

Alizarin took a deep breath, pushed the door open, and stepped out into the predawn darkness. He walked forward, hesitant at first, but gaining speed as he put space between himself and the home he was leaving behind. The White Moon shone bright overhead, illuminating his path as he made his way toward the town of Arelia Rim proper.

He shifted his pack on his shoulders as he walked, telling himself that he had thought his decision over far more than enough, and that he wasn't simply running away like the worthless, spoiled child he was.

There was no future for him here. He had tried, the God Beyond knew he had done at least that much. But no matter how much effort he gave... it was never enough. There was nothing that he could do. This was his sole remaining recourse.

He walked down the middle of the street, giving no indication that there was anything amiss with him being there, or at least none that would be readily apparent in the dimness. Wearing a thin and dark-colored shirt and pair of pants fit for not-sulking in the lukewarm summer night, Alizarin's face appeared rather odd, his raven-black hair contrasted oddly with his skin, which was so pale as to be nearly luminescent.

He was taller than many of the townsfolk, and his bright green eyes were a shade that was readily different from the violet common in the town. He had a lithe figure, but his movements showed little hindrance from his moderately heavy pack.

Alizarin came upon the town square and looked around. Lined by the various permanent shops owned by citizens of the town and paved with a smooth, whitish stone cut into neat squares, it was the premiere venue for visiting merchants and farmers to sell to the townspeople. It was currently empty, the merchants having already packed up their stalls in preparation for their departure.

That was why he was here. Alizarin walked toward the one building on the square with light shining out from its windows, the town inn. He walked across the square at a brisk pace, eyes fixed straight ahead.

As he pushed open the door of the inn, a wave of sensations washed over him. He squinted against the sudden light as the smell of fresh bread and the sizzling of meat assailed him.

Recovering quickly, Alizarin entered the building, searching the common room for the man he had identified that afternoon as the senior most member of the merchant caravan. He spotted him at a corner table, looking down at something spread out over much of the surface, most likely a map.

Alizarin walked toward him, seeing that the merchant was looking at a map of the continent.

“Excuse me.” Alizarin said.

“What can I do for you?” The merchant asked, looking up from his map.

“I want to go with you to Varaleon.” Alizarin said quickly.

The merchant raised an eyebrow. “Young man like you? Can’t say you’re the first fool boy I’ve seen looking to make his fortune in the big city.”

“I can pay.” Alizarin responded carefully. “And I can keep up on foot, if needed.”

“Not what I mean.” The merchant said. “Are you sure you want to try Varaleon? The Capital would probably offer better prospects. I hear the army is recruiting, and with the news from the west, Empheria may need every soldier it can get pretty soon. Even in peacetime, there are opportunities...”

The man trailed off as he saw the look on Alizarin’s face.

“I’m not looking to make a fortune.” Alizarin said softly.

“Lost divinities.” The merchant muttered. “You’re looking to be a Bloodcrow, aren’t you?”

A Bloodcrow. A Quintasarial Knight. A man of the taciturn order of warriors who protected the people of the Expanse from the enigmatic monsters that stalked the countryside, killing at random and leaving destruction in their wake. They were said to practice blood magic that granted them unnatural powers; in addition to the oversized weapons they carried, stories said that they could outrun racehorses, kill with a glance, reduce a barn to embers with a thought, and any number of other destructive and bizarre things. All told, a visit from a Quintasarial hunting party only marginally better than an attack by the monsters they hunted.

They also minted and issued a currency, the Sigilmark, that was accepted across the Expanse, and actually preferred over the local coinage in many places. Alizarin suspected that their control over the currency may have had something to do with their poor reputation, but he couldn’t say how.

It was said that the least of the full Knights was a match for a hundred soldiers in a fair fight, and that each was completely and utterly a broken man.

If the latter was true, Alizarin would fit right in.

Any man between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four could try to join the order, but many applicants were rejected, and many more failed their training. But it was said that they

reimbursed anyone who could make it through at least part of the training process, and they gave a purpose to some of those who had no other value.

“Yes, I do.” Alizarin said. “But that’s my business. I don’t see why you’d care.”

He shrugged. “It’s your pyre. The trip will take about a turn, give or take. It’ll be a Mark for whole distance, meals included, and for an extra three you can ride in one of the wagons sometimes.”

Sixteen days to cover the four hundred or so miles to Varaleon averaged out to about twenty-five miles a day. It was a good pace, though it was made easier by the excellent road system maintained by the Principality.

A Sigilmark was the base unit of the Quintasarial currency. The general wage for a common laborer was around two Marks a turn. A person could live on a Sliver, one tenth of a Mark, per day, leaving him forty pennies a turn for luxuries, such as it were.

Ten Marks made a Ring, ten Rings made a March, and ten Marches made a Pinnacle. A Pinnacle, worth one hundred thousand pennies, was more money than Alizarin had ever seen.

One Mark for a sixteen days of travel wasn’t a bad price. Alizarin nodded and reached into his pockets, carefully removing thirteen Silvers and handing them to the merchant.

“We’re leaving at dawn. Go get whatever you want to bring, but don’t be late.”

“I’ve got everything I need.” Alizarin said. “I think I’ll wait.”

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As the lead driver in the caravan urged his horses into motion, Alizarin began to look back toward the town of Arelia Rim, but he closed his eyes and stopped himself. He could no longer tolerate any doubts; he had chosen his course. It was too late to turn back without being noticed, and there was no argument he could make to himself against going that he hadn’t already overturned in the six Turns he had been considering this.

Stepping forward, Alizarin placed his right foot on the smooth grey stone of the Prince’s Road and lifted his left off left off the dirt track behind him.

Steeling his resolve, he didn’t look back.

[x]

After a Half-Turn on the road, Alizarin had discovered a problem that he had, perhaps, failed to fully anticipate.

After eight days on the road, each spent walking through most of the daylight hours, Alizarin was *bored*. For all their skill in haggling, the none of the merchants were particularly interesting conversationalists. They had quickly grown irritated with his questions about the places they had visited, and Alizarin had stopped asking after he'd realized that they had spent most of their careers following the same long loop through the eastern Principality.

The walking was unpleasant, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. Alizarin had found every excuse he could to walk long distances in the past six Turns in preparation, and hiking had never been difficult for him. The food was questionable, but he'd had worse. It had rained on the third day, but they continued forward, wagon covers keeping the rain off and the chamfered stone surface of the road no more difficult to transverse wet.

Alizarin had eventually settled for looking at the scenery as he walked, though it was the same patchwork of meadows and forest that has surrounded him for his entire life.

Then, perhaps two hours after noon on the eighth day, Alizarin's boredom abruptly vanished, along with the first wagon in the caravan.

Saying that it 'vanished' was not entirely accurate. It would be better to say that a creature somewhat shorter and considerably wider than a horse charged out of the forest faster than most would have thought possible and rammed the wagon with its frontal carapace and smashed it to kindling.

Alizarin, on the opposite side of the caravan, had missed the initial approach of the creature, but the massive sound of its impact was audible for miles. He spun towards it, and caught his first clear view of a Travesty.

Its main body was perhaps four and a half feet tall, though its frontal carapace extended at least a foot above that. It had six legs, greyish skin, and an unremarkable rounded body. The exception was its carapace; a massive plate of armor with a wider profile than its entire body which came to a sharp point then extended back over the front third of the creature's body in a shape a bit like a beak, rising higher than the thing's spine.

Alizarin had no idea what it was. It wasn't simply that he had never seen anything similar before, it was somehow completely *different* from every other animal he knew.

As he watched, stunned, the creature turned to where the driver of the wagon was sprawled on the ground, took a few steps forward, and began to devour him.

Another resounding crash filled the air as Alizarin felt bile begin to rise in his chest, then another, then another.

Without a second thought, he took off running, the screams drowning out the sound of tearing flesh.

Crossing the strip of grass separating the road from the forest in two heartbeats, Alizarin was in the forest before he had fully processed what was going on.

When he had a chance to do so, he didn't slow down.

The trees were spaced fairly widely. They were leadwoods, trees widely considered to be worthless. They were heavy and difficult to cut or work, and also burned poorly, but were soft, deformable, and possessed poor tensile strength. They tended to choke out any of the other plants that might attract game, and produced a foul-smelling in the spring. By and large, people only interacted with them to remove them when they got in the way of something else.

Alizarin slowed somewhat after several minutes had passed, but he didn't let up entirely and return to a walk until two or three times that span of time.

After pacing slowly for a minute or so to catch his breath, Alizarin realized he was lost. He knew where the road was, in the sense that he knew that if he about-faced and started walking he would eventually reach the road, but he wasn't sure what the most direct route would be.

Stopping to look around, Alizarin spotted a long, rectangular patch of ground elevated perhaps a foot above the ground, with a squarish rock a bit more than two feet on a side covered in moss near one end. The edges of the patch were sloped irregularly, and there were odd contours to the ground over the whole area.

Walking over to the stone and sitting down, Alizarin wondered what it was. It certainly didn't seem natural, but at the same time it looked too irregular to be man-made. He supposed it could be some kind of burial place, but-

A creaking sound filled the air, strangely loud in the quiet of the leadwood forest. Alizarin felt the rock beneath him shift, then with a screech like tearing metal, the ground beneath him collapsed.

He was weightless for a second, then he hit the ground, the rock he was sitting on crumbling as it impacted and left him sprawled on his back. It wasn't as bad as he had expected, probably because the disintegrating rock had broken his fall.

Alizarin took a deep breath and stood up, a strange metallic taste filling his mouth. He crouched and ran his fingers through the powdered remnants of the rock and looked at them. The dust had a distinctive reddish hue and was rather coarse.

*Rust?* Alizarin wondered. *How could that be?*

Breathing through his nose as he looked around the cavity, illuminated by sunlight streaming in from a gaping hole in the roof, Alizarin made several observations.

The first was that he was in an underground space of about the same dimensions as the elevated patch of ground with a ceiling about nine or ten feet high. The second observation was an extension of the first; he wasn't tall enough to reach the top of the space, let alone climb out. The third was that the cavity was mostly empty. Alizarin couldn't see anything he could use as a stool to reach the cavity and escape.

Other than the uneven layer of soil along the ground, the only irregularity in the rounded rectangular prism of the space was a large cylinder set against the far wall. It reached all the way to the ceiling, though some portion of that was due to the rounded pedestal more than a foot tall beneath it and the identical cap on top.

The surface of the cylinder was a dull, aged brown. Alizarin walked towards it for a closer inspection, feeling a slight springiness in the dirt covering the ground.

Alizarin stopped at arm's length from the cylinder, wondering if he could use it to escape. Myriad possible potential threats ran through his mind, but he banished them almost immediately, shaking his head. The most immediate threat was starvation; starving to death in a hole in the ground because he was scared of a cylinder.

That didn't make him any less nervous. Reaching out gingerly, Alizarin rested the tip of his forefinger on cylinder. It felt surprisingly smooth, like the fine glass used in a handful of houses in Arelia Rim.

It was also cold to the touch. It was late summer and, while temperatures did stay more constant underground, it seemed *too* cold. It was like-

A spiderweb of cracks appeared on the cylinder with a sound like breaking ice. Then the whole thing exploded outwards, releasing a wave of shiny silver liquid. It hit Alizarin before he had a chance to react, striking his chest far harder than he would have thought possible and knocking him backwards.

But before he could hit the ground, the silver fluid had flowed behind him and arrested his fall shockingly gently; it was like landing on a hill of feathers, but without the pointy bits.

The silvery liquid moved out from under him, congealing into a blob which began rising from the ground like a crude snowman. Then a thin tendril shot out from near the top of the blob and struck him in the neck, breaking the skin.

Alizarin felt something pulling his tissue toward the sliver lodged in his neck, which withdrew almost as quickly as it had appeared, the dark stain on the tip quickly disappearing.

There was a short pause. Alizarin pressed his hand against the hole in his neck, but it didn't seem to be bleeding nearly as much as he would have expected.

Then the blob shot upwards to match Alizarin's height, then seemed to peel from top to bottom and fold backwards and into itself.

Where the blob had been now stood one of the most unusual young women Alizarin had ever seen.

Alizarin was nearly six feet tall, and she stood perhaps an inch shorter than him. She had blue-grey hair that fell straight to just below the nape of her neck, and rather odd eyes; it took Alizarin a second to realize that she had rich golden irises, but the whites of her eyes were a pale glacial blue. Her creamy skin was completely unblemished, almost *too* perfect, and the entire layout of her face seemed designed to be rather attractive without being especially noticeable or exceptional, odd though the idea seemed.

Her clothes were equally unusual; she was wearing a deep blue blouse and skirt that reached about down to her knees. The blouse was fitted with shiny golden buttons and emblems, and her shoes appeared to be featureless socks perhaps half an inch thick that covered her feet up to top of her ankle.

"Time and date unknown." She said.

Her voice, while soft and unmistakably feminine, had a strange edge to it beyond simple monotone, almost as if it were hollow somehow.

"Today is the eleventh day of Summerdeath Turn, 1565 IM." Alizarin said nervously. "Its early afternoon."

"I am unfamiliar with that calendar system." She responded.

"IM is *Igea Malica* or somesuch. That means it's been fifteen hundred and sixty-five years since the Desolation of Regarium." Alizarin said, beginning to suspect there was something *seriously* amiss here.

Everyone *knew* the stories of Enigmas that could take on human form, but he had never paid

any serious attention to them. But now, seeing a girl appear out of some kind of quicksilver blob... What if the cylinder had been a prison he'd unwittingly released her from?

*Then the warden is a moron.* He thought. *If this thing is really any danger and that was some kind of container, it would have had to be better guarded.* The stories disagreed on a lot of things, but none of them ever called the Quintasarial Knights incompetent. That was one of the reasons he was running away to sign on with them.

But this thing *clearly* wasn't human. Frowning slightly, he realized that he had unconsciously begun to think of it as a *her*.

"And Summerdeath Turn? I am not familiar with this expression." The thing said.

"It's the fifteenth turn in the year." Alizarin said, trying to stay calm. "The last turn of summer."

Keeping the thing... Not particularly passionate seemed like the best course of action. He could simply leave once he got out of the hole, and if it tried to kill him then, at the least he would know what was going on.

"Also." He said. "If you could gift me with assistance in leaving this cave, I would be grateful."

"Of course." It said.

Stepping forward and wrapping its arm around him in an unsurprisingly fluid motion, the creature lifted him off his feet and pressed him against its chest as it sprang into the air. Alizarin felt a jolt as it took off, and could feel dust swirling around him as he passed through where the ground had been.

They peaked more than ten feet up from ground level and fell in an arc, landing just outside the formerly raised area of ground, most of which appeared to have collapsed into the cavity beneath.

It had taken perhaps three seconds at the absolute most. Alizarin was suitably impressed once he finished coughing up rust.

"Thank you." He said, once he finished coughing, then glanced at the position of the sun. "I have a long trip ahead of me, but I should be able to make the next town before dusk if I make good time. Farewell."

Alizarin could still remember which way he had approached the cavity from, and thus which direction he wanted to head to get back to the road. Hopefully he'd be able to pass by the wreckage of the Caravan; it would cost him some time and he was fairly sure he had enough money on him to make it to Varaleon and the Peerless Spire, but it wouldn't hurt to make sure.

The creatures who had attacked were clearly predatory, so Alizarin doubted that they would stay around for longer than it took to devour the convoy, which probably wouldn't be very long given their display of enthusiasm, so it would probably be safe.

After walking for about six seconds, Alizarin noticed that something was wrong, namely that there was a second set of footsteps behind him. He stopped, and they stopped at well. He turned around.

He saw the blob girl from the cave. He couldn't say he was entirely surprised; it wasn't as if there was anything else out here likely to be following him.

Alizarin sighed. "Why are you following me?" He muttered.

"Those are my instructions." It said calmly. "Under the circumstances, these are the actions I must take.

"What circumstances?" Alizarin said, raising an eyebrow. "And what are your orders?"

The creature tilted its head to the side. "Odd. I am unable to recollect the elements of the circumstance relevant to this conclusion, but my orders are clear notwithstanding."

"And what are those orders?"

"I am to accompany you and comply with all orders except those that would result in or require high treason." It said.

"Why me?" Alizarin asked.

"Unknown."

"God Beyond." Alizarin said, resting his temples on his fingers. Why had this happened to him, now?

"Are there any orders I cannot give?" Alizarin asked. "For example, could I order you to kill yourself?"

"Yes." It said. "I cannot self-terminate, but I could theoretically obey an order that would lead to my destruction."

"Alright." Alizarin said. "Then I-

He stopped. While this situation was certainly irritating and *potentially* extremely dangerous, this thing had done nothing to give any indication that it would hurt him, let alone do anything other than help him. Was that really sufficient justification to order this thing to kill itself?

Alizarin sighed. He supposed it probably wasn't. If the thing was lying to him, there was nothing he could do to discern that now, but if it was telling the truth, he could always order it to go walk to Oceria or something if it became a problem.

"Fine." He said. "At least walk next to me. I don't want to give the wrong impression."

Slavery was illegal in Emepheria, but it was still widely practiced in some places further north. Brining a slave into Emepheria was a legally complex issue, but as an Emepherian subject, he certainly couldn't do it, and that sort of suspicion was the *last* thing he needed.

It nodded, then walked forward and took up position next to him. Alizarin tried not to look at it.

The duo continued toward the road for some time, then a thought occurred to him.

"Why are you walking at all, come to think of it?" Alizarin asked. "Couldn't you just roll around?"

"My form is set." It replied. "I am capable of limited alterations, but am limited to this basic shape."

Alizarin frowned. "Why is that?"

"I do not know."

They walked the rest of the way to the road in silence.

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Alizarin was sufficiently lost in thought that he had walked several feet into the open before he was aware he'd left the forest.

It nearly cost him his life.

The ruined caravan was spread out across the road in front of him, each wagon thoroughly smashed to matchwood. Human bodies and dead horses were scattered everywhere, and the barrels and crates that had held the caravan's cargo were shatter, their contents spilled.

And the monsters were still everywhere.

There were perhaps twenty of them. Some were rooting through the spilled foodstuffs or lapping

up the pools of liquor that had spilled from broken barrels. Others were nosing through the wood remnants of the shattered wagons, and still others seemed to be doing nothing in particular.

A fair number of them, of course, were gnawing on bodies.

As he stepped out of the forest, several of the creatures 'looked' up from whatever they were doing and pointed their frontal carapaces towards him. One began to walk forward.

Alizarin took a step back, eyes widening as he was struck by a wave of nausea. Somehow, between the terror and confusion and irritation, he had avoided letting the reality of what just happened sink in. Forty-three people were just killed and eaten, and now he was about to be forty-four.

"Analysis suggests unidentified entities are hostile." The quicksilver doll said, her voice the same as always. "Shall I engage?"

"Can you win?" Alizarin asked.

"Yes." It said. "I have no reason to believe these creatures pose a threat."

"Do you have any idea of their capabilities?" Alizarin asked, curiosity mixing with terror. "You said they were unidentified, and I—"

The doll began to walk forward. As it did so, it *changed*. Its blouse began to swell and take on a sheen as it changed into an intricate cuirass on the same deep blue, golden buttons changing into odd emblems and devices. The doll's long skirt contracted seemed to split, half contracting towards its legs, pinching itself into two cones as it extended toward its sabatons and became a set of closed grieves, and the other half changing into a flexible skirt of articulated plates.

As its rerebraces and vambraces grew down its arms and gauntlets finished growing over its hands, the really odd changes began.

A blob of silvery material appeared in her hand and swiftly grew into a falchion of silvery blue; built like a cleaver and curved slightly. It was well over three feet long and should have been an unwieldy two-handed weapon, but the quicksilver thing held it casually in one hand.

The gauntlet on the other hand began to grow, the fingers extending into long, heavy claws, each one like a ten-inch saber.

The two protrusions of silvery material began to rise from its pauldrons, stopping near the same height as its ears. Then the tips began to swell, like an upside down fruit blooming impossibly quickly.

As the color dulled to a dark grey, the lumps began to extend forward, each separating into six long pipes as it did so. Each of the extensions was perhaps the size of a minstrel's flute, and they were set in a pod mounted on top of the doll's shoulder, though the connection was connected by a cowl that extended a few inches forward from the pod with a circular section cut out, so the top reached further than the bottom.

All this took place in perhaps two seconds.

One of the monsters lined up its whole body with the doll, which crouched like a boxer in anticipation.

Then it charged.

It accelerated shockingly quickly, armored head held close to the ground. The doll jumped forward as the monster charged, peaking more than six feet off the ground. Twisting in the air, it grabbed the top of the monster's carapace and swung its whole body perpendicular to the monster's path of advance, then swung its falchion in a long arc.

The armored head continued forward, but as it began to tumble forward, it took a fraction of a second for Alizarin to realize that the doll had cut the monster cleanly in half.

As the doll landed, the rest of the monsters began to charge. The doll dashed to the side, then made a sharp turn toward the ruins of the caravan.

Raking another monster along the flank with its claws, the doll made a turn to face Alizarin and the backs of the beasts. The long barrels on its shoulder pods began to emanate a soft blue light and rotate in their mountings.

Then lines of silver light appeared in the air, traced in an instant from the tip of the topmost barrel along a perfectly straight path to a point on the back of one of the monsters, enduring for a fraction of a sliver of time and then vanishing, only to be replaced as the next barrel rotated into position.

Lightning flashed and sparked around the creatures as the rays raked across them. They were not the burning blue-white of a summer storm, but a disgusting shade of pale purple. It did not simply seem unnatural, but was uncomfortable to look at; something about it felt inherently *wrong*.

As the barrage continued, the lightning faded and the silver lines began punching into the skin of the monsters. Their skin ruptured as the bolts impacted, but rather than bleeding, various size bubbles broke off of the wounds, rapidly fading and vanishing as they floated away.

Nearly half of the monsters dropped before they could bring their armored heads around to face the assault. The fusillade continued, but now the silver lines struck the curved carapace and fell in arcing paths before vanishing.

Before the monsters could gain any momentum, the quicksilver girl charged. She sidestepped a monster near the center of their rough line, opening its flank with the backs of her claws and cleaving the beast on the other side with her falchion.

Pivoting to the side and sweeping her silver bolts across the back of the monsters along the left flank, the warrior turned to face the remaining quartet of monsters. They began charging again, heedless of their losses, but the outcome was the same.

The quicksilver girl dispatched each of them with swift efficiency, driving her blade point-first through the carapace of the last monster, the shell crumbling like chalk under the force of her attack.

Then suddenly, the road was calm again. The air was quiet, and except for the corpses of the monsters slowly foaming away, everything was still. The fight had been furiously and shockingly brief, and Alizarin realized that at some point, he had stopped thinking of the quicksilver girl as an 'it'.

He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

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Alizarin stared at the small campfire, resting his hand on his chin.

After killing the monsters, he and the quicksilver girl had picked through the ruins of the caravan. He had been counting on it for food supplies, and he didn't want to rely on his limited funds to buy everything he would need to make it to Varaleon.

While the monsters had rendered the food a complete write-off, they had made to other rather interesting discoveries. The girl had found the strongbox where one of the merchants had kept his travel funds and broke it open without trouble.

Sigilmarks were made from blood, gold, and iron, said to be the three things needed to fight any war. In practice, they were hard steel with a trace of gold and some faintly glowing patterns on either face. The blood, if it was really present, evidently wasn't enough to attract attention from the monsters.

The box had contained seven Rings and several dozen Marks, an incomprehensibly large sum than he had set out with from Arelia Rim . It made him vaguely uncomfortable to be the sole

survivor of the attack and immediately loot the wreckage, but he wasn't going to jeopardize his survival over it.

Even more concerning to him was his reaction to the deaths of forty-three probably innocent people. He knew it was bad, and it made him sad that they were dead but... That was it. It hadn't really affected him.

Alizarin sighed and slumped deeper. He had always been like that; nothing had ever really shaken him much. He supposed that might have been one of his problems; maybe he had never done anything to make himself less of a failure because nothing had enough impact on him.

He had taken one other thing from the wreckage of the caravan. It was a weathered knife made from what appeared to be a single piece of greenish steel, weather but still sharp and serviceable. It was clearly made more for utility than combat; it was too curved to be much use for stabbing, and the serrated section of the back was clearly intended more for cutting wood than tissue.

He shook his head and looked up at the quicksilver girl sitting on the opposite side of the side, hugging her knees and resting her chin on them. She had shifted back to her normal clothing after the attack, and Alizarin was still vaguely bothered that she appeared to have made the material for her combat equipment out of nowhere.

The Green Moon was high in the sky and almost completely full, while the White Moon was absent entirely. The Black Moon was about two-thirds full as well, but really only mattered to sailors and astronomers. As a result, there was a slight verdant tint to the light, almost overwhelmed by the firelight, but still on the edge of perception.

"Do you have a name?" Alizarin said. "I'd rather make small talk than sit here brooding, but a name would make that easier."

"I do not have a name." She said. "Designation is unknown."

"Well, then you can be Hydrargyria." He said, pronouncing the name 'hi dray gee ah'.

"Hydrargyria." She said, as if seeing how it felt. "Does it have any significance?"

"Not that I know of." Alizarin said. "But it seems to fit you for some reason. I don't really understand how, but it does."

Hydrargyria tilted her head to the side, the firelight reflecting oddly in her eyes. "My I like this name?"

“You don’t need my permission for that.” Alizarin said.

“Incorrect.” Hydrargyria said. “I am unable to make internal state alterations without express authorization from a command authority.”

Alizarin frowned. “Then you have my permission to make such alterations in minor matters independently, as so long as it could not result in harm to me.”

“Thank you, Alizarin.” Hydrargyria said. “I am immensely grateful for this privilege.”

“Its not a problem.” Alizarin said. “But what were you doing in that cave, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” She responded. “I recall nothing from before you breached my container.”

“But you mentioned you had orders. How do you know what those are?”

“I simply know them.” Hydrargyria said. “Even if I cannot recall what they are, I know what they instruct me to do.”

She appeared to be growing distraught, though it would have been almost impossible to notice if Alizarin had not been paying attention to her so intently.

“That’s fine, though.” Alizarin said, leaning his head back to look up at the stars. “As problems go, I suppose you don’t have it that bad. Between not needing to eat, immunity to disease, and your combat ability, you’ve pretty much removed the three most likely causes of death for almost everyone in the Expanse, so you’re probably better off than ninety or so percent of everyone. As it happens, that tends to make the smaller problems seem a lot worse.”

“I don’t know if I understand.” Hydrargyria said.

“Well, think of it this way. You could be me.” Alizarin said. “I’ve never really been and real or significant danger of starvation or violent death; my life is probably fairly good, all things considered. I just manage to screw up everything I touch; it’s like I’m some kind of incarnation of failure.”

“I don’t believe that to be accurate.” Hydrargyria responded.

Alizarin rolled his eyes. “I suppose I can read fairly well, or at least well enough to miss doing something that matters.”

“That is not what I meant. You saved me.”

“Eh, anyone could have fallen in that hole and found you. Then you turned around and pulled me out of the fire, so I think we’re even.”

Hydrargyria shook her head. “That isn’t what I was referring to. I have a single afternoon of memories, but somehow I know enough of human nature to tell that what you did... Was not a common choice.”

Alizarin shook his head, frowning. “That’s what any decent person would have done. Makes it kinda surprising I did it, actually.”

“My observation contradicts this conclusion.” Hydrargyria said. “But we have a long day of walking tomorrow, and I believe you require rest. I will keep watch and awaken you at sunrise. Is this acceptable?”

“I guess.” Alizarin said. As soon as she mentioned sleep, he realized just how exhausted he was. It would probably be best to find a good place to lie down before he got too drowsy to care.