

BLACKHEARTED BETRAYAL

A SHADES OF FURY NOVEL

K A S E Y M A C K E N Z I E



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

PRAISE FOR

GREEN-EYED ENVY

“Engrossing ...Mackenzie’s writing is clean and clever, the plot is twisty and intriguing, and Riss’s charm and sass elevate her above many other fantasy heroines.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Complex and intriguing ...[a] wonderful mystery, and enough intrigue to keep me on my toes wondering exactly who done it.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Love this series, and Riss! She is such a kick-ass heroine that you can’t help but root for her. She has spunk and an attitude and knows how to use it, which is why I like her so much. It’s just great writing and keeps the reader interested. I cannot wait to see what happens next!”

—*Night Owl Review*

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“Mackenzie proves that her thrilling debut was just the start of great things to come ...a nonstop ride packed with mystery, betrayal, and murder ...well worth reading.”

—*RT Book Review*

“Superb ...This is a great tour of Boston’s paranormal underground.”

—*Alternative Worlds*

RED HOT FURY

“Urban fantasy readers looking for something new will thrill to this exhilarating debut, populated with creatures from Greek myth ...Riss is the perfect urban fantasy heroine—fresh, sassy, smart, and determined—and a cavalcade of fully developed side characters keep this twisty tale moving quickly.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“I loved it. Kasey Mackenzie is a brilliant new talent, and *Red Hot Fury* is fun, inventive, and has an awesome heroine. Easily the best book I’ve read this year.”

—Karen Chance, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Cassie Palmer series

“Pulls you in from page one, and the action doesn’t stop there. Marissa is a Fury with sass, skills, and leather ...not to mention a sexy Irish Warhound by her side. If you’re ready for a unique spin on all things paranormal—and you’re ready to stay up a little too late reading—grab *Red Hot Fury* and prepare to dive in. Kasey Mackenzie’s first *Shades of Fury* novel sets a new standard for urban fantasy.”

“Warning to readers: You may become hooked and gain little sleep while reading *Red Hot Fury*. Fans of Laurell K. Hamilton, Charlaine Harris, and Karen Chance will keep on the lookout for Ms. Mackenzie and the Shades of Fury novels!”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

“A superfast-paced story. The plot just swoons by, and it was incredibly fun to read ...*Red Hot Fury* is fabulous! There [are] plenty of kick-ass action scenes, the world-building is really interesting, and I'm definitely looking forward to the next book in this new urban fantasy series.”

—*Night Owl Reviews*

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GREEN-EYED ENVY
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KASEY MACKENZIE



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Debbie. You left us way too soon, but I know you're finally
peace, and you know I'll help our family carry on through the grief. We'll love and miss you always.

*Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,
Love leaves a memory no one can steal.*

—FROM AN IRISH HEADSTONE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This section is going to be long again because this book has been, without a doubt, the absolutely hardest to write of my life. Many personal challenges kicked me around this year, culminating with the heartbreaking death of my mother, Debbie, on Thanksgiving night. I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every person who, in whatever way, helped my family deal with this tragedy, from those who gave their support and love to those who made sure my baby boy had a wonderful Christmas. Both old and new friends helped ease my heart during the toughest crisis of my life. Sorry there's not room to list you all by name, but just know that you are all appreciated so much more than I can express. Thank you!

Thanks again to my ever-patient editor, Jessica Wade, and everyone at Ace who was so understanding as I dealt with all the trauma this year; to my awesome rock star of an agent, Ginger Clark, who never doubted I could get this book done; to my amazing cover artist, Judy York, and Ace's fantastic art department, who all amaze me more with each book; and to the enthusiastic readers, librarians, and booksellers who have connected with this series and make what I do possible.

Last but not least, thanks to my beloved family: my loving husband, Shawn, who has more faith in me than I could ever have in myself; my adorable son, Zack, who is the sweetest and best baby boy a mother could ever have; my stepfather, Larry, who loved my mother so much and whom we love for that and many other reasons; my baby sister, Kelsey, who has become such an amazing mother and dealt with so much the past few months with grace and love; my brothers, Dustin and Chris, whom I may not always see eye to eye with but love tremendously; my future brother-in-law, Scott, who is an amazing man; my new nephews and niece, who gave us all reasons to smile even in the darkest of days; my grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and in-laws, who pulled together to help us deal with Mom's passing; and my best friend, Julie, who is just as much of a sister to me as my biological sister. Much thanks and love also to my fabulous friends in the writing community, including (but not limited to) Jill Myles, Gretchen McNeil, Cindy Pon, Chris Marie Green, Wen Spencer, Jackie Kessler, Heather Brewer, Cole Gibsen, Shawntelle Madison, Chloe Neill, Team Purgatory at Absolute Write, my chat buddies at Forward Motion for Writers, and the St. Louis Writers Guild.

Remember to hold your loved ones tight and tell them how you feel about them: You never know when it will be for the last time.

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CHAPTER ONE

NOTHING KILLED A POSTPARTY BUZZ LIKE waiting all night to jump your lover's bones only to have a Harpy bust into your home while you're getting frisky on the sofa. Even worse, a *pregnant* Harpy, whose enormous belly, swollen ankles, and raging mood swings served as a walking billboard for conscientious birth-control use. I let out a choked scream and covered my nakedness with an afghan when the Harpy Queen waltzed through my front door *entirely* too early in the morning. Scott Murphy, the love of my life, became alert—er, the *other* kind of alert—and lunged to his feet, fortunately still wearing his tuxedo pants.

I grabbed his arm before he could strike. “Down, boy; it’s Serise.” The only Harpy neither of us would attack on sight. Normally, when a Fury—like me—became so overcome by Rage, she couldn’t control it and Turned Harpy, which was bad news. But Serise had earned my trust enough that I’d programmed my magical wards to allow her inside without raising a dozen alarms. Something I was very much starting to regret.

“Somebody had damned well better be dead, *Your Majesty*, or you may well soon be, baby bump or no.”

She blinked yellow-green eyes and laid a protective hand upon her stomach. “Have I interrupted something important?”

Trust a Harpy to completely miss any and all social cues, like the half-naked couple *getting busy* on the sofa. She might be slightly saner than her sisters thanks to her status as Queen, but that didn’t make her any less socially awkward. “Seriously, Serise, you have like five seconds to get to the point before I kick you *out* of my house.”

“Nobody is dead, but I believed the two of you would wish to know about the man I caught shadowing me after I dropped off your nieces at their home.”

My hackles rose in a more figurative sense than those of my Warhound lover beside me. “You let some strange man *follow you* to my brother’s home?”

Serise finally seemed to clue in to the absurdity of conducting a serious conversation while Scott and I were half-naked in the living room. “Perhaps you would prefer to clothe yourself before—”

“Gods damn it, Harpy Queen, are my nieces in danger?”

“Of course not.” She actually sounded offended. “Firstly, I never claimed the man was unknown to me. Secondly, you should know I would never be so clumsy as to allow anyone to trail me while on guard duty, especially not my children’s sisters.” Serise’s children—the one already born, Rinda, along with the unnamed bun in her oven—shared the same unknown father’s DNA as my adopted niece, Olivia, who was a biological cousin to my niece, Cori. In Serise’s eyes, both girls shared kinship to her own children, which meant they were to be protected. Came in damned handy, considering all the recent abduction and assassination attempts aimed at my family.

“Furthermore, this man was already at your family’s home in Salem. He followed *me* back to Boston, where I led him on a fruitless chase until I knew the wedding reception would be over and you would be home.” We had just come from the wedding of Scott’s old flame. Of course, a serial killer had almost gotten in the way, but that was another story.

I leaned forward with narrowed eyes and yanked the afghan up when it started to slip. “Who the hell do we know that would follow you from my family’s home into Boston without trying to talk to you? Or, as was more likely since most arcanes hated Harpies, to kill her?”

Serise’s disconcerting gaze moved from my face to Scott’s. “The man you’ve been looking for since the night your sister Fury died, the missing Warhound, Sean Murphy.”

THE UNEXPECTED REVELATION HIT ME LIKE A combat boot to the stomach; and yes, I knew how *that* felt from personal experience. My duties as both member of the Sisterhood of Furies and Chief-Magical Investigator for the city of Boston came with hazard pay for good reason. With everything I had experienced over the years, few things took me completely by surprise anymore, but hearing that Scott's baby brother had transformed from missing person to Harpy stalker managed to wallop me right upside the figurative head.

Sean had vanished in the chaos when I led a group of allies against the mortal scientists who'd been experimenting upon arcanes like Vanessa, my childhood friend and sister Fury who died giving birth to Olivia. We'd believed Sean to be captured by the brainwashed Sidhe serving the scientists, but shadowing Serise from Salem to Boston indicated he possessed at least a modicum of freedom. Considering we'd been turning over every stone we could to find him for months and he hadn't had the courtesy to let us know he was still alive, that didn't sit too well in my stomach.

Scott's sudden growl hinted he didn't like the sound of it, either. "You saw my brother tonight, and you're *just now* telling us?"

Serise gave a careless Harpy shrug. "I did not recognize him until I circled back to shadow *him* for time."

Scott clenched his fists, and I could just picture him counting to ten beneath his breath so he wouldn't lose his cool. Hound tempers may not have anything on the supernatural Rage that fueled both Fury and Harpy magic, but they came in a *close* third. "Did you talk to him? Are you *sure* it's him?"

"I did not approach lest I scare him away before *you* could speak with him. I did, however, memorize the address of the building he went into."

She scrawled the details onto a piece of paper, and Scott frowned like it personally offended him. I touched his arm. "Problem, sugar?"

He shook his head and looked up at Serise. "Thanks for the info. Can you do me a favor and keep this between us?"

"Of course, if you feel that's the wisest course of action." Her gaze grew suddenly fierce as she curved her hand against her belly again. "Provided you inform your brother that continuing to shadow *me* will be extremely hazardous for *his* health. Only the fact I recognized him as your kin kept me from eliminating the potential threat to my children."

Scott nodded. "You have my thanks for sparing him, Your Majesty." He nodded to the door in a no-so-subtle hint, not that his lack of tact would particularly bother the Harpy. "Do you need an escort home?"

Serise shook her head. "No. Two of my sisters accompanied me tonight and await me outside." Then, without further ado, she made good her escape. Not too big on niceties like *hello* or *good-bye*, that one.

I let the afghan drop once the front door clicked shut and snatched the scrap of paper from his hand. Reading the numbers and letters didn't shed any light, however. Years of working Boston's streets helped me identify the address as being inside the city's magical Underbelly, but that wasn't terribly revelatory. "Spill it, Murphy. I know that something about that address has you spooked."

He dropped back onto the sofa and shook his shaggy auburn hair. "Not spooked so much as surprised. We've got a job scheduled at this address starting tomorrow night."

By *we*, he meant the Shadowhounds, a group of mercenaries founded by his father, Morgan, which Scott now led. At least until his big sister, Amaya, recovered enough from her run-in with those aforementioned mad scientists to resume her position as Shadowhound *Numero Uno*. At which point I planned to recruit him to the MCU.

“Okay, no way is *that* mere coincidence. Who’s the job for?”

His expression grew slightly sheepish. “An Anubian priest.”

I forced myself not to scowl from the reflexive disgust that swept over me anytime someone mentioned my least favorite immortal, Jackal-Faced Anubis. Just my typical bad luck that the one god who detested me also happened to be my lover’s patron deity.

Back when my best friend, Vanessa, had first disappeared, I’d crashed Anubis’s slice of the Underworld and gotten the *tiniest* bit snippy with him. Okay, maybe a whole lot of snippy, but who could blame me? My closest friend in the world had been missing for months; I couldn’t find any sign of her *or* a body and had been convinced her narcissistic ex-lover had murdered her. In order to bring him to justice, I needed confirmation that she was indeed among the deceased, and Anubis could have given me that very thing. Instead, he’d become a whole lot of divinely wrathful with my ass and kicked me out of the Underworld. Scott didn’t know just how bad the blood between his deity and me ran, but he *did* know Anubis was nowhere near being on my Christmas-card list.

Not that I was ever organized enough to send *those* out on time.

“Do you think Sean is trying to ambush you via the priest?”

Scott’s generous lips tugged downward. “Now why would my brother want to *ambush* me, Riss?”

Because he was getting kinda crazy stalkerish with me before he disappeared? Because he started acting like he kinda hated you and wouldn’t be too sad to see you out of the picture? Not exactly suggestions I could pose to Scott at the moment seeing as how I’d never found the right time or words to come clean about the things his brother had done and said in the time leading up to his disappearance.

“Er, by ambush, I mean ask you for help without letting anyone else know he needs it.”

His expression changed from annoyed to thoughtful. “That would make sense. I mean, if he’s in trouble and can’t risk bringing it back home, the Anubian temple is a damned good choice to arrange rendezvous.”

His sudden distracted air had me letting out an inner sigh. If Serise’s abrupt appearance hadn’t already killed our amorous mood, his brotherly concern would have hammered the last few nails into its coffin. Not that I could blame him. One of the things we had most in common was our deep love of family.

“You may as well go back to your place tonight, then, so you can get an early start on figuring out what the heck is going on with your brother.”

Sheepishness gave way to a look of gratitude mixed with guilt. “You sure?”

I brushed a kiss on his lips. “Of course I am. I’ll be busy all day tomorrow getting Trinity up to speed for my leave of absence, anyway.”

“That’s right; Cori all ready to swear her oaths to the Sisterhood?”

My fifteen-year-old niece had finally Fledged as a Fury after several anxious years where we waited to see if she would follow in both her aunts’ arcane footsteps or instead remain a magical skip like her parents. “More ready than you can even imagine. Mom’s meeting us the day after tomorrow to make sure no little *accidents* happen during the trip to the Palladium.”

The Palladium existed in the slice of the Otherrealms controlled by the Sisterhood of Furies and was where we conducted most official business. It also happened to be one of the few places in the Otherrealms not currently debilitated by a strange supernatural plague. The fact that the Otherrealms were slowly but surely dying off was the primary reason arcanes had traveled en masse to the mortal realm several decades ago, which nowadays kept me gainfully employed as Chief Magical Investigator in charge of all crimes committed by or against arcanes.

Scott wrapped his arms around me and squeezed. “You afraid of another attack?”

Discord had broken out among the Furies in the past months, pitting sister against sister in deadly strife, something I once would have thought impossible. “It would be foolish not to anticipate that as possibility. I’d rather be prepared and not need to be than the alternative.”

“That’s what I like most about you, baby. Always thinking ahead.”

I shifted against him, pressing my bare chest against his own suggestively. “Really? *That’s* what you like most about me?”

His earlier distraction faded, and golden Hound eyes glowed with rekindled desire. “*One* of the things I like most.”

“Oh, yeah? What *else* do you like?”

“I can think of at least a few things.” His voice grew husky, and his warm, callused hands caressed my lips teasingly. “Like your beautiful smile.” Those amazing hands moved several inches lower. “And your delectable neck.” He leaned forward and nipped the sensitive flesh in question, before trailing his fingers down to the serpent heads tattooed onto each of my shoulders. “Not to mention your sensitive shoulders.” I moaned when he dragged his fingernails across them, then down to my quivering chest. “And most especially your perfect, gorgeous breasts.” His mouth soon followed caressing fingers, and I was most gratified to discover that the Harpy Queen hadn’t been a *complete* buzzkill after all ...

THE OBNOXIOUS SOUND OF “WHO LET THE Dogs Out?” had me clawing for my cell phone and cursing Cori’s prankster ways at an hour that felt way too early the next morning. One of these days I was going to learn how to prevent her from changing my ringtone when I wasn’t paying attention. “This had *better* be important,” I barked into the phone after my bleary eyes registered it wasn’t even 7:00 A.M. I’d gotten used to sleeping in until the decadent hour of 8:00 ever since I’d hired Kale and Mahina, the husband-and-wife Night Owls who oversaw the Magical Crimes Unit’s night shift, meaning I rarely had to pull eighteen-to-twenty-four-hour shifts anymore.

“Now, is *that* any way to greet the loving mother who was only restored to you a few short months ago?”

My lips twitched upward, and I relaxed back into the plush pillows behind me. “It is when she wakes me up more than an hour before my alarm goes off.”

“Oh, is it *that* early in the mortal realm?”

The feigned innocence in her tone made my lip twitching turn into eye rolling. “You know damned good and well what time it is here.”

Her voice lost its teasing edge. “I *do* know how little sleep you usually get and wouldn’t disturb your rest unless it *was* important. New rumors are flying among the Elders that the Alecto Prime has cut off ties with the Tisiphone Prime.” Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera were the classes of Fury, and I was a Tisiphone.

I frowned. “Officially or unofficially?”

“Either way spells trouble, especially considering the Megaera Prime’s attacks upon our family and a new, even more disturbing development.”

“So when exactly are you ever going to call me with new, even *less* disturbing developments?”

“So when exactly are you going to give me another grandbaby?”

Oh, touché, Mom. She knew just how much the thought of bringing children into the world at that time freaked me the hell out—and wasn’t adverse to throwing that in my face to shut me up. Something I might have done were the roles reversed: I was so my mother’s daughter.

“Okay, so tell me about this new, *more* disturbing development.”

“Maylin refused to appear before the Conclave when summoned yesterday.”

I sat up straight in bed, nearly dropping the phone in my rush. “Whoa, wait, what? Can she *do* that?”

Maylin Chang had the distinction of serving as Tisiphone Prime, meaning she ruled over the class of Furies both Mom and I belonged to with pretty much an iron fist. That being said, *all* sisters were subject to the authority of the Conclave of Fury Elders, our governing body, up to and including the Primes. The closest analogy among the mortals might be the difference between the state and federal governments in the U.S. Traditionally, each class of Furies kept the identity of its Prime secret from the other classes—and most especially from non-Furies—but when the Conclave summoned, Primes were supposed to appear before a closed Conclave session under a cloak of anonymity, at which point they revealed their identity to the fifteen sisters who served on the Conclave’s Lesser Consensus. Those sisters were sealed under oath *not* to reveal the identity of any Prime.

“What did Maylin say when you asked her what the *hell* she was thinking?”

“She’s refusing to see me now, too.”

My heart sank because Mom was right; this really *was* a disturbing development. Mom and Maylin had become close friends during the Great War several decades earlier—what the mortals euphemistically referred to as the “Time of Troubles.” Our Prime had been one of the first to welcome Mom back from her MIA status with open arms and had pushed hard for the other Tisiphones to elect Mom to our vacant seat on the Conclave’s Lesser Consensus. She’d not yet been officially voted onto the Lesser Consensus, but things were looking pretty promising.

“Are you telling me that *Maylin* is the one pulling Nan’s puppet strings?”

My grandmother, Maeve (whom my family had called Nan for as long as I could remember), had miraculously awakened from a prolonged magical coma not too long ago, which *should* have been as amazingly good news as Mom’s being rescued from those mad scientists. Unfortunately, Nan wouldn’t talk to either of us and had inexplicably challenged Ekaterina, the sister serving as the head of the Lesser Consensus, to a duel for her seat on the Conclave’s ruling council. The levelheaded Nan Mom and I knew would *never* return from the brink of death only to challenge another sister to a potentially deadly duel over what amounted to mere *politics*. Mom and I suspected that someone else had used dark magic to wake Nan from her coma and manipulate her into those bizarre actions, or else had killed Nan and was impersonating her magically. Not completely far-fetched, since Furies had impressive shape-shifting abilities.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t believe this is all coincidence any more than you do. I think it’s more important than ever that you bring Cori to the Palladium as soon as possible. I’ll feel better if you’re both here where I and my allies can watch over you until we figure out what is going on in our class—not to mention the strife with the other two classes.”

I glanced at my bedside clock. “I have to finish filling Trinity in on some administrative details before I start my official leave, but I can grab Cori first thing in the morning and meet you at the rendezvous point.”

“Will you be able to drag yourself out of bed early enough to meet us at 9:00 A.M.?”

I ignored her gentle dig. “*Us?*”

Her tone turned grim. “Given the number of near *accidents* we’ve had lately, I recruited Laurell and Patricia for escort duty.”

“Oh, good, I’ve fought beside those two before. Wicked fierce in battle.”

“Exactly why they were my first choice. That, plus their staunch support of my bid for the Conclave seat the past few months.”

“I better get going so I can finish everything I need today and make sure Cori will be ready in time. See you at nine tomorrow morning, then?”

“Sounds good. You take care, darling, and bring Cori to me safely.”

“Will do, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I couldn't help the goofy grin that spread across my face whenever she said that. Having her back in my life after more than twenty years of believing her dead was hands down the best thing to happen to me in ages. Granted, getting back together with Scott had made me ecstatic, but nothing and no one could compare to your mother—or love you quite the same. Which made Nan's incomprehensible behavior to her own daughter all the more unbelievable.

We'll figure out who has screwed with her head, and we'll make things right again.

I had to believe that—any other result was simply unthinkable.

TRINITY LARUE LOOKED UP FROM A BOWL OF gruel when I leaned against the doorjamb of her office next door to mine in the PD. “How on earth can you eat that squirrel food?” She finished chewing with what had to be pretended bliss. I refused to believe anyone could actually *enjoy* eating sugarless granola cereal with fat- and taste-free milk.

“It's good for you. Much better than all that sugar and caffeine *you* ingest.”

“Yeah, well, I've got to keep my Fury metabolism fueled, thank you very much.”

“You're such a lucky bitch that you *never* gain an ounce despite all that junk you shovel into your face.”

“Yes, well, that souped-up metabolism comes along with assassination attempts every other day and the danger of Turning Harpy whenever I channel Rage.”

She wrinkled her nose sympathetically. “True, I'll take the health food and my newfound gym-addict status over the constant death threats and uncontrollable anger.”

“Don't forget: *You're* the one with the Spyder.” Her eyes went a little dreamy at the mention of the electric blue sports car her older brothers had rebuilt for her thirtieth birthday not that long before. It sure as hell beat the MCU's land whale of a stakeout van that I commandeered whenever flying on my own two wings or taking the subway just wouldn't do. “You ready for me to get you up to speed on where everything stands?”

Trinity and I had worked together on the Boston police force for several years before we officially formed the MCU, with me as chief and her as deputy chief. She'd been assuming more and more responsibility as I managed to loosen up my controlling ways and conquer my fear for her safety as the lone 100 percent mortal on our team. Once she called me out on that tendency to coddle her, I'd done my best to curb the habit. She'd proven herself on every occasion, and she sure as hell deserved my respect.

She spooned up the last bite of squirrel food and popped up to come around her desk. Her office was *nearly* as compact of mine—minus the conference table and chairs squeezed against the wall—so I immediately noticed the oversized vase of calla lilies when she brushed past the credenza upon which she had placed it. The extremely *expensive* vase of calla lilies, which I knew were her favorite flowers.

“Well, *somebody* must have gotten lucky last night.”

A smile spread across her face as she gave a saucy wink. “Oh, like you *didn't* after you and that Hound of yours got half-drunk last night.”

“Me *less* than half-drunk and him *more* than half-drunk, thank you very much.” Thanks to that whole Fury metabolism I had going on, which gave me the opportunity to play designated driver with Scott's zippy red Ferrari. “But wait, I didn't see you leave the reception with Penn's brother.”

“That's because I didn't.”

“You little vixen, you! So if things didn't pan out with Tariq, who are the flowers from?”

Her smile took on a mysterious edge. “That's for me to know, and you to *maybe* find out, if things

keep going as well as they have been the past little while.”

“Damn tease. At least tell me if I know the guy.”

“You have previously made his acquaintance, I believe.” She pushed me gently away from her doorway. “Now, that’s all the info you’re allowed until you get back from your leave, or we’ll *never* get any work done because you’ll be busy hounding me or, even worse, the poor guy who may very well at *some* point get lucky.”

Trinity dated a lot—with her good looks, sharp brains, and sly sense of humor, no surprise there—but she guarded her heart carefully and took her time before deciding whether a guy was worth getting more intimate with. She was like me in that regard, probably one of the reasons we had connected so well as partners. For all our differences, we had a lot of the same core values. Like our dedication to the MCU and protecting the people of Boston from various and sundry magical crimes. I couldn’t think of a better person, mortal *or* arcane, to entrust my city with during my absence. Good thing, too, because there really wasn’t anyone else I *could* entrust it to.

We spent the next few hours going over various mundane—but necessary—administrative minutiae, with me trying like crazy to ferret out more details from her regarding the guy who had sent her such lovely flowers. She didn’t crack the slightest bit, taking extreme pleasure in watching me try without success to guess who the new man in her life was. I finally gave up when we knocked off for the night, she presumably to head off for a dinner date with Mr. Mysterious, and me heading to Scott’s apartment so we could hopefully enjoy a repeat of the night before—minus the overbearing Harpy Queen—before I left for gods knew how long to clean house in the Palladium. A Fury’s job was just *never* done.

CHAPTER TWO

WITH AS MANY PEOPLE AS HAD TRIED TO KILL me over the years, you'd think I would get used to it. Then again, the fact I hadn't *completely* gotten used to it was the reason nobody had yet managed to come in, not permanently anyway. Temporary death—there'd been a few of those. Nothing I'd like to repeat anytime soon—especially considering how much I'd pissed off Scott's Jackal-Faced god that last time. Being two times a cop—Fury and Chief Magical Investigator—meant two times the psycho out for my blood. Of course, getting that very real threat through my fifteen-year-old niece's head at precisely nine the next morning was easier said than done.

“Aunt Riss, I just don't understand wh—”

I turned from the subway entrance and narrowed my eyes at my soon-to-be apprentice. “What part of *be quiet* did you *not* understand, apprentice?”

She flushed when I used her title rather than name and had the sense to actually shut her trap. Stubborn she might be (hmm, wonder where she got *that* from?), but she learned quickly, a quality that would serve her well during her training. Assuming I could keep her alive long enough to swear her oaths to the Sisterhood. A flash of red teased my peripheral vision, and I whirled, instinctively placing my body in front of Cori's. Normally, the red leather uniform of a Fury meant safety and support, but not so much these days, with civil war brewing among the three classes of Furies.

The hint of red *did* prove to be a Fury's uniform, but no threat to Cori or me. My mother swept out of the subway station's door, flanked by the two Furies she had mentioned the day before. Mom zeroed in on us straightaway. She nodded to each of her informal bodyguards, who took up posts at the sides of the doorway while Mom jogged the last few feet separating us. We exchanged smiles, but she focused most of her attention on Cori, drawing her into a bear hug and murmuring into her ear. Cori alternately grinned and flushed, torn between adolescent pride and embarrassment over the big deal Mom was making over her. No surprise she made such a fuss; it was the first time she'd seen Cori since the teen Fledged into her Fury powers a few days before.

“While your aunt and I *are* proud of you, Concordia Joy,” Mom said, “you'll also find we expect a great deal from you. To start with, you must remember to treat us always as elder Furies first, your aunt and grandmother second.”

Cori let out a huff of air. “Now you sound like *her*.”

Another arch of the brow. “Where do you think *she* got it from?”

I laughed outright. “Oh so true, I'm afraid. Stacia may have been my official mentor, but Mom taught me a lot about being a Fury before she disappeared.”

Mom and I exchanged a grim glance. That was another of those shared griefs that would never fully go away.

The hair on the back of my neck stirred, and my body tensed in response to a sudden surge of adrenaline. Someone was channeling magic nearby. It might have been a mere coincidence, but ...

Trusting survival instincts honed over the past two decades, I nodded toward the door. “We should get a move on.”

Mom placed an arm along Cori's shoulder and nudged her forward. “Of course. Laurell will serve our rear guard while Patricia clears our forward path.” The second-named Tisiphone nodded before vanishing in the direction from which they had appeared. Laurell waited until we followed and fell in behind us.

Passersby who caught sight of Mom's red leather (Cori and I were wearing more anonymous street clothes) gave us a wide berth on the staircase to the subway platform. Halfway down the steps, we

channeled Fury magic to camouflage our little entourage. While not technically invisible, we became nearly impossible for mortals—and most arcanes—to detect, as much for the mortals' peace of mind as our safety. They tended to freak out when winged demigoddesses leaped atop speeding train cars to reach the magical portals sprinkled throughout Boston's underground railway system.

Despite my sudden sense of unease, we made it to the platform unaccosted, other than my bum knee's pitching a fit as I jogged down the stairs. Magical and medical remedies, including physical therapy, promised a brighter prognosis than when I had originally injured it, but both would take time to pay off. For the moment, I just had to grin and bear the pain.

Patricia waited for us at the empty end of the platform, eyeballing the area for any signs of danger. Laurell no doubt did the same from behind. While I only knew the two vaguely, what I *did* know reassured me. One of those rare mated pairs of Furies, they were unfailingly loyal to the Sisterhood and, most especially, other Tisiphones. Knowing they had watched Mom's back when I couldn't had given me enough peace of mind to finish up my police duties on the serial-killer case and now made me feel better about getting Cori safely to the Palladium. Of course, that thought no sooner crossed my mind than trouble struck.

Goose bumps pricked my skin as the hair on my neck rose once more. Someone had once again channeled the barest hint of magic nearby. I didn't waste time thinking, just shifted to full Fury form. Mortal honey blond hair surrendered to charcoal locks that snapped in the magical breeze caused by transformation. Boring blue eyes changed to glowing green orbs meant to inspire terror. My jeans and T-shirt became identical to Mom's red leather pants, sleeveless vest, and flat-heeled, knee-high boots. Most impressive of all were the twin tattoos along each upper arm that morphed into living, breathing serpents: the magical familiars called Amphisbaena, who amped up my own arcane abilities.

Nemesis and Nike hissed in response to my mental warning of potential ambush and wound their way from upper arms to lower, ready to aid me if needed. Mom and the other two Tisiphones picked up on whatever bad vibes I'd caught, and we drew a protective circle around our most vulnerable member.

Cori gulped and shot me an uneasy glance. "Aunt Ri—I mean, Marissa?"

"Shh," I murmured, and tried to figure out what had set my inner alarms blazing. Barely a dozen mortals stood at the opposite end of the platform, also waiting for the next northbound train. A couple of arcanes—shifters of some sort—stood across the tracks waiting for the next southbound train. No magical currents vibrated in the air other than the eddies left behind by my sudden transformation. Why, then, was I so sure something bad was about to go down?

I turned to confer with Mom, only to notice Laurell stepping close to Cori. My skin crawled even more when I saw her serpent tattoos flash briefly, seeming to shimmer from Tisiphone red to Megaer green, then back again. *Shit, an imposter.* Managing to mask the sudden flicker of realization from my face, I sent a magical feeler toward Patricia. The arcane feedback bouncing from her to me screamed purely Tisiphone, so that was one less worry; though when she figured out someone had taken out her mate long enough to impersonate her, there would be hell to pay.

All this transpired in a few breaths' worth of time, but it was just long enough for the imposter to yank Cori away from my mother's side and aim a magical weapon at the Fury she considered the biggest threat. No big surprise that turned out to be me. I had a reputation for shooting first, asking questions *never* when it came to loved ones.

Mom whirled, confusion on her face, but froze when she saw Cori held in front of Fake Laurell and the weapon pointed at me. Patricia's breath hitched, and she let out a choked, "Laur?" before registering the inescapable conclusion. *This wasn't Laurell.*

"Drop it!" I growled.

Knowing what I meant, the imposter allowed her disguise to fall away, revealing someone I *should have* but hadn't expected: Durra, the bitch who'd been infatuated with Vanessa and irrationally blamed me for her death. Durra had also tried to abduct Cori just days before. Some people apparently never learned.

"This is becoming a habit of yours, Megaera." She took my insult of using title rather than name without batting an eyelash. "But really. Ambushing me twice in subway stations? How pathetically predictable." Fake it till you can make it, I always say. She didn't need to know just how fast fear for Cori had my pulse racing.

Patricia hissed when she recognized the dark-skinned Megaera facing us. "If you've harmed Laurell, *sister*, I'll carve you into pieces with my bare claws!" No idle threat, considering that her Fury talons had broken through her skin the moment she spoke.

"Peace, Tisiphone. Laurell has merely been—detained—upstairs. She is unharmed."

"She better be," came the growled response.

Mom bit out a growl of her own. "Do you *have* a death wish, Durra of the Megaera? Interfering with an Elder Fury escorting a candidate to the Palladium—days after attempting to abduct the same candidate—who is also that Elder's granddaughter by blood. I could flay the flesh from your bones, and none would gainsay me."

Durra winced, skin paling several shades. Still, her weapon never wavered. "I appear in the name of the Megaera to summon you two sisters of the Tisiphone into her presence. This candidate will stand hostage for your goodwill until you leave the Megaera's presence. Safe passage to and from the Megaera's hall is granted. Failure to answer the summons means that this candidate shall remain hostage until such time as you do appear."

Mom and I glanced at each other with deer-trapped-in-headlights expressions. Prime Furies typically only had the power to compel sisters from their own classes to appear before them. It was an absolute power but finite in that it applied only to the class over which they ruled. The only exceptions to that were when two Primes issued a summons jointly—virtually unheard of—or during times of war. As far as I knew, no such war had been declared.

Surely we would have heard if a formal declaration had been ...

That thought faded when reality intruded. In all the millennia the Sisterhood had policed the arcane races, one thing had always held true: The Sisterhood stood united against the other species. Never once had we devolved into warring among ourselves, not to the extent that civil war had ever been declared. Even now, when sister fought against sister, would that unspoken rule be broken? No; to the outside world, appearances must be maintained. Formal war would never be declared if that war was waged within. The Sisterhood *would* stand together as far as others were concerned.

Among ourselves, however, battle lines were clearly being drawn.

"M—Marissa?"

That choked comment came from a shaken Cori. She looked like she wanted to open a can of kickass on Durra the way she had before, but at the same time she trusted me to handle things so that she wouldn't have to. I would *die* before I let her down.

"What assurances do *we* have that the Megaera will keep *her* word?"

Durra shook in Rage, taking the insult toward her superior much worse than the one to herself. Holding on to her temper took visible effort. Finally, she managed to grit her teeth and let out a sharp whistle. Moments later, a half dozen Megaeras strode down the staircase and stopped just behind Durra. Make that five Megaeras and one pissed-off Tisiphone.

Patricia let out a relieved breath when she recognized Laurell. All I could notice was the fact that we were outnumbered, barely, but outnumbered all the same. Especially considering that, in a fight,

Cori would be way more hindrance than help.

One of the newcomers held out a ceremonial olive branch, the arcane version of a white flag and far more respected by our kind than its mortal equivalent. That they carried it meant they truly wished us no harm. Betraying its promise of safety would make them oathbreakers in the eyes of the gods and mark them for death—nasty, not-at-all-quick death. The Megaera with the olive branch nudged Laurell, who stalked past Durra without a word and took her place beside Patricia. That Megaera then stepped in front of Mom and went down on one knee. “I stand hostage for the Megaera’s goodwill while you appear before her.”

Mom opened her mouth to make some no-doubt-diplomatic response, but I beat her to the punch. “And who are you to her that we should give a shit?”

The other Megaeras bristled at this outright insult, but Durra hushed them so the branch-bearer could answer. “I am the Megaera’s great-aunt and mentor. She will not break her word, and any Megaera who violates her edict shall be executed.”

I blinked, then blinked again. Prime Furies *did* have the right to execute traitors to their classes without trial, but it was a right even more rarely exercised than summoning sisters outside their own classes. The Megaera was playing hardball. This *had* to have something to do with Nan, recently awakened from her twenty-year coma only to jump into a political hotbed, not to mention the Prime Tisiphone refusing to appear before the Conclave. Why else would the Megaera first try to kill me, abduct Cori, and blockade my mother only to seek a conference with those she opposed?

My pulse picked up speed when I realized the Prime Megaera’s offering a reciprocal hostage gave us another bargaining chip to hold over her head should the necessity arise. Each class jealously guarded the identity of its Prime sister to prevent others from tampering with her sovereignty. With the Megaera’s great-aunt as hostage, however, it would be easy to discern the identity of our hostage and work backward to discover the Prime’s identity as well. The Megaera knew this and was making clear statement. Her desire to speak with us was great and, should treachery arise, it would *not* come about on her end. Of course, by claiming Cori as hostage, she guaranteed it would not come about on *our* end, either.

I touched Mom’s arm and nodded slightly. She let out a deep breath before speaking. “We two sisters of the Tisiphone accept your standing as goodwill hostage for the Prime Megaera and further accept her summons and offer of safe conduct.”

Cori let out a breath of her own and shot an uneasy glance from Mom to me. Further demonstrating that she *could* be taught, however, she kept her lips zipped. The branch-bearer nodded and moved to stand between Patricia and a still-simmering Laurell. I stepped closer to Cori to offer her reassurances. Durra bared her teeth but made no move to stop me.

I kept my voice low and calm. “I’m afraid you’ll have to spend some time with these—sisters—of ours while Allegra and I meet with the Prime Megaera. My previous instruction still stands.” I.e., *be quiet*. “We’ll be as quick as we can.”

She gave a brave nod and even managed the ghost of a smile, falling back without protest when Durra nudged her toward the Megaeras behind her. “If you two will come with me?”

Like we had a choice.

While I reassured Cori, Mom wasted no time giving instructions to Patricia and Laurell. They would head on to the Palladium as planned while we went along with the Megaeras like good little girls. Yeah, just *thinking* that had me rolling my eyes. I was about as far from being a good little girl as, say, the Jackal-Faced god was from being a cute and cuddly puppy dog.

CHAPTER THREE

I EXPECTED DURRA TO LEAD US AWAY FROM our former destination, and she didn't disappoint. She and three of her sisters escorted us up and out of the subway station. The remaining sisters of both classes stayed behind to accompany their hostages to the Palladium. What *did* surprise me was the fact our escorts didn't lead us to another Otherrealm portal. Instead, we wound a circuitous route through Southie, around the South End, then into Chinatown. At that point, our ultimate destination became clear: Not the Otherrealms at all but Arcane Central here in Boston, the predominantly arcane neighborhood known as the Underbelly. I opened my mouth once or twice but shut it when Mom showed me an expression much like the ones I'd given Cori. She really *had* taught me most of what I knew about being a Fury—attitude wise, anyway.

Nearly an hour after we left the subway behind, Durra approached a building deep in the Belly that seemed a likely spot for a meet-and-greet with her superior, a pantheon, or temple dedicated to all the gods and goddesses. Fitting, considering that's who Furies were officially sworn to serve. Some of us had our personal favorites, of course, but we owed allegiance to no one god in particular.

It wasn't a big shocker to discover that the pantheon crawled with Megaeras. Hell, with an undeclared civil war brewing, their Prime would be an idiot to venture away from the Palladium without a substantial guard force to watch her back—and front—and both sides. So far, no matter how much she'd pissed me off, the Prime Megaera hadn't struck me as the slightest bit stupid. Bitchy and treacherous, yes; stupid, not so much.

Durra exchanged inaudible murmurs with one of her sisters before turning back to Mom and me. "The Megaera awaits us just beyond this antechamber. I assume neither of you carries spell-worked silver?"

Even though that was a big no-no on sacred ground unless one was a temple guardian, I couldn't blame her for checking. Her ass would be in just as much trouble as ours should she bring us before her Prime carrying the metal lethal to our kind. She didn't take us at our word, of course—the slight tingle of a magical scan washed over us before she was satisfied we spoke truly. Durra nodded to the sister closest to the door, who then swung it open. Mom and I followed the assassin-turned-kidnapper-turned-escort without a word.

Modern-day pantheons were more like Christian churches than their predecessors. We passed from the cold marble antechamber into a warmly decorated chapel consisting of a dozen rows of pews leading to a carpeted dais—the chancel—on the far side of the room. Gorgeous tapestries lined the chapel walls in between elegant stained-glass windows throughout the room. Several tense-looking Megaeras sat in the front pew, staring up at the chancel's sole occupant: a tall, dark-skinned woman in full Fury form who bore a vague resemblance to the olive branch-bearer-turned-hostage. *The* Megaera.

As if she could hear my mental identification, she turned emerald eyes toward Mom and me. My steps faltered slightly as I followed in Durra's wake, but I tightened my lips and turned the stumble into an outright strut. I was a *Tisiphone*, dammit, and no way would I let another Fury intimidate me as if I'd just Fledged yesterday. Not even *the* Prime Megaera.

I forced my gaze back to her Furied-out eyes and finished looking her over. Her dark brown skin showed off the red leather uniform way better than my pasty white skin did. Her hair, while the typical Fury's charcoal in color, had been plaited into several dozen braids wound into tight buns jutting out from her scalp, no doubt in homage to her homeland. Based upon her great-aunt's slight accent and Durra's fanatic devotion, I was willing to bet her birthplace was somewhere in central Africa.

Durra reached the foot of the dais and distracted me from my unabashed appraisal. She went down

on one knee, placed a hand upon her heart, and muttered something in an unfamiliar language too rapidly for me to channel magic to comprehend. Definitely sounded like Swahili or something similar. I tried to remember exactly where Durra was from, but we hadn't been close even *before* she tried to kill me.

The Megaera's sudden sharp voice belied the pleased nod she gave her sister. It also matched her great-aunt's in accent. "Keep to English, Durra, so that all present may understand." And to lower the chance we might pick up enough clues to figure out who she was in case we needed to track her down again later.

Durra nodded. "Of course, Prime. I bring with me Allegra and Marissa Holloway of the Tisiphone to answer your summons, as requested."

Ten to one that hadn't been the phrase originally spoken.

The Megaera accepted Durra's announcement with a graceful flick of her wrist. Durra rose smoothly, bowed first to her Prime, then—to my surprise—Mom and me, before joining her sisters on the front pew, leaving mother and daughter Tisiphone to face the imposing Megaera alone.

Fortunately for my still-developing diplomatic skills, tradition dictated that the seniormost sister—in this case, Mom—spoke first. "As your sister Megaera indicated, we two of the Tisiphone stand before you in answer to your summons. By what right do you summon sisters not of your own class?"

The Prime touched her palms together and inclined her head respectfully. "By my right to serve as Voice of the Triad."

Shocked whispers behind us demonstrated that the other Megaeras felt as much surprise as Mom and me. She and I shared a look before focusing on the Megaera again.

Mom's voice sounded much less accusatory and more awed this time. "The Triad has spoken to you directly?"

The Prime nodded, expression more serene than I could have managed under the same set of circumstances. Serving as leader of the individual classes was only one function performed by the Prime Furies. Their more sacred duty was to act as messengers for the gods and goddesses on those rare occasions they chose to communicate with the Sisterhood directly. The last time I personally knew of its happening came only from secondhand stories told to me: Upon the night of Hazuki's assassination, the Moerae who finally succeeded in brokering that blood-soaked Peace Accord ending the Great War only to be murdered by a splinter faction of arcanes who did *not* want peace on any terms. After her assassination, the Sisterhood's first instinct had been to hunt down and slaughter her assassins, something that would have plunged us straight from one war into another. The Deities had forbidden that act by speaking through all three Prime Furies, leaving the Sisterhood no choice but to obey. Of course, the Deities might speak with the Primes more often than word got out, but still. That was a pretty startling statement.

The Megaera's abrupt reversal from trying to kill us to suing for peace made all-too-much sense. The Deities themselves had intervened. Rather than be merely grateful, however, I was a whole lot of scared shitless. For them to exercise a rite so rarely used, things had to be even worse than any of us expected, like the difference between the *Titanic* heading toward an iceberg and a moon-sized meteor hurtling toward earth. Mom's fingers clutching at my hand showed that she, too, was terrified.

The Prime turned her attention from Mom and me to the sisters behind. "Leave us," she commanded.

Several of the Megaeras shot us uneasy glances but scurried to do her bidding. Durra, not surprisingly, protested. "But that would leave you defenseless, Pri—" The Prime's eyes flashed a brighter shade of green that had Durra scrambling toward the door. *Nobody*—however well-intentioned—accused a Prime of being defenseless and got away with it, not to mention gainsaid a

direct order. “As you wish,” Durra choked out before vanishing after her sisters.

The Prime gave a deep sigh when the chapel door thudded shut. “If only children would *think* before they speak.”

Mom gave me a sardonic glance before smiling slightly. “If *only*.”

An answering smile flashed across the Megaera’s face before she became businesslike once more. “Now that we are alone, I can prepare you.”

That didn’t sound particularly good.

“The Triad desires to speak with you both.”

My knees buckled but not due to the injury I’d suffered when saving Scott from insurmountable odds. Drumbeats sounded inside my ears in sharp staccato for several seconds before I realized it was my pulse pounding in fear. Funny, in a not-ha sort of way, since a minute earlier I thought myself incapable of being any more scared.

Just as the Sisterhood had its hierarchies—apprentices like Cori, sisters like me, and Elder Furies like Mom, so, too, did the Immortals. Demigoddesses such as Furies who *barely* counted and were usually classified with the other arcanes, lesser gods and goddesses who were *truly* immortal (meaning they could not be killed in any way, shape, or form) but had either little magical or political power, and the greater gods and goddesses who were referred to as Deities-with-a-capital-D. The divine beings falling into this category were those who possessed a shitload of power both magically *and* politically (as reckoned by fellow immortals). The Triad referred to whichever three Deities currently had enough magical and political power among Their fellows to be elected as nominal leaders. While They didn’t rule over their peers in the strictest sense of the term, They *were* responsible for serving as Tribunals against any immortal thought to have committed crimes against other immortals.

Mom’s hands squeezed my fingers tightly, and her ragged breathing indicated she was no less fearful than I. Nan hadn’t raised a fool any more than my mother had.

This time, I was the first to find my voice. “But that—that’s—*impossible*. The Triad doesn’t speak to—we’re not *Primes!*”

The Megaera inclined her head in agreement. “You are not.” She tilted her head, then murmured with a thoughtful tone, “Not yet.”

My poor, skittering mind could take no more, and my body shifted from partial to full Fury form out of pure instinct: glowing green eyes, huge feathered wings, hissing Amphisbaena writhing along my arms, and razor-sharp talons bursting from my fingernail beds.

Amused emerald eyes met my own, and the Megaera let out a soft laugh. “You’ve half prepared yourself already.”

Her matter-of-fact response to my uncontrolled shift lessened the embarrassment—a little. Only Furies in full-on demigoddess form could withstand a meeting with *true* Immortal beings. We would be unable to see them at all in mortal form, and in partial Fury form, we would see them but be unable to withstand their sheer magical glory. Mom shifted to help lessen my faux pas even further, something that made me love her all the more. She also expanded on the Megaera’s response to my incoherent babbling. “It’s not impossible for them to speak with non-Primes, Marissa, they just rarely choose to do so, especially outside of a wartime Conclave.” The Conclave consisted of all Elder Furies, who were eligible to vote in the Greater Consensus, and the fifteen Furies—five from each class—elected to serve on the Lesser Consensus.

I blinked at Mom’s revelation. Apparently Elders kept all kinds of secrets from junior Furies. Although, really, considering how much more we worked in the outside world, that only made sense. Just like the mortal PD I worked with, the Sisterhood kept its secrets from outsiders as much as

possible. Mom was only 'fessing up now because she *had* to. My mind finally finished its panic attack and logical thought kicked back in. If the Deities rarely chose to speak with non-Primes outside a wartime Conclave and were about to break that usual pattern, that could mean only one thing. The Sisterhood's brewing internal war had the potential to spill out across the arcane world as a whole. And the Triad thought *we* could do something to stop that.

I licked my lips and stared at the Megaera intently. "Why?" Meaning: *Why us?*

She didn't dissemble, but neither did she answer my question. "Let us finish preparing for their arrival, and I will let the Triad explain."

Goose bumps broke out all over my body, and I couldn't help the shudders that followed. True, I had confronted lesser gods before—case in point, my lover Scott's patron deity, Anubis—but they were just a step above Furies on the magical food chain. A big step, to be sure, but the step dividing *them* from the Deities-with-a-capital-D was ten times greater than that between Furies and the lesser gods, maybe even a hundred. The thought of facing not just one Deity but *three* was almost too much for me to handle.

Still, I guess I should have been grateful they were giving our puny little brains time to prepare for their arrival and limiting their number to three. A magical number; a sacred number—and the reason Furies had been divided into *three* classes—and even more interesting when I really thought about it. The Triad would carry the authority of the immortals as a whole, which meant that somebody had been a *very* bad boy or girl since the only reason the Triad could have to confer with the Sisterhood directly was to serve as Tribunal against someone of true immortal blood.

Mom broke into my reverie by shaking me slightly and nodding toward the Megaera, who had opened a concealed door behind the chancel. She held her arms out in a formal gesture, sweeping them from us to the doorway. "Come, sisters, let us prepare to receive the counsel of the Deities who would aid us."

And who would have us aid them, the cynical side of me couldn't help but add silently. I shoved that irreverent piece of my personality way, way down inside. If ever there was an absolutely worst time to give in to one's Inner Snark, meeting with the Triad would be it. Only once I was sure I had ironclad control of my emotions did I follow in my mother's footsteps through that doorway, feeling very much like Alice stepping through the looking glass.

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