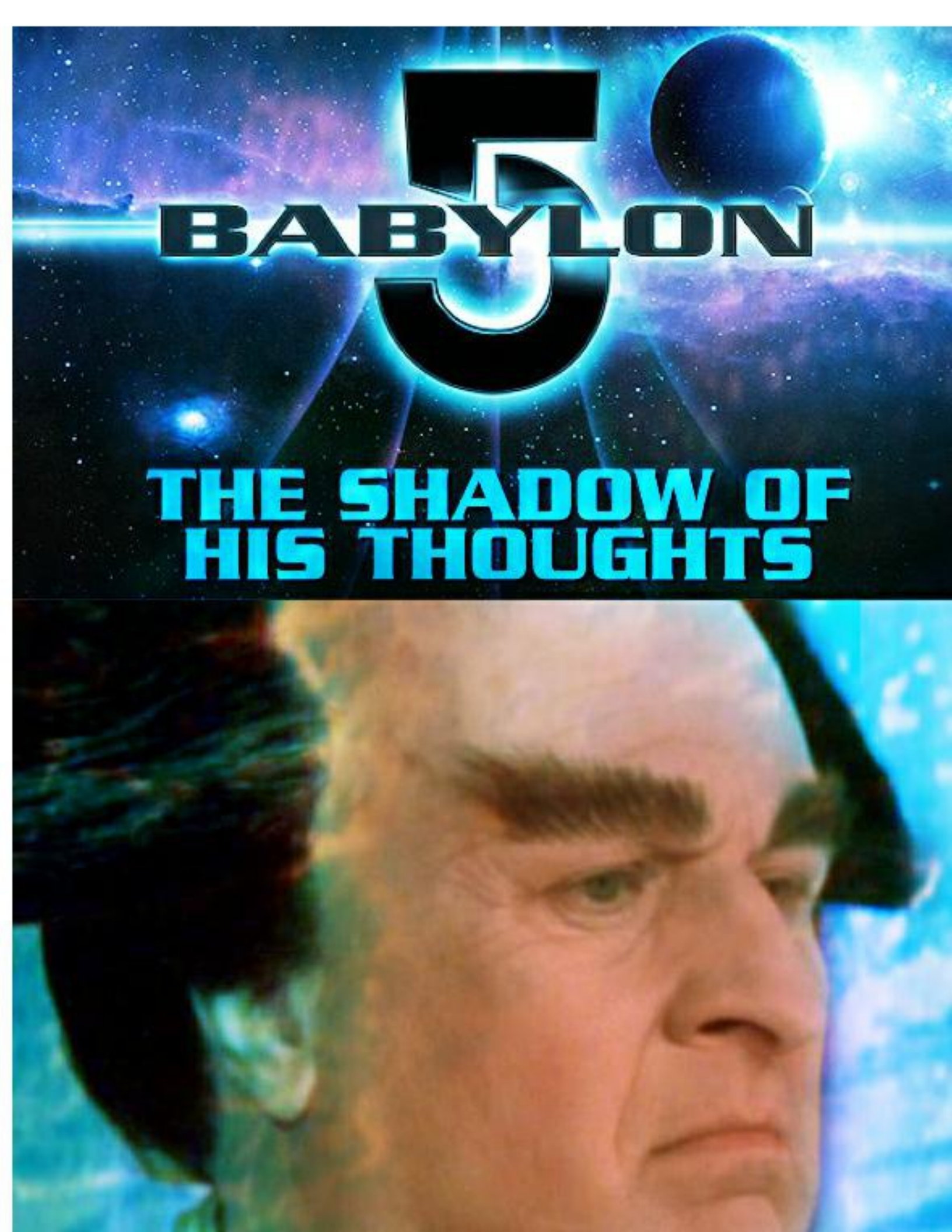




5 BABYLON

**THE SHADOW OF
HIS THOUGHTS**



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J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

The Shadow of His Thoughts

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Disclaimer: This is the actual Londo Mollari-centric short story written by J. Michael Straczynski. I found it in an old pdf that was floating around the internet. However the formatting and even the spelling were really messed up, leading me to believe someone might have put it together by hand. I cleaned up the text, fixed the errors, and formatted it here for your pleasure. Understand that if there was any legitimate way to get my hands on this short story I would take it. But, since it's been out of print for years I feel somewhat justified in sharing it here, with my good, dear Babylon 5 friends.

Warning: This story takes place during Londo's time as Emperor. Bring tissues.

The dream was the same.

It was always the same. The chakat lay on the ground before him, its four legs bound by ropes, horns scratching the dry ground beneath its head. The sun was hot overhead.

A voice, always the same voice, whispered from behind Londo. You know what you have to do. What you have always done. Londo stared at the creature, and its gaze met his own. The eyes that looked back at him were fierce, proud, unbowed. And somehow familiar. In the dream it said to him, soundlessly and wordlessly but with absolute clarity. It is duty. You cannot fight duty.

I can't do it, Londo thought back, and looked down. The sword was in his hand. Yes, you can, it thought at him, and it struggled to raise its head, exposing its throat. Waiting for the deathblow. Sobbing, Londo brought down the sword, watched the life fade away in the creature's eyes.

Tears fresh on his face, Londo awoke to the sound of bells. Bells that had tolled for one hour each morning every day for the last six days. Six days since he had taken on the role of emperor; six days since the bombardment of Centauri Prime had left vast tracts of the capital city devastated and in flames. All work stopped while the bells tolled, and the world was momentarily united in silence for those who had died in a conflict that should never have happened ... a conflict that had been secretly engineered by that alien race known as the Drakh to produce rage and resentment in his people — emotions that he would have to nurture into something darker with the passing of years.

That was, after all, his job.

The title of emperor was just a cover, also arranged by the Drakh ... a means to an end.

But I'm not supposed to think these things, he reminded himself as he felt the presence of the Keeper stirring at the juncture where his shoulder met alien flesh, where nerves and neural pathways merged so that his will was no longer entirely his own. He was able to shield only his most private thoughts; if he subvocalized or brought his thoughts to the surface, the Keeper could sense the shape of them, and relay them by telepathic link to the Drakh, working quietly in the recesses and ancient tunnels beneath the royal palace ... building a future for his world whose shape he did not like to consider for too long. But at least it was a future, which is more than his people would have had if he had refused to accept the Keeper.

No one else could see the Keeper unless it allowed them to see it, which was usually a prelude to extermination. He, on the other hand, could see it all the time, but tried desperately not to let his gaze wander in that direction more than necessary.

Denial had always been one of his greatest strengths.

The bells stopped. Had it really been an hour already? He closed his eyes as he did when he was a child, against mornings that came too soon, hoping somehow that the day and his responsibilities would disappear, and he could be free. It was a fleeting hope and, like all hopes, daily crushed under the weight of the waking world.

He opened his eyes, the moment passed, and Emperor Mollari the Second rose to begin the seventh day of his rule.

Minister Vole was wringing his hands again, one over the other in a motion so tight that Londo couldn't tell where one hand finished and the other began. "I'm sure His Excellency was informed —"

"If I had been informed, then I would know. Since I knew nothing of this until you mentioned it, then either I was not informed, or I have suddenly gone senile and should be taken out and shot. Which of those possibilities are you suggesting is the case here?"

Vole's hands moved faster, "I meant no offense, Excellency, because certainly Your Excellency's memory is in perfect condition, the whole world is confident in Your Excellency's magnificent abilities and —"

"Vole?"

The carriage had been made twelve hundred years earlier, during the reign of Emperor Morell, as a gift for his wife Celina. Not long thereafter, she went mad and hanged herself from the highest of the palace's four towers. Londo wondered if there was a cause-and-effect relationship there, given the garish bad taste that had gone into the design of the carriage, the almost grotesque indulgence of encrusting it end to end with every gemstone to be found on Centauri Prime.

If I had to ride in this thing every day, I'd probably kill myself, too.

"Is this really necessary?" Londo asked resignedly, already suspecting the answer.

Minister Vole nodded. Londo stared at the minister's hands. Vole whipped them behind his back and continued nodding. "It's tradition, Your Excellency."

"I know the tradition," Londo said, and sighed. He wondered absently which of the four towers in the palace was, in fact, the highest.

One never knew when that sort of information could come in handy.

He knew the tradition. And the story. He had grown up with both. And now he was about to enter into the tradition himself.

So it came to pass that in the third year of his reign, Emperor Morell was returning to the royal palace with his soldiers, after winning the Battle of Scoria Plains against those who would rend the people of the land in two. He stopped by the river Tuwain to water his dromes and rest his soldiers after the long march from the sea.

There he found the woman Malia, who the villagers said was a prophetess. For twenty and four years she had lived in a cave at the mouth of the Tuwain, surviving on the kindness of those in the village. She was brought before the emperor and asked to foretell the story of his rule. Malia prophesied that a great danger lay ahead of Emperor Morell, that a dagger would strike to his heart from near his heart, and that his life would be forfeit unless he heeded her warning. When the emperor asked how he could avoid this death, Malia spoke only of the crescent moon hidden in darkness. Asked to put a price on her prophecy, she asked for nothing save the emperor's good wishes, for she was his loyal and steadfast servant. Upon his return to the royal palace, a great dinner was held in honor of Emperor Morell. There his family gathered, including his nephew Elfeni, whose name was dear to him. As Elfeni rose to toast the health of his uncle, the emperor cried out and the Imperial Guard seized Elfeni, stopping him as he drew back a blade to strike down the emperor. Elfeni later confessed to a secret alliance with those who had attempted to bring about a civil war in which he would be made emperor.

His life saved by prophecy, the emperor returned to Tuwain, where he gave the prophetess Malia a tenth share of his fortune. He pledged that for as long as an emperor sat upon the throne of Centauri Prime, there would always be a prophetess in Tuwain, that she would ever be in royal favor, her needs and wants attended to, her name revered.

And so it was that over the years, with the passing of each prophetess, another came to take her place in Tuwain. On that day, each emperor would travel by the same carriage and the same road taken by Morell to Tuwain, to personally oversee her enshrinement as prophetess supreme.

The last prophetess in the line that began with Malia had died in the bombardment; another now had to take her place, and Londo had to be there for the ceremony.

He could not justify it. There was work to be done, temples to be rebuilt, wounded to heal—

—grudges to nourish, rage to fuel—

—so that he could hardly justify being away from the royal palace for that long.

And yet...

And yet what was the purpose of rebuilding if it was not part of the process of healing the wounds that his people had suffered? And was not part of that process restoring a sense of stability?

That was the purpose of tradition, to give people something to hold onto in times of trouble.

And was there any trouble greater than the bombardment and savaging of Centauri Prime...and the other trouble that Londa knew was biding its time beneath the royal palace?

Londo sighed again, knowing his decision was inescapable, as most of his decisions lately had been.

He would go to Tuwain.

As was required, they set out before dawn, the royal carriage in the middle of a long procession of other ceremonial carriages and drome-pulls. Crowds lined the streets and waved as they passed, faces lined with worry and the dirt of rebuilding momentarily eclipsed by smiles. Londo nodded back at them through the open window, even more sure now that his decision was the proper one.

Once outside the capitol city, they turned to the old roads, which were now overgrown and little used. The crowds grew smaller and appeared less often, until they disappeared altogether. From time to time Londo glimpsed a lone traveler walking along the road who looked on, astonished, at the passing parade. The rest of the time he was left alone with his thoughts, and he little cared for the company. He did best when the business of rebuilding left him no time to dwell on his situation, or the choices that had brought him to this point. But alone in the carriage, with only the bumps in the road and the silent forests on either side to keep him company, he was left only with his thoughts, his doubts, his recriminations—

—and the occasional whisper from the Keeper residing invisibly on his shoulder, reminding him of the things they needed him to do upon his return to the palace. He wanted a drink desperately, but since his gradual discovery that alcohol was the one thing that could buy him a moment's privacy from the Keeper (don't think it too loud, don't let them know you've figured that part out yet, it's the only tool you have), he saved that for moments when it could be used to his advantage.

By night they camped by the side of the road, where he could at last contact the royal palace by viewer and receive updates on the state of his people. Then a few hours of fitful sleep, and back on the road again.

On the third day out, another procession caught up with his own. The carriages were white, lined with white veils, and drawn by pure white dromes. Londo recognized the markings and knew that they contained the new prophetess of Tuwain.

He emerged and went to meet them. As he drew closer, the doors of the main white carriage opened, and amid a shower of white flower petals, the prophetess emerged with her entourage. She was dressed all in white, her face veiled; even so, Londo could see her well enough, and took a breath in astonishment.

She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

And she could not have been more than sixteen seasons.

This can't be right, Londo thought. She's too young by far.

As he stopped before them, an older woman—the young girl's escort, he supposed—bowed deeply. "Your Majesty," she said. "I am Delasi Miro of House Miro. It is my honor to present to your Shiri Dei of House Dei, whom I am honored to serve as guardian."

"It is an honor, good lady," Londo said, his curiosity piqued even further. Under Centauri

law, to be guardian was to speak on all matters of importance for someone too young to speak for himself or herself. Anyone wishing to benefit from Shiri's prophecies would have to go through Delasi first. Interesting, he thought.

"Are you the child's mother?"

"No, Highness, her mother died in childbirth. She has been raised by her father."

"Ah. And where is he?"

"He did not come. His ... business does not allow him to be away for long periods, and it was decided that she would do better on her own."

Londo smiled. It was decided almost always meant I decided it would be to my best advantage, but I don't want to say that. He looked now to the young girl. "Is this what you wanted, child?"

She spoke without looking up. "I am my emperor's servant, and I gladly honor him with my utmost obedience."

"A fine answer," he said, and glanced sharply at the older woman. "Also well rehearsed."

Delasi smiled and nodded. "She takes instruction well, and wishes only to be of service."

"Of course," Londo said. "Perhaps the two of you would care to ride with me in the royal carriage. We could talk further."

The girl glanced up for a moment, and looked almost frightened. Delasi only nodded. "We would be most honored, Your Majesty."

"And how long have you been a prophetess?" Londo asked. The countryside passed slowly outside the carriage.

"She has been able to see since she was barely a child of three seasons," Delasi said.

"An advanced case, to be sure," Londo said. "You would almost think that a child who could see at three could be allowed to speak at sixteen."

Delasi's lips pursed in a way Londo found most satisfying. Any further, and he was sure her face would disappear entirely into her head. It was a trick he would actually pay to see. With her silence won, for the moment at least, he looked back to Shiri. "What can you tell me of my future, child?" he asked.

For the first time, she met his gaze. Her eyes were windows onto an old soul, framed with resignation and a sorrow that should never have been allowed into one so young. Her gaze seemed to pass right through him, to a place somewhere behind his head. Then she looked away again. "Perhaps His Majesty would prefer to hear of other things," she said.

"The emperor asked you a question," Delasi said. "Answer truthfully."

Shiri considered her words carefully. "I see little joy, and much sorrow," she said at last. "I see fire and death and pain. I see you betrayed by almost everyone you have ever trusted."

"Almost everyone?"

"Your greatest enemy is also your greatest friend, and the trust you place in him is rewarded at the end of days. He is your freedom, and you are his. And in the end..." She hesitated, then forced herself to continue. "In the end, you die in the arms of your friend, and he dies in yours, that a world might live."

For a moment, Londo felt the world slide out from under him. The image she described was a dream that had always been with him, the dream of his own death, in which he and G'Kar of Narn ended their long and strange relationship by strangling one another to death. It was a relationship born in mutual hatred, the kind of rage that only a conquered people can have against those who have enslaved them, as Centauri Prime and enslaved Narn. G'Kar had grown from a resistance fighter to a leader among his people following their liberation, and had finally been assigned as ambassador to Babylon 5, as Londo had in his earlier days. There they had fought, and squabbled, and gradually carved out a mutual respect that had, impossibly, grown into something approaching friendship.

Until this moment, he had always believed that the dream pointed to a final act of vengeance by one against the other.

But now, in her words, the first time he allowed himself the possibility of hope. That a world might live, she had said. But which world? Narn or Centauri Prime?

He stirred, realizing that he had sat silent for too long.

He cleared his throat. "And what else do you see?" Her face darkened again, and her gaze drifted to his shoulder. Londo felt for a moment that she could see what was there, what no one else could see. Impossible, he thought. But the Keeper felt it too, and Londo sensed it go quiet ... watching, waiting.

"I see ... shadows," she said. "It is hard for me to see what sort of shadows, or what throws them, but I see pieces of shadows all over the palace, and beneath it, gradually spreading across our world. They are the ones who will bring the fire. They are the ones who will bring the pain."

"I do not know who they are," she said, "I know only that that they are. And that they are here." Londo said nothing, knowing with cold certainty how close her words were to the truth, that the Drakh had once served an advanced race known only as the Shadows, gone now, but who left behind their weapons and their servants and their allies. Pieces of shadows indeed. Slowly he realized that this was not just a hit-and-miss prophetic, guarding her words or disguising them in metaphor and imagery. She was, as the humans said, the Real Deal. And she knew things that the Drakh would not want her or anyone else to know.

An instant later, from the Keeper on his shoulder came a whisper that slipped into the back of his thoughts, instructions relayed from the Drakh in the capital city who monitored the Keeper as it monitored Londo.

The girl must die, the Keeper whispered, and Londo's blood ran cold in his veins.

Do it yourself if you have to, the whisper continued, but it must be done before she can take up her position.

Before she can speak with authority, and betray our presence.

She must die.

The rest of the day's ride was conducted in an uneasy silence punctuated only by occasional polite comments. Where Shiri had been the one to avoid his gaze, now Londo did the same, knowing what he knew. His thoughts raced back and forth between two poles:

If he had to do as the Drakh instructed, how could he ensure her death without compromising himself or revealing their intentions?

And, deeper in his thoughts, where he hoped the Drakh could not find it, how could he avoid having to kill her?

He was grateful for the interlude when they reached the final rest stop. The next day's journey would see them in Tuwain. While his entourage set up his tent and prepared dinner, he moved apart from them and opened the portable viewer that would put him in touch with the royal palace.

Minister Vole's face appeared on the viewer within a second of its being activated. He's probably been sitting by the screen all day again, waiting for the call, Londo concluded, Vole's eagerness could make even a dead man nervous. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Any news?" Londo asked.

"I'm told that repairs to the spaceport are nearly complete; we should be able to reopen the rest of it by week's end."

"Good. Contact the ministry for urban repairs and tell them to take at least an hour off to celebrate."

"I will, Excellency."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing significant. The usual requests for your attention, debates in the Centarum that need to be resolved—"

"They can wait. I need you find out everything you can concerning a woman, Delasi of House Miro."

"Of course, Excellency. Is it important?"

Londo stared at the screen. "I'm sorry. For a moment there I imagined myself to be the emperor. You see, when the emperor points to something—anything—it automatically becomes important. I am pointing to this, Vole. If you are suggesting it might be something other than important, then I must no longer be the emperor. Of course, that

would imply sedition on your part, which last I heard was punishable by death, so—"

"I will get on it immediately, Excellency."

"Thank you, Minister." The screen blipped off. Londo allowed a smile; playing with Vole was almost too easy. He found he actually missed sparring with G'Kar and Sheridan, even Vir ... at least there he had some competition.

He closed the viewer and decided to take a walk before retiring. He signaled to the Imperial Guard, who would maintain their distance out of respect, while staying near enough to intervene should he run into trouble.

The woods near the campsite were thick with trees, their silver and gray leaves already turning black and gold in anticipation of winter. A narrow path ran through the place where they grew together the thickest. Londo walked the well-worn path with confidence, knowing he need only make a sound to attract the guards, when he heard another sound nearby.

Someone was crying.

He slowed, edging toward a clearing in the woods.

There in the double moonlight he saw Shiri in the arms of a young man. He was holding her so tightly that Londo thought she might be pulled through him to the other side.

"You shouldn't have come, Corlo," she was saying.

"It's dangerous."

"I don't care. I had to see you. I spoke with your father. He doesn't want you doing this any more than I do. It's that woman, Delasi ... she pressured him into making her your guardian. She uses people. She doesn't care about you, Shiri. All she cares about is power."

"I know that, Corlo. I know what she is, and what price I will pay. But this is the only way to keep our family's honor. House Dei is without power and without money. Soon all we have will be sold or taken away. My father could even be sold into bond slavery to pay off our debts. I have a gift that guarantees that no matter what happens to me, my family will be taken care of forever. My father needs this, even if he can't see it himself I can't turn my back on him."

Corlo pulled her from his chest and looked at her. "Can you turn your back on me?"

"I'm not—"

"Once you're enshrined at Tuwain, you are not allowed to marry, not allowed the company of any man. That's the law. We'll never be together again. Can you do that to us? Can you do that to yourself?"

"Yes." she said, and looked away. "I can. Because I have to. I have obligations. It's my responsibility, my duty—"

"Shiri, I love you."

"I know," she said, and the grief in her voice tore through Londo like a blade. "And I love you. And I love my father, and I love my family. Now I have to choose between them and you. It's not right, and it's not fair, and more than life itself I want to run away with you, right now, where no one could ever find us. But I can't, Corlo. I can't ... "

Then suddenly she turned and ran into the woods, heading back toward the campground. The young man called after her, but she didn't answer. He stood there for several minutes, hoping she would return, hoping for a word, a sign that somehow she might change her mind.

But she did not return, and after a while, he turned and walked slowly away, disappearing into the woods. Out of the corner of his eye, Londo saw the Imperial Guard edging forward, to see what had caused him to stop. He waved them back, letting the silence linger in the clearing. In such a short time, how could he have come to care so much for some one he knew he would have to kill?

Londo looked up at the twin moons overhead.

What am I to do now? he wondered. There were forty- seven gods in the Centauri pantheon; surely one of them had a solution to his problem.

The night, however, gave no reply to his question.

The dream was the same. It was always the same.

The creature lay on the hard, dry ground, its eyes staring up into his own.

You cannot fight duty.

The flash of the sword. The tears. Great Maker, Londo thought as he sat up, his face wet.

I don't know how much more of this I can take.

It was still dark, well before dawn. As his eyes cleared, he saw the viewer blinking with a message-waiting signal. He rose, shook off the dream, and went to it.

Predictably, it was Vole. "I found the information you requested, Majesty. It took no small doing, and I went to great lengths to—"

Londo fast-forwarded for thirty seconds. That was how long it usually took Vole to explain in excruciating detail how hard it had been to find the requested information before he could finally get to the point.

"—the lady Delasi and House Miro are of old blood, but little money. They sold their position in the royal court years ago to House Davo. Delasi herself is said to be very intelligent, though I get the impression we could substitute the word 'ruthless' and very few would argue the point. She is political, and a manipulator. Word is she has found some way to regain power and influence for herself and her House.

And her name is Shiri, Londo thought.

The rest was little more than gossip, of no real use.

Londo switched off the viewer and sat quietly in the dark for a moment. He could feel the Keeper stirring, reminding him of the guards who stood outside, who could remove Shiri without question or hesitation.

If I have Shiri killed, as you ask, it will greatly complicate matters in the royal court. There will be an investigation. Even I can't arbitrarily have someone killed; there are rules since Cartagia's day. A woman like Delasi could find ways to exploit that; your position could be compromised.

Shiri must be eliminated, the Keeper relayed back.

Then let me do it in my own way.

After a long pause, the Keeper whispered back.

Very well! But we will be watching.

Londo stepped out of the tent into the chill, predawn air and made his way to Shiri's tent. The guard glanced up at his approach but made no effort to stop him from entering her bedchamber.

Times had changed, but emperors still had certain...privileges.

Londo guessed that the same thought that had occurred to the guard also came to Shiri when she opened her eyes and saw him standing over her bed. He put a hand on her shoulder. She trembled under his touch.

"Majesty—" she began.

"Shhh ..." Londo said.

"But I haven't ... I have never ..."

"I have, many times, and as the humans say, it's not all it's cracked up to be." He smiled down at her. "Don't worry. Now, put on your clothes, quickly. We have much to do, and little time in which to do it."

He led Shiri into the tented area that protected the royal carriage from the elements and dismissed the guard, who glanced back at them with obvious suspicion about what the two of them might want to do alone in the carriage.

Do I look that much the lecher? Londo thought, and decided he probably did. No matter.

Time to get to work.

Londo approached the carriage. "You start at the back," he said, "and I will begin at the front. We'll meet somewhere in the middle."

"Majesty, what am I supposed to do?"

"Have you ever plucked a bird for dinner, child?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you can help me pluck this one," he said, and twisted free a small gem from the side of the carriage. He placed it in her hand, and her eyes went wide.

"Take them carefully, one at a time, from places where there are so many that they will not be missed. By the time we meet in the middle, you will have enough to restore your family's fortune for the next five generations."

She met his gaze, and he saw suspicion there. "What will it cost me?" she asked.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "A little of your honor. It is a terrible price but the sting passes with time. I would do it for you, but I have so little honor left that it would hardly buy you a small cottage in the outer provinces.

"Now, enough talk," he said. "Start plucking."

The sky was starting to lighten as Londo hurried back to his tent. He glanced back briefly to see the lone Imperial guard he has assigned to the task riding off on droneback, Shiri clinging to his back. If she looked back at him, he could not tell.

He was out of breath, but smiling broadly. These were the moments he enjoyed most. It took him only a few moments to rouse his entourage. He raised such a clatter and an alarm that the guards and functionaries and plenipotentiaries and escorts and chaperones and dromesman piled into the clearing half dressed.

He hid his amusement at the sight, especially when Delasi appeared in their midst, her dress hanging in ways never intended by her designer, her body, or the Great Maker.

"We have been tricked," he said, his voice carrying through the clearing. "And it is on your behalf, Delasi, that we have endured this charade."

"Majesty, I—"

"You have not been invited to speak," he snapped, and she averted her eyes. Londo turned his attention to the rest of them. "The young girl Shiri, of House Dei, is no more a prophetess than I am. She came to see me last night, in tears—tears, I tell you—over her deception. She believed she was acting in a good cause, but the weight of her pretense and the terrible secret behind it were simply too much for the poor creature to bear."

The crowd was silent, waiting for the rest. Londo let the moment grow, enjoying himself beneath his carefully outraged exterior.

"The secret ... is that it is Delasi who is the true prophetess," he said, noting with

satisfaction the look of stunned disbelief on her face. "Shiri only repeated what she was told to say by Delasi, who did not want the title of prophetess supreme because of the great burden involved. A life of solitude and responsibility, without marriage or love. Shiri was willing to sacrifice all this for the sake of our people, and allow Delasi to work through her. But here, on the night before her enshrinement, knowing the responsibility and the importance of the ceremony, she found she could no longer carry through with the deception."

"Though Shiri believed she was acting in the best interests of all involved, a lie is still a lie. So by Imperial Decree, she is banned from any contact with the royal court. Her family is declared free of any penalties because they were innocent in this, but no one in the palace will attempt to contact her for any reason. To be shunned from our presence is surely the worst punishment that can be devise to fit the crime."

The crowd nodded. Good, Londo thought. Now no one will try to contact her, which would yield information that might contradict what I've just said.

Now for the fun part.

He started into his tent. "Lady Delasi," he shot back. "Attend."

She followed him inside. He sat and regarded her silently for a moment. She had regained some of her composure, and was studying him just as he was studying her.

"You may speak," he said.

Delasi straightened. "Majesty, I am not a prophetess."

"This is true."

"Then you knowingly lied."

He shrugged. "It is impossible to lie otherwise."

"And you expect me to go along with this?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Sit, and I will tell you," Londo said.

He stretched out on the high seat as she took her place opposite him. "Let us speak plainly, Delasi. You and I, we are political creatures. We come from the same amoral gene pool. You attached yourself to Shiri because you hoped to use her to your own advantage, to exert influence over the nobles and others who would come to Tuwain seeking guidance."

"Majesty, I would never—"

"Yes, you would. With you as Shiri's guardian, they would have to go through you in order to speak with her. You could choose who was and was not allowed to see her, indulge favors, accept bribes, use your access to her, and to them, to improve the condition of House Miro.

"But now you have a unique opportunity, Delasi. You and I both know that sooner or later, Shiri would back out of the deal once she began to truly understand how you were using her. She has an annoying nobility of spirit that almost guarantees conflict over issues of morality. That problem has now been eliminated, the pebble removed from your shoe. Try as you might, Shiri would never have altered her prophecies to suit your needs. As prophetess yourself, you can say anything you want."

From her expression, Londo knew she was intrigued, but still cautious.

"There is still a problem, Majesty. As I said before, I am not a prophetess. I cannot see the future."

Londo smiled. "Neither can I. What difference does it make? Our job is to tell people what they want to hear. We are much alike in that way. No one really wants to hear the truth, good lady ... they don't really want to know how they will die, that they have sadness and pain in their future, that their name will decline with their power and their appearance; that in the end, all is swallowed by death and silence.

"But those are the sorts of things that Shiri could not help but tell them, because they are true. Sadly, I suppose, they are always true. But truth has nothing to do with what people like you and I want from the world. Position. Influence. Money. As prophetess, you can say what you want, couch your intentions any way you wish, without having to include any unfortunate or untimely truths."

"And when my prophecies fail to materialize?"

"Just be sufficiently artistic—that is to say, vague—in your prophecies so that they can be interpreted later in whatever fashion best serves you. A prophetess once told me, 'You must save the eye that does not see.' " Londo shrugged. "It's five years later, and I still don't know what she meant."

For the first time, Delasi relaxed. Londo thought he might actually see a smile forming but couldn't be sure. "Tell me, Majesty, has a prophetess ever retired from Tuwain?" she asked.

"They have all been retired by death. But to all things here must be a first time. Why?"

"Well, after five or ten years of work in His Majesty's service, holding a position of such authority, I would think that a title and land would be only proper compensation. To have the presence of a renowned prophetess placed in the royal court itself would be most ... advantageous."

"It would indeed," Londo said, and this time there was no mistaking it.

She was definitely smiling now.

Londo found the enshrinement at the river Tuwain to be a magnificent ceremony, rich in color and texture. Delasi, he thought, was quite stunning in her gown of white and gold, as she looked across the open expanse of stone and water at him with eyes that glittered like small silver coins.

Which was most appropriate. What was it the humans said about the eyes being the window of the soul ... ? No matter, he decided. They understood one another.

The ride back to the capitol seemed shorter and less odious than the ride out, even with the presence of the Keeper intruding into his thoughts from time to time.

She is still a potential threat, the voice whispered in his thoughts.

True, but she has been publicly discredited. No one will listen to her now. She is far from the palace, and will never be allowed closer, so your secret is safe. You should be reasonable. Even you cannot eliminate all of the potential threats.

Not today, perhaps, the Drakh sent back, but there is still tomorrow.

Yes, Londo thought, there is always tomorrow.

Upon arriving back at the royal palace, after his briefing from Minister Vole, Londo returned to his suite, where he found a letter waiting for him. Though he had not seen her handwriting before, he knew even before opening it that it came from Shiri.

Thank you, the note read. There is no gift that I can give you that would be the equal of the one you have given me: my freedom, and the restoration of my father's House. So I give you the only thing I have to give, the last prophecy I intend to make.

One day, Emperor, you will be free of your burden. One day you will save our people, and all the sacrifices you make will not have been in vain.

Londo set the note down again and looked out at his dear city, framed by scaffolding, climbing its way back from the horrors of war, and was surprised to find tears running down his face.

The dream was the same. It was always the same.

The chakat lay on the ground before him, its four legs bound by ropes, horns scratching the dry ground beneath its head. The sun was hot overhead. A voice, always the same voice, whispered from behind Londo. You know what you have to do. What you have always done.

Londo stared at the creature, and its gaze met his own. The eyes that looked back at him were fierce, proud, unbowed.

And in the dream, the eyes that looked back at him were the eyes of Shiri, frightened and alone ... they were the eyes of his people as he passed them on the street ... and then, at the last, he recognized them for what they were—his own eyes, looking up at him.

It is duty, a voice whispered. You cannot fight duty.

Londo looked down. The sword was in his hand.

Yes, I can, he thought back, and brought down the sword, severing the ropes that bound the creature's feet. It staggered upright and met his gaze one last time.

Then, with a power and a freedom he had never experienced before, he watched it race away, disappearing into the distance, into the woods, into the future.

The dream never came to him again.

End

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DESCRIPTION:

This story is set after the series finale where Londo learns the hard truth about his future and with this knowledge, a new kind of freedom.

JMS AT RASTB5M SAID:

JAN.14.2000

The first one was a Londo story because I really wanted to do something different and cool with the character, go inside his head and show the transition to being emperor, let folks know that inside he was still the same Londo.

APR.1.1999

The first one, "The Shadow of his Thoughts," is a Londo story taking place in the days shortly after his coronation as Emperor.