

2374.23.6

How the mighty have fallen! Today I got a job serving food at a small café in the outer ring. The pay isn't much, but I get three meals a day there.

2374.28.1

A couple of Rrhhzx-prtha -- How do you pronounce that? -- came by the café today. I didn't even know that we served food that they could eat, but the chef recognised them instantly and helped me rig the transparent film around one of the booths and flood it with a mixture of gases that would kill me in moments, but which they breathe. They're nice folks when you get to know them, though. The chef later told me that they usually stay in the counter-rotating wheel -- that's where the special quarters are -- but that they usually come by to eat a meal in the café every time they docked. Not because of the food but because they like to associate with other species, and here in the café they can do it without enviro-suits.

2374.39.3

Finally! A mining operation needed someone to take the supply-run to one of the outer planets. It's only until the ordinary pilot returns from the hospital, but still, it pays better than the café.

2374.40.5

Back from the trip. Seven long days. Three out, one to offload and three days back. I should probably write about the trip, but what is there to say? Flying a shuttle between planets is boring, and with both launch and docking automated, the pilot is not much more than a glorified passenger. Maybe the café isn't so bad after all.

2375.0.6

A new year, new opportunities. There was an opening on a freighter, not as shuttle-pilot, but as cook. The freighter, like most of its kind, is a long central column with struts along the entire length that the cargo is attached to, with crew space somewhere in the middle. My room is located next to the galley so that I won't disturb anyone when I get up to prepare breakfast for the early shift.

2375.2.4

I'm settling in on the *Sssiss'Phissll*. No, I have no idea what the name means. The crew is strange, but nice. The captain is from a reptilian race I've never heard of before, and the rest are ... a mixed collection from the reaches of known space. The comms and computer operator is a KzhThak'Zzha, a large insect! I didn't know that they ever left their home world. Cooking for such a diverse crew is an experience to say the least. There are carnivores, vegetarians, a scavenger and I'm not certain that I want to know what the KzhThak'Zzha eats. At least I'm getting better at preparing the food. The first few meals weren't exactly something to be proud of.

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2375.3.6

Yesterday evening, Masmah, a large Mhargh, more than three times my weight, approached me with an offer to let me share her bed at night. She explained that her people have the same instinctual aversion to sleeping alone that we do. I hate to admit it, but it felt wonderful waking up next to her this morning, even if she's so different from me; long, shaggy, black and white fur, short limbs, stumpy tail and small round ears. She smells strongly, kind of musky, but nice.

2375.4.5

Today I managed to talk the captain into letting me practice with the shuttle in simulation mode. I didn't get in more than an hour, but I think that I know the controls well enough to fly it if needed. I would have preferred more, but we're nearing an area in hyperspace that's more turbulent, and the ship's computer won't have capacity for both tasks.

2375.7.3

We're docked on a small moon. Most of the crew left in a shuttle, heading for a few days of relaxation. That leaves only the captain, Masmah (who's the supercargo) comms and me. I spent most of the day exploring the commercial part of the complex, but only bought a new set of claw-files.

2375.7.4

I spent the day with *Zz'Khkt'za*, helping it to collect spares for the computer. Yes, it's an *it*. It told me so, explaining that it won't get a gender until its next stage in life. It didn't need my help carrying anything, but more as bodyguard in case someone mistook it for a pest. I've never seen a 'pest' that's half as tall as I and carrying all kinds of tools strapped on its limbs.

2375.7.5

Today, Masmah and I started to resupply the ship. Or, at least that's the excuse we used to go shopping since most of the goods had been ordered already. We had fun though. She knew about a few shops that I didn't find the day before yesterday. And one of those places sold *Mh'Tok* berries! I miss Mother's garden with all the walkways, small ponds and the *Mh'Tok* bushes in the middle.

2375.8.4

We're under way again, and this time we have passengers, a pair of *Zixmathi* priests. I don't know why, but they make me uneasy. It's not just their four arms and bare, leathery skin, not even their attempts to convert me to their faith. Maybe it's their condescending behaviour, or their disapproval of *Zz'Khkt'za*. Masmah is continuously fluffing and smoothing her fur when they are near, and several of the crew stay in their quarters when they're off-duty.

2375.11.6

Today the *Zixmathi* priests finally debarked. I can almost feel the relief of the crew.

2375.23.2

It's a long time since I last wrote something, but until now there's not been that much to write about. Today the captain told me that three stops from now, this ship will bring me to my home world. Now I need to decide what to do. My winding trail ends if I'm still aboard when the ship docks at the orbital. Am I ready for that? Or should I leave the ship on another stop? I've started listening to language tapes for our next destination, just in case.

Part 1

2375.25.5

We arrived at the Wrragh'Wí system late this evening. There's something going on here; there are too many military ships in orbit and docked at the orbiting station.

2375.25.6

What a day! I found out why there were so many warships here. They're at war with a savage race. I watched a video recording made from an orbiting ship. It showed the first-contact ship being shot down and destroyed by strange looking fighters. The screams coming over the radio link were horrible! I'll write more later. I only have a few minutes before I get fitted with a space suit, and I must call the captain to tell him where to send my things.

2375.25.7

I didn't get time to write more yesterday. I'm now on a military carrier that's about to jump to hyperspace. They must be short on fighter pilots because they launched as soon as I was aboard. I tried the simulator yesterday and scored higher than many of their own pilots. Not that I'm surprised; the fighter is quite easy to manoeuvre and, besides, daddy's shuttle is almost as fast. The space suit they gave me is quite awkward. I mean, some of the part designs are obsolete everywhere else. The boots are much too big, and I had to use several extra insoles to make them fit. I talked to my freighter's captain yesterday. He was disappointed that I enlisted, but he did send my things over.

2375.26.3

After simulator practice today I got my first lesson on using a plasma-rifle. Where did they get them? The design is OLD! Nobody uses that crystal configuration anymore. It's also bulky; nothing like the hunting rifles back home.

2375.26.6

I began learning the enemy's language today. It's strange. The sounds or the words themselves aren't the problem, but the sentence structure is. They seem to be using comparisons with unrelated items to describe situations or actions, and sometimes the words actually seem to have the opposite meaning. How can you expect a race to act rationally when their language is so irrational?

2375.27.2

Today one of the officers decided that he wanted to become friendlier towards me, but he quickly decided against it when my claws cut straight through his uniform, his fur and into his skin. Yes, I prefer to share a bed with someone, but he wanted to do more than just sleep. I'm NOT into cross-species mating!

2375.28.5

Today the officers assigned us to individual fighters. Because I'm one of the best, they had to assign me to one. It's old and battered but it's mine. Unlike those with the newest, who have to share fighters with a backup pilot, I have it to myself. We also got our survival packs and individual rifles for use if we have to abandon our ships. All of the equipment looks obsolete to me, but the other pilots claim that it's the latest models. I spent most of the evening trying to reset the food sampler to fit me since I have a broader tolerance than the Wrragh'Wí.

2375.29.4

We exited hyperspace earlier today and are now in orbit above a deceptively beautiful blue planet. There's a whole armada in orbit, and that worries me somewhat. The Wrragh'Wí have had so many ships here for two years, and still haven't won, and that against a race that's using fighters with chemical reaction engines instead of magnetic impeller

Part 1

drives. The enemy doesn't even have gravitic compensators to help them turn. And why is our armada in such a high orbit?

2375.29.7

Now I know why the ships are so high up. Earlier today we watched as chemically powered rockets (!) launched from the ground and headed straight towards one of the carriers. Only one of the rockets was on target, and that was destroyed by plasma blasts before it could do any damage. The rest of the rockets missed altogether. According to the briefing we got afterwards, the enemy began launching these rockets some time ago, and because plasma bursts tend to deflect when they hit atmosphere they need to keep this altitude. The rockets are designed to explode at some distance and hurl fragments at high velocity towards a ship. In the beginning, before we moved our ships, we didn't always manage to destroy the rockets before they got into range. Consequently, we lost several ships, either destroyed outright or seriously damaged.

2375.30.3

I spent the day launching from and returning to the carrier. It's boring, but it IS flying, so I mustn't grumble. At least I got to fly down to the upper atmosphere a few times to get to know how the craft handles. Afterwards I got one of the technicians to modify the controls to better suit me. After all, no one else is supposed to fly MY fighter.

2375.31.2

Today I got my first actual mission. I can't write too much about it -- secrecy, you know -- but it's a simple recon mission. They don't expect me to actually find anything, but then again, I might get lucky. Several of the other pilots got similar missions, too. The real objective is to see how well we handle the craft and fulfil our orders, or at least that's the consensus among the pilots. Anyway, we launch early tomorrow, so now I must check my gear.

2375.31.3

Well, now I'm on my way. We launched from the carrier about a quarter of an hour ago. It's quite difficult to write this with my gloves on, but I can't risk removing them. I shouldn't have brought my diary in the first place, but I didn't dare leave it behind. Besides, it's not as if someone down there would be able to read it if they got hold of it. I'll write more when I'm back on the carrier.

2375.31.3

As I write this it's almost dark outside, and I'm on a boat somewhere on the blue planet's surface. I don't know how long it'll be until my captor finds this diary, but I'll try to update it as often as possible until then. Daddy knows my keyword, so he can read it if it ever gets back to him. What happened? I was scanning a valley, searching for signs of recent activity when I was shot down by a single projectile from a crude-looking rifle. A single METAL projectile hit the magnetic impellers, and that was it. My captor, a male Earthling who calls himself Anthony, is strange. After examining my weapon he made no attempt to search me for hidden weapons; only told me to follow him. He didn't even bother to keep watch over me, apparently assuming that I would simply obey him. Not that I had any choice; it's impossible to run in a space suit, nor did I have any place to run to. And now I'm in a cabin on his boat, supposedly only to get out of my suit and into other clothes.

2375.31.4

I don't know what to believe anymore! It's early morning, and my captor has just gone to his cabin to sleep, leaving me to roam the boat at will. I'm an enemy; why doesn't he at least lock me in my cabin? What else happened last night? Right after my last entry I went to the large room aft in the boat to find that my captor was busy making dinner. He seemed surprised to discover that I'm female. I, too, got a surprise, but much nastier. The food sampler is broken! I have only Anthony's assurances that the food isn't dangerous to me. The rest of the emergency equipment

Part 1

was also ruined. All but one of the ration packages had been hollowed out, and the rest --- also ruined one way or another. Anthony came up with some startling claims; that the Wrragh'Wí diplomats were shot down while trying to steal gold, and that they killed more than a hundred million humans during the initial bombardment. It's hard to believe, but my allies destroy my equipment, and my enemy -- well, he acts friendlier, in a not-caring sort of way, than anyone I've met since I left the freighter.

2375.31.4

Something strange happened a few minutes after I finished the last entry. I heard mumbled, broken screams from Anthony's cabin. It sounded as if he was crying out a name. I tried the door to his cabin, fully expecting it to be locked, but it opened almost silently. When I looked in he seemed asleep, but I can't be certain since I know almost nothing about his people. Since he had calmed down I closed the door again and went back to my cabin to think. Later I went to the rear of the boat and poured myself a cup of something he calls 'tea'. It's some sort of brewed extract made from plant leaves, and it's quite good. Daddy would probably try to get an exclusive contract to sell it, but then he always thinks about the company first. With nothing else to do I started examining the room. On one wall was the rifle he used to shoot down my fighter, securely locked in metal brackets. There was also a picture, about a handspan wide and one and a half high, showing Anthony and a female (?) standing together. At least I think it's him, but he's thinner now and his eyes look different. Almost as if something is missing in them. If that's a female with him, I wonder who she is?

2375.31.5

Today, or rather this night -- since Anthony sails at night and sleeps during the day -- he started the interrogation. No, he didn't use chemicals, force or even the threat of using them; rather, it was more like a friendly conversation where he mostly listened. What's strange is that he didn't ask about the Wrragh'Wí military forces. No, he was interested in *me*, where I came from and what I've done. Why? He also used some sort of lamp -- or at least he called it a lamp -- earlier in the night. I don't know of any lamp that looks like a long tube, and can't imagine what it's for. All I know is that it made a rapid, clicking sound.

2375.31.8

Now I know what the lamp is for. It's a signalling device, using short and long flashes of light to convey a message. How do I know? Tonight he received a message with information about my people, information that they must have gotten from other prisoners, or possibly even from computers of the ships they shot down early in the war. He claims that the humans' computers are many times more powerful than even the navigational computer on a large battleship.

2375.32.3

I'm scared. Something happened earlier tonight. We're anchored in a small bay, and first I thought it was because he was planning to send another message; but no. He asked me to come up on deck with him; there was something he wanted me to see. We watched as some sort of rocket launched from somewhere over the horizon. At first I thought it was one of those rockets that they've been launching to harass the ships in orbit, but then he told me that this one had a nuclear warhead. These people have NUCLEAR weapons! But that's not what's scaring me. No, it's a single statement he made -- he called it 'the end of the war, and possibly the end of a civilization'. THAT, and the emotionless way he said it, scares me.

2375.32.4

Tonight I found out what he meant by 'the end of the war'. They didn't launch just one, but hundreds of those rockets last night. Since very few, if any, were aimed at the orbiting ships, most were allowed to rise unhindered. Then they all exploded. The Earthlings didn't use the shockwave or debris from the explosions to destroy the ships in orbit. Instead, the electromagnetic pulses from the nuclear explosions destroyed the electronics onboard the ships, effectively dooming them. I watched in horror as a ship entered the atmosphere, only to break apart and burn, killing

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its crew. And Anthony KNEW what was happening! He helped kill those thousands of soldiers up there. A whole armada destroyed in a moment. But what's scarier is that it can't be over yet. I know that, and I could see that Anthony knew it, too. When he went to bed a few minutes ago he looked as if he was carrying a burden as heavy as the world. Did I just write that? 'A burden as heavy as the world'? I've started to use those illogical Human sentences myself, and what's worse, they actually make sense.

2375.32.4

Only a few minutes after I finished my last entry I heard Anthony's screams again. I peeked into his cabin, expecting him to stop as soon as I touched the door, as it seems he always does, but not this time. He was still crying, and this time I managed to understand a few of the words. One sounded like 'Marita', the name written -- with strangely uneven, almost illegible letters -- on the picture I noticed earlier. Other words like 'burning', 'dying', shouts that sounded like orders for fighting but unfamiliar; 'angrip', 'hold stillinga', all mixed in between sobs. He didn't stop before I placed my hand on his, and he started again as soon as I removed my hand. What has he experienced that makes him never sleep without crying? I must have fallen asleep for the next thing I remember is resting with my head on his chest and his hand caressing my muzzle. It felt strange but good. I'm scared again, but now for a different reason. I want to feel his strange, furless, five-fingered hands touch me again.

2375.32.4

Neither of us has said anything about what happened this morning, but I'm getting worried about him. He's walking about as if he's not really aware of anything. Of course I can worry about him, can't I? I'm totally dependent on him since I can't sail this boat. And even if I were to abandon the boat, where could I go? We're still anchored in the small bay. Not that it matters. I have no idea where on the planet we are.

2375.32.5

It's morning, and yesterday evening was a repeat of the one before. He was screaming and crying again, not stopping until I touched him. What was different this time was that I deliberately lay down beside him. It felt so good to sleep next to someone again. And yes, he again woke me with gentle caresses. Why did he stop as soon as he felt me waking up? Why don't I want him to stop? Why doesn't either of us speak about it?

2375.34.6

I'm worried. We both still pretend that nothing happens at night, or in the morning. But that's not the main reason I'm worried. Today he switched on some sort of device -- a radio, I think -- and now he sits there listening for something. He doesn't seem to care about anything anymore. I've been preparing breakfast for almost two eight-days now, but today I also had to prepare the dinner. Luckily, I've been watching how he does it, and my experience as a cook on the freighter also helps.

2375.35.3

Today we ran out of drinking water. I managed to rouse Anthony long enough for him to do something about it, though. He launched a small boat that he had stowed on deck, and he rowed ashore with a few large cans that he filled at a spring.

2375.35.5

We're still short on water, but instead of trying to rouse Anthony, I decided to go myself. The small boat looked so easy to handle when Anthony did it, but I discovered that looks can be deceiving. I followed the stream for a while to make certain that it wasn't polluted. It wasn't, but I found something else: A garden, obviously abandoned. The houses nearby were destroyed, and there was no sign of anyone having been there for a long time. I recognised the

Part 1

fruits on one tree and even some vegetables that Anthony had been using for food. I spotted some animals, too, but I didn't try to capture any of them.

2375.36.3

Today we heard a message on the radio: 'The Phoenix has risen.' Anthony explained it to me. They launched their own ship against the Wrragh'Wí homeworld. Once there it delivered a barrage of nuclear warheads, which exploded above the planet. Now, to my horror, I know the full meaning of that sentence; 'The end of the war, and possibly the end of a civilization'. In a single attack the humans not only destroyed the remaining Wrragh'Wí warships, but also every civilian ship, orbital facility and probably most of their technological infrastructure. Then the ship returned here, using no more time on the entire mission than a fast scout would use one way. After explaining the message to me, Anthony went to bed again, and now I think I'll go myself. I can hear him crying already, and I know he needs me.

2375.36.4

Earthlings have thin, furless skin. They also have very gentle hands. Maybe it's not so bad after all, being stranded on this planet. Anthony is up on deck, steering the boat and looking much more alive than he has in many eight-days. I think we're going in a different direction than before, but I'm not certain. As long as he's out of his lethargic state I'm happy.

2375.37.5

The ship's in a harbour and Anthony is ashore somewhere. He told me to stay below decks, so I'm staying in our cabin, brushing my fur and writing in my diary. I did notice that the picture that he had in the rear cabin is gone, though. I'm not certain if that's a good sign or not. A few people have called out Anthony's name, but since he told me not to reply, I haven't, even though I'm curious about what they could tell me about him. I also heard some of them talking together, but I didn't understand a single word.

2375.37.6

Anthony returned late last night with fresh supplies, but without the picture. I could also smell tears on his face -- I don't think he understands how sensitive my sense of smell is -- and when I asked him about it he said that he 'had to lay some ghosts to rest'. It makes no sense to me, but today he seems happier, so I'm not complaining. We're also sailing again, this time heading south, I think.

Part 2

2375.39.4

I haven't written anything these last two eight-days, not because there's not been anything to write, but because I didn't know how to write it. I still don't know, but I can't keep putting it off any longer. Tomorrow we'll be arriving at our destination, a small town with a large port, so this may be the last night I spend with my lover. Yes, lover. He's lying beside me right now, sleeping. When I first crept into his bed it was to fulfil needs, his need for compassion and my need for ... what? Someone to cuddle up to? But now? Now it's for something else. Now it's for love. There! Now I've written it. I love him, and I think he loves me.

2375.39.5

It's early morning still, Anthony is up on deck, and I'm about to prepare breakfast. In another hour or two we may be separated, and it scares me. I want to climb up on deck and tell him to turn the ship around, to sail as far away as possible, but I know that we cannot.

2375.39.5

It's evening, and we're still together. In fact he's brushing my back right now as I'm writing this. What happened today? I'm not certain about it all myself. Nothing happened as the ship sailed into the harbour. We were finishing up breakfast when a man came to call on us. I fully expected to be chained and brought to a prison camp, but the man, Major Thomas Hinchley, took me to his office for questioning. No, he didn't ask me about the Wrragh'Wí, or 'wolves' as they call them here. Rather, he served tea and cookies and began asking me about interstellar politics. Now I wish that I had listened more to what Daddy was always talking about. He also told me that they had another name for Anthony around here. 'The Iceman' they call him. But there's no ice in the hands that even now caress my tail, imploring me to put my diary away...

2375.39.6

Something happened yesterday that I didn't write about last night. After Anthony picked me up at the major's office we stopped at a café to eat. No, it wasn't that all the soldiers there were staring at me -- which they did -- it was one of the soldiers. A big obnoxious brute came over to our booth and tried to start a fight with Anthony. Anthony was sitting down, behind a table and at a distinct disadvantage, but still two other soldiers held the brute back, fearing for his life, not Anthony's. Can one man's reputation be that awe-inspiring? And what has he done to deserve it?

2375.39.8

Today the major took me to one of their hospitals, supposedly to get a medical profile. I'm still confused about what I saw there. They made me lie down on a bench that then slid through a machine. At the same time a screen showed my body, bones, muscles, fat, everything, all in different colours to easier show details. It was incredible! Not only did it reveal scar tissue and mended bone in my leg from when I crashed the flier, but it also revealed that I once sprained my hand. No one knew that, not even Daddy. Our own doctors would gladly trade their tails for a machine like that! In another room I witnessed a man being fitted with a crude mechanical arm. How can they have such disparity in technology?

2375.40.3

What a day! Instead of another day talking with the major, Anthony took me to a clothes store. Somehow he had managed to get the authorities to pay for new clothes for me. The storekeeper was nice, after she got over the surprise of seeing me in her store, that is. Afterwards we went to the café to eat again. The only thing that could have spoiled the day for me was the same brute that accosted us that first day here. It must be true though, what the humans say here; 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall', for he made quite a lot of noise when I kicked him across the street. Now? Now I'm waiting for Anthony to give me the backrub that he promised me...

Part 2

2375.41.1

When Anthony walked me back to the boat today we met Sarah (the storekeeper) and she invited me to a party that she'll be holding later this evening. She called it a 'baby shower'. I'm either missing something here, or the translator that made the learning tapes messed up. Anthony of course, refused to explain.

2375.41.2

Last night was fun. I found out what 'baby shower' meant; that they 'shower' a female that's recently become a mother with gifts. No, they don't drop them on her. It's yet another of those strange phenomena in their language. Anthony, knowing what it was, gave me an envelope to give to the young mother. It was a 'gift certificate'. As I'm led to understand, it's almost like credits, but can only be used in one store. I got to see the child, a small boy, when the mother fed him. He looked ... wrinkled and entirely without teeth. The others assured me that it's normal, though. The food was wonderful, a cake with a soft white covering, 'cream' I think it was called, fruit salads and fizzy drinks. They assured me that the drinks didn't contain alcohol so I tried them. The bubbles tickled my nose so much that I had to sneeze. Then they gave me something they called 'chocolate'. I'm not certain what it was, but it tasted great! It also made me feel, not dizzy exactly, but strange in a pleasant way.

2376.0.8

A new year begins. It is now more than a year and a half since I left on what I thought to be the winding trail, but which I've later realised was a trip to spite my father. I kind of miss his overbearing behaviour now, because, no matter what he was doing or where, he always managed to celebrate the passing with the family. I don't know who -- I've only told the major -- but someone told Anthony that my people exchange gifts on this day. He gave me a silver bracelet, but I don't think he knows what it means when a male of my people gives a female a bracelet.

2376.1.2

The pilots from a nearby airfield invited me over today. They had a small surprise for me, they said. If what they did was a 'small surprise' I'd hate to see what they call a big surprise. They fitted me, as best they could, with a very closefitting and uncomfortable suit -- it's supposed to be like that they told me -- then dumped me into the rear seat of one of their fighters. The noise when it took off was deafening, even through the helmet and ear-protectors, and that was the pleasant part. Right after takeoff the fighter started climbing vertically, and even managed to accelerate! Then the pilot took a few rolls and a loop. Not a pleasant experience without gravity compensators, I almost blacked out once. Then came the real surprise; the pilot told me to go ahead and take the controls. It was ... exhilarating having all that power under my control. Afterwards, the pilots explained that the suit -- it's supposed to force blood away from the legs and body cavities and up to the head -- together with special breathing techniques, and extremely reclined seats, allows them to withstand forces of up to seven (!) times the local gravity. No wonder they managed to hold their own against Fang fighters. They also gave me a patch with the squadron's symbols to sew onto a jacket or flight-suit. I somehow qualified as an honorary member by not throwing up during flight.

2376.1.6

It's VERY early morning, and Anthony and I have just returned to the boat. A few hours ago Henri (the major's aide) woke Anthony and me with news that there was a ship in orbit, and that I was urgently needed. The ship was Dad's, or to be more precise, the company's fast courier. His ship is descending towards a nearby airfield even as I write this. What will happen? Is he very angry with me?

2376.1.6

It's evening and I'm still angry with Dad. He had to ask Anthony about the war even when he didn't want to talk about it. I wish I knew where Anthony is, but nobody knows where he went. The police said they found the car he took midway between the airfield and town, but there all trace ends.

Part 2

2376.1.6

Henri drove Daddy and me into town a while ago so that I could gather my things. It felt strange, walking around in the ship. So quiet, almost as if the ship was angry for something and wasn't speaking to me. Now I'm doing it again, using those weird human expressions. It'll be strange, sleeping alone again. A bonded couple here on the ship offered to let me share their bed, but I didn't feel like it.

2376.1.7

I met Anthony again today and I managed to give him a last hug before we left. I don't think Daddy really understands how I feel about him. I met Sarah again too, and she gave me something; a large box of chocolate, and a stern message to return as soon as possible. When we got back to the ship there were four humans waiting for us, three male and a female. Three of them are supposed to study our technology and make the necessary adaptations to fit their computers on our ships. The fourth, a short, scrawny male by the name of Roger Thompson, is a physics professor. He's supposed to learn more about hyperspace technology and navigation. It seems that they don't really know how it works yet, and still they managed to send a ship to the Wrragh'Wí homeworld and back. What they did, as he told me, was to take apart the computer from one of the Wrragh'Wí ships, examine how it worked and built a computer that did the same, only faster.

2376.2.5

Tonight we almost had a disaster aboard. No, there's nothing wrong with the ship, but we almost lost the professor. It seems that he never read the booklet that the major had compiled, and when Sehh'Remma -- a female bodyguard almost as big as Daddy -- snuck into his cabin last night he misunderstood. Luckily she only made a few, deep scratches before he let go with his hands. Because neither speaks the other's language I had to explain, first to him about our people's aversion to sleeping alone, and then to her about the human's interpretation of what it means when a female enters a male's room at night. I think they cleared it up between them though, because this morning they came out of his cabin together, she with a silly grin on her face, and him with a few scratches that weren't there last night.

2376.6.3

Home at last! Or am I? The humans have an expression; 'Home is where your heart is'. It sounds strange, but now I'm beginning to understand the meaning behind it. The technicians are all staying in guestrooms at our house, except for the professor, that is. Sehh'Remma insisted that he stay at her place. When I asked her what she saw in him she told me that it's not easy for her to find a male who's not intimidated by her size, and besides, he tastes good and follows orders. I had my doubts so I asked him, but all he said was that 'terror has its own attractions'. Whenever I think I'm beginning to understand humans, they say or do something completely unexplainable.

2376.6.4

Mother helped me unpack today. I think she did it because she wanted to see if any of my clothes from Earth suited her; after all, we are about the same size. It's been a long time since we've had so much fun together. I let her borrow the strapless evening gown. The way it fits her is going to cause a riot at least. She also spotted the bracelet that Anthony gave me, and I had to explain that he didn't know what it meant. All she said to that was, 'Did you ask?'

2376.7.2

You'll never guess who came by today. Masmah! She made poor Roger faint when she slumped down on the bench next to him and Sehh'Remma. I guess I can understand it; I would probably react that way, too, if a two-meter tall bear sat down next to me. I wonder if I dare show her the pictures of Earth bears that I brought with me? After Sehh'Remma finished scolding her for frightening Roger they decided that they liked each other. Masmah even admitted to telling my father where I was. I'm still undecided about whether to be angry or thankful. After midday

Part 2

we went over to Sehh'Remma's place, a small house by the river. Be VERY careful if you're near water on a hot day if you're in company of a Mhargh. She dropped everything, the belt, the collar -- they don't need clothes with that shaggy fur -- and jumped straight in. And when she got back up a few minutes later she shook herself. There was water flying EVERYWHERE!

2376.8.5

I went into town today to get myself something sweet. Who do you think I met at the café? Sehh'Remma, Masmah and Roger. The strangest thing was that he was sitting between them and holding his arms around both, or at least he tried to hold around them. While we were sitting there drinking chilled juice and chatting -- why does my life seem to revolve around cafés? -- Reh'h'Sharan walked in. He still had the delusion that I liked him, and even had the audacity to try to give me a grubby, old bracelet! I don't think he'll bother me again though, for Masmah yanked an iron bar from the fence and casually wrapped it tightly around his fat body, then told him that if he ever came near me again, she'd tighten it.

2376.9.3

Today came what I've been dreading since I returned; a group of clan elders came to talk with me, to find out what, if anything, I've learned on my journey. I served them tea and even gave them a small piece of chocolate from my dwindling supplies, then we sat down to talk. The humans have a name for the sensation; 'deja vu' to describe the feeling that you've experienced the exact same event before. It felt exactly like, first, Anthony's interrogation, and then the long sessions with the major. I still don't know exactly what they were looking for, but when they left a few hours later, Rrsh'Marree -- my Fathers aunt -- held my hand in both of hers. When she released her grip there lay a single, plain, gold ring in my palm.

2376.9.4

Getting an ear pierced hurts!

2376.10.5

The company council approved Daddy's contract with the Humans yesterday, and he's now busy hiring pilots and technicians for a flight of old Talon Two fighters. They're nowhere near as good as the Longpaw fighters our people now have, but if the Humans fly them the same way they fly their own fighters, they'll either break apart or outperform everything else. I saw Roger again today. He looks stronger and more alive (?) than I can ever remember seeing him. Sehh'Remma, and probably Masmah too, seem to be good for him.

2376.11.4

Finding technicians for the fighters wasn't too difficult, but finding pilots was worse. Most seem eager for a chance to fly, and maybe even actual combat, but they don't want to do it in the Talons. I got a few to change their minds by showing them actual recordings of Earth's hopelessly outdated fighters attacking and winning against modern Wrragh'Wi Fangs. Mother is right, it's easy to get a male to do what you want if you only use the right approach. No male likes to be told that there are others out there who are braver than he. Besides, telling them how it felt to control one of those fighters didn't hurt either. Males are like small cubs; always wanting to try a shiny new toy.

2376.12.5

Daddy's away again. The assembly of traders wanted to talk to him about supplying modern weapons to an aggressive and dangerous race. He told me that he had a suspicion who was behind the accusations, and that I had to make certain the freighter left on time. We're still assembling equipment, but it looks like we're set for launch in an eight-day.

Part 2

2376.12.7

We've begun loading the freighter. Half the fighters are already on external points where they can be launched immediately. To 'refresh' the pilots in battle-drills we keep four of them in their fighters at all times, running systems checks and testing weapons systems. If nothing else, it keeps everyone else at a respectful distance. The rest of the fighters are either on the ground or flying 'practice' escort missions, following the large shuttles around. I'm not certain this was what father meant when he told me to make certain nobody interfered, but the pilots are enjoying themselves.

2376.13.5

All the fighters are safely attached, all cargo is stowed and all passengers are aboard. Now we're only waiting for clearance from traffic control to launch. There are a few more passengers than expected though; a few doctors wanting to study Earth-type medical equipment, a few artists, a few diplomats, Sehh'Remma and Masmah. Sehh'Remma won't let Roger out of her sight; she claims he needs someone to look after him, and Masmah has decided that they need her help in constructing the lunar facility. Me? I've spent the last eight-day surreptitiously packing clothes and other belongings. I left a message for Mother that I think she'll understand; 'I decided to ask about the bracelet'.

2376.17.4

It's now two years since I started my journey. Only two years? It feels like I've experienced enough for an entire life already. To celebrate the occasion I split the rest of the chocolate with Sehh'Remma, Masmah and Roger. The way Masmah sidled up to Roger, and his desperate efforts to fend her off afterwards can only mean that it had an even stronger effect on her than the rest of us. We've been travelling for almost four eight-days now, and we still have two to go. I now understand why Daddy wants the new computers so badly.

2376.19.5

We returned to normal space a few minutes ago. As soon as we got radio contact with the Earth forces and identified ourselves we launched four of the fighters into a high orbit. Now we're preparing to launch another four fighters and the two large shuttles. The shuttles are both half-full with maintenance equipment and half with passengers and luggage. As soon as we're away, the freighter will move into another orbit and take on the job as fighter base, supplying those fighters not on the ground. In a few eight-days they'll begin the work of installing the new computers.

2376.19.5

The shuttle landed half an hour ago, and it's taken me this long to retrieve my bag. Now I'm sitting in a car -- belonging to one of the local fighter pilots -- heading towards town. Why am I suddenly feeling so giddy, as if I've just eaten a pound of chocolate?

2376.19.5

Home! The boat's gentle movements, the creaking sounds, the smell of salt water, oils and lacquers, the silver bracelet on my arm. All that and Anthony's arms around me, everything tells me; this is home.