

That thieving bastard.

Did he really think I hadn't seen him stuff the necklace into his sleeve? My teeth clenched and a furious heat sizzled down my spine, pooling in my stomach like acid. And who the hell wore a long-sleeve shirt in this weather, anyway? Even in a tank top with a headband holding back my long hair, my forehead was still varnished in a tacky layer of sweat.

The creep peeked up at me under his black and blue hair, smirking, before going back to leisurely 'browsing' through the wares at our booth. He picked up another necklace before placing it back down to fiddle with the potions, reading their attached tags.

They told me it would be easy when they left this morning. Putting me in charge of our tiny stall right at the heart of the French Market. *It shouldn't be too busy, they said. You'll be fine. You've got this.*

But they were wrong. The city square had come alive in the few hours since dawn. The sun came out to play, and with it came the morning shoppers and the fanny-pack-toting tourists. I groaned miserably, wishing to be anywhere but here.

Any excuse to go to New Orleans had my guardians here in an instant, speeding the old caravan down I-65 while singing about country roads and open highways. Lots of witches made New Orleans their home. It was easier to blend in when there were palmisters, psychics, and occult shops all over the place. Made it harder to decipher fakes from the real thing.

It was accepted here—more than that, both the locals and the tourists had come to expect it over the years, so long as the money kept raking in.

So, I understood why they liked it so much. Less hiding. And even the earth under the soles of my flip-flops seemed to buzz with power like nowhere else, eagerly waiting to answer a witch's call.

*Where are they?*

I looked over the heads of the throng of people, the heady scent of roasting meat and the tang of fresh oranges wafting over from the food vendors. The smooth rhythm of sax and guitar rose from where two buskers played for nickels and dimes in the square. I couldn't see them anywhere.

*Damn.* I set my jaw. Guess I'd have to deal with the douche myself.

Clenching my hand into a fist, I drew in a deep breath, squashing my body's instinctual reflex to draw magic.

“Uh, hello? Anybody home?” The nasally voice broke my concentration and I cleared my throat, turning to find two chicks in their early twenties. Both icy-blond with honey-colored eyes and showing off a generous amount of their perfectly bronzed skin. They looked like they belonged on the streets of Beverly Hills rather than a noisy square in New Orleans.

“Did you hear what I said?” the one on the right whined.

I eyed the guy still sifting through our booth, running his immoral fingers over the rings Leo had crafted the week before, lifting one to inspect the topaz gemstone.

*Don't even think about it...*

He put the ring back down. But the weight in his sleeve seemed larger than it was a moment before. I took a steadying breath.

I'd deal with him in a minute.

“No, I'm sorry, what did you say?” I answered blonde number one in a rush, keeping a wary eye on the thief.

She huffed, holding up a potion bottle filled with a shimmery red liquid, matching her perfectly manicured crimson nails. “Does this stuff work?” she asked haughtily. Her eyes narrowed as she shook the lust potion in front of my face. “And, like, did *you* brew it? Or was it brewed by—you know, like, an *actual* witch?”

*An actual witch? Was this bimbo serious?*

There were true Alchemists and then there were those who attempted to replicate our natural abilities with crude science. They made some admirable attempts, but never quite accomplished the things they set out to do.

Metal into gold? Even I could do that with a simple sigil, and I was only seventeen and technically not allowed to practice underage magic—at least not without proper adult supervision.

But alas, it was frowned upon to use our abilities for direct monetary gain in mortal society.

Pretty much all the fun stuff is forbidden.

Philosopher's stone? Well, once our people had the knowledge and the formula to do it, passed down through generations, but it was lost somewhere along the way from our homeland of Emeris to our new home in the mortal lands. But I really don't think people should live forever anyway, and we live longer than most already.

I smiled sweetly at the pair of them, pitching my voice to match my expression. “Of course I didn’t brew it.” I clasped my hands together at my front and batted my eyelashes. “It was made by the Wicked Witch of the West at the stroke of midnight under the light of a full moon.”

Blonde number one sneered at me, curling a pink lip over blinding white teeth while blonde number two’s eyes widened, backing away from her friend. “You think you’re *so* edgy in that baggy tank top with your stubby nails and your pale skin and that *obviously* dyed red hair? Well, you’re not. And you just lost a paying customer.” Blonde number one sniffed, tossing the potion back onto the table. “Come on Fiona, lets go get a smoothie.”

I wanted to shout after her. Tell her my bright red hair wasn’t dyed, and that I could see her ass hanging out of her shorts as she walked away. But it wouldn’t be worth my time. *Ignorant humans*. Must be nice to not have to live in hiding. Afraid to be yourself. Avoiding discovery at every turn.

They were probably born and raised here.

I didn’t even know where I was born. And I was raised in the back of Leo and Lara’s caravan after a human woman begged them to take me when I was barely six months old. All I knew was what she told them. That my father was a witch and he was dead. That she was my human mother and didn’t know the first thing about raising a witch. She never said how she knew Leo and Lara were witches.

The woman left me with them, and she never came back.

It was no wonder I’d lost all respect for humanity. Girls like that just solidified my views. Selfish, cowardly creatures.

And they thought *we* were the monsters. What a joke.

Scowling, I turned back to the booth and my spine went rigid. Where did he go? Magic buzzed in my veins—an innate defense mechanism I shoved deep down, attempting to bury it before it got me into trouble.

I scanned the crowded market space, spotting a black haired head with a streak of blue running through it.

*Got you now, sucker.*

I darted after him, throwing a half-assed warding spell up in my wake to try to keep shoppers away from the booth. I weaved through the bodies in my way, almost losing sight of him as he neared the food vendors.

The guy looked back, catching sight of me chasing him. Our eyes locked. And then he bolted.

“Hey!” I shouted after him, spurring myself to go faster. “Hey! Thief! Stop that guy!”

A hundred sets of eyes turned to the sound of my shouting voice, but none moved to help me. *Useless.*

Sweat dropped down my back, and my flip-flops slapped the pavement. Nearing the exit to the market, he sped up. *No!* If he got outside, I’d lose him for sure.

And who knew how much more stuff he stole while I wasn’t paying attention. *Stupid.*

I moved to cut him off through the fruit market and ran smack into a pyramid of apples, scattering them to the floor and almost slipping on them. My hands flew out to my sides, catching my balance.

“Sorry!” I called back to the shopkeeper, who shouted obscenities after me as I wound between the stands.

*Crap, crap, crap!*

Why did I always have to mess shit up?

My chest squeezing, I darted between two booths and missed him by a hair. He blew past me into the main square, shoving people out of his way without a care.

“Stop!” I screamed at him, beyond furious. The familiar crackle of energy under my skin wouldn’t be soothed, no matter how much I tried to swallow it down.

He was too fast. I’d never catch him. And then I’d have to deal with their disappointment *again*. I’d have to explain how I messed up. They wouldn’t be surprised. They’d say they *knew* I wasn’t ready to have the responsibility of running the booth.

My body opened to the energy running through the earth like blood through veins. Hauling it in like the first breath after coming up from the water. It came rushing to me with the slightest thought, like it was only waiting for permission.

“*Stop!*” I shouted again, and the ground shook beneath my feet. A great groan had me skidding to a stop. My hands shook.

*Crack!* The pavement split. A fissure slicing through it from where I stood, skittering out over the square. Chasing the thief down faster than I ever could.

Someone screamed.

The sky darkened, and my blood boiled.

The fissure reached him, and he grunted as the ground heaved under his feet, sending him sprawling into the street. The jewelry jolted and bounced from his sleeves to land unceremoniously across the street beside him.

Cars screeched to a standstill. Their horns blaring. People everywhere were shouting. Running. *Earthquake*, they said, but they were wrong.

The magic I'd used still coursed through me, slowly waning. Leaching out of my bones to return to the earth, leaving me shivering against a sudden chill.

The ground still pulsed beneath my feet. My fists clenched.

*What have I done?*

Across the street stood two men. They weren't running away. Or trying to film the scene. They weren't even looking at the giant gash in the pavement.

They were staring at me.