

Appearances

a *Babylon 5* story
by Mary Jean Holmes
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Day One: Lies

I

Dreams are the touchstones of our characters.

Henry David Thoreau

It was the dream that awakened him.

He often woke, aware that he had dreamed, but unable to recall any specifics. An armchair-psychiatrist friend had once told him this meant that the dreams had fulfilled their purpose: sorting out the flotsam and jetsam in the brain, resolving worries or dismissing them, restoring peace and order to the mind. Sometimes, he supposed this was true — which meant that the vividly recalled night-images of the past few days were an indication of just how unsettled and tense he actually was.

Tonight's variant had started out pleasantly enough. He was... somewhere, he really didn't quite know where. It reminded him of many places he had been, but at the same time was none of them. He was standing on a hilltop carpeted with tall green grass, shaded by wind-sculpted trees, and graced by the mingled fragrances of sun-warmed flowers, the mother's touch of gentle breezes, the sparkling curve of a water-carved stream. His attire was nothing out of the ordinary, save for a full cloak of unfigured white silk which caught the wind in such a way, he could not help but feel that if he lifted even one foot off the ground, he would take wing and fly. Above, the sky was clean and vibrant, pure glass through which the sun's rays slanted as light into a cathedral. Against the earthy but unearthly blue, white-and-gray cloud formations drifted by, each a crystallized memory of one pleasant moment summoned from the past.

In his hand, he held a small branch of pale, twisted wood, upon which burst a profusion of long, glossy green leaves and clusters of tiny blossoms. Each bloom was no wider than his thumb, its center an almost crystalline blue, like a perfect sapphire seen through clear water. The nine heart-shaped petals faded from that deep blue near the base to a translucent white at each tip, giving an overall effect of a flower carved from a jewel and limned with frost. At first, the blooms seemed to have no scent, as one might expect of something wrought by an artist's hand, but as he concentrated upon it for a moment, he detected a very delicate fragrance, combining something of roses and lilacs and apple blossoms. It was all around a pleasing thing, but he was certain he had never seen nor smelled anything like this before.

As his attention drifted away from the twig in his hand, he became aware that he was not alone. He knew it, but he could not see the presence he could nonetheless perceive somewhere nearby. Even so, the beauty of his surroundings made him feel that he was in no danger, like a child who knows he is under the watchful eye of his parents. He could not be touched here in this place of perfect peace. Safe, he closed his eyes and listened to the Song of the natural world. He wished he could stay here forever, away from the horrors of the real world kept at bay somewhere beyond the protective dome of the sky.

Then, the peace shattered. He opened his eyes; all was dark. The sounds of nature's placid beauty became a piercing shriek, the keening sound of raw metal against metal somehow ripped from a living throat. The wind, which had been soft and soothing, was suddenly a hurricane filled with searing heat and the terrible power of nature's fury.

In the gale-torn blackness, something moved: strange and almost imperceptible, now with the wind, now against it, now in smaller whirlwinds that for a moment struck him, then vanished. The sensation was like being lashed by a whip tipped with a barb of steel ice, impossibly keen and chilled to the temperature of empty, sunless space. Whenever his unseen assailants touched him, something darkly bright flashed in the corner of his eye, then was gone before he could turn to see what or who had struck him. The metallic shrieks were voices, he suddenly realized, but none ever uttered by means of the mere vibration of vocal cords. Each time he was attacked, the voices assaulted him; but though he could not understand so much as a single phonym, every syllable brought exquisite agony to his merely mortal ears.

"Who are you?" he screamed, pained and frustrated, trying vainly to shout the noise and the voices and the wind. "Why are you doing this?!"

A voice stabbed into his mind.

You are not ready.

You do not understand.

You do not even understand yourself.

Impudent.

Disobedient.

"No!!!!!"

The last word was his own, denial that he had done anything to deserve such punishment, acceptance of his own role in what had happened. But the voice in his head only repeated the accusations, over and over until he was certain he would go mad.

Then, abruptly, there was silence. For the smallest fraction of a second, he hoped that the nightmare had ended, that he had wakened. Hesitant, he opened his eyes.

He was not in his bed, in his own bedroom, but he was also no longer trapped in that hideous maelstrom of dark and heat and cold and pain. He could see again, if only his own body and the pure white clothing in which he was arrayed. Again, he was holding something, this time a knife made of crystal. Its hilt was carved in an alien shape, the origins of which he recognized but for the moment could not identify. The odd three-edged blade was at its thickest no broader than his forefinger, but was two full hands' span in length and wickedly sharp. The crystal, tinted either by the cleverness of nature or the cunning of a sapient hand, was of transparent clarity at the butt end of the hilt, and shaded to a vivid blood red at the blade's tip. As he held it up to inspect it, brilliant asterisms glinted off its three edges. His own shadow stretched before him on a polished white floor, the silhouette long and dark, indicating a light source at his back.

He turned, and saw a Vorlon watching him from a distance.

He could not see it clearly, but he knew that this was not the same being he had met in his one face-to-face encounter with a member of that enigmatic species. Its vaguely ethereal yet visibly substantial nimbus of light obscured its features, but its curiosity touched him as perceptibly as the movement of cool air against his face.

"Who are you?" he asked. If he had been brought here for examination, he felt he at the very least had the right to know who was responsible.

The light intensified, swallowing the Vorlon. Instinctively, he shut his eyes and looked away, lest he be blinded.

When he opened his eyes, the Vorlon was standing little more than an arm's length before him, its aura of light palpable against his skin, like the brush of a cloak being stirred by the wind. Curious, he looked up.

It had his face.

He gasped, startled, and involuntarily stepped back. The Vorlon did not follow.

"There is a price to be paid," it said dispassionately.

"How?" he asked, though he should have known — and then, he felt it. Something damp in his hand, on his wrist. He looked down to the hand which held the knife, and saw it covered with blood.

Horrified, he dropped the weapon and heard the bell-like cacophony of sound as it shattered — but the blood continued to flow. It dripped thickly to the floor, staining its spotless perfection; it slipped between his fingers, slithered up his arm to cover his shoulder, his neck, his chest. He could feel the rhythm of his own heart, and with each beat, the stain spread as his own blood coursed from the pores of his skin as from gaping wounds. He opened his mouth to speak, and choked on the viscous bitter-hot liquid filling his throat. His eyes stung, filling with tears; through that transparent veil, the light surrounding them turned from white to red.

"In blood," the Vorlon replied. *"Your blood."*

That was what startled John Sheridan wide awake, breath frozen, heart pounding. He sat up straight in bed, eyes opened onto semi-darkness, dim and distant light falling on indistinct, shadowy shapes. For a moment, he could not be sure if he was in his quarters on Babylon 5, or had simply slipped into another phase of the dream. Seeking confirmation, he held up his hands, touched his chest, and found them soaked not with blood but with sweat. The instant that realization sank in, he closed his eyes and loosed a large sigh of relief.

It had been two nights since Kosh had died, and the second on which he'd been plagued with horrible nightmares. Sheridan knew some of the dream-imagery to be a reflection of his own feelings of bewilderment, loss, and grief over the Vorlon's unexpected death. He had suffered from spells of dream-disturbed sleep before, especially right after the War and during some of the more stressful times in his life. But these dreams were worse than any cold sweats or night terrors, shaking him to the very roots of his soul with their symbolic ambiguity, which he *knew* held hidden meanings that he could not see, try as he might. Images of wanton death and wholesale destruction could not hold a proverbial candle to these dispirited visions that always left him in a state of complete confusion for his own future.

And he'd thought his waking hours as captain and governor of the former Earth Alliance station Babylon 5 — daily eternities spent battling against the powerful Shadows and a wildfire of hate sweeping through the galaxy's supposedly civilized worlds — were a nightmare. Maybe this was getting to him because Kosh had chosen to speak to him in the guise of his father in that not-a-dream John had had as the ambassador was dying. Maybe it was because he still didn't have a clue as to who had murdered the Vorlon, and probably never would. Maybe it was because Kosh had *been* a Vorlon, one of that race of walking enigmas who somehow seemed omniscient, unassailable, indestructible. Maybe these dreams were plaguing him because he had been touched by Kosh, both mentally and physically, for reasons he still could not comprehend. Maybe there had been something more to his peculiar relationship with Kosh, something beyond an effort to achieve understanding of one another, something that stayed with him beyond the Vorlon's death and manifested itself in these horrid nightmares.

Or maybe it was because John had begun to feel that something dark was now moving on the station. Something black and sinister, possessed of a deadly power, that slipped in and out of the shadows too quickly to be caught.

Shadows. He couldn't so much as think the word any more without feeling a shiver as cold as the void. He had never been afraid of the dark, even as a child, but with all that had happened in the last few years, he was definitely beginning to fear the twilight.

But he had never let fear overwhelm him before, and he wasn't about to break that habit now. Determined to expel the cobwebs of dread from his mind, Sheridan pulled his legs out from under the twisted and sweat-soaked covers to sit on the edge of the bed. His night-clothes were plastered to his skin; sweat dripped from tendrils of hair that had fallen across his forehead. There was an awful taste in his mouth, salty and metallic — almost like blood. The simile brought the final image of his dream surging to the fore of his thoughts; he ruthlessly suppressed it as he headed for the bathroom.

It didn't matter that the computer hadn't yet called to waken him. Even if he'd only gone to bed half an hour ago, the captain knew he wasn't going to get back to sleep again, not until his body and mind were too exhausted to stay awake. He put on some of his favorite quiet music and shuffled into the bathroom.

Under ordinary circumstances, Sheridan was a handsome man of impeccable grooming (the latter part and parcel of a career officer in the command track); under the current circumstances, he looked like hell. His light brown hair was disheveled, his night clothes a sticky, wrinkled mess, his face the color of lukewarm death, and his hazel eyes tinged with red so bright, it could easily have been the remains of blood.

John shuddered at the very thought, and quickly set about correcting the situation.

He went through his usual morning rituals, comforted by the knowledge that he probably had an opportunity to luxuriate in them for as long as he wanted. It took a long time in the shower (achieved only by overriding the computer's complaints concerning recommended time limits for water conservation) and meticulous brushing of both teeth and hair before Sheridan felt sufficiently purged of the physical reminders of his nightmare.

When he finally came out into the dimly-lit living area, wrapped in the soothing familiarity of his long robe and a pair of loose casual pants, John was surprised to realize how wide awake he actually felt. On the whole, when his sleep was disturbed by such episodes, he felt drained both physically and mentally, and managed to get through the day ahead only by dint of dogged determination. Today, he felt strangely refreshed, despite the extremely disturbing nature of his dream.

Maybe, he reflected, he hadn't risen so early, after all. He hadn't bothered to look at a clock or ask for the time since he'd been jolted back to consciousness. Mildly curious, he asked the computer for that information rather than turn up the lights.

Eternally pleasant, it responded: "The time is 11:37 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, August 10, 2260."

"*What!?!*"

Sheridan's almost horrified reaction prompted an equally pleasant repetition of the information. No wonder he felt so wide awake! The computer should have wakened him over five hours ago, and hadn't. For the first time in his professional career (barring infrequent episodes with injuries or debilitating illness), he was seriously late for work.

Before the computer finished its repetition, he was on the com. "Sheridan to C and C," he began, wondering if there was any plausible excuse he might use to cover his behind (such as a glitch in the system), or if he should just suck it up and admit that he had overslept. Big time.

The com-screen lit not with a disgruntled image of his second, but rather the almost too-cheerful face of Security Chief Michael Garibaldi. "Morning, Captain," he greeted in a voice well suited to his expression. "I was figuring I'd hear from you any time, now."

This gave Sheridan pause. The chief *never* answered routine calls to C-and-C. "Michael?" Puzzled, he paused to clear the remains of sleep-gravel from his throat. "Where's Commander Ivanova?"

“Taking care of the store, as usual,” came the amiable reply. “But since I knew you’d be calling in to tell her you’re late, I set up the com relay to direct your call to me instead of her, spare her the interruption. Hope you don’t mind, sir.”

The captain frowned. “You *knew* I’d be calling in late? What’s up, Garibaldi? If this is some kind of joke, it’s not very funny....”

The chief’s smile remained undimmed. “No joke, sir. Things are quiet right now, nothing the rest of us can’t handle on our own for a while, so we got together and decided we could give you the day off.”

Puzzlement became suspicion. “‘We’?” Sheridan repeated. “Just who constitutes ‘we’?”

Garibaldi remained nonchalant as he thoughtfully ticked off the list on his fingers. “Me, Ivanova, Doctor Hobbs, Ambassador Delenn — that’s all.”

“That’s more than enough. Which one of you came up with this bright idea?”

The balding man shrugged. “It was pretty much a consensus, sir, but if you really want to pin it on someone, Doctor Hobbs was the one who brought it up. Yesterday afternoon, Susan, the Ambassador, and I were going over security arrangements for tonight’s reception for the new Alliance members—” He noted, but did not mention the pained expression that touched the captain’s features at the mere mention of the upcoming event. Delenn had suggested it as a way to get some of their new allies who had recently been at war with one another to meet again, but off the battlefield and in social circumstances where they might find their ways back onto the road toward peace. Sheridan had approved of the idea when it had first been mentioned, but that had been before the nightmares began.

The chief continued without missing a beat. “—when the good doctor came in. Seems she’d been trying to get up to speed on some of her new duties as Acting Chief of MedLab, and when she was browsing through the Command Staff’s files, she happened to notice you haven’t been on a non-medical leave for almost six years.”

He paused to click his tongue for dramatic effect. “Well, you know I don’t exactly have the greatest record when it comes to taking regular leaves, sir, so I’m not one to point fingers, but Ivanova and the Ambassador weren’t as open-minded. They both think you’ve been running yourself into the ground more than you should, lately, and I hate to admit it, but I had to agree. You’re not going to do anyone any good if you wind up in MedLab from exhaustion and malnutrition, and I suspect our new allies’ll think twice about having signed on with us if you walk into that reception tonight looking like a cadaver that hasn’t figured out it’s dead, yet.” With a small smile, he added, “Sir.”

Sheridan wasn’t quite sure how he felt about this little conspiracy. His suspicious frown faded slightly, but did not disappear. “So the four of you think that one night’s good sleep is going to make up for months of virtual insomnia?”

“Of course not, Captain, but it was the best we could manage to placate Doctor Hobbs. By the way, I’d steer clear of her for a few days, if I were you. Apparently, there’re a few things in your last check-up that Steven let slide ‘cause we were up to our necks breaking away from Earth and fighting Shadows. If she sees him before she’s had a chance to cool down, he’d better hang onto his scalp. And she’ll give you hell, too, if she catches you.”

“Then I suppose I should feel grateful she didn’t haul me down to MedLab and lock me in an isolation chamber until she thought I was back in acceptable shape. I take it you were responsible for disabling my wake-up call?”

Garibaldi grinned sunnily. “Yes, sir. *And* for slipping Hobbs’ prescription into your orange juice while you were spending the wee hours of the morning in the War Room.”

“What?!”

There was mischievous pride in the chief’s shrug. “Hey, *she* wanted to have my people drag you back to your quarters so she could give you a lecture and make sure you were tranked for the night — or a few days. Since I knew how embarrassing that might look to the crew — *and* to all the ambassadors if you don’t show up at that reception

tonight — I told her I'd make sure you took the stuff, and wouldn't let anyone bother you 'til you were ready to wake up on your own."

Garibaldi was taking such great delight in the revelation of his subterfuge, John wasn't sure whether to be appalled or amused. "And your version of making sure I took it was to slip me a mickey? What if I'd decided not to drink orange juice before going to bed last night?"

"This morning," Michael corrected. "I make it a habit to know as much as I can about everyone I can, especially the people who might be responsible for saving or losing my butt, someday. Everyone's got their bedtime rituals. Londo *used* to party until he got kicked out of the bars and the casino for the night; God only knows what he does nowadays. G'Kar lights up candles and incense and probably passes out from lack of oxygen while he's in the middle of his prayers. Most of the Minbari meditate, but they seem to do that every chance they get. Ivanova has tea with one lump of sugar and precisely two cookies. Franklin does isometrics, Zack reads some really tacky novels, I check every nook and cranny for things that shouldn't be there. You drink orange juice, sometimes with something stronger in it, sometimes not, then brush your teeth, take a shower, and try to go to sleep."

Sheridan shook his head in wonder. Garibaldi often claimed to know everything about Babylon 5 and all the people on it; each time he revealed a new area of expertise, the captain became that much more convinced of his claim. "And what if I *had* put 'something stronger' in it last night? I might've ended up comatose...."

"Nah, the Doc said alcohol would only make you fall asleep faster, and maybe sleep longer. Ivanova and I had a bet going about how long you *would* sleep, without any interruptions. She thought you'd either wake up at the crack of dawn, as usual, or stay out of it until ten minutes before the reception. I figured you'd be up by noon. Looks like I won."

He paused to take a deep breath and release it again as a sigh. "But all kidding aside, sir, Susan and Delenn are pretty worried you're staying up day and night and skipping meals 'cause you're punishing yourself over what happened to Kosh, and they've got Doctor Hobbs ninety percent convinced she should order a psych evaluation on you." The very thought of it made him grimace. "I didn't think it'd do any harm to let the three of them get their way for one day, 'specially if it'll keep the Doc off your back and make tonight a little more bearable all around."

Sheridan had to concede his point. It wasn't just an attempt to avoid the nightmares that had kept him from sleeping much these last few days. His sense of duty and responsibility toward those who were under his command or who followed him — even Vorlons who only "followed" him in the sense that once, just once, they complied with his wishes — was driving him to do as much as he could to ensure that Kosh's sacrifice had not been in vain. But he knew he couldn't even the scales by pushing himself into an early grave, and he was grateful he had a crew who cared enough to at least try to make him put on the brakes, even if only for a day.

He managed a small smile. "Agreed. And I have to admit, I'm feeling more awake right now than I have in weeks. But with the reception tonight, aren't the rest of the crew and the ambassadors wondering why I'm not around to take care of all the last-minute details?"

"Oh, sure," Garibaldi answered with casual aplomb. "But we've got that covered, too. We've been telling anyone who asks that it's your birthday, and that it's tradition to give you the day off. The humans all understand, and most of the aliens've been willing to buy it, as long as it doesn't mean you won't be show up for the reception. Those who haven't bought it...." He spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I've fed 'em to Ivanova. So far, it's done wonders."

Sheridan's small smile dimmed to a small frown. "Michael," he said levelly, "it's *not* my birthday."

The chief was not the least bit chastened by the mild rebuke. "I know that and you know that, and maybe a dozen or so other people on the station know that, and they're not about to quibble. It's worked like a charm, but if you'd rather we told the ambassadors you'd be happy to see them, sir...."

The captain shuddered. He'd been through all the pre-reception diplomatic idiocies before, and had no desire to repeat the experience, if at all possible. "No, thanks, anyway. You can tell your co-conspirators I'll be have myself."

Garibaldi grinned sunnily. "Great, 'cause the next part of Doctor Hobbs' prescription should be getting there any second, now. Enjoy, sir. And don't show your face in any place official 'til it's time for the reception, or I might have to invent an excuse to confine you to quarters."

The com chirped, signaling a closed channel with a self-satisfied complacency that aptly matched Garibaldi's parting words. Sheridan was left to puzzle over their precise meaning for only a handful of seconds before the cabin's annunciator chimed. He glanced down at himself, figured that if he was supposed to be enjoying a day off, he was sufficiently dressed for polite company, then bade whoever was at the door to enter.

He was mildly surprised when Lennier came in, carrying a trayful of covered dishes, and somewhat more surprised when Delenn followed, similarly laden.

"Good morning, Captain Sheridan," the attaché greeted first, with a customary smile and half-bow. "I trust we are not disturbing you?"

"Not at all, Mr. Lennier. Mr. Garibaldi warned me you were coming — more or less. Good morning to you — and to you, Ambassador. I take it this is another part of Doctor Hobbs' 'prescription'?"

Delenn smiled enigmatically and bowed her own gentle greetings as she and her aide set down their trays in the kitchen area and began moving the contents to the dining table. "In a manner of speaking," she replied. "Doctor Hobbs recommended you eat a proper breakfast, although she did not specify what items should be included. There was some debate on that issue, until Mr. Garibaldi suggested a menu on which everyone could agree. Lennier offered to do the preparation, and I volunteered to make sure the... ah... *medicine* was taken."

That part of the conspiracy met with Sheridan's approval, although he had some misgivings about the possible implications in her mention of "everyone." Garibaldi had said only he, Ivanova, Delenn, and Hobbs were in on this, but since Lennier was also here and clearly knew what was afoot, the chief hadn't quite told the truth.

He was about to ask just how many people really were involved in this conspiracy when a tantalizing bouquet of scents tickled the captain's nose: unsynthesized coffee, real eggs, freshly baked bread, some tantalizing blend of warmed fruits.... Reflex salivation came not far behind.

"The last time there was something edible in this room that smelled this good was when Garibaldi brought me dinner to thank me for helping save his life," John said, resisting the urge to lick his lips. "That was two weeks after I first came aboard."

He moved toward the table as the younger Minbari moved the last of the serving dishes and began to uncover them, revealing a breakfast the likes of which Sheridan had not seen in years. He had to swallow to avoid drooling. "Where did you *get* all of this? It must have cost a fortune!"

Enigma brushed Lennier's expression. "I did the preparation and cooking, but many people contributed," was his only explanation.

Before the human could ask for a better reply, now certain this conspiracy was more extensive than he would've liked, Delenn intervened. "If I am not mistaken, John, there is a saying among your people about not looking a gift horse in the mouth. It *is* considered rude to ask the source and cost of what is supposed to be an anonymous gift, is it not?"

Sheridan surrendered, understanding that this somehow played into the scam about today being his birthday. "You're right, you're right, I'm sorry. It's just that when you haven't seen a real egg in years, you can't help but wonder how it got here." He took his seat at the table. "Thank you, Lennier. I'm going to enjoy every bite of this."

Lennier graciously accepted the praise as he filled the human's cup with singularly fragrant coffee. "I'm sure the others will be grateful. If it will help assuage some of your curiosity, my own contribution, other than my work, is the bread. It is a delicacy on Minbar because of the skill needed to prepare it properly, and so it is only made for special occasions. It is known as *nasikh tsu'khai*, the—"

The captain held up one hand to stop him. He regretfully gulped down his mouthful of the excellent brew before speaking. "Wait, let me take a shot at it. Ah..." One could almost see the furiously working synapses behind the narrowed hazel eyes. "...'food of celebration,' right?"

Both Minbari nodded confirmation of his correct translation. "Your command of our language is improving quickly," Delenn noted with approval.

"Not as quickly as I'd like," John admitted. "After all, I've had the *White Star* for months, and by now, I really should be able to talk to my own crew without needing a translator. All I can manage are a few words and polite phrases, nothing I need to actually *communicate*."

The ambassador was forgiving. "There hasn't been much time for study, given all the crises we've faced of late, and our languages are more difficult to learn than your own. Under the circumstances, you're doing much better than could be expected."

"Probably because my Dad was a diplomat. He studied some new language every few weeks when I was a kid, and used us for practice. Lizzie and I got pretty good at picking 'em up out of self-defense. But my Minbari still isn't good enough for me to be sure I wouldn't give the crew orders to blow up the ship. And you didn't have to go through so much trouble, Lennier. Despite what Garibaldi and Ivanova might be telling everyone, it's *not* my birthday."

But the attaché remained unruffled. "I know, but it is still appropriate to the day, since tonight we will formally welcome many new members into our Alliance. Is that not sufficient cause for celebration?"

That remained to be seen, Sheridan thought, since they wouldn't know if some of their new allies who had been former enemies could learn to get along again until they brought them face-to-face. However, he did not mention his reservations to Lennier. "I certainly hope so. Will the two of you join me? There's enough here to feed half an army."

"I will join you," Delenn said, indicating her acceptance of the invitation with a slight bow of the head. "If only to make certain you do not let it go to waste. Lennier has agreed to help Commander Ivanova and Mr. Garibaldi prepare for the reception, until I have fulfilled my promise to Doctor Hobbs, and have seen to an appointment at our new medical clinic."

The smile fled Sheridan's face; fine lines of concern settled between his hazel eyes. "Are you sick?" he asked, not wanting to pry but unable to keep silent.

But the ambassador shook her head. "No, I'm fine. When Babylon 5 broke away from the Earth Alliance, we understood that this and our involvement in the war against the Shadows would eventually place an excessive burden on your medical staff, since they would no longer receive regular relief from your general medical forces. Since we Minbari supported you in this secession, we felt that whatever we could do to see to the medical needs of our own people would reduce the drain on your staff and resources. So we made plans to open a clinic here on the station that would attend the needs of our military forces whenever they are here."

"That's very considerate of you," the captain said with gratitude, which worked nicely to mask what might have been an inappropriately excessive expression of relief. "I'll admit, I *have* wondered just how we were going to manage if things got rough, especially after Doctor Franklin resigned. Not all of our medical staff are as skilled in xenobiology as he was, and we have no idea when or if he'd coming back."

"Which is precisely why I and others in our forces felt we should establish a facility of our own. If it is successful, I intend to suggest that others in our Alliance share the burden by doing the same. Our clinic actually opened yesterday, but I was unable to welcome them at the time."

Lennier, who had been waiting patiently for an opportunity to speak, stepped forward. "If it would be of assistance, I could attend to it for you, Delenn...."

But the elder Minbari shook her head. "No, it is my responsibility as Minbar's representative to Babylon 5. But thank you for offering."

He inclined his head, accepting her choice. “As you wish, of course. Before I leave, Captain, there *is* one small item to bring to your attention.” He reached inside a hidden pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper, which he handed to Sheridan. “I found this on the door to your quarters when we arrived.”

Only mildly curious (since the breakfast and his company currently held the bulk of his interest), the captain unfolded the note with one hand while he nibbled on a slice of the sweet and flaky Minbari celebration bread. Under his fingers, he could feel the fine linen quality of the paper; it was tinted a pleasant pale blue with white veining and gold-leaf edges, indicating something much better and more expensive than a slip off a cheap notepad that had first been recycled sometime in the late Twentieth Century. It even had a vague but pleasing scent to it, not cloying like a sappy love-letter, but an enjoyable woody fragrance, almost like frankincense. He didn’t recognize the hand of whoever had written the brief message, but it, too, was of graceful form.

“*‘Watch the 12:00 ISN newscast,’*” he read aloud, for the others’ benefit. “*‘You may find one of the items to be of special interest. Happy birthday, Captain.’* No signature,” he added, though he hadn’t expected one. “I guess somebody bought Garibaldi’s ‘birthday’ scam. Did either of you see who might’ve left this?”

Lennier shook his head; Delenn responded, “The corridors were empty when we arrived. Does the message concern you?”

“No. But I can’t say I really want to spoil what is promising to be an abnormally enjoyable day by watching that propaganda circus they’re calling a newscast. I get stomach pains every time I look at those grinning puppets they’ve planted in front of the cameras. But I’ll think about it. Who knows, some good news we can trust might’ve slipped past Clark and his cronies.”

Satisfied that he had not been the accidental bearer of bad tidings, Lennier excused himself, bowed, and left to let them enjoy the meal in peace. When he was gone, Delenn settled into the chair opposite Sheridan’s. Although she poured herself a glassful of juice, she made no move to touch the food.

Puzzlement skittered across the human’s features. “You’re not going to just sit there and watch me eat, are you?” He had an awful suspicion she would say yes, because of the pledge she had made to Hobbs.

Delenn’s answering smile showed flashes of affectionate humor. “The thought *had* occurred to me, as I have already eaten — but that was very early this morning, and I find I am somewhat hungrier than I had anticipated.”

“Good. Because there’s nothing guaranteed to take away a person’s appetite quicker than someone staring at every single bite you take.”

“And we cannot have that. But I *am* curious. When he suggested the foods we might include, Mr. Garibaldi referred to this meal as ‘brunch.’”

Sheridan nodded. “It’s slang for a late morning meal between the usual times for breakfast and lunch.”

“So Mr. Garibaldi told me. But since I have seen the humans on this station eat at virtually all hours of the day, what would you call a meal that falls between lunch and dinner? Dunch? Linner? I couldn’t find any such words in the computer files....”

John was able to suppress the laugh that rose up in his throat only by choking slightly on the mouthful of fruit compote that was going down at the same time. He covered it with a slight cough, but was unable to keep the rest of his amusement from his eyes and face. “Ah... well, I suppose that’s because most people just call it a snack, nowadays. Once upon a time, when humans ate their main meal in the middle of the day, *that* was called dinner, and the evening meal was called supper — and no, there aren’t any words like dupper, either. As far as I know, the only people who have a word for a late afternoon meal are the Britons, and they call it tea.”

The Minbari’s eyes blinked curiously. “‘Tea’?” she echoed. “But why—”

This time, Sheridan allowed himself to laugh, albeit softly. “Ask Marcus about it, if you’re really interested,” he suggested. “At least he’s got the right cultural background for it, and if he doesn’t know, he can point you in the right direction.”

She pondered his reply, decided it was more sensible than asking him to explain the details of something with which he was clearly only marginally familiar, and accepted the advice with a gracious smile. “Perhaps I shall, when it is convenient.” As she reached for a slice of Lennier’s bread, she noticed the note Sheridan had discarded beside the tray. With her free hand, she picked it up, unfolded it, and scanned it, thoughtfully. “Would you be offended if we turned on the visual portion of the ISN program, John? I enjoy it no more than you, but I must confess to a certain morbid curiosity.”

He shrugged, willing to be flexible. “Sure, why not? Maybe for a change, it’ll be worth a laugh. Could explain why somebody thought I’d be interested.”

After calling up the channel on the vid with the sound disabled, they turned their attention back to the meal and other conversation. Delenn considerably avoided any mention of the upcoming reception or station business; thus, it was pleasant not to have to discuss life-or-death meetings only a few minutes away, or the latest problem with the Shadows, or a massive need the station’s budget could no longer handle, or the never ending rolls of casualty statistics. The mere opportunity to sit down and talk about inconsequential matters — Lennier’s bread, the subterfuge that had allowed this time to happen, old memories of similar unexpected surprises — was an even better gift than the breakfast, which would be eaten and digested before they went back to work.

At length, a shift in color on the video screen caught the Minbari’s attention from the corner of her eye; she glanced toward it, and saw something she had not anticipated. “This must be the article mentioned by whoever sent the note,” she said, tilting her head toward the screen.

John looked up, and saw behind the insipid reporter a picture of Babylon 5. “Sound,” he ordered the computer, his own curiosity now piqued.

“...following the recent rebellion against Earth Central,” the perpetually-smiling female-shaped marionette they called a newscaster was saying with sickening cheer. “Information available at that time indicated the actions were a part of Hague’s plans to incite revolution against President Clark, but recent investigation by ISN reporters has revealed what appears to be a more subversive plot designed to undermine Earth control of Babylon 5. Data obtained from ISN contacts within Earthforce show a connection between Minbari involvement in the incident at B5 and an attack upon the EAS *Agamemnon* near Jupiter several weeks prior to the station’s secession from the Earth Alliance.”

The picture behind her shifted to a split-screen image, one half of which showed the *White Star* as it came to the defense of B5, probably obtained from the gun cameras of the *Nimrod* before its captain had been persuaded to leave the area. In the other half, a somewhat less distinct picture showed the *White Star* just within the atmosphere of Jupiter, undoubtedly taken by the *Agamemnon* before the smaller ship had escaped.

Though Delenn’s expression showed her concern for this unanticipated job of detective work, John was not surprised. “I’ve been wondering how long it would be before some bright light in Earthforce connected the two,” he admitted. “A ship that distinctive can’t go unnoticed for long, and we’ve made no attempt to hide the *White Star* since we broke away. Someone who passed through the station since then was bound to mention it to Clark and his people. They’ve probably been sitting on this for a while and just came up with some brilliant way to make themselves look like the wronged martyrs and us like the heartless terrorists. Figures.”

The reporter continued. “Although it is not known at this time if these incidents involve the same ship or two separate ships from the same fleet, officials within Earth Dome have announced that the ship or ships are a new Minbari design. Earthforce tactical experts believe the vessels were designed for intelligence gathering and reconnaissance, as part of a larger plan to infiltrate and conquer Earth bases, outposts, and colonies in preparation to a large-scale invasion of Earth itself.”

Delenn’s opinion of the report was eloquently expressed by a most indelicate sound. “If their hatred and fear of anything foreign were not so pitiable, and if I did not already know of the Shadows’ part in causing these hostilities,

I might almost find this amusing. Statements such as this make it abundantly clear just how much the Earth government is lying to its own people, keeping them isolated from the rest of the galaxy to achieve their own ends.”

“Reporters and politicians and racists,” Sheridan observed, in sympathy with her feelings. “All bad apples that Mother Nature kicked off the same branch of evolution, if you ask me.”

The image behind the newscaster returned to a view of B5. “Additional confirmation came in a report sent in by an ISN team on special assignment to cover conflicts outside the Earth system. The following transmission is the most recent of many intercepted by our reporters over the past eight months, and is now brought to you as an ISN exclusive.”

Her beaming face was replaced by a sudden burst of static, then the image of the purloined message. It was indistinct at first, but swiftly cleared as the reception was enhanced. When the distortion faded, identification became possible.

The transmitter was Delenn, calmly speaking in her native tongue; a time-mark in a corner of the image dated the message as having been sent less than a day before. The voice of the announcer provided illumination. “Sources within Earth Dome identify this as Delenn, the Minbari Ambassador to Babylon 5. ISN specialists have analyzed all transmissions, and believe them to be covert communications between the Minbari Gray Council and their operatives aboard B5. Their goal: to infiltrate, subvert, and ultimately take full control of Babylon 5 to use it against us in war.”

Sheridan was appalled. “They’re out of their minds!” he declared, ready to throw the nearest heavy object into the vid screen rather than merely order the computer to shut it off.

But Delenn touched his hand, staying further action. She continued to watch the screen as a cornered bird stares at a snake: horrified, but unable to look away from its own coming death.

It did not disappoint her. Translation programs altered the newscast’s audio as it reached its key moment, so that her Minbari words came out in plain, coldly indifferent English:

“...have successfully diverted Earthforce vessels from future intervention. It is my recommendation that our forces be mobilized within the next 90 standard hours, so that they may be brought into position to blockade the station and assume control of local jump-gates and transfer points. In the meantime, we will see to it that all persons in command, security, and key civilian posts are neutralized, so that by the time the blockade is in place, Babylon 5 will be ours.”

Any trace of color drained from Delenn’s face. John felt his heart plummet to his toes like a lump of dead ice.

“Happy birthday, Captain.”

Damn.

Never explain — your friends do not need it, and your enemies will not believe it, anyway.

Elbert Hubbard

Even though he knew it was pretty much an impossible dream, Michael Garibaldi tended to wake every morning with a futile hope that maybe today would be that one perfect day on which nothing went wrong. Sometimes, he was allowed to maintain the illusion until he got to the mess hall and was served the same dreary breakfast he'd eaten just about every morning for the past four years. On occasion, if he was in a particularly good mood and the food didn't sit in his stomach like a stellar core fragment, he got to hang onto that whimsy until he reached the security office and was hit by the first crisis of the day. Even more rarely, he managed to get past lunch without a major explosion (either literal or figurative, take your pick) somewhere on the station, or in nearby space.

Usually, he was lucky if he made it out of the shower before his first frantic call of the day.

Today had started off better than most. Other than the occasional call from pompous ambassadors wanting to make sure their delegation would be accorded the greatest respect at tonight's reception, things were amazingly quiet. No riots among the station populace, no Shadow attacks, not even too many of the usual drunks from the casino or scuffles in Down Below.... He'd actually managed to find enough time to finally catch up on some of the records-updates made necessary by their break from Earth. Yes, today had been shaping up as a candidate for an almost perfect day — until precisely seventeen minutes past noon, when a frantic Zack Allan had called and practically ordered him to switch on ISN. He had then been treated to what he had come to think of as The Report from Hell, and nothing had been the same since.

Garibaldi wasn't sure what bothered him most about the newscast: its clearly inflammatory content, or the fact that it had to be aired just in time to cast a pall over the entire day. *It wasn't like I was expecting the whole day to go without a hitch*, he told himself and whatever Powers might be listening, if they truly existed. *Just half the day. Just twelve crummy hours. Was it really too much to ask?*

When he arrived at the Captain's quarters at 12:35 for a hastily-called meeting to discuss the matter, he had to conclude that it was.

The untouched remains of the unpleasantly interrupted meal still sat, along with all the dishes and utensils, on the dining table. Though Sheridan had taken the time to dress since they'd last spoken, Garibaldi suspected that, given the brief time that had passed, the captain had done little more than comb his hair and throw on whatever clothes first came to hand. Both he and Delenn appeared tense, although Sheridan, as always, showed his emotions more visibly, this time in precisely measured pacing. The other two guests, Lennier and Commander Susan Ivanova, were seated, but both their expressions reflected the grimness of their unexpected circumstances.

Garibaldi clicked his tongue in quiet sympathy as he surveyed those already assembled. "Last time I saw a group of faces like this was when I was pallbearer at my Uncle Guido's funeral. And by comparison, they were ready to go dancing in the streets."

Ivanova, blue-gray eyes dark as her uniform tunic, loosed a restrained harrumph in answer. "What were you expecting? Tea and crumpets and a little pleasant discussion of the latest art vid?"

The chief shook his balding head as he claimed a seat on a tall stool near the kitchen area, not far from where the commander was sitting. "No, this is pretty much right on target — though I'd *hoped* someone might've missed hearing about it long enough to enjoy the day, like the rest of us had planned." His pointed glance singled out the captain.

Sheridan, whose course of pacing took him the length of the couch upon which Delenn and Lennier were seated, shook his head. "No such luck, Michael, but I appreciate the attempt. Right now, it's more important that we try to figure out why ISN decided now was the time to air this kind of... garbage, and just what they hope to get from it."

"I don't think there's any real doubt about where it came from," Ivanova commented, since the captain's remark was clearly an invitation for discussion. "We know that ISN's nothing but a propaganda machine for EarthGov these days, and we've all got a pretty good notion of who's really pulling *their* strings."

Sheridan's agreement was grim. "And we can be damn sure they'd be ecstatic if we just played nice and went away, or let them blow us to kingdom come. I don't suppose any of us honestly expected Earth would ignore us forever. Sooner or later, they were going to reach into their bag of dirty tricks and come up with a way to justify another assault on us."

"Yeah, and isn't this a doozy?" Garibaldi quipped. "Of course, it's on page one, chapter one of the *Official Paranoid's Handbook*: If big guns and armed troops won't win friends and influence people, pull out old bigotry and past grievances. Guaranteed to make a real impression every time. And their timing couldn't've been more perfect. It doesn't take a prophet to know that the ambassadors coming to tonight's reception are *not* going to like this."

"But why attack Ambassador Delenn?" Lennier asked, his puzzlement earnest. "Your Nightwatch already tried to use her to force us off the station and take control, and failed. With such tactics already laid bare, would not their next attack logically focus on the command staff, and your decision to rebel against your government?"

"Not *our* Nightwatch," the security chief corrected, unoffended by the Minbari's remarks, which a narrower mind might have interpreted as racist. "If I could figure out a way to do it, I'd slip something into the drinking water to turn every one of 'em bright orange, then round 'em up and herd 'em out the nearest airlock. They've been nothing but trouble from the start, and the longer they stay here undetected, the longer they have a chance to pull something *really* dangerous."

Sheridan agreed with both sets of sentiments. "I'd be just as happy if we could persuade them that voluntarily leaving Babylon 5 is in their own best interests. But I might as well wish for all of Earthforce to wake up and decide they're on the wrong side of this war and sign on with us. And you're right, Lennier, it *would* make sense for the people running ISN to mount a campaign against those of us who were behind the secession. But I learned a long time ago that when you're talking politics or the news media, the definition of *sense* isn't anything you'll ever find in a dictionary."

Garibaldi concurred. "Besides, Lennier, you're an open-minded kind of person, the sort who listens to all the sides and is still willing to give someone the benefit of the doubt. You've gotta look at this from the point of view of a creep who thinks a two-meter beam of solid beryllium is flexible. Boil it all down, and you're not looking at a campaign being aimed against *us*; it's designed for the people back home, and maybe those out here who aren't so sure breaking away from Earth was such a great idea, after all. They're not doing this to get a rise out of us; they're doing it to drum up sympathy for something they've got in the works."

He stood up, a habitual restlessness which added a broader range of body language to his words. "If you're going to pick a target to make 'em look like the villain, you don't go after your own people — especially not someone like the Captain. Regardless of what went on these last few months, there are probably still a lot of people who think of Captain Sheridan as a hero, saved the lives of their families or buddies or whatever during the War. When your side only *had* one hero in the whole bloody war, breaking that image is going to be damned tough. So if you want to start undermining things, you don't shoot for the hero in the hot-seat; you aim for the old enemy who's sitting right next to him, and giving him military support for protection."

"But the Ambassador is *not* your enemy...!" the aide began.

Ivanova chimed in. "You and I know that," she said, her demeanor sober. "Garibaldi knows it, the Captain knows it — hell, the whole station knows it, with maybe a few exceptions. We trust one another, not just because we have to, but because we've had time to learn that we *can*. We know the Ambassador would never stab us in the back like this. But what we know isn't the point. Whoever masterminded that news item probably figures Delenn is the best example of a known enemy we've got on board. She's one of the few Minbari most people on Earth know by name and on sight; they know she's got clout with your people, and could pull off just this kind of coup if she wanted to. If you were trying to single out someone to paint as a double-dealing turncoat, who would you pick? A leader of a race that had nearly wiped out your entire people, or one of your own heroes who might've been duped into believing a former enemy was now suddenly his friend?"

The young Minbari appeared inclined to maintain his protest, but Delenn intervened, setting one hand on his arm to still further rebuttal. “Their point is valid, Lennier,” she said calmly, though one could see fine lines of stress around her eyes. Even though she had dealt with such campaigns of hate before, experience did not make facing new ones any easier. “We’ve made many friends and allies among the Humans — good, trustworthy people who understand that the war between us was a mistake, a terrible misunderstanding that belongs to the past and should not come between us in our present efforts against the darkness. But both our peoples have factions that will not let go of old grievances and vendettas; they will not let their wounds heal, and even take pride in their misguided attempts to keep them open, festering. To many of our Warriors, Captain Sheridan is still Starkiller, the enemy who tricked them into a humbling defeat and embarrassed their pride beyond hope of reparation. To some of the Humans, I have become a symbol of hatred rather than a focus for reconciliation. They do not see my transformation as a gesture of peace, but cause for offense. If those controlling the Earth government wish to portray a person in our new Alliance as what they call ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ then who better than I to play the role?”

As she spoke, Delenn’s normally placid voice began to show the strain of her own internal distress, a tightness that increased with every word uttered. Aware of it, Lennier did not argue. John stopped behind her and settled his hands on her shoulders, a gesture of sympathy. The muscles beneath his fingers were as taut as a new drum-skin, and loosened only slightly at his touch.

“Unfortunately, she’s right,” he said, successfully suppressing the anger he felt at yet another unwarranted attack against Delenn. “That’s exactly the kind of tactics these pro-Earth fascists would come up with. Start a campaign of lies against our strongest allies, then, when you’ve got people believing it, turn the tables and make it look like we’re a bunch of traitors who’ve bought into their collusion. And since ISN’s there and we’re out here in the middle of nowhere, there’s not a thing we can do to stop our people from seeing any other inflammatory newscasts they come up with, not unless we shut down the entire newsfeed.”

Ivanova sniffed her displeasure. “Which would leave us with *no* idea of what they’re up to, or what they’ve got planned. Cute.”

Lennier’s frown deepened. “Then if there is nothing we can do to change or prevent what is happening, why are we here? What could we hope to gain from discussing a matter beyond our influence?”

Garibaldi, who had strolled into the dining nook to investigate the uncleared remains of the captain’s breakfast, offered a less depressed analysis. “Well, for one thing, it’s not entirely out of our control,” he said, gesturing with a slice of Minbari bread between appreciative bites. “Sure, we can’t do a thing about the bilge EarthGov’s got ISN pumping into the comlines, but we *can* try to make sure this raw sewage doesn’t end up poisoning the minds of everyone here on the station. My bet is they’re hoping to divide and conquer, and if we don’t let them, if we keep an eye on how our people are responding to this ISN crap, we can do whatever we can to nip any problems on this end in the bud.”

Ivanova smoothed back a stray wisp of dark hair as she contemplated the chief’s assessment. “So, do we start by putting together a rebuttal to send out as a station-wide announcement?”

Sheridan, however, shook his head and resumed his pacing. “Not yet. There’s an old saying: *Never explain. Your friends don’t need it, and your enemies won’t believe it, anyway.* If we treat this like all the other propaganda ISN’s been spitting out since it came back on line, ignore it, we may convince people that it’s nothing to worry about. But if we get defensive right off the bat, we’ll look like maybe we *do* have something to hide. No, we’re better off just keeping calm and not making this an official matter. Then if anyone *does* start asking questions we can’t dismiss, we can give ‘em the best defense of all: the truth. We’re not worried about a Minbari invasion because we know there isn’t going to *be* a Minbari invasion. If they aren’t satisfied with that...” He shrugged eloquently. “Well, we’ll just have to cross that bridge when and if we come to it.”

Some of the tension in Delenn’s expression faded. “Yes, I believe that *is* our best course of action. I’m certain some of my own people will view this as an insult, no matter what its source, but I’m also sure I can allay their suspicions. It’s the other members of our Alliance who concern me. What if they are unwilling to believe the truth?”

Well-versed in Russian tragedy, Susan understood her concern. “Then Clark and his people get exactly what they want: an opportunity to move in, take over the station, and blow the one real shot we’ve got to beat the Shadows before they destroy us.”

Garibaldi, however, was remarkably nonchalant. "Not gonna happen," he quipped, licking the last crumbs of celebration bread from his fingers. "This stuff is great, Lennier. You oughta try selling it to the restaurants, or in the Zocalo. You'd make a fortune." As quickly as he had diverged from the subject, he returned to it. "Too many of the governments who signed on with us know first-hand what they've got to lose if they leave the Alliance. And no matter what kind of lies ISN might feed 'em, they've got to know that Earthforce alone isn't strong enough to protect them from the Shadows. They may grumble and gripe about who's in charge and what might be going on behind their backs, but it's gonna take more than a few cleverly-worded rounds of ISN double-talk to make 'em break the treaty."

"And that's why I called you here," Sheridan said, his pacing once again halted. "Between the five of us, G'Kar, and Marcus, we've got as close as we can get to a finger on the pulse of this place, on all levels. We have to keep our eyes and ears and every other sense we've got open, not just to know how everyone's reacting, but to find out who the hell knew what was in that broadcast, and why they wanted to make sure I saw it."

The two junior officers exchanged glances; both pair of brown eyes then impaled the captain with an unspoken, "Huh?"

John produced the folded slip of blue-and-white paper and handed it to Garibaldi. "Lennier found that on the door to my quarters when he and Delenn brought my breakfast," he explained. "Someone here on B5 knew about that news item, what was going to be in it, and even when it was going to air. If we can find whoever wrote that message, I'll wager a year's pay that he or she will have more than a little idea of what's going on."

"No bet," was Michael's answer as he examined the note. As Sheridan had earlier, he felt the expensive quality of the paper beneath his fingers; he whistled softly. "Nice stuff," he judged. "If there's a vendor here on the station who handles it, I ought to have a list of suspects for you by the end of the day. If it was brought in from outside..." He shrugged and shook his head. "Well, at least it's a place to start. I presume none of you knows anybody who uses or sells this stuff, or recognizes the handwriting."

"No," Delenn said first. "And I fear our assumption that this was nothing more than an innocent message has ruined any hope of finding the culprit's fingerprints."

"Don't count on it," the chief assured her as he allowed Ivanova a look at the note. She took it gingerly, mindful of the ambassador's remark. "We've got scanners that can pick up even the tiniest DNA fragments, if there're any to be found. And the fact that whoever wrote this signed it with 'happy birthday' means that it was written only this morning, and by someone who heard our little diversionary tactic." He glanced at the two Minbari. "I take it you didn't see anyone who might've left it."

Lennier's reply held a mixture of apology and recrimination. "No. Although in light of the results, I am sorry I ever saw it."

"Don't be," Sheridan said, aware that the attaché was probably feeling responsible for ruining what had been planned as a day of pleasant relaxation. "You found the only lead we've got to staying a step ahead of whatever's coming, and that's nothing to regret."

"Amen to that," Ivanova added in support. "You know, this doesn't look like normal handwriting to me. Too neat, too even, too perfect."

"But it's not a computer printout," Garibaldi observed. "The ink's wrong, and you can feel ridges on the back from the uneven pressure you get with a pen."

"Oh, it's handwritten, I agree. But it looks like calligraphy, not everyday writing. Some of Brother Theo's monks go in for that sort of thing, and this looks a lot like their style."

Delenn's eyes widened. "Surely you're not suggesting one of Brother Theo's people is responsible for this?" She could scarcely think it possible, knowing what she did of the peaceful clerics living in Down Below.

Susan shook her head emphatically. "No, I don't believe that any more than you do. But it's possible they taught someone how to do it, never imagining they'd use it to cover their tracks in a scam like this."

“Then that’s another lead,” Sheridan said, offering his second a brief nod of commendation, “That’s just the kind of thing I want you and the Chief to look for: any trails of bread crumbs our friends in the Nightwatch might’ve accidentally leaked behind ‘em — ‘cause I’ll wager my last credit one of their people is behind that note. The more information we have on what’s going and what’s coming, the better we can deal with it.”

Garibaldi retrieved the message paper, gave it another glance, then slipped it into a pocket. “Do you want me to start asking questions, or just sniff around a little and see what stinks?”

“Just sniff around, for now. Asking questions always brings out the paranoia in certain types, and I want to keep this low key so they won’t go to ground before we can catch them. Susan, you know Brother Theo; ask him if they’ve been teaching calligraphy classes, or if they know of anyone on the station who specializes in it. I think we can trust him to keep this to himself, and make sure any investigation he makes stays under the table. Michael, ask G’Kar to report anything he and the other Narns in security might hear about this newscast that we should be aware of. They’re neither Minbari nor Human, so they’ll probably have a better chance of picking up on how the other races are reacting. Since we know Delenn didn’t make that phony transmission, chances are ISN’s using either state-of-the-art three-d rendering or someone under a Changeling Net to pose as her. You’ve got people in security with no connections to Nightwatch who have experience in vid analysis; get them to pin down any flaws in that broadcast that might prove one of those methods was being used. And find somebody you can trust to be discreet to help check out possible sources of that paper.”

Garibaldi acknowledged the order with a brisk nod. “Will do — but it won’t be easy if I have to send someone around to the vendors and ask questions about buyers. All the merchants on station know my people, and they’re gonna want to know why we’re checking into this.”

“Perhaps I may be of assistance,” Lennier interjected, eager to help. “It is not unusual for ambassadorial aides to purchase special supplies for their superiors. Vir Cotto, for instance, often makes arrangements to purchase luxury items for Ambassador Mollari. Although it would appear suspicious for one of your officers to inquire after an expensive item such as this, it would be completely unquestioned, were I to ask.”

The chief’s expression showed his appreciation for Lennier’s offer, but a hint of concern as well. “Wouldn’t that violate your rules about not lying, if you go around saying you’re buying something for Ambassador Delenn when you’re not?”

“Not at all. There’s no reason for me to say I’m *buying* the paper, only that the Ambassador is interested in locating a source for it. That *is* the truth, is it not?”

“Very much so,” that ambassador agreed. “Thank you, Lennier. I’m sure this will be a great help.”

Sheridan smiled in approval. “Then we’ve got our plan of action set. Susan, if you’ll give me half an hour to shower and change into my uniform, I’ll relieve you in C-and-C—“

“No you won’t, sir,” Ivanova interrupted, the crisp edge to her tone a sign of impending stubbornness. She quickly rose to her feet, prepared to literally stand in his way. “You’re not scheduled to return to duty until 20:00 hours, remember?”

John waved it aside as a matter of no consequence. “Yes, I remember, but that was before *this* happened—“

“Doesn’t change a thing, sir. Your schedule still stands, and if you come within fifty feet of C-and-C before tomorrow morning, I’ll have Doctor Hobbs confine you to quarters for working an unauthorized shift.”

The captain’s dismissal became a frown of annoyance. “Ivanova...” he began threateningly.

Garibaldi intervened on her behalf. “She’s right, Captain. You can’t flush the whole thing, not now.”

“Why? It’s not like we’ve never had to cancel leaves when things got rough, and this doesn’t even qualify as official R -and-R.”

“Maybe not — but this is more important than that. Not because of the birthday scam,” he amended to forestall Sheridan’s protest, “but because half the crew found out about it when we went around juggling schedules to make it work — *and* because of those things Doctor Hobbs turned up in your medical records. Do you realize just how long it’s been since you’ve had more than two or three hours of down-time that didn’t involve recuperation?”

Sheridan opened his mouth to quote the precise date of his last leave — then abruptly, he closed it. The last time he could recall planning a vacation from work had been almost four years before, when the *Agamemnon* had put in at Centauri Prime, the leave he’d had to cancel only two weeks before Anna died.

My God, he thought, stunned by the reality, *have I buried myself in my work that long?* He sank down onto the arm of the sofa beside Delenn, momentarily enervated by this shocking realization.

Hesitant, he cleared his throat before answering. “It’s... ah... it’s been a while, I guess.”

“Yes, sir,” Michael agreed, almost cheerfully. “Five years, three months, two weeks, and an odd number of days. Now, I’m no one to point fingers when it comes to skipping leaves and marrying myself to my career — but even I can tell we’re looking at an unhealthy length of time with too much work and no real breaks. Hell, if it was one of us with that record and you doing the talking, you’d be calling for an armed escort to pack our bags and cuff us to the next outbound transport.”

He gestured expansively, allowing for different circumstances. “So okay, we can’t do that. Not only don’t we have the authority, but we all know things are just too dicey for any one of us to be away from our jobs or the station for long. But we *can* arrange for you to have half a day where you can kick back and not worry that everything’s going to go to hell in the next few minutes. Can you honestly call that unreasonable?”

Sheridan shook his head. “No. And I appreciate what you tried to do, Michael — all of you,” he added, his glance sweeping the others to assure them they were included in his gratitude. “But given what’s going on, do you really think one day off is going to make any difference to my health, mental or physical?”

The chief looked him straight in the eye, undaunted. “Yes, I do — *especially* given what’s going on. When you left the *Aggy* to take charge of this floating nuthouse, you went straight from one high-pressure assignment to the next, no break. And when you got here, right in time to deal with the *Trigati* and pick up the mess Jeff got dragged away from when the President was assassinated, you hit the floor running and haven’t had enough time to really catch your breath since.”

His timbre became serious. “None of us here are stupid, John; we know that things aren’t going to get better until they’ve gotten a hell of a lot worse — and whatever happens, you’re going to be right in the middle of it until it’s over. Maybe it *is* only a few lousy hours, but you deserve it, and you probably *need* it more than you think you do. It’ll be good for you, it’ll be good for the crew’s morale to think they’re doing something nice for you — and believe me, there are going to be a *lot* of hacked-off ambassadors around here if they find out we were handing ‘em a line. Besides, it’s exactly what you *have* to do if you don’t want to tip off our little note writer, and if you want to convince everyone not to worry: continue the day as planned, as if nothing happened.”

Delenn, who had listened thoughtfully, offered her support. “I understand, Mister Garibaldi. If so many people have been inconvenienced by our efforts to appease Doctor Hobbs, then to change our plans now because of a newscast we know to be a lie will only convince them that it is at least in part a truth. You cannot do that, John.”

“And you don’t have to worry about who’s minding the store, sir,” Ivanova added. “We’re going to need someone in C-and-C to field questions if they do come in, and I’m not really needed for the investigation, not yet. It’s going to take a while to track down all possible sources for that paper; in the meantime, Garibaldi or Lennier can go have a chat with Brother Theo. They’ve both dealt with him before, and I’m sure he’ll be happy to cooperate no matter *who* we send down. Except you, sir,” she added, the twitch of a droll half-smile tugging at one corner of her lips.

Catching her inference, Sheridan’s eyes lifted heavenward in exasperation. “Good Lord, isn’t there *anyone* on the station you didn’t drag into this little conspiracy?”

The commander's small shrug was all innocence. "A few. But they're mostly people who hate your guts, anyway, so we didn't figure you'd mind."

The hazel eyes now closed; their owner sighed. "You guys didn't miss a trick. Did you ever bother to stop and ask yourselves whether or not I'd want to have anything to do with this?"

Garibaldi's grin was bright with mischief. "No, sir. When we first came up with the idea, Susan regaled me with a very interesting story about a little *soirée* the crew on Io arranged for you after you'd been in command a few years, 'cause you'd spent six weeks solid trying to make the place match up with some airheaded senator's idea of 'perfect'—"

"All right, all right, you've made your point!" Sheridan interrupted before the chief could launch into any details. He was 99% positive he knew the incident to which Ivanova had referred, and while there was nothing seriously sordid about it, pulling off the event had involved some rather spectacular breeches of station regs, which he had let slide since it had provided a break he hadn't even realized he'd needed. Framed in the sort of words Garibaldi was fond of using, it could easily take on a rather lurid air, and he was reluctant for either of the Minbari to hear it and get the wrong idea. "So you've got the whole day mapped out for me. Ivanova will take care of C-and-C and field whatever crises come up, you'll send the Narns and your people around the station to sniff out information, and you and Lennier will take care of the rest. Now, just what the hell am I supposed to do until the reception? Sit here in my quarters and twiddle my thumbs? By your logic, hiding out for whatever reason would look just as suspicious."

Delenn touched his arm to attract his attention; he looked down at her and was favored with a small but charmingly persuasive smile. "Actually, John, I have a perfect idea for how we can *both* spend the time"

III

Revenge proves its own executioner.

John Ford

Only one floor below the Captain's quarters and not far away, another person was also considering the matter of time. In the case of Vir Cotto, the contemplation focused not upon how he should spend it, but upon the vastly more pleasant and constructive ways in which he wished he could. Less than four years before, he had thought the life of an Ambassadorial Aide would be glamorous compared to the life of ridicule he had been forced to endure among his family back on Centauri Prime. When the job began to prove less pleasurable than he had anticipated — a circumstance, reflection told him, that had started along with his superior's association with the despicable Mr. Morden — he had somehow managed to learn to live with it. His tenure at the Centauri Diplomatic Mission on Minbar had almost made him forget those past unpleasanties, until that, too, ended, and he was sent back here to Babylon 5 to try his best to function as both attaché and conscience to his superior, Ambassador Londo Mollari.

On this particular morning, he was taking a moment to daydream while the computer spent a moment absorbing the changes he had made to Londo's schedule of appointments. In the two days since Lady Adira had been discovered dead in her cabin on board the ship bringing her to Babylon 5, Mollari had been disinclined to honor any previously made commitments, and it had fallen on Vir to reschedule or cancel any appointments the Ambassador refused to accept.

For the most part, Vir couldn't blame him. Londo had been so looking forward to Adira's visit that, for a brief while, the aide had let himself hope that her presence might finally bring the Ambassador to his senses, open his eyes to the horrible things going on around them — things in which Londo had no small part — and at long last make him see the error of his ways. When she died — and more, the manner in which she had been murdered — all of Vir's hopes for such a transformation died along with her. He felt deeply sorry for the loss Londo had suffered, and he was more than willing to allow him the time he required to mourn, but he could not dispel the disquieting suspicion that in his private moments, Londo was spending as much time plotting for revenge against Adira's murderer as he did in grief.

Fortunately, Mollari had not been able to lock himself away entirely, nor to drown all his wits in alcohol. It was necessary that Adira be laid to rest according to the proper rituals, and that her remains be returned to Centauri Prime for appropriate internment. He had seen to the matter without Vir's prompting, and for that, the attaché was both relieved and glad. Much as he sometimes hated Londo — or rather, what Londo had become — he still owed the man a great deal, and he continued to hope that someday, he would have a change of heart. That he saw to Adira's final needs without any nagging from his aide was a sign that there was still a good man buried beneath the indifferent and vengeful exterior, and Vir tried to take it as progress in a positive direction.

At length, the computer signaled its completion of the assigned task. Vir scanned the remaining items on the day's itinerary, and found only one remained: speaking to the Captain about obtaining special clearance so that the shuttle which would carry Adira home could depart as soon as it was ready. Vir didn't mind doing this for his superior, as it might ease his burden of grief, if only just a little.