

The timing has never been right. Neve noticed him for the first time years ago. She was feeding information to Tarquin when he walked into the Lamplighter draped in fur and wearing clothes that probably cost more than rent on Neve's apartment for the entire year. The kind of clothes people don't wear in Docktown unless they had a wish to be mugged. She remembers Tarquin rolling his eyes at him. How he said, "*Papa's prized little nug.*" Neve was distracted at how the dingy light of the lamplighter didn't seem to dim him at all. There was a soft glow around him, catching in his golden ringlets. Mercar, never far from Tarquin those days, scoffed and replied, "*And that nug wants to be a Dragon.*"

Neve didn't write him off as much as they did. At the time, she was only a *consultant* for the Dragons. She was someone they worked with when it mutually benefited them both. Neve kept that way with most people. Keep them at arm's length and then another couple of meters for good measure. She thought he was heartbreakingly beautiful, but too young for her and, besides, she didn't have time for entanglements. Trusting people, letting them get close, that path only led to misery. She was better off on her own. Less people got hurt.

Becoming friends with Rook and the motley crew she assembled in the Lighthouse--all experts, all capable, but all as flawed as Neve herself was--wasn't what she thought would happen. Rook was never quite comfortable around her. She never said why, but Neve is a detective. She prides herself on her observational skills and, after the dragon attack, she used them to study Rook in her iced over anger. She knew it had something to do with her being a Tevinter mage, even if she was low-born. There were clues and tells that Rook, through a proud Rivaini, originally came from Tevinter. She had a cadence in her voice that spoke of Minrathous specifically. Even now, after it all, there is still a distance between them. She knows it has nothing to do with Lucanis. Neve was never real competition nor did she truly feel much for him beyond the aesthetic. Emotionally distant, handsome, tortured--they were literary and all reasons Neve could safely have interest in someone, because there was a good chance that that interest would never be reciprocated.

Since that time in the Lamplighter, she has caught glimpses of the elf she learned was named Pip. Beautiful, too beautiful for the streets of Docktown, but changed by it all the same. His rosebud mouth is set harder and he wears the same cobbled together bits of armor and fabric and leathers that all Shadows wear. She's seen him with Mercar and Tarquin, talking about plans for rebuilding. Minrathous is a mean, cruel lady, but she's hers--theirs--and they will fight to fix it.

Since the dragon, she'd been in the city more. Gotten to talk to him. Gotten to be close enough to smell the rosewater in his hair. Learned his little tells. The way he tucks his curls behind his

delicate, pointed ears when he's nervous before tangling his gold-adorned fingers together. They've spoken and shared fish--on the house despite her protests, because she saved Hal from Aelia--and he's looked at her in a disarming, frightening way with those amethyst eyes of his. Neve will never bridge that gap. She will never twine her fingers in his hair and lean down to kiss him. Pip seems open to it, in his arch comments and in his gentle looks, not like closed off Lucanis who is involved in Maker knows what with Rook in Treviso. She doesn't think their relationship is healthy, but who is she to judge or make any calls?

No, after it all, she knew it was best to keep things with Pip professional. The Dragons had a lot of work ahead of them. Docktown will always be lowest on the rung of what gets fixed. It's up to them. Rook came sometimes, moving rocks and destroying clumps of blight with her magic, but it was just them. As it was during the dragon attack when they realized she wasn't coming with her lyrium dagger to fix it. Neve has always relied on herself, and so too must the Dragons. Then Tarquin and Mercar return from Nevarra.

"It's absolute dogshit," Mercar says.

"You're saying that because you don't like it," Tarquin replies, then pauses. "But you're right. She probably thinks it's some calling. Something to do with all her idle time after saving Thedas. While we just fuck ourselves here."

Neve had been with Pip and a few other Shadows, mending stone walls and ferreting out the last clumps of Venatori lurking in the darker corners of the city. They'd all been in the Swan when the dour duo returned.

"What is?" Pip asks.

Mercar greets him by cupping his elbow gently and giving him a more genuine version of his usual smile. The two of them being related was not something even Neve would have seen coming. Two branches of the Mercar family and each adopting an elf, just a few years apart. Even they didn't know until Ashur--may he rest--said "*Mercar!*" and they both looked up.

"Later," he says. "Too many ears."

Neve knows what he's talking about. Rook's tranquil solution. She can't blame Tarquin for being leery, but she knows Mercar's bile about it is mostly because he simply doesn't like Rook. They've come to blows before and every conversation between them--few though there are--is a prelude to another brawl.

Pip frowns and taps his fingers on the stem of his wine glass. He always manages to make even the most mundane actions in the most drab surroundings look beautiful, practiced, delicate.

"I know you know," Mercar says, jerking his chin towards her. Under his freckles, he's flushed. Neve knows it's with anger rather than exertion from walking to the Swan from the eluvian. "Going to defend her again?"

Neve shakes her head, mostly due to the lack of privacy that the Swan provides. What Rook is doing is heresy to most. The last thing any of them need is to go down with her.

"You should have seen who was there," Tarquin says.

Something else Neve already knows. She was present, when he came in behind Rook's friend, the Champion.

"Who?" Pip asks.

Mercar takes their glass of wine from him and takes a sip. He ignores his cousin's squawk of indignation as he replies.

"The kaffas from Kirkwall."

"Fasta vass," Pip replies in a breathy voice. "It was really him?"

Mercar nods.

"Apparently," Tarquin says with derision.

It may be unfair that when anyone, particularly anyone in Tevinter, talks about anyone from Kirkwall, it is only ever referring to one person. Anders. He seemed so different in person. Smaller and yet taller. Sadder, too, but still angry. Neve isn't sure if she's impressed with him or not.

"I always kind of wanted to meet him," Pip says, tipping his head to the side.

"Why?" Neve asks before she can stop herself.

Anders had become a kind of folk hero to many mages, but Pip is a *soporati*. He shouldn't mean much to him at all.

"Well..." They twine one of his curls around his finger as he speaks. With his other hand, they grab the wine glass back from Mercar. "He built that bomb that was able to blow up the entire chantry and reverberate across the whole city. Kirkwall isn't that small. I'd like to know what he used to make it."

A brief silence stings at their table.

"I feel like I shouldn't have to tell you *not to* recreate the bomb that destroyed the Kirkwall chantry and set off the Mage-Templar War, *Filippus*," Mercar says, wrinkling his nose.

Pip widens his eyes in innocence. "Who said anything about recreating it? I just want details."

He smiles and, despite the ice she's encased around it, Neve's heart flips.

--

Tarquin and Mercar get each other worked up into a froth about anything having to do with Rook, so Neve has been the mediator. She doesn't think she's very good at it, considering the wall between her and Rook, so she may have suggested that Pip come along. It has nothing to do with any attraction to him, of course, but Pip is good at making sure that Mercar behaves--for the most part.

"Oh, you've been hiding this one, love," Isabela says when she gets a look at them.

"How could I hide him if I didn't know him?" Rook replies.

The rapport between them, as Neve has indicated in her notes, is not specifically akin to family, but something close enough. Rook might not even realize how much she defers to Isabela despite being a captain in her own right.

"He's gorgeous. Who does he look like?" she asks. "Something in the chin reminds me of someone, I know it."

Pip isn't *unused* to attention, but Neve can see that he is wholly unprepared for facing the full brunt of it. He has been receiving news of these gatherings from Mercar when he speaks in his brittle, bitter edge that comes from his dealings with Rook. He probably wasn't expecting a warm reception.

"Anders, who does he remind you of?"

The casual way that she and Hawke handle him as if he is just another person and not someone who holds misery and gravity in his hands is almost dizzying. He walks out the way he did that first time that Neve met him, like his patched-up coat is heavy on his shoulders.

"Who?"

Isabela gestures to Pip. "This pretty one."

Anders's eyes settle on him and Neve's keen observational skills watch him take the slightest, most minute double take.

"Oh," he says, and his voice sounds different. "Hello."

Hawke rolls her eyes. "Sometimes you drive me up a Maker-damned wall."

There is a brief exchange of eye contact between them that speaks of the near two decades of knowing each other--of that Neve is sure.

"Hello," Pip replies. "And, no, I have no idea who she thinks I remind her of."

Isabela shakes her head. "I'll figure it out. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to keep my deniability, darlings."

She blows a kiss to Rook and squeezes Hawke's arm gently before she leaves.

"Ignore her," Anders says. "I'm Anders."

"I know," Pip replies. He delicately extends his hand, rings flashing in the candlelight, and Anders takes it. "I'm Filippus, but everyone calls me Pip."

Neve watches the two of them speak and feels something...strange in the pit of her stomach. Mercar must feel something similar, because he draws up behind his cousin. The few inches that he has on Pip make him stand taller than him, but still don't make him close to Anders's height. Even slouched as he is, he stands much taller than both elves.

"We're just here for an update of how this is all going to affect us," he says. He jerks his head sharply to Rook and says, "Tell your friend to keep his chantry-exploding hands to himself."

"He isn't my friend," Rook says.

Mercar, being Mercar, doesn't miss a beat. "Oh, then, I guess me and him have that in common."

--

There are certain logical truths that Neve knows. One of which is that you cannot lose something that you never had. She has never even breathed a word of attraction towards Pip to anyone, not even the cats on the street, so it goes to show that, to everyone around her, she had no claim to stake. No feelings to take into consideration. She is Neve Gallus, Minrathous detective, ally to the Shadow Dragons--or a full-blown Maker-damned member at this point--and she works alone.

Still, there is the sting, when Mercar is up on a wall, flicking his throwing knives into a target on the newly painted wall of a recently rebuilt house, grousing to Pip.

"If you're going to be childish, I'm just going to go home," he says. The watery sunlight slanting through the clouds is doing things to his hair that make it almost gold in parts.

"I'm not being childish," he replies.

*Flick, flick.*

The knives land in the target, but don't penetrate the mortared stone.

*Good. Tarquin was complaining about how long the masonry was taking. He wouldn't want his...whatever Mercar is to him to ruin it with whatever tantrum this is.*

"Is it him or because you don't want me involved in this?" he asks.

"It can be both," he quips. "Whatever idiocy Rook is doing, he's involved in it, and I don't want *you* involved in it."

"I'm not," he replies.

"But you're sleeping with him."

Neve feels something grip her chest, her stomach, her guts. She curls her toes on her foot and stops in place.

“So?” Pip asks. “I’m not marauding the seas, looking for tranquil, am I?”

“Hmph,” Mercar says. “Just be careful.”

Neither of them have seen her. Tarquin is expecting her and she doesn’t want to make him any more irritable than he already is, but. It doesn’t take a detective with her skills to deduce that they’re talking about Anders. Apparently he and Pip have spoken about *other* kinds of explosions.

Unbidden envy coils around her as she takes a step forward to join them and try and pretend she didn’t hear what she heard. She and Pip were never together--she made sure of that--so then why does she feel this?