

CHAPTER 1

THUD. SCREECH. THUD. Screech.

I had to give the dracanae credit. It was persistent.

“I swear to Zeus and his blazing libido, if that thing doesn’t shut up, I’m going to make a snakeskin suit for myself.”

Raising an eyebrow, I glanced across the cab of the armored truck to look at my younger brother. Liam’s arms were folded tightly over his chest, his battered black Periochí Polemistés armor pulling at his muscles. Sunlight glinted through the passenger window and threaded through his shaggy mop of dark brown hair. Smears of dirt and small bruises dotted his chin. I looked rougher than he did—blood was caked along my hairline, a welt throbbed on my cheek, and I’d had to use a healing spell on a rib that the dracanae had broken when its tail smashed me into the dirt—but I was in a marginally better mood. My head was clear, my wounds had mostly healed, and I hadn’t used the Berserker Rage. This was a good day for me, which was really, *really*, saying something.

Still, Liam was eighteen, and pouting and sulking were hallmarks of that age. I thanked the gods that his tantrums were half-hearted and mild compared to what a teenage war scion’s could have been.

“You’re going to wear dracanae skin? I thought you outgrew your gangster-cowboy phase.”

Liam’s sharp, sky blue eyes whipped to me and then narrowed when the dracanae screamed and dragged its claws over the metal walls again. The shrieking noise made both of us wince. The doors were too thick for it to break through, so we were safe, just stuck with the noise and possible ear damage.

Liam hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

“You hear that, right? That sound like music to your ears, dude?”

Instead of replying, I frowned at the upcoming roadblock. The call about a loose dracanae had come from a metal-finishing company near Anaheim Lake. A forger scion

on a smoke break had seen the beast in the water, panicked, and called for Region Warriors to capture it before it could do what all mythological beasts did best—rip human beings to shreds.

Liam and I were dispatched from the Stratónes to bring it in so it could be processed and brought to a stockade. The job had been rough—dracanae were comfortable in their water element, whereas war scions favored heat and flame—but we caught it before anyone could be hurt.

The metal-finishing plant had lots of blocked-off areas around it, but the roads had been opened for us to get through. The road block in front of me was diverting us north, past the metalworking plant, toward a gravel road surrounded by discarded construction equipment.

“I’ve heard better,” I said in response to Liam’s question. Driving the truck onto the rough gravel, I scanned the construction site. I’d have to go around the industrial buildings and take the back road to get onto the main street, which would be a pain in the ass. This road shouldn’t have been blocked off in the first place. “Still, we got the job done. We’ll take the dracanae to a stockade, do the paperwork”—Liam groaned and sagged in his seat—“and start our weekend early.”

Liam rolled his head in my direction. “Seriously, Derek? You’re banking on speedy paperwork to get us a little relaxation?”

My palms scraped over the steering wheel. Images I didn’t want to see flashed in my mind, and I winced slightly.

“Today I am,” I muttered.

Liam fell silent, no longer a cranky teenager, but a concerned brother who’d caught my reaction.

He settled back in his seat and scuffed his boots along the floor mat. “Good point.”

We stopped talking, letting the aggravated dracanae fill the silence. I wanted to curse myself, to tell Liam he could go back to sulking and whining so he wouldn’t cross his arms over his torso and rub his left ribs or his right pectoral. I wanted to pull to a stop, look him in the eye, and promise to take him to the beaches in the Poseidon region. It was still early spring, but he loved Santa Monica, and the ocean cheered him up.

But I didn’t say any of that because I saw a black shape flicker behind a set of heavy

pipes. I frowned. The forger scions who worked here all wore bright vests and hard hats, and none of them were out here. I'd told them to stay in the metalworking plant until I called and gave the all clear.

Someone else was out here, trying to hide.

I stopped the truck and unbuckled my seatbelt. Liam glanced out the window and then at me. "Um, I'm as annoyed by the dracanae as you are, dude, but stopping isn't going to make it shut up."

"I saw someone over by those pipes," I explained, unlocking the door. "Stay here, ace."

"What? Hell no! If you get to walk out and spare your eardrums, so do I."

All I could do was roll my eyes and sigh as Liam unlocked the passenger door and jumped out of the cab. I grabbed the keys from the ignition and slid out of the truck.

We walked toward the front of the truck, the roasting California sun beating down on us and searing through our Kevlar and Cut-TEX armor. My fingers twitched for a weapon—the *kopis* sword sheathed on my back, or one of the knives I carried on my right pectoral, on either side of my rib cage, on my belt, and in my boots. The unused Berserker Rage rolled across my heart like smoke, reminding me it was there even though I had no reason to use it. Not yet, anyway.

There was a slight tension in my stomach and hair rising on the back of my neck.

I only felt that way when I knew I was being watched.

Liam's voice echoed in my head through our blood bond when we stopped in front of the truck. <You want to split up and find the ninja?>

<No,> I thought back. <Pretend to be checking the back tires or something. We'll see if we can draw him out.>

<Ah, the old 'pretend to put our backs in stabbing range' tactic.>

I rolled my head toward my brother. He gave me that annoying, lopsided smirk that had taunted me for the past eighteen years. I responded by flicking his ear with my fingers.

Liam growled and rubbed the side of his head. "Jackass."

"Stop talking, and get walking, ace."

He grumbled under his breath but did as I asked. I turned my back to the pipes and

walked to one of the truck's side vents, pretending to flick dust out of it. The whole time, I drew magic out of my soul and eased it into my veins, letting the power enhance my sense of hearing and smell.

With my Adapted senses, I could hear the distant clangs of mechanical equipment from the metalworking plant and the low buzz of cars driving over the highway. The dracanae's howling and thrashing in the back of the truck seemed louder, and I could smell hot metal and diesel exhaust.

Crunch.

I kept working at the vents, listening to the shift of gravel under boots as someone approached my back.

<I've got somebody coming up behind me, ace. You see anyone else?>

<No, I don't think... wait, I—>

His response cut off, but I could neither answer him nor check on him. From right behind me, I heard the intake of breath and the sound of a blade scraping out of a leather sheath, a sound I knew the way I knew my own soul.

I snapped my elbow back and was rewarded with the hard crunch of shattering cartilage followed by a roar of pain. I whirled around, bringing my foot up to kick my attacker. The tip of my boot grazed his jaw, knocking him to the ground.

I reached over my shoulder and drew my sword from its back sheath. The curve of the kopis gleamed under the sunlight, the Greek blade a match for anything my attacker would be using.

Which was... a sickle?

My attacker picked up his weapon, stood, and faced me.

I had a brief moment to take in his appearance. I couldn't discern his age, but he was at least fifty pounds lighter and nearly a head shorter than me. He wore a short black trench coat and black clothes over his lean frame. His whole face, save for his eyes, was covered by a black balaclava. The skin I could see was so pale that it looked gray. If he hadn't been glaring at me with eyes nearly as ashen as his skin, I would have thought he was halfway to his grave.

If the pale man was intimidated by me or the wickedly sharp blade in my hand, he didn't show it. Instead of coming at me with the sickle, he opened his left hand and called

on his magic. Coils of black smoke seeped out of his skin and pooled in his palm to form an inky-black ball of dark magic.

Aether—the fifth element and the kind of magic that could literally create nightmares.

Which meant the bastard in front of me was a dark scion.

He shoved the dark sphere of magic at me. I leaned back and let it fly into the truck. The sphere exploded and hissed on impact, its smoky tendrils corroding the metal I'd been standing in front of moments ago.

I stepped away from the truck and heard shouts from behind me. From the corner of my eye, I could see two black-clad people—a bulky man and a slender woman, both in balaclavas—running toward us. I couldn't let Liam engage them alone, but I couldn't show my back to a dark scion, either.

<Ace, I can't get to you yet. Are you okay?>

<I'm fighting a godsdamn water scion and—>

Which meant he *was* okay for now, but if the other two reached him while he was already in a fight...

I whirled around, lashing out with my sword. It clashed with the sickle, which had been cleaving toward my throat. The dark scion growled and shoved his left hand at my chest. Aether swirled out of the skin of his wrist and whipped toward me. His eyes glimmered with delight.

Unfortunately for him, he wasn't the only one who could play with magic.

I held up my free hand, palm out, and called on my elemental fire. It responded instantly, soaring through my veins like flame over oil, pressing against my skin until it burst out of my hand and exploded against his dark magic.

His acid spell was consumed by my fire, and his eyes widened.

I shoved my magic against his, forcing the sharp tongues of flame to lick the tendrils of smoke and devour it whole.

More aether rippled off the dark scion's hand, trying to overwhelm my fire. He was as strong with his magic as I was with mine, but I couldn't keep toying with him. I needed to get to my brother.

I changed tactics and launched a blast of elemental fire at his face. The flames would

dissolve before they could strike him, but he didn't know that. The dark scion cursed and backed off, and by the time the blast of fire evaporated, I was in front of him. I pounced and jabbed my knee into his chest. He cried out and hacked a horrible cough that almost made me feel guilty about nearly caving in his chest.

But I *needed* to help Liam.

I smashed my fist into the dark scion's temple. The force of the blow knocked him out, and he dropped to the ground.

I whirled around and saw Liam locked in combat with a woman dressed in a tight black shirt, jeans, and boots, her face covered by a black balaclava. Crystal-clear water coiled around her hands and glittered under the sunlight. The woman snapped her wrists at Liam, loosing two whips of elemental water. As the water moved, the end of the whips began to solidify into sharp ice tips. It was an impressive trick that required a lot of skill. Whoever this water scion was, she was powerful.

But my brother had tricks of his own.

Liam ducked and opened his palm, drawing elemental fire out of his skin to rest in his hand. He pushed his hand out and up in one fluid motion, and the flames stretched upward to melt the ice and keep the water scion away.

I could no longer see our other two opponents.

As if reading my thoughts, Liam opened his connection to the blood bond. <I've got her handled. Get the other two.>

At his words, I Adapted for increased speed and ran to the other side of the truck. It took me two seconds to get there. The bulky man—wearing a black business suit, of all things—and the woman were waiting for me.

The man's eyes bulged, but the woman opened her hand and called fire into it. In her palm, the flames lengthened into a spear. I skidded to a stop just as she hurled it at me, and ducked under flames that melted the air over my head and tinged my vision orange for a single second.

She was too aggressive to be a forger scion. She was either a war scion, like me, or a craft scion, which meant she was in this region illegally.

The man opened his palms and called on his magic. Pale-yellow lightning crackled between his fingertips. I was barely able to think *Oh shit* before he shoved out his hands

and launched the bolts at me.

I Adapted my skin—pouring magic into it to make my flesh harder and more resistant to damage—and jumped back to avoid the worst of the strikes. The thin, jagged bolts struck the dirt half an inch from where I'd been standing, and seared my vision.

“You didn't tell me Derek Areios would be with them,” the man boomed with a deep voice.

“He wasn't supposed to be,” the woman beside him protested, readying another sphere of fire in her hand. “I didn't see it.”

See it?

She threw the flaming orb at my skull. I brought up my free hand and called fire out of my skin. My magic demolished hers in an explosion of embers and light. I glared at her and stalked forward.

“Get the door open and get the heart,” the woman said as she came toward me.

I slowed down, racking my brain for spells that required the heart of a dracanae. There were none I could think of.

“You're kidding,” he protested, his eyes bugging out as he watched the small woman approach me. “Didn't you hear me say that's *Derek Areios*?”

I usually hate it when people know my name, but sometimes it comes in handy.

She whipped out her hand and unleashed a stream of fire. I leaped aside and watched the blazing orange flames devour the air next to me. The stream arced backward, chasing me across the gravel.

Something flashed in the corner of my eye. I turned and leaped back from the short blade—a *kukri*—that slashed toward me. The woman sliced the blade back down, trying to catch me again. I wove around her strikes, but she moved like the wind—fast, graceful, and relentless. I blocked every strike she made, but there were too many close calls. She seemed to know exactly how and when I was going to move, something the dark scion hadn't been able to do.

She was stalling me. In the background, I could see the storm scion swirling his hands upward, calling gusts of wind to him. Dust and grit curled under his palms and smashed into the door of the truck.

No, no. Shit!

A short flare of light scorched my vision. The woman's blade hacked toward my skull. I grabbed her wrist with my free hand and saw her eyes widen. Her torso was completely exposed. In hand-to-hand combat, that was a death sentence.

Or it would have been, if I had still been a killer.

Instead, I jabbed my elbow into her stomach to wind her, hooked her ankle with my foot, and dropped her to the ground. I yanked the kukri from her grip and tossed it aside. She snarled and tried to get up, but halted when I pressed the tip of my sword to her throat.

The Berserker Rage prowled through my heart, teasing my conscience with whispers of *Do it, do it, spill her blood, take her life, she's defeated, you have her.*

"Don't," I told her and the Rage.

Silver-blue eyes bored into me, and I knew that if she had her way, she would filet me and roast my remains.

Turning my head away, I whistled sharply. The storm scion by the truck and the water scion battling my brother both halted their attacks.

The storm scion stood between us, glancing at the woman pinned to the ground by my sword.

"This ends now," I called to him. "I don't know why you want the heart of a dracanae, but you're not—"

"Dracanae?" exclaimed the storm scion.

As if it could hear its name, the creature shrieked and thrashed in its metal prison, causing the whole truck to rock.

The storm scion backed away, confused. He looked at the woman under my sword.

"I thought you said they had it with them!" he shouted.

"I did!" the woman yelled back. "My vision wasn't wrong."

Vision. So she was a Seer. No wonder she'd been able to fight me so well. But Seers were supposed to have extremely accurate foresight into daily events when they focused, as she must have, and I carried a huge magical presence, which meant I was easy to See.

How could her Sight have been wrong?

"All right, we're going to sort this out right—"

Darkness shrouded my peripheral vision. A searing lance of pain cleaved into my

side, and then I was on the ground.

Smoky aether closed around my limbs and torso like creeping frost. A thousand tiny, razor-toothed mouths ate through my armor and freeze-dried my skin. Smoke squeezed my chest and burned my lungs. I couldn't move, completely wrapped in darkness.

Distantly, I thought I heard the scions shouting. I forced my eyes open and saw Liam running toward me, his face pale with panic. A shadow crossed in front of me—dusty boots and a trench coat I recognized.

The dark scion.

Another ball of aether filled his hand. Liam skidded to a stop, but it was too late. The smoking sphere of torture flew out of the dark scion's hand and smacked into my little brother's chest. Liam flew back and collided with the ground. He didn't move again.

The Berserker Rage, the scorching pulse of wild magic I'd ignored all day, flooded my body. My mind screamed at it to stop, but all I could see was Liam lying there, unmoving. The dam holding back the Rage shattered, and the full extent of my magic was free.

I forgot the pain. I forgot where I was. I forgot why I was here. I didn't care.

All that mattered was freeing myself from the aether-binds and ripping my enemies limb from godsdamn limb.

“Gage, what the fuck did you just do?” screamed the Seer.

The dark scion—Gage—sprinted toward the truck. His corrosive magic struck the doors and gouged them open. The dracanae's howls tore free.

In the background, the water scion hovered near my brother's prone form. She knelt and held her hand above his chest. Snowy magic drifted from her fingertips into his torso.

No, no. Don't you dare. Don't touch him!

My body heated with magic.

“Shit,” rasped Gage. His shoulders shook as he coughed violently. Then he shot two streams of aether into the open door of the truck. The dracanae shrieked, and Gage stepped back. “I thought you said they were transporting the Heart of the Devourer!”

Fire exploded out of me from head to toe, smothering the aether eating at my skin. I didn't bother healing myself. When the fire extinguished, I rolled to my feet, sheathed my sword, and dashed forward.

The storm scion saw me. “Uh, guys?”

“They were supposed to be!” the woman shouted at the dark scion.

Metal screeched, and the dracanae yowled. The truck rocked violently.

I still didn’t care.

“Guys!” The storm scion shoved out his hands and fired two blasts of yellow-tinted lightning at my chest. I ducked one of them, but the other caught me in the chest and knocked me back. I felt the impact, but there was no pain. It was a setback, nothing more.

I gathered more magic, feeling the intense and welcome heat of my fire spread out from my palms and crawl up my arms.

The dark scion and the Seer noticed me. The water scion looked up from where she was hovering over Liam. The storm scion cursed and brought up his hands.

I unleashed my fire on all of them.

The blaze erupted from my hands in streams twice as wide as me. I heard them shout and curse, could see the tinges of smoky aether, jagged yellow lightning, pale blue water, and brilliant orange fire colliding with my magic.

They wouldn’t be able to withstand it for long. They were strong and clever with their magic, but I was a force of nature, unstoppable when I wanted to be.

The Berserker Rage added to my power, coaxing my fury.

Burn them all, they tried to kill you, killed your brother, destroy them, they’re weak, nothing like you.

My eyes caught sight of the dracanae. It had crawled out of the burnt truck doors and was sneaking up behind my enemies. But its serpentine form recoiled at the feel of so much magic, and turned toward the other form on the ground.

The one that wasn’t fighting.

The easier prey.

Cursing, I swung my hands upward and shot a stream of fire over the scions’ heads, toward the dracanae.

The scions, still alive and stunned, leaped away from the arc of flame. It came down between Liam and the dracanae, protecting my brother. He was still unconscious but no longer covered in aether.

I grabbed the kopis from my back and charged forward. My focus was on the half-

human, half-snake monstrosity and nothing else.

I took in its horrific appearance as I ran. Thick, olive-green scales covered the lower half of its serpentine body. Its tail was as thick as my bicep. Rough, cracked scales covered its torso and stretched along corded arms. The four thick fingers of each forelimb were tipped with hooked talons. Its roughly-human head had slits for nostrils, a wide mouth of sharp teeth, raised brow ridges, and bulging yellow eyes with vertical pupils. It was a cold-blooded nightmare.

But I can be a nightmare too.

The dracanae slithered across the gravel and swung one of its arms down at my head. I jumped back. The limb punched through the air in front of me. I aimed my sword and fire at it.

Its arm snapped up, the back of the dracanae's hand aimed at my chin. I twisted away and stabbed the kopis into its side. The beast shrieked and slashed its talons at me. I grabbed its arm and held it away from my body.

Fire tore out of my hand and burned the leathery limb. The smell of scorched chicken skin and burning fat filled my nose. Flesh bubbled and popped around my fingertips. The dracanae hissed and whipped its good hand at my face. I sliced my sword upward and cut into the beast's arm. Snakeskin split against the blade, and the dracanae howled again but didn't stop rushing me.

I let my body go on autopilot. Twenty-two years of training took over, and I Adapted to protect myself. Talons hooked into my side, puncturing my armor and skin. Cut-Tex usually protected me from stab wounds and slashes, but a dracanae was far more powerful than a simple knife. Hardening my skin with magic had kept me from instant death, and thanks to the Rage, I could feel nothing.

I lifted my sword and hacked down, severing the dracanae's hand. Thick, bruise-colored blood splattered against my ravaged armor. The amputated hand was still embedded in my side. I pulled the severed limb out, feeling the tug but not the torture.

I clapped a hand to my side and sent a healing spell into my body. The skin around my wound heated and prickled slowly. My magic was starting to run low. The Rage had almost run its course.

The one-handed dracanae writhed maniacally on the ground, shrieking in outrage

over its missing limb. Furious yellow snake eyes fixed on me. Dark blood dripped onto the sand in front of the dracanae's ruined arm. It opened its jaws and hissed. Saliva dripped from curved fangs as long as my middle finger.

The Berserker Rage swirled through my limbs and gave me one last push of strength, making me smile.

I slid the kopis into its sheath.

When the dracanae pounced, I didn't run. I didn't dodge. I centered my weight and brought up my hands. Three hundred pounds of green scales, razor talons, and jagged teeth dove straight for me.

I didn't try to avoid it.

The dracanae collided with me and smashed me into the dirt. My elbows knocked into the ground, and I unleashed elemental fire.

Dracanae flesh melted. I slid my hands into the beast's body as though it was putty. The dracanae screamed in agony, but I did not relent. I kept pushing my hands through its skin, broiling the monster from the inside out. Its arms batted against my body, but if those claws stabbed me, I couldn't tell. I was completely focused on incinerating the monstrosity.

Howling death throes echoed in my ears. My eyes were blinded by firelight and blood. The smell of burning flesh was so thick and cloying I could taste it.

Suddenly, the creature's smoking, dead body pitched forward. I shoved it off me and breathed deep. Smells of dust, smoke, and blood twisted around me. Adrenaline filled my veins and my heart galloped a free, wild beat.

This, this, is what I live for. What I am good at. What I do to keep—

My eyes snapped open, comprehension slicing through the battle-crazed fog of my thoughts.

I turned and found the limp form of my eighteen-year-old brother lying face first in the dirt just feet away from me. I got up, limped to his side, and dropped to my knees on the ground.

The Berserker Rage released its hold on me. The power that had energized me before gave way to catastrophic pain. I collapsed next to my brother, my lungs seizing so badly that I couldn't even scream. I had no magic left. I couldn't heal Liam or myself until I

rested and recharged. That wouldn't happen for a few long, dreadful hours.

All I could do was lie in the dirt by my unmoving brother and feel the collection of agonies rip through my body. I had scorch marks on my chest, burns from the acid spell, an oozing hole in my side, a pounding in my head and back, and raw, overworked muscles.

And then, as my mind replayed everything I had done, I felt the guilt.

I'd almost killed four people. *Four people.* I had shot all my fire at them without even thinking. Because they were in my way. Because I'd wanted to.

I had barely been able to see them. My fire had crashed into them like a wave. If even one of them hadn't been fueling that makeshift barrier with their magic...

I craned my head up as much as I could, wincing at the twinge that went through it.

The four scions were running down the dirt road toward the city, getting smaller and smaller by the second. Even if we recovered now, we'd be too weak to fight them again.

Which meant we were in *huge* trouble.

Still...

I lowered my head and closed my eyes. *Thank the gods. Thank the gods they're alive.*

Having one death on my conscience was one too many. To add four to it, no matter what they had done—

I heard a groan from beside me and turned my head. Relief swelled through my aching chest when Liam's eyes pinched together and he sat up.

He placed his hand on his heart, likely to send a healing spell through it. He opened his eyes and looked at me lying beside him, cataloging my every injury.

"You look about as shitty as I feel," he grumbled.

Even though it hurt, I managed to smile. "Glad you're okay, ace."

Liam settled his hands over my chest and used his magic to heal me. In a couple minutes, the warmth of his spell faded, and I was able to sit up without passing out.

"What the hell happened?" he asked. "And what the hell is on your hands?"

Though I was reluctant, I told him. Liam was my brother, the one person in the entire world that I trusted with my life. He knew all my secrets, and I knew all his.

That wasn't to say he didn't judge me for them, particularly when I described the gruesome way I'd killed the dracanae.

By the time I was done describing my colossal fuck-up, I was sitting with my knees pressed against my chest and my stare at the ground.

“So they escaped,” Liam murmured.

I looked at my little brother, who stared at me the way he always did when I lost control—angry that I had used the Rage again, disappointed that I’d thought I needed it, worried that I wouldn’t be able to stop next time. That *he* wouldn’t be enough to stop me.

Anger, disappointment, and worry—the twisted emotions he used to stab at my soul. I deserved it ten times over for what I’d done and for what the Rage would goad me to do again.

I cleared the hoarse strain out of my voice. “We need to go back to the Stratónes.”

“Good call,” Liam agreed.

We got up and walked to the truck. At least it was mostly intact. I grabbed a water bottle from the glovebox, used it to wash most of the gore from my hands, then hopped into the driver’s seat. Liam took out his cellphone and called for a Retrieval Squad to collect the dracanae’s remains.

“So, thanks for killing my appetite,” Liam said after he hung up.

I looked at him. “What?”

My brother rolled his eyes so hard I thought they’d swivel out of his skull. “Come on, dude. You fried that dracanae worse than the Human Torch in a tantrum. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to eat barbecue again.”

I shouldn’t have laughed. Not only did I feel awful, but it was a nightmarish joke. But Liam, damn it all, got a grin from me. He always did.

“Kale salad with steamed broccoli it is,” I teased.

He looked genuinely horrified. “Oh, come on, dude. *So not* what I meant.”

I chuckled, a sound that didn’t last more than a couple seconds. It still hurt to breathe.

“So.” Liam exhaled. “What do you think they were looking for?”

“No clue, ace. They called it the Heart of the Devourer.”

“Gods above and below, seriously? That sounds like a vampire metal band that dresses like Gene Simmons.”

“At least they’d have an actual rock star for a role model.”

My brother hesitated then added, “Boss will likely send us after them.”

I nodded grimly. “Probably.”

“Do you think it was a good idea to let them go?”

I looked at Liam, the unspoken question rising in his eyes. Should I have abandoned him to chase after four very dangerous scions looking for what sounded like a very dangerous item?

My answer was the same no matter how I looked at it. No. I would never have left my brother for anything in the world. I’d nearly lost him five years ago, and despite his cordial tone toward me now, I knew he was going to verbally flay me later. But he was all I had. He was the lifeboat that saved me from drowning. Whatever punishment came from letting four criminals go was worth it to see his scraggly mop of hair and lopsided smile beside me.

“Don’t worry about them, ace.” I smirked half-heartedly. “I’m sure we haven’t seen the last of them.”

