

DESTINY STRIKES

A SHORT STORY
TALES FROM THE READING DRAGON INN

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Introduction

This is a short story which was created by me as a bridge between my novels *Thomas the Poisoner* and *Triskaidekaphilia*. It features the first appearance of Brinder Calum the Shadowine Bounty Hunter as a youth. I hope you enjoy it on its own merits, but for me its another little gift for the readers of my novels who may be curious about the Academy and some of its students.



Chapter 1 Strange Destiny

Brinder looked up at his father sitting at the table eating his breakfast and spoke, "There is a priest at the door. He says you must speak to him."

Brinder saw the odd look his father gave his mother. His mother had a fervent look of ecstasy mixed with trepidation.

His father stoically spoke, "Finish your breakfast. I will speak with the priest."

Brinder's mother fussed as they finished eating. A few minutes later his father returned with a grim expression as he inspected the remains of his breakfast.

Brinder's mother spoke, "Has the time of selection come?"

His father replied, "Yes Finella. They have summoned all the youth from eight to five years old to appear at the temple. It has been three years already, and the White Raven has said that the tax must be again paid."

Finella replied, "Rexis it is a great honor if Brinder is selected."

Rexis sighed, "I would rather be less honored for the certain knowledge I will have a son to inherit from me. There are several other youths, and it can also be hoped that perhaps none will draw her eye at all from this group."

After that next cycle Brinder stood rigidly in the front of the temple. He was dressed in his best formal dark robe. Like the other youths standing in line on either side of him he was uncertain what the exact meaning of this ceremony was. He looked to his left and right briefly in curiosity and noted that most of the other children were older than him. It also seemed that many of them were nervous to be standing in front of their community as the priest stood with his back to them before the altar chanting his ritual.

A quick count let him know nine boys and ten girls stood in a single line facing the altar. The oldest was almost nine, and the three youngest were five years old like him. A glance over his shoulder showed the parents of the children gathered while sitting in chairs watching the ritual. After their arrival they had all been told that the White Raven, the goddess of death, and queen of the Shadow Realm would send her minion to select any youth for her service she deemed acceptable. As Shadar-kai, the people of shadow, who lived under her tolerance in her realm, it was their duty to appear before her minions when summoned.

The priest turned around to speak to those assembled, "I humbly ask that you all kneel to pray and give thanks to the White Raven. She has graciously kept our people alive in this shadowed land of dead spirits. We survive by her generous blessings on the Shadowine. We come when summoned by her, and give service as we are called by her. I beseech the White Raven to look upon us, and judge whether any candidates here are worthy to enter her service."

The priest turned back to the altar, and completed the ritual as everyone cautiously looked up from their kneeling position at the space behind the altar. A brief shaded darkening eclipsed the rest of the room as the wall behind the



altar glowed brighter than the surrounding gloom. The priest and candidates were illuminated by that glow. Brinder noticed that several of the candidates deliberately pulled more shadow about themselves to make their appearance less obvious.

The image of the White Raven appeared glowing from the wall behind the altar. Her brightly shining elegant white gown eclipsed everyone else's vision until she was the only thing still clearly seen. Her long raven hair flowed in a silky manner contrasting with her pale alabaster skin. She sat upon her throne in the palace of judgment looking through the projection at the priest and nineteen candidates presented before her. She seemed at least twelve feet tall even sitting, and for a goddess this was expected as appropriate by her followers.

The White Raven's voice was glory itself as she spoke in the language of shadows, "I put forth a call to the people of shadow. I see before me once more all those gathered from across my realm. Each of you put forth as candidates to enter my service. When my herald calls out your name, step up to the priest in your location. These are the ones I have judged worthy to enter my service. The priest at your location will make arrangements for you to travel to my halls of glory."

A black armored Shadowine stepped into view beside the White Raven. Everyone knew he was Yenton first herald of their goddess. Each of the candidates at their location began listening closely as Yenton began calling out names from a list held in his memory. The first twelve names were from other locations, and then the thirteenth name was called.

Yenton spoke the destined name, "Harolin Thugos."

Brinder breathed an unintentional sigh of release. He watched as Harolin stepped forward from their line to stand before the priest. Brinder recalled that Harolin was seven. The parents speaking earlier had said Harolin was considered one of the most likely candidates due to his pious nature.

The other candidates also seemed to be relaxing. Brinder had been told by his parents that it was extremely rare for the White Raven to select more than one candidate from a single location. Only waiting out the ceremony as the candidates were selected from the other locations remained. As soon as the twentieth name would be called, marking a person selected from the location of each temple in their lands, they felt it was to be all over except for the closing ceremonies.

Yenton called the twenty first name. Quiet gasps of shock seemed to go through the assembled people at the temple. A faint muttering continued as even more names were called. Then Brinder held his breath as the twenty sixth name approached.

Yenton spoke the destined name, "Carona Gethos."

Carona Gethos stepped forward to stand before the priest next to Harolin. She was almost nine, a slight bit too young for the last selection ceremony, and so close to an age of being past selection with this one. Two had been selected from their community, a heavy price indeed since two healthy young citizens in their small community would certainly be missed. Yenton continued until he read off a total



of forty names. Two from each temple in number although Brinder considered it was possible more or less may have come from another individual temple.

Although losing two young members from their community to the White Raven's tax would be felt most dearly, the cost was mitigated a bit by the fact it appeared that each community had to pay the same price. Brinder thought that times must be tough indeed for the White Raven to require such a levy. After Yenton finished speaking the last name, the White Raven stood in their presence.

An astonished hush silenced the people watching. It was unheard of for the White Raven to freely stand before a gathering of her devoted worshipers. Even the local priest seemed to be at a momentary loss regarding the proper protocol. He quickly settled on bowing his head to the floor, and the worshipers all quickly followed suit.

The White Raven spoke once more in the Shadowed Tongue, "I know I have placed a heavy burden on you my devoted followers this year. I can only say that the candidates who have been selected will do each of your communities proud in their service to me. Some are destined to become the next generation of priests, and shall return to your communities in time. Others will eventually enter my palace and serve me directly. However, one more will be called for special service in my name."

The White Raven's herald Yenton looked at her briefly, and then called out, "I introduce you to the Greater Spirit Balinac."

The image on the wall began to dim. The bright palace of the White Raven surrendered itself to encroaching darkness of shadow. Brinder saw it enter the image from the side. It was a nightmare vision of horrible darkness deeper than any in the entire Shadow Realm. Even the radiance of the divine White Raven seemed dimmed in its presence, as it could not be illuminated by her holy light. Its deep echoing voice boomed out through the projected image on the wall.

Balinac spoke, "I require the services of one of the White Raven's Shadowine followers. They will come into my service leaving their family and home. I will be their new guardian as they are raised and trained to perform the tasks I will set for them. Their service to me will be counted as direct service to the White Raven when they die and their spirit returns to her realm. Additionally, the community I select them from will be rewarded as well. That community will be allowed to call upon my protection once only in a time of great need. As you may well know, even a god will not scoff at such an offer. So consider your reward ample for the price."

A great black smoky furred cat with three tails emerged from the shadow of the priest right in front of Brinder. It stood at least nine feet high at the shoulder towering above the assembled Shadowine. Waves of terrible fear rolled through the assembled Shadowine, people of shadow, before the terrible beast. The priest of the White Raven turned to face it.

The priest spoke to it with a slight tremble in his voice, "Is it one of my group you are taking oh most terrible Godkiller?"



The beast spoke in simultaneous voice with the humungous shadowed form in the palace of the White Raven, "I prefer Balinac if you please. Godkiller is such a prejudicial name after all."

The priest nodded, "Balinac it is then. The legends of you always speak of two tails being your mark."

The local Balinac nodded as it spoke simultaneously in both locations again, "I've changed it to three recently now. It is a new addition in the past two hundred years prime standard calendar."

Balinac lowered its head and moved it closer to the priest, "Put out your hand brave priest of the Shadar-Kai."

Brinder could see a small dark ring dropped from the mouth of Balinac into the hand of the priest.

Balinac spoke in both voices, "By this ring I may be summoned one time. I will only allow it if your community is in peril. I will permanently destroy any peril which directly threatens your village just one time, even if they be a god. Such is my promise to you followers of the White Raven, in exchange for the life and service of one of your own."

The White Raven spoke, "Balinac, the Three Tailed Beast, the Deepest Shadow, Guardian of the doom of the gods, and companion of the Shinigami the new Slayer of the Gods. Make your selection from among my followers. Any will serve you to the best of their ability as it is my command."

The local Balinac turned and faced the assembled prostrated candidates. Brinder found himself compelled to look up at it without any fear. It gazed back directly at him.

Balinac spoke in both locations, "I choose Brinder Calum to enter my service for the duration of his life. Come with me young Shadowine. You are going to leave this life behind now."

Brinder stood up and walked next to Balinac facing the priest and the image on the wall.

The White Raven spoke, "The choice is made, and the deal is sealed. Let none question it further, or begrudge the necessity. Brinder Calum you will serve Balinac as if you were serving me directly. I expect loyalty, trust, and absolute obedience otherwise I shall be greatly displeased. Respond to my priest, and I shall know your response."

Brinder spoke with a clear voice, "I obey you mighty goddess of death. I shall serve this being as if serving you."

The darkness in the image receded as Brinder and Balinac merged with the shadow cast by the priest beneath them.



Chapter 2 Academy

Brinder was heading out from the russet brick boy's rectory into the bright sunlight. He still found the concept of lights in the sky a strange one even after nearly ten years of learning and training at the Academy. It still bemused him to see the strange assortment of young beings which were taught there. Races he had never dreamed existed as a child were represented by the other beings he met along his walk down the path.

The course work was diverse to suit the various skills being taught, with a set of special focus programs in arcane, spiritual, and shadow force manipulation. Most of the arcane courses were attended by the high elven race students with a fair assortment of gnomes humans, and the occasional halfling in their ranks. Many of the spiritual courses had numerous kobolds, humans, and dwarves in them.

Brinder found that as one of the very few Shadowine at the Academy he excelled in the shadow regimen being instructed. Only the one Twiline girl Shandra had as good a grasp of the subject, and Brinder had a better innate feel for the manipulation of shadow compared to her. His first year instructor Gathos had cautioned him early on in his time there that it was lazy to lean too much on just Brinder's innate ability as opposed to learning to expand extraordinary talent through study. Since that time Brinder had excelled to the top of his class in shadow manipulation, and was also performing strongly in martial instruction.

Brinder hurried to catch up to Shandra as he saw her emerge from the girl's rectory building ahead of him. Shandra's black skin and bald head with sharply pointed ears told much of both her shadow touched nature, and her people's servitude to the dark goddess Lilith, corrupter of the high elves. Shandra had shown some promise in arcane craft early in her days at the Academy, but ancient hatreds were hard to quell even here. She had eventually requested a transfer to shadow study to avoid the hassle of dealing with a largely high elf student body in the arcane arena.

Brinder greeted her, "Hey Shandra! Wait for me a moment."

Shandra paused to allow him to catch up, "Hello Brinder. It's nice to see you out in daylight for a change."

Brinder's shadow shifted in a manner not suggestive of the sun or his movement. Shandra gave him a pleasant smile.

Shandra chuckled, "I wish I could get my shadow to gather so deeply on a bright day like this one. I think you could fade into it even now."

Brinder laughed back, "It isn't easy let me tell you. It does keep me cooler in this bright sun. I envy you your dark skin though. This pale grey sticks out like a ghost at night."

Shandra asked, "Do you have any idea who the special guest is supposed to be at the special assembly today?"



Brinder smiled, "I asked Myr after his class on advanced shadow techniques yesterday. He says a special guest instructor is coming, and that a new line of accelerated training is going to be starting soon. He suggested that this one is for us shadow specialists for a change."

Shandra grinned widely, "It's about time. I'm pretty sick of the arcane classes getting all the special attention lately. Do you realize they now have five specialty lines to choose from already?"

Brinder shrugged, "I hadn't kept up with it. I've no aptitude for arcane work, so it really holds no interest for me. As far as the spiritual line of study goes, I'm told you are either born able, or will never be able to do it. At least with the shadow line of study, anyone who can grasp the concepts can do it. Don't worry about it too much Shandra. Just think they have over sixty different martial lines available for study here. The martial classes are who really have an advantage in flexibility don't you think. Even Hardtack himself has come by as a guest instructor several times. I really enjoy watching him make the other instructors look like inept first year students in comparison."

Shandra rolled her eyes, "What do you expect? They call him a grand master level martial instructor. Rumor has it that he even personally instructed the Shinigami you know."

Brinder smiled, "I heard him mention it in one of his guest classes on the use of the short sword. I've decided to get one of the Wakizashi blades like his as soon as I can afford one."

Shandra snickered, "Good luck at that. I heard that his blades are adamantine. You could own a large community in the Prime for the price of one of those weapons. Even the astral dweller's spectral swords are said to not hold up against one."

Brinder sighed, "Ah well. Any idea why we are holding the special assembly outside today? This sun is getting kind of hot even with the extra shadow."

Shandra answered, "Remember Myr said not to use so much shadow for cover. It will be a dead giveaway when you receive your assignment on the prime. Remember to think human."

Brinder made his jaw slack, "Duhhh."

Shandra laughed, "Isn't it more like this."

Shandra rolled her eyes back into her head and staggered along blindly. Brinder instinctively reached out across her chest to keep her from accidentally stumbling into a bush beside the path. She opened her eyes in shock for a moment, and looked over at him cooly.

Shandra practically purred, "Is that an offer?"

Brinder registered where his hand was, and blushed furiously as he pulled it back, "I'm sorry. I was just trying to save you from falling. I didn't mean to grab you that way."

Shandra dropped her hand briefly to sharply tap his behind, "I know, and now we're even. Now let's hurry before we're late."



Brinder and Shandra stood in line with their fellow shadow class members. Their group was the smallest of the three groups assembled, with the majority of students being lined up with the arcane class, and the medium sized group belonging to the spiritual class. Students of all three classes were required to take martial instruction, so there was no separate martial class. The martial instructors acted as free ranging proctors for the other three classes keeping them organized, and lined up neatly by instruction years.

The academy headmaster Glorandel raised his graying head and stroked his long beard looking toward the sky. Most of the students automatically followed the direction of his gaze. Brinder felt the black metal ring on his right hand tingle in a way that he felt indicated a shadow gate was nearby.

Brinder thought at his ring, “Balinac.”

Balinac’s disconnected voice was heard in his mind speaking in a soft female voice, “Shadow Gate process initiating. Mistress Yuki, Shadow Gate will open in twenty, nineteen, eighteen. . .”

Brinder began silently mouthing the count along with Balinac’s voice in his mind, “Ten, nine, eight . . .”

Brinder noticed a few other shadow students, the ones which were also wearing a ring like his were doing the same. Balinac’s count was pervasive as they each began counting out loud.

“ . . . Four, Three, Two, One. Shadow Gate initiated.”

Brinder saw the jealous looks from several of the arcane students. It was only the few shadow students graced with rings like his who could accurately predict the exact arrival of a shadow gate. They had learned the trick of briefly taping into Balinac’s counting a few years back, and had taken to finishing the count out loud to annoy the usually cocky arcane students.

Above them in the sky a gigantic curtain of impenetrable shadow rippled into the bright blue from nothingness. It was several hundred yards across horizontally and vertically, and it never failed to impress the shadow students with the sheer raw power it took to create a planar dimensional gate of that size. It made their attempts at shadow manipulation seem rudimentary at best.

A subtle “Ahhh.” sound escaped the assembled students as they watched the gate unfurl like a flag of darkness in a stiff breeze.

Then the nose of a titanic astral ship breached the surface of the gateway. As the bow cleared the threshold of the gate they could all see the proud “Nibelungen” spelled out in bold common lettering. It was the astral fleet carrier returning to base after five long years traveling the aether. Brinder felt his heart stir with pride. He had not helped build the “Nibelungen”, and he had also not yet qualified to crew it, but it was the mother ship of the astral fleet operated by the Shinigami Mica Lichan, and commanded by his wife Admiral Yuki Lichan.

As the titanic astral vessel continued through the gateway, Brinder noticed the plumes dark smoke pouring from the top deck of the carrier as it continued to emerge. It was obvious that several of the living wood arcane war golems must



have been burning on the surface deck to create such a smoking fume to rise from it. Then he noticed the iron sides of the Nibelungen were scarred and pitted as if challenged with both fire and acid. A general commotion of concerned noises broke out among the students.

As the ship cleared the gate Shandra whispered over to him, “Where have they come from?”

Brinder focused on his ring with the question and the soft female voice of Balinac replied, “Outer Phlostigen adjacent to the Greater Abyssal. Now leave me alone as I am too busy to satisfy your curiosity at the moment master Brinder.”

Brinder whispered back to Shandra, “Outer Phlostigen adjacent to the Greater Abyssal it seems. It doesn’t look like they had a good time of it. I think a lot of the older model war golems were damaged or lost entirely. I wonder if the rest of the fleet is doing well.”

Shandra projected confidence as she answered, “The Shinigami is aboard the battle ship Götterdämmerung leading the fleet. I’m certain they will pull through.”

Two hours later Brinder and Shandra sat in their classroom with the rest of their designated year quietly studying. Their class had been provided a reading assignment by their homeroom instructor Myr, and told to await the arrival of their special guest quietly. While several other students incautiously whispered among themselves in the absence of their teacher, Brinder quietly read the assigned section of the textbook. He still remembered the day the White Raven had called upon him to serve, and he vividly remembered the goddess’ command to be obedient more than he recalled any instructions from his own parents.

Brinder looked up from his textbook as the other shadow students grew quiet. Myr walked into the classroom followed by a short female human with black hair wearing a formal black ship captain’s uniform. Behind the female human casually ambled in a friendly looking curly haired pudgy halfling.

The academy students all stood up rigidly behind their desks as they saw the Admiral Yuki Lichan of the Nibelungen, wife of the Shinigami, standing before them. Brinder thought it rude when the pudgy halfling shook its head and chuckled at them. Brinder thought something about the halfling wasn’t quite right and it caught his attention enough to bother him. He thought back about the last chapter he had just read about assassination as a means of political control.

Most of the chapter had covered the history of the now legendary Thomas the Poisoner, and a fair amount of it also covered the exploits of the Shinigami Mica Lichan and his wife Admiral Yuki Lichan. Yet something else briefly bothered his mind about it. A small one sentence reference in the last third of the material he had read.

Myr spoke, “Be seated class. Standing before the class today is Admiral Yuki Nene, commander of the astral fleet carrier Nibelungen, and her guest. However, today we have a quick quiz before instruction begins. Everyone, write your name on a piece of parchment, and answer these two questions. Who is potentially the



most dangerous person in this room at this moment? Why are they the most dangerous? Fold your parchment in half, and pass it forward when you have finished with your answer. Hurry up now. No extra points for lengthy answers, a line or two will suffice to prove your knowledge, or lack thereof.”

Brinder wrote: The halfling named Alvos, because there is no known record of her capabilities taught to us yet. However, she keeps company with notably highly dangerous Admiral Yuki Lichan. The unknown is the greater potential danger of the two.

Myr collected the answers and began reviewing them all briefly before calling out, “Master Brinder, the majority of the class selected Captain Yuki Nene as the most dangerous person in the room. The most common reason listed was because of her notable training as a Ninja assassin as was discussed at length in your chapter reading assignment today. Another smaller portion of the class selected me. The most commonly listed reason was my penchant for downgrading poorly reasoned answers. That group will of course be downgraded for poor reasoning as they have suggested. Would you care to elaborate for the class on why you were one of two people in the class who selected the harmless halfling standing here beside our esteemed guest?”

The rest of the class except Shandra snickered as Brinder rose to answer, “My answer was the halfling because she keeps highly dangerous company in the form of Admiral Yuki Lichan, but still seems harmless. To my observation that suggests this halfling is Alvos, the only still living being who has ever survived killing the Shinigami according to our chapter reading lesson for today. Since the textbook did not specify how this was done, I calculated her ability to mask her apparent deadliness was a definite sign of a superior assassin to Admiral Lichan whose exploits and capabilities are well known at the Academy. In this case the unknown clearly carries the greater potential danger of the two.”

Myr spoke to the silent class, “Excellent response, and proper reasoning in a short time frame Master Brinder. Shandra, explain to the class why you also selected the halfling standing here.”

Shandra stood and spoke briefly, “Never trust a shortling sir. They are sneaky bastards.”

Myr nodded his head, “While you didn’t demonstrate knowledge of the chapter lesson, you did demonstrate a knowledge that comes from hard fought battles between the twiline and the shortlings as you call them. I will also note you derived your answer more quickly than Master Brinder, although without an applied knowledge of your assignment. High marks there Shandra, but the top marks go to Master Brinder for today’s quiz. Now let me introduce you to Admiral Yuki Lichan and Alvos. Perhaps they will choose to enlighten you with some of their recent exploits.”

One hour later Myr dismissed the class to break for lunch. Captain Yuki Lichan had to depart shortly after her initial greetings to the class, but the halfling



Alvos remained to talk to the class about the recent battle the fleet had engaged in near the Great Abyssal. Brinder noted that although Alvos had seemed friendly and open to questions, she had immediately steered the conversation to the pressing topic of the fleet, and easily dodged any discussion of her own capabilities or activities.

Alvos called out to Brinder and Shandra as they started to depart their classroom for the communal lunch room, “You two are relieved of the rest of your classes for today. Come with me.”

Brinder looked over at Shandra who looked uncomfortable as he answered, “Where are we going?”

Alvos’ tone surprisingly became icy like winter steel, “Don’t question me child. You’ll find out when we arrive.”

They followed Alvos outside the building, and began walking down the trail toward the training grounds in the forest. Something seemed wrong about the situation to Brinder, who glanced over at Shandra and nodded at her. Shandra mouthed “danger” back at him. They dropped back and spread out slightly so as not to both be within reach of a single weapon strike. As they had been taught, one of them would become the bait to create the opening for the other.

As they entered a dark patch of woods with shadowed limbs, quickly Alvos vanished from Brinder’s sight. Brinder quickly shadow stepped to transport himself in front of Shandra facing her five paces away so that they could both see the other’s back. Brinder saw Alvos step from the shadow behind Shandra with a raised knife in hand. Brinder dropped his waiting noose of shadow around Alvos’ neck and yanked her back away from Shandra suddenly strangling the halfling before the knife could fall. The body of Alvos dropped with a heavy thud to the ground behind Shandra. Then Brinder jumped in surprise as he heard a similar thud behind him.

They both turned around to see the dead body of Alvos behind each of them strangled by the other’s shadow noose.

Brinder’s jaw dropped, “Two bodies? They were twins?”

Shandra was obviously sweating nervously, “Damn, I knew Shortlings can’t be trusted.”

They heard pleasant laughter above them and saw Alvos sitting on a high tree branch with a friendly almost childlike smile.

Alvos spoke, “You two will do quite well I think. You have the killer instinct to react quickly and correctly. That is the earmark of a good potential assassin. The rest can be learned with time. Myr told me he had two promising candidates, but left it up to me to discover which two. I’m the one who suggested your quiz today, and the chapter reading lesson. I’m deliberately not spoken of much around here. I’m Alvos sensei of the Shadow Assassin corps. I’m a grandmaster assassin, and you should know killing me twice has done you no good. Those two are simple simulacra. This current simulacra is much more complex and deadly than those



two. It's hard driving three at one time anyway, kind of like playing three games of shoji at once."

Brinder spoke, "You are driving a war golem? Three war golems at once?"

Alvos nodded, "Yes, undercover stealth models. Considered very top secret. I've been doing this for a few centuries now, so three at once really isn't that hard."

The other two Alvos stood up and saluted. Then they shadow stepped out of sight.

Alvos laughed again, "I have to return those two to inventory before they are missed. I kind of borrowed them from our research department without permission. They are mechanical models of war golem. This body is a biological one. Ultimately the mechanical models are more durable, but much less flexible in the manner of usage. With this body I could kill the Shinigami again if I choose to do so."

Shandra spoke, "What now?"

Alvos replied, "Now you become my students since you have passed my test. Don't worry, if there is one being I don't want to offend it is Balinac. She is the only being which could kill me for certain really, so with her as your patron the two of you are under no threat of real harm by my hand."

Brinder asked, "What is the game plan?"

Alvos replied, "For you both six months of accelerated special assassination training with a shadow force emphasis since you are qualified in that area. That is the most I can spare from the fleet operations while the 'Nibelungen' is repaired and retrofitted at the moment. Then we had probably better get Shandra up to speed on some additional arcane training since I know you've been independently augmenting your capabilities in that area. Trust me honey I know all about the kinds of prejudice you're facing, I've personally been killed more than once using the body of a twiline. Also you are very right about us shortlings being sneaky bastards. I'll see to it that headmaster Glorandel himself will tutor you in arcane matters for the next year. As a half elf, he understands the unreasoned enmity from the high elves better than many."

Brinder asked, "What about me after you are done?"

Alvos replied as she nimbly dropped down from branch to branch till she reached the ground, "Balinac wants you active in the field to complete your training after I get you started on the basics. You are going to learn self sufficiency by joining an adventuring party. Balinac has pulled the correct kinds of leverage to get you stationed on some backwater world on the prime material. She had to leverage some of deities there to permit the transfer. A couple of them are allied with Number Seven at the moment."

Alvos paused for a breath before continuing, "As far as the lay of the land is considered where you're going, usually nothing greater than an ancient dragon shows up as a threat there. There are a couple of highly connected powers running around, but it's nothing you should fail at trying to slip under their notice. Balinac's communication rings are somewhat limited that far out from our base here. You'll



need to be fairly close to a shadow zone to get a clean connection. I recommend the temples of any local death gods for a chance to get near a shadow zone.”

Brinder looked down as Alvos landed on the ground in a perfect dismount, “What is my mission to be?”

Alvos waved her hand to follow as she began walking, “Reportedly several minor aberrations are loose there and the mess needs to be cleaned up before the problem has a chance to get worse. I’ll warn you that the natives are all deeply involved in a twisted morass of local politics, but fortunately the reports are that nothing there really pays much attention to the greater actions happening on the planes. The local deities are pretty active as well, so try to avoid pissing off any priests and the like. Remember to be polite.”

Brinder nodded, “Yes, Grandmaster Alvos.”

Alvos continued, “Oh, and the Shadow Realm nearby doesn’t have any Shadowine who choose to recognize the White Raven as the goddess of death. They worship some evil god called Mortis. The upshot is all of the local prime Shadowine have pretty horrible reputations with their neighbors. I recommend you quickly learn to play a human as best you can. I recommend you don’t reveal your shadow powers to anyone you can’t trust. Remember, your weapons training should suffice to get you through most situations. Well let’s get cracking; we have six months to get you ready to leave Brinder. Shandra, if your studies go well enough in the next year, I may see about promoting you to work in my astral fleet unit. That is if you perform to my satisfaction. You’ll definitely not blend in well in most portions of the prime material. There is a lot of racial prejudice against Twiline there. It’s not a nice matter at all.”

Brinder followed along listening to the seemingly unthreatening and joyfully chatty Alvos. He adjusted his private threat ranking assessment of Alvos two positions higher than he had originally decided. Alvos’ casual ability to put other beings at ease and off guard was insidious in nature, and he looked forward to learning the technique.

