

Frostmorn

A Daystar Short Story

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Alahir adjusted his oversized scarf one last time, wincing as he bumped several of his new training bruises, and peered out the window. Perhaps winter had miraculously disappeared in the time it had taken him to prepare for its offensive tactics.

Snow piles. More snow piles. Even a few snow mounds, just to break up the monotony.

He huffed. Someday, when all this training was over, he'd be a Scion, and then he'd be legally allowed to carry fire relics, and then he'd take a flaming sword to every one of those snow mounds.

But not today.

"Alahir!"

He turned as Rama hurried up beside him. His fellow trainee surveyed his clothing and grinned. "Going out, or just crossing the courtyard?"

He chuckled. "Am I so predictable already?"

"I only wish you were that predictable in the sparring ring. I might actually beat you more than once a month."

She pushed the door open, and he followed her out of the Harbor, a blast of wind driving away the brief warmth of her exaggerated compliment. The sky was speckled white with little snows—for the life of him, he could not remember the word for individual pieces of snow. It was something like . . . flecks? Snowflecks?

No. But close enough.

He and Rama shuffled down the nicely shovelled path and onto the decidedly unshovelled street, the snow creaking oddly beneath their boots, because snow wasn't strange enough already.

As usual, no one else noticed—people in Shovin appeared perpetually delighted to see fresh snowfall, and only those pushing carts through the drifts seemed to share Alahir's sense that something was very wrong with this part of the world.

But if there was one good thing about winter in Shovin, it was the food. Four visits to the candied nut cart in one week wasn't excessive, surely? Especially not after his first training session with Captain Malas.

Yat, he deserved an extra sack of nuts just for surviving it. One almond per bruise.

"Oh!" Rama fluffed through a snowdrift toward a shop window, and though she and Alahir weren't together except by chance, he followed anyway.

"Toys?" He frowned at the figurines she was admiring, a half dozen carved wooden animals engaged in a frolicking game of tag across the inside windowsill.

"For my niece and nephews," she explained, shooting him a surprisingly dismal look. "First day I've had time to shop for Frostmorn."

"Frostmorn?"

"The solsti—oh, right!" She straightened. "You wouldn't have that in the north. No frost."

"We do have morns, though, and the solstice," he offered, mostly to distract himself from the sudden dread roiling in his stomach. He'd been so caught up in adjusting to life in Shovin, to his training, his new companions, the weather . . . But of course they'd have a solstice festival here as well, and of course it would involve gift-giving.

Because knee-deep snow wasn't enough fun already.

"So, gifts for family? Is that your tradition?" Exactly how many gifts would he have to buy in the next three days?

"Family, friends . . ."

"Fellow trainees?" Alahir ventured, throwing subtlety into the storm as he did a frantic count in his mind. "Scion captains?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that, not unless you're genuinely close to someone. There's no politics or currying favor on Frostmorn, though after today I wonder about bribing Captain Malas."

Alahir chuckled, tension draining from his limbs as quickly as it had come. All his family was in Tsalger, and he wasn't particularly close to any of his fellow trainees or the Scions themselves yet. Though the idea of trying to bribe Captain Malas was deeply amusing—and somewhat appealing. She'd hinted that they'd be starting throwing spikes soon, and that was a whole new avenue of bruises and blisters waiting to happen.

"Do you think it'd work?" he mused.

"Are you kidding? She'd just hit us harder." Rama chewed her lip as he laughed. "Anyway, if you haven't any close friends here yet, then you should count yourself lucky this year. Though perhaps a little lonely."

Close friends. It hit him at last, and all of his amusement and relief fled, leaving a solid lump weighing down his stomach.

Navarion.

How in all the spheres could he have forgotten Navarion? His best friend. His legal patron, the reason he'd been allowed to move to Shovin. His . . .

Crown prince.

"Oh," he squeaked. He coughed and tried again, feigning calm. "Right. That's . . . good. I'll . . . I'll go make some friends, then."

He glanced up the street, pulse racing as if he'd spotted Navarion standing right there, frowning imperiously at Alahir's utter lack of worthiness to be his friend.

No, that was not Navarion. Navarion would stand there and smile and tell him that Alahir needn't buy him a gift at all.

"Alahir, you left your home and your family and everything familiar to come here. That is already more than I deserve."

He heard it every time he tried to go even a step out of his way for Navarion, and if he couldn't find an appropriate gift, he'd hear it again.

He tugged on his hair and shook his head. Not again. Shovin was a huge city. There had to be something worthy of a friend who happened to be a prince. Something that would tell Navarion how much their friendship meant after all those years of loneliness, all those years closing himself off from others. Surely there was a gift like that in one of these shops. He just had to find it.

His gaze swept from the toys to a bakery across the street, then a potter's shop, then a weaver's.

Suddenly Shovin seemed very large indeed, and full of unprincely things.

"I'm going to get some candied almonds," he told Rama weakly, slipping away from the toy shop.

"Oh, wait for me!" She hustled after him.

He didn't protest, nor did he hear a word she said as they approached the cart.

Three days to find a suitable gift.

He was going to need a lot of almonds.

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Three days later, Alahir was feeling very ill, and not just because he'd eaten about four dozen bags of candied almonds.

He'd scoured half the city, or so it felt, and all he had to show for it was sore feet, numb ears, and a lot of nothing.

And tomorrow was Frostmorn.

He hovered outside a bookshop, though he'd told himself he wouldn't go in. He'd visited at least five already with no success. Too many options presented themselves each time, and even if something had caught his eye, there was every chance Navarion had already read it, or had no interest in reading it. And a book felt too personal, even as it felt not personal enough, and . . .

Was he going to have this problem every year? Whose idea had this been, giving people gifts to celebrate the days getting longer? How did those things go together, anyway?

Growling, he twirled his hair around his gloved hands and moved up the street, kicking uselessly at snowdrifts. One of the heat relics tucked in his boot shook loose and knocked against his toe, then rolled around like a pebble beneath his foot with every awkward step.

A tea shop ahead beckoned, promising an escape from his dilemma, a place to fix his boot, and a chance to try a new blend. But not for Navarion, of course, who preferred coffee.

But Alahir had ruled coffee out as well. At least the subject of a book would suggest he'd put some thought into it, but coffee required no effort except going into a shop and purchasing coffee beans. However one did that. They came in bags, he presumed, and then . . . and then someone did something to them and they ended as a revolting beverage.

Maybe he ought to get Navarion tea after all.

"Auuugh."

A quiet cough. "May I help you, sir?"

He blinked at the speaker, then at the building he was standing beside. Clothing.

"Uh, no. No, pardon me."

Navarion had plenty of clothing, and anyway, he frequently lamented that Alahir had no taste. Which was true—and meant he had a perfect excuse to avoid even thinking about clothing as a gift option.

“Focus,” he muttered to himself. “You can do this.”

He still had time, even if it was the shortest day of the year. He wasn’t giving up. He just had to keep thinking.

Snow swirled around him, covering shop signs and pooling on windowsills and making the wares inside each building difficult to identify. Alahir tugged his hat down over his stinging ears and resumed squinting through the snow.

A fancy stylus. Some sort of expensive mead. An empty book for the prince to write in. A friend for Kwin, more a joke than anything. Navarion would probably love that, actually, though the servants might not. And anyway, another pet did not send the right message.

What gift said “I’ve known you less than a year, but you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I’d die for you”?

. . . but not quite so intensely as that.

Another kick at a snow drift, another bruised toe. Muttering under his breath, he moved toward a little alcove outside the next shop and bent to unlace his boot, but he’d not even removed his gloves before the door swung open and a woman breezed through and nearly crashed into him.

“Oh, pardon—Ser Khiyamat.”

He straightened, and his face flushed. “Lady Alendrin.”

They stared at one another, and Alahir waited. No matter his hurry, Varis Alendrin outranked him, so excusing himself wasn’t an option.

Her lips twisted the way they always did when she looked at him, and he prepared for the usual quip about his hair, but all she said was “What are you doing here?”

"Fixing my boot." Which he could do later, when she wasn't eyeing him like a hawk. A hawk with midnight-blue eyes and lucky-cloud skin.

Perhaps he *should* excuse himself.

"Fixing your boot outside Aliani." Disbelieving laughter tinged her words, but when all he did was frown, she lifted a hand to her mouth in a poor attempt to hide the way her suppressed smile pushed at her cheeks. "You have no idea where you are, do you?"

"Shovin, last I checked." He brushed a hand over a huge pile of snow beyond the alcove. "Yes, definitely Shovin."

"The expensive part of Shovin."

He shrugged and kept his shoulders raised when a sudden rush of frigid air swept down the street. "Yes, well, I need a Frostmorn gift for Navarion." Preferably before he froze to death.

"Navarion?" Her hand fell from her mouth. "Crown Prince Navarion?"

"Are there other people named Navarion?"

Her lips pursed in exasperation, though he thought he saw a twinge of jealousy as well. "For your sake, I rather hope so."

And before he could ask whether she was getting Navarion a gift—mostly to watch her squirm—she caught the sleeve of his coat and tugged him from the alcove, then flourished an arm down the snowy street. "So, where are you headed next?"

"I'll know it when I see it." There, that sounded sufficiently vague and mysterious. Well, perhaps just vague. Assuming he'd been dismissed, he bowed to her and began walking, then faltered when she fell in step beside him. "Lady Alendrin, don't you have somewhere to be? Perhaps some plants that need"—what did people do to plants?—"plant . . . ing?"

She smirked gleefully, fingers deftly fastening the buttons of her berry-red coat. "No errand I have is so urgent that I cannot spare the time to watch Ser Khiyamat buy a

gift for his dear friend the crown prince. So where to first? The printer! You can write him a collection of poems. Or the glassmaker . . . my goodness, those colors." Her eyes glittered with sharp humor as she glanced at him sidelong. "That'd be perfect coming from you."

Alahir kept walking, focusing on the relic knocking around inside his boot—a more pleasant distraction than Varis and her constant inability to decide between teasing and criticism. She could follow him all the way back to the Harbor if she pleased, and then he'd hide, wait until she left, and go back out again. In disguise if he had to.

Gradually, however, Varis's flippant suggestions began to alternate with actual insight.

A jeweler. ". . . the teardrop style, of course . . ."

A wood carver. ". . . prefers cedar, I hear, though not for . . ."

Another tailor. ". . . somewhat wider collar than is traditional, but of course he has impeccable taste in . . ."

Alahir's hands fisted in his coat pockets, and an icy hollow opened in his chest. Three days ago, he'd thought himself close to Navarion, but now . . . Even if something in one of these shops had stood out to him, he'd not have had the faintest clue where to begin. Yet here was Varis, who always insisted she was unworthy of Navarion's friendship, rambling on like all of Navarion's preferences were common knowledge. Which they probably were.

To everyone but Alahir.

The ice in his chest spread outward. Perhaps he ought to give up. Admit he was a terrible friend. Or find someone who knew about coffee beans.

Or ask Varis for a real suggestion.

He shuddered at the idea. Was he truly that desperate?

Gnawing his lip, he glanced at her sidelong, imagining it. She'd scoff, or laugh, or probably both, but she might help in the end, if only to have as many opportunities as possible to make pointed remarks about Alahir's presumption. Not that he cared. And if it would get him closer to a gift for Navarion . . .

He was rolling a request around in his mouth—it tasted awful—when a flutter of color across the street caught his eye. Brightly painted scrolls hung outside a shop, waving faintly in the cold afternoon breeze.

Alahir drifted toward them. He'd not considered art—another thing he'd never talked to Navarion about—but there was something about the vibrant colors, the freely trailing brush strokes, the energy of the simple landscapes as they swept across the paper. They felt like Navarion. Like that sense of wonder at even the smallest things, so out of place in a prince who already had the best the world could offer.

A flash of red at his side. "Trust a lowborn." Varis gave a dramatic sigh.

"I like them," he said absently, admiring a vivid green forest speckled with cheerful flowers.

"You would. Outlandish just like you. Must be the theme of this street—talented artists with no sense of restraint."

"Hm, yes, I suppose they are a bit bright. Oh look!" He gestured at one with exaggerated enthusiasm. "This one matches your coat."

He ducked into the shop before she could respond.

A woman no older than Alahir bowed as he brushed his shoulders clean of snowflecks—flicks?

Whatever.

"Welcome, my lord." Her gaze drifted past him. "My lady."

Sauntering to Alahir's side, Varis shot him a searing look and stepped directly onto his foot, though whether that was for the coat remark or to prevent *my lord* from going to his head was hard to say.

"Are you looking for a particular design or theme?" asked the shopkeeper, politely oblivious.

Alahir scanned a scene of the Khorga desert, or a place like it—streaks of golden yellow beneath a starkly blue sky, wisps of brushed cloud making their feeble way across the page. It looked like it could be a real place, but at the same time, like somewhere . . . better. Somewhere *more*.

Varis kicked him out of his reverie, and he fought to remember the shopkeeper's question. "Ah, no. Just looking."

He just-looked through the entire shop, ignoring Varis as he drifted from one landscape to the next. Each was mesmerizing, but it was the one in the far corner that held him fast.

He didn't know whether the place was real, but the warmth in his chest was real, and the place in his memory was real. The shore in the Nakwen Islands, bare and wild and beautiful. Not a place he'd expected a prince to drag him, but there they'd gone.

And there, on that lonely stretch of sand, Navarion had told Alahir about his desire to see the sea—not the hundred-odd lengths stretching out before them, but all of it, the entire span of water hidden beyond the silvery wall of the sphere.

And there, on that lonely stretch of sand, Navarion had once again called Alahir *friend*, and Alahir had at last let him use it without argument or complaint.

He slipped a hand from its glove and trailed a finger carefully along the scroll's edge. Not quite *I'd die for you*, but somehow very close.

"This one," he said, mostly to himself.

Varis crossed her arms and tilted her head, one eyebrow raised. "You're not serious."

He grinned. "Perhaps His Highness is more outlandish than you realize."

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Alahir spent several hours the next morning removing the scroll from its protective box, admiring it, and putting it back, but it wasn't until Navarion arrived that he remembered something very important: Navarion was not outlandish.

At all.

The only thing outlandish about Navarion was how much coffee he drank.

"Happy Frostmorn!" The prince bustled into his little room, tossing back the snow-covered hood of his thick coat as though removing an elaborate disguise.

Alahir had to try several times before anything coherent made its way through his closed throat. "You—you too."

His gaze flew to the scroll box, adorned with an oversized paper cutout of the sun and set prominently in a sunbeam on the small table beside his bed. As Navarion set down the bundle he was carrying and began unwrapping its contents, Alahir dove for the box and shoved it beneath the table.

Breathe, Alahir.

He raked his loose hair out of his face and obeyed the stern voice, and the panic subsided. He was overreacting. Navarion wouldn't laugh or scoff, not even if he hated it.

Still, maybe Alahir could distract him long enough to snatch a final glance at it. Just to make sure Varis was still wrong.

"Well?" came Navarion's voice.

Alahir glanced down, and all thoughts of the painting melted away. An array of cheerfully yellow foods decorated his low wooden table, wafting a dozen delicious aromas through the room.

"Nav, what is—did you drag all this out here from the palace?"

"By myself." Navarion smiled smugly. "If they don't want me going out unaccompanied, they shouldn't leave the servants' entrance unattended. And so near the kitchens."

Snickering, Alahir settled onto a cushion and surveyed the feast, his stomach rumbling eagerly. "What is all of this?"

"I didn't know whether they would do a traditional Frostmorn breakfast at the Harbor, so I thought I had better bring one. Egg cups, butter crème tarts, sweet rice with candied ginger, fresh cheese, griddle bread with lemon curd, and of course"—he pushed a large mug of creamy golden liquid toward Alahir, its deliciously sweet scent cutting through all the rest—"spiced pear cider."

Well. As far as holidays buried in snow went, this one had promise after all.

Navarion lifted his own mug. "To brighter days."

Alahir echoed the blessing and took a long sip of cider. It tasted every bit as delicious as it smelled. His nerves settled, and he took another drink, then helped himself to an egg cup, a griddle bread . . . might as well take some of everything. It had come from the palace, after all, which meant Emperor Navanith would be furious to know Alahir was eating it.

Better take two of everything.

"You know," he mused through a bite of butter tart, "if you didn't get out of bed until the sun was up and you went to sleep when it went down, the days would be naturally brighter."

"You'd also be awake for rather fewer hours each day."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Navarion regarded him with a familiar look of fond disdain. "It's still a mystery to me how you became so accomplished a swordsman when you have the ambition and energy of a sloth."

"Well, it's a mystery to *me* how you became a pr . . ."

Navarion smirked. "Yes?"

Alahir flicked a piece of ginger at him. "Give me an hour, I'll think up something clever."

They settled into eating, pausing between bites—well, Navarion paused—to discuss Alahir’s throwing spike lessons, Navarion’s progress training his new doe, Prince Anorith’s sudden interest in swordfighting, and Alahir’s latest letter from home.

The longer they talked, the further Alahir slouched and the straighter Navarion sat, as though he thought he could balance them out.

“I don’t know how you can eat like that,” Navarion lamented at last.

Alahir grinned and slumped even further, exaggerating every motion. “I don’t know how you can relax like that. It’s Frostmorn—surely princes are allowed to have bad posture on holidays?”

“I fail to see how wrenching your spine into a knot is in any way relaxing.”

It was in no way relaxing, but it made Navarion squirm, so it was worth it. “Maybe you should try it.”

“Maybe you should—ah!” He twisted around, and just as Alahir was about to compliment him on his attempt at spine-wrenching, he turned back and held out a neatly wrapped bundle. “Gift-giving is traditional on Frostmorn, and if you sit up properly, you may have it.”

Alahir obeyed despite himself, all his anxiety flooding back at once. Somehow, in all his searching and agonizing, he had not once considered that Navarion might get him a gift. Which was absurd, because showering Alahir in gifts was one of Navarion’s favorite pastimes.

Embarrassed and half terrified, he accepted it. He pushed aside his platter and set the little bundle on the table; its bright yellow ribbon fluttered as he struggled to untie it with faintly trembling hands.

“Nav, you didn’t—”

His breath caught. A sheath of eight long, slender spikes stared up at him, the metal glinting in the sunlight. Near the tip of each was a delicately carved shield rune.

"Oh, Navarion," he breathed, slipping one out of its place and rolling it slowly between his fingers. Cool and smooth and light and perfect. "These are beautiful."

"I do hope they're . . . That is . . ." Navarion shifted on his cushion and twisted one of the buttons on his shirt. "I went to Captain Malas to ask if you might need anything, and she said you'd be learning to use shield spikes soon."

Alahir trailed his finger over the rune, sensing the faint magic waiting to be summoned. "They're so . . ." How to compliment Navarion on his unexpectedly practical taste in weapons? "Elegant."

Navarion looked faintly relieved, though not entirely convinced. "I wanted to have them made of silver and etched with Khor designs, but Captain Malas disabused me of that idea."

"Silver?" Alahir chuckled, imagining the reactions of his fellow trainees.

"She was rather insistent about it, in fact. And I suppose she would know what's best. But I did have the weaponsmith put your initials on them."

Something heavy settled in his stomach that wasn't eight egg cups and four servings of rice. "You . . . you had these made specifically for me?"

"Well of course!" He brushed at his hair.

Alahir's heart began to pound, and his hands fell to his lap. How could so small a weapon suddenly weigh so much? And how was it possible to feel simultaneously grateful and awful, and for the same reason?

His head tried to turn toward the scroll box, and he pulled it back hastily, a cold sweat prickling over his limbs.

What had he been thinking? He couldn't give that to Navarion. He'd paid a fair amount for it, yes, but certainly not enough, and he'd hardly had it painted specifically for Navarion, and . . .

He'd done this all wrong.

Swallowing hard, he forced himself to raise his eyes. "Navarion, listen, I—"

"Don't." Navarion lifted a hand, a familiar look in his dark eyes. "You're new to Shovin and Frostmorn, and even if you'd known, I'd not have expected anything. It's gift enough that you're here."

There it was. *You're enough, Alahir*. But of course that wasn't true.

Alahir stifled a sigh.

"Besides." Navarion chuckled. "I don't think my quarters can hold any more gifts after Bells Eve. At least Kwin's destroyed a few dozen of those." His face turned red. "That sounded horribly ungrateful. They're appreciated, of course, but if I displayed every glass figure I've ever been given or hung up every piece of art, there wouldn't be a single bare space in my quarters. It's fortunate the complex has plenty of other buildings to adorn."

The shield spikes were well-made—Alahir hadn't accidentally snapped one in half by the end of Navarion's speech despite his hands' best efforts.

"Oh," he heard himself say, his voice small. "Yes, that makes sense."

He set the spike back with its fellows and gripped his cushion instead, forcing himself to remain sitting straight—from this angle, he wouldn't be able to see the scroll box already gathering dust beneath the table.

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"Ouch!"

Rama nearly dropped her practice sword, and Alahir cringed. "Sorry, sorry." Again.

His sparring partner rubbed her wrist and gave him a good-natured grin. "I'm fine. Now my bruises will have bruises." Her gaze darted to Captain Malas, and she hastily raised the sword. "Quick, let's start over."

They began the exercise again, and Alahir vowed to keep his attention on Rama this time. He was in the middle of training. He couldn't afford to be thinking about Navarion's Frostmorn gift, especially a week later.

Not that he could stop himself when the sheath of throwing spikes was strapped to his arm and every sweep of his sword brought them directly into his line of vision.

He could hang the painting on his own wall and spend several months cringing at the sight of it and feeling like an idiot. Or he could try returning it to the shop and spend only a few minutes feeling like an idiot. Or—

“Ow!”

“Sor—”

“All right, *stop*.”

The class stilled, and Captain Malas stalked over to Alahir and Rama. “Ser Khiyamat, are you paying *any* attention to what you’re doing?”

Alahir flushed. “No, Captain. I’m sorry.”

“And would you care to share with the class what is occupying your thoughts instead?”

“*No*.” The word escaped before he could stop it.

Several snickers and a few sharp whispers met this audacity. Captain Malas raised an eyebrow. Rama took one discreet step backward.

“You’re all dismissed,” the captain barked. She pinned Alahir with her gaze. “Except you.”

He nodded, not daring to move as the rest of the class filed out. Nor did he bother preparing a defense—he didn’t have one.

“Now then.” She crossed her arms.

“I’m sorry.”

“Tell that to Ser Nakheti. Tell *me* what’s bothering you. I’ve never known you to be so unfocused.”

There was no point dissembling—Navarion had visited the Harbor often enough, after all.

"I bought His Highness a Frostmorn gift," he said, praying desperately that she did not ask for details. "I thought it was suitable, but after what he gave me, I realized I was wrong. And now I feel stupid." He swallowed hard. "And . . ."

She let his silence continue a long moment before offering, "And like a poor friend?"

His shoulders slumped in time with his long sigh. "Yes."

"May I see one?"

Vaguely aware that she wasn't pounding him into the floor, he passed her one of the spikes. She twirled it between her hands with an appreciative nod, then whipped it at the target across the room. It struck the padded square with a dull thwack.

"Beautiful." Her mouth twitched. "He wanted to have them made of silver, did he tell you?"

Alahir managed a soft laugh. "Yes, well, he is a prince."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "I suppose. But he was not concerned with their monetary value. He kept asking how they might be made more special. As if something as impersonal as a set of weapons might not be . . . suitable."

She strode toward the target, leaving Alahir frowning at the floor. In its scuffed surface he could almost see Navarion shifting on his cushion and fidgeting with his buttons. He recalled his friend's insistence that Captain Malas had talked him out of having the spikes made as he'd wished.

Something as impersonal . . .

What, Alahir wondered suddenly, would have happened if he'd given Navarion the painting first?

His hand tightened around his sword. He'd never know the answer—but he could still find out how Navarion felt about receiving gifts a week late.

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The only problem with preparing the gift for Navarion was that Navarion was already in his room.

"Alahir!" The prince closed his book and rose from the corner where he'd been sitting. "You finished early. I expected I'd be waiting rather a long while." He gestured tentatively at the spikes still strapped around Alahir's arm. "Do they work well?"

"They're amazing. Everyone was jealous." He grinned, wrestling down a new surge of doubt now that Navarion was standing right in front him, perfectly poised and dressed in his usual elegance. "And Captain Malas was relieved to see you'd taken her advice about the design."

He searched his friend's face for signs of uncertainty at these words, but no search was necessary. Navarion's dark skin had flushed redder than if he'd just come in from the cold, and his fingers leapt to one of his coat buttons, which already hung by a mere thread.

Something sharp rippled through Alahir's stomach. "Navarion."

"I wasn't certain . . ." The button clattered to the floor, but Navarion didn't seem to notice. "That is, the silver and the etchings—I only wanted you to . . ."

"I know. Trust me, I understand." He clasped his friend's shoulder. "But I mean it, Nav. They're shiny and sharp and I can throw them at things and make shields. Frostmorn gifts do not get better than that."

"Oh, phah. You know nothing of Frostmorn gifts."

Alahir winced. That was entirely possible. And if he left that box where it was, he'd never have to know one way or the other.

And yet . . .

Before he could second-guess himself again, he set the sheath on the bedside table and retrieved the box from beneath it. It weighed far more than he remembered.

Swallowing hard, he turned and handed it to Navarion. "Speaking of Frostmorn, this is for you."

Something like delighted dismay lit Navarion's face. "Alahir, I told you—"

"You told me too late." Alahir shrugged sheepishly. "I bought that the day before Frostmorn."

"The day— But then why . . . ?" His gaze moved from the box to Alahir, to the spikes, back to the box. His eyes went wide. "Alahir!"

"Yes, I know, I'm an idiot. Look, just open it before I change my mind and take it back."

"No." Navarion pivoted, shielding the box from Alahir's reach. "Whatever it is, you cannot have it . . ."

Silence.

Hardly breathing, Alahir inched around so they were side by side again. The familiar seascape greeted him, the bright blues disappearing each time Navarion traced his fingers delicately over the airy brushstrokes. A soft, faraway smile floated at the prince's lips.

At last he looked at Alahir, and his voice softened. "You remember that?"

"Yat, how could I forget—you went on for hours. Sea this, ocean that, I thought you were going to start a new religion." His teasing grin faltered under Navarion's steady gaze; of course Navarion would also recall the importance of that place to their friendship. Smiling awkwardly, he ducked his head and nodded. "Do you like it?"

"Like it? Alahir, it's beautiful! Did you truly think I wouldn't?"

"I don't know, I . . ." Alahir slouched against the wall and knotted his hair around his fingers. "I was all ready to give it to you, but then you'd gone and had weapons made for me, and Lady Alendrin said it was too bright and garish for your impeccable taste in everything, and then you were telling me about your excessive art collection, and you're a prince, and . . . and I panicked."

Navarion stared, mouth quivering with suppressed laughter. "Alahir—"

"I know, I'm ridiculous and paranoid."

"You are." He laughed ruefully and listed his head to indicate the nearby shield spikes. "But perhaps I am as well."

"Ah, no, there is no *perhaps*. You are ridiculous and paranoid, too."

Navarion smirked. "Yes, well, at least I didn't allow *Lady Alendrin* to discourage me. And about color, of all things. Haven't you seen that coat of hers?"

Alahir slapped a hand over his mouth, but he couldn't contain his laughter, and there was no point in doing so, anyway. Suddenly the whole thing was funny, himself most of all.

By the time he'd finished laughing, Navarion had hung the scroll from an old nail in Alahir's wall, and for a few minutes, they stood side by side, staring in contented silence.

"So," Navarion said at last. "Frostmorn next year. What do you say we simply eschew gifts and focus on eating?"

Alahir heaved a sigh and threw an arm around his friend's shoulders. "Now *that* is a tradition I can get behind."

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