

Witch You Would

A Novel



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CHAPTER 4



Penelope

*H*ands shaking, I texted Emelia while my stomach tried to escape through my belly button.

ME: I GOT FIRED OMFG

EME: NO SHE DIDNT

EME: what a raging come ping a

EME: come pinga, stfu autocorrect

ME: lolsob

EME: do you need money?

ME: not yet

EME: you can sleep in my bathtub

EME: like a sad mermaid

EME: I'll get you some shells for your boobs

ME: conch shells lol

EME: more like snail shells

I snort-laughed while continuing to freak out. I could multitask. Then a worse thought occurred to me: I couldn't drop off the store keys for two weeks because I was stuck here.

A movie played in my brain: Ofelia can't find some random item; Ofelia calls the cops and blames me; a SWAT team dramatically blows open a wall in the warehouse, rushes in, tackles me, and cuffs me while everyone screams; my mom cries on TV about how I'd always been a failure, especially compared to my sister, but she didn't know I was desperate enough to turn to a life of crime; Rosy tries to bring me an escape spell hidden inside a pastelito—

ME: ffffffff

ME: I have to turn in my work keys
but they're at my house

EME: I'll take care of it

ME: excuse me how

EME: I have my ways

ME: you're going to ask Cari to break in

EME: ding ding ding

Our cousin Carina had like twelve jobs, all side hustles. She was also our family fixer, always running around Miami to help someone out. Most importantly for this situation, she had a locksmith kit.

ME: they're on a hook by the front door

ME: make sure she locks up again after

EME: duh not her first time

ME: okay they're taking my phone
in a minute gotta go

Eme sent me a GIF of a cartoon otter saying, "You got this!" and it made me feel a little better.

I tried to figure out what else I needed to do before I was cut off. Tell Rosy? No, she'd want to talk; I texted her a dancing girl emoji. Call Ofelia and beg for my job? That wouldn't work unless I did it in person, and if she said no, then I'd have no job and no *Cast Judgment* to win. Maybe if I explained where I was, I could convince her the show would be great free publicity for the store? Except she'd never be able to keep it a secret, and the lawyer ninjas would take me out.

Another thought smacked me. Gil. I needed to email him before Ofelia did.

Why hadn't I ever told him my actual name? Why hadn't I asked

him out? I made a constipated hippo noise and tried to open the store email.

I was locked out.

Ofelia had once bricked her computer by downloading enough malware to destroy reality, but she'd managed to change the email password three seconds after firing me. How?

Rachel called, "Five minutes!" before vanishing again.

Five minutes? It took forever to mic me and Felicia. I guessed cotton shirts weren't abominations in the ears of the sound gods.

I opened my personal email and started a new one to Gil. Thankfully I remembered his email address. My brain slipped into some anxiety flow state as I typed faster than I ever had in my life. I barely even knew what I was saying. I think I told him I was going out of town and begged him to wait for me, like this was some period movie where I was going to war and he would be left behind, staring out the window as a single tear rolled down his cheek and sad violins played.

I hit send before I could edit. When would I get my phone back? What if my email went to spam and he never saw it?

Why did I care more about this than getting fired?

A reply appeared. No way. Too fast. I opened it and my stomach sank to my feet.

An auto-reply. Apparently Gil was actually going out of town instead of pretending like me, and he would only be checking emails periodically. I almost hit my forehead with my phone, except that would mess up my makeup, so I just shook it and growled.

I was fired, I would probably never talk to Gil again, and—

Stop it, Penelope! Breathe. I couldn't be distracted right now. We weren't starting the actual spell-casting until tomorrow, but I needed to make a good first impression on Charlotte Sharp. There

was no way she'd think I was a cool, competent caster if I was twitching like I'd had a venti espresso.

"Time's up," Rachel announced. "Please place any phones, tablets, computers, and similar devices in the box."

Little Manny put a large metal bin on the floor, and we all surrendered our electronics. Rachel closed the lid, locked it, and muttered an incantation. Glowing blue sigils floated about an inch from the sides and top for a few seconds before sinking into the surface with a silent rush of energy and a whiff of sulfur.

No turning back now.

"Okay, we're good." Rachel tapped her tablet and gestured at the door. "Let's get you to the set."

We followed her like ducklings—or a rubber duck, in my case.

The warehouse part of the building somehow managed to be enormous and claustrophobic at the same time. Fluorescent lights hung from bare concrete ceilings twenty feet above me, outshone by an array of sun-bright LED panels on stands. A fancy camera mounted on a crane thing loomed to one side like a long-necked metal dinosaur. There were carts with mystery gadgets covered in dials and buttons and switches, cables snaking across the floor in every direction, and plastic bins and latched cases for equipment. It smelled like sawdust, paint, and a hint of body spray.

In the middle of the open space rose a giant room with high walls and double doors but no ceiling. Cables poked out of small holes in the insulated drywall, some leading to power strips and extension cords, others to a tower of blinking lights and TV screens in front of fancy ergonomic chairs. Unlike the quieter office area, here people rushed around, setting things up, moving them, muttering into walkie-talkies or collar mics. It felt like I'd stumbled into a beehive and I had to watch out or get stung.

Rachel led us through the double doors in the room-in-a-room, where we immediately hit another wall that branched into a hallway going left and right. We went left, turned a corner, and came to a stop.

In front of us, the *Cast Judgment* set waited in all its magic-making glory. The white walls were covered in stylized runes, sigils, mandalas, and other symbols that looked impressive but were magically inert. A giant silver pentacle gleamed on the floor, the prep stations arranged in two rows behind it, plus one in the back center. Stainless steel countertops and tables gleamed above brightly colored cabinets and shelves, one color per contestant—or in this case, per team. Each station also had its own wooden table, chalk-painted floor area, fridge with freezer, and fancy six-burner gas range with oven, way nicer than the one I used in the store.

Oh, right. I was fired. The delicate flower of my good mood withered.

“Amazing,” Amy breathed.

“This is so . . . wow,” Quentin said. “It’s one thing to see it on TV, ya know?”

“For real,” Dylan agreed.

Felicia looked bored.

Rachel walked to the other end of the room and muttered arguments into her collar mic that ended with her stabbing her tablet with her finger like it had offended her.

“Schedule change,” Rachel told us. “We’re doing solo and pair interviews after lunch, pairs first. Host and judge intros and partner assignments now. Camera guys are on their way to get everything set up, then Isaac and Tori will take over.”

A bald bear of a man strolled in carrying a complicated-looking

camera on his shoulder. He wiggled his fingers at us, put the camera down, and waited. Another camera person ducked behind a wheeled tripod thing near the entrance, and I think there was one more in the back of the room somewhere. Lights were turned on and off. The camera on the crane swung into position overhead.

Everything suddenly went quiet as a storm blew in. Isaac Knight, the showrunner. His brown hair was ruffled like he'd been running his hands through it, and his goatee was starting to take over the rest of his face and neck. Like most of the PAs, he wore jeans and a hoodie, but unlike them he'd paid extra for designer logos. He couldn't have been much taller than me, but his vibes filled the room as he looked around. Chisme online said some people called him Isaac Nightmare because he was hard to work with. I couldn't imagine he was much worse than Ofelia and some customers I'd had; maybe I needed to imagine harder. He focused on me and the rest of the contestants, and it was like looking into the black eyes of a shark.

"You five," he said, pointing in our direction. "Stand next to your stations so I can see how you look."

We hadn't been told which stations were ours, so none of us moved.

A lady in a black turtleneck and jeans with an asymmetrical brown bob spoke up. "Amy, you're red. Quentin, orange. Felicia, yellow. Dylan, green, and Penelope, blue."

We scrambled past each other, almost colliding. Then we all stared expectantly at Isaac.

Isaac frowned. At me. What did I do?

"Tori, why isn't she team yellow?" Isaac asked. "She's wearing yellow."

“She’s also wearing red and orange,” Tori of the turtleneck said slowly, picking each word like it was a melon at the grocery store. “Do you want wardrobe to—”

“No, just switch them around,” Isaac said, flapping his hand. “Isn’t her celebrity wearing yellow, too? It works. Matchy-matchy.”

My pulse sped up. I tried to remember if I’d ever seen Charlotte wearing yellow.

“Okay,” Tori said. “But Felicia is wearing pink.”

“And her celebrity is wearing blue. Swap them.”

Tori tapped something into her tablet as Felicia and I traded places. Now I was in the back left and she was center back. I swallowed spit and tried not to fidget.

“Everybody look eager and excited,” Isaac said. “Nate, give me medium and close shots of each of them.”

He turned and walked out. I kept swallowing. How was my mouth so dry? Look excited, he’d said. I put on my retail smile. The auditions had been stressful, but this was a whole other level.

And we hadn’t even started spell-casting yet.

After a hundred years of staring past the camera at the entrance, then at camera guy Nate’s shoulder, attempting to emit positive energy while the giant lights around us shifted miniscule amounts, Isaac came back and pronounced us ready.

“Get the talent in here,” he told Tori, slurping a green smoothie through a giant straw.

The drink reminded me of Rosy, dancing as she made batidos, humming along with the restaurant music. I wouldn’t get to see her as much now that I was fired, not unless I got another job in that shopping center. Maybe at the daycare? Or the gym? Or the Vaquita up the street?

It hit me that I had never really expected to win this competi-

tion. Sure, I'd daydreamed about money and time to work on my abuela's spellbook, about meeting famous people and impressing them enough that they'd hire me. But I'd never thought through how much my life might change, because I didn't really believe it would. Every step of the audition process, I waited to get the call or email telling me I was out. Every time I made it to the next stage, the only person I could celebrate with was Emelia, so none of it felt real.

But it was. It so was. And I could win, damn it. If I was good enough to be here, I was good enough to go all the way.

If only I could make myself believe that.

Rachel reappeared, followed by the host of *Cast Judgment*, Syd Hart. They were tall and thin, with pale skin and long black hair, and tiny crow's-feet around their blue eyes that told you they smiled a lot. They wore a leopard-print shirt under a black leather jacket, a look I could never pull off. On the show and in interviews, they were goofy and told a lot of jokes, but maybe they were more serious in real life?

"Syd will start with their usual thing," Isaac said. "Contestant intros, then judges, then we'll do the celebrity pairs. Any questions?"

"One question," Syd said. Isaac made a *get on with it* circular motion with his hand.

"What is a witch's favorite subject in school?" Syd asked.

Everyone stared at them. Nate snickered.

I raised my hand. "Spelling?"

"Correct!" Syd grinned and tossed something at me.

A lemon candy. I felt like I was in third grade again, getting a treat from the teacher. And suddenly, I wasn't as nervous anymore.

Isaac looked like that meme of the guy with the smiling mask

over the angry crying face. “No more questions? Good, great. Tori, take over.” He stalked out, and Syd winked at us.

“I can’t believe he hasn’t hexed my mouth shut,” Syd said in a stage whisper.

Rachel vanished back into the hallway. Tori started issuing orders—I guess she was the director? Assistant director? I didn’t understand all the show titles. Someone else brought in one of those things with an arm that clapped shut and made a loud noise, with digital numbers on the front.

“Remember,” Tori said, a calm breeze compared to Isaac’s thunderstorm. “One camera will be on you while Syd talks about you, but other cameras will always be rolling on everyone together. Don’t stop looking at Syd, don’t fidget, don’t pick your nose. When the judges are introduced, wait for Syd to finish, then clap and get excited, but not too much. This isn’t a concert or football game. When your celebrity is brought out, same deal. Big smiles; you’re hyped to partner with them. Got it? Good. Let’s roll.”

The butterflies in my stomach caught fire. I wanted to work with Charlotte Sharp, but the other options were probably great. Just . . . not as great. I wished I’d practiced reacting in a mirror. I didn’t want to look unhappy if I ended up with someone else.

The person with the clapper thingy stood in front of the camera on wheels and rattled off something fast, then opened the arm and snapped it shut. The noise was so loud I jumped.

Syd moved smoothly into the same spot the person had been standing in and looked straight into the camera for a count of five, then began.

“Some people cast spells for work,” Syd said. “Others cast them for pleasure. These five competitors will be casting for the chance to win a yearlong residency at the Desgraves Studio and a hundred

thousand dollars in cash. And our panel of experts will cast the most difficult thing of all.” They paused dramatically. “They’re going to cast judgment.”

I knew from watching the show that it would cut to the title and play a little theme song now, but editing would add that stuff later.

Syd continued. “Our contestants have come from all over the country to beautiful Miami, Florida, for a very special season of *Cast Judgment*. Instead of competing alone, they’ll each be partnered with a Spellebrity caster to push their creations to even greater magical heights. But before we introduce those special guests, let’s meet our lucky five.”

They turned around to face the camera at the back of the room while Nate walked slowly in front of us. “Amy Song is a studio musician from Jersey City who sells handmade charms online in her Mirage shop. Dylan Williams is a grocery store baker from Baltimore who experiments with magical pastries in his spare time. Quentin Adams is an auto mechanic from Minneapolis who tinkers with antique enchantments. Felicia Rivera is a real estate broker and interior designer from Los Angeles with a flair for fashion spells.”

She definitely looked like she had strong clothing opinions.

I was, embarrassingly, “Last but not least, Penelope Delmar is a spell technician from right here in Miami. If you need help with your magic, just ask her.” Syd grinned, and we all chuckled politely.

Syd gestured at a PA, who ran over and handed them a bottle of water. They took a quick swig, made some weird noises, then turned back around to the camera in front of us and stared silently at it for a few seconds before continuing.

“Now, let’s bring out our judges,” Syd said, launching into introductions that I already knew from watching the show.

Fabienne Desgraves, founder and owner of Desgraves Studio.

Dark brown skin and eyes, black hair almost shaved on the sides but longer on top. Coral jumpsuit cut like a suit jacket in front, a short cape draped over her bare arms. Deep red lips curled in a mysterious smile. Her comments usually focused on style, flair, and cool factor.

Doris Twist—not her real name—started in the 1980s with her show *Witching with a Twist*. Pale and as old as my abuela, hazel eyes watery but still sharp. Cream-and-purple dress with lavender sweater, gray hair pulled back in a tight bun. Very politician’s wife—meets—church lady. Super nice; whenever she said something even a little critical, she sounded really sorry.

Hugh Burbank—surprisingly his real name—owner of Burbank’s Boutique. Dark green shirt and gray slacks that matched his eyes and hair respectively. Fashionably tan skin like Felicia’s. Permanently sneering. Also shorter than I expected; he seemed to loom over everyone on the show. Camera tricks, I guess. His compliment sandwiches were bunless shit burgers.

What if I messed up so badly that he hit me with a burn epic enough to turn me into a meme? Oh my god! Shut up, brain. Smile. Clap. Catastrophize later.

Syd took another quick water break, but this time they called Tori over and held a muttered meeting. At one point they both looked at me, which totally didn’t make my anxiety worse, nope.

Eventually Syd nodded and faced us again.

“Now,” Syd said, “it’s time for our fabulous competitors to meet their celebrity partners.”

“Stop,” Tori called. “‘Spellebrity,’ Syd. You have to use the trademark.”

Syd grinned sheepishly at us and repeated the phrase correctly. They continued. “First, we have Jaya Kamath, host of *Jaya’s Charm-*

ing Charms and author of the *CIY Charms* spellbooks. Jaya will be paired with . . .” Dramatic pause. “Amy Song!”

We all clapped as Jaya walked over to Amy. She wasn’t quite at Amy’s level of cottagecore, but they looked like they shopped in the same store. Both seemed happy.

The other intros went the same way. Tanner Byrne, host of *Spell Rehab*, did reproductions and restorations of old enchantments. He was sent over to a delighted Quentin. Zeke Murphy owned a famous magical candy shop in the Strip District in Pittsburgh, Zeke’s Sweets N’at, same name as his show. Dylan was his partner.

Just me and Felicia left. Oh my god. Was I sweating in this freezing warehouse? Had I put on deodorant this morning?

“Charlotte Sharp is the owner of Athame Arts—”

My blood thumped in my ears like bass at a club. Charlotte wore a pale blue knit top with navy pants. Her blond-highlighted hair was styled in a bun with loose strands framing her face that probably took her stylist forever to get perfect. Her honey-tan skin was—

Wait. Her sweater. Was blue. Not yellow.

“Charlotte will be working with . . . Felicia!”

I really hoped the camera wasn’t pointed at me, because I had no clue what my face was doing. Hopefully still smiling. My cheeks definitely hurt. I forced myself to clap for Felicia, who didn’t look as delighted as she should after stealing my partner.

Okay, she hadn’t actually stolen my partner. I was still salty, though.

“We’re especially excited to be able to pair our local competitor, Penelope, with another Miami caster.”

What? Who? I stared at the hallway entrance.

“You may have seen his work on his popular Jinxd channel—”

No! No. No no no. Please no.

“—star of *Mage You Look*—”

Kill me.

“Leandro Presto!”

Leandro turned the corner, waving and grinning at nobody in particular. His safety glasses were on, hair slicked back, mustache waxed and curled, and he wore a vintage yellow shirt covered in drawings of, I kid you not, hamburgers and French fries. He froze the instant he saw me, and we stared at each other across the room like stunned telenovela characters.

“Stop!” Tori shouted. “Let’s do that again. Penelope, Leandro, we need more enthusiasm, please.”

Leandro turned around and marched back into the hallway, shoulders up to his ears. Felicia chuckled. I wanted to stab her with my pencil. Instead, I dug deep for excitement, some shred of satisfaction. All I could find was a sinkhole of despair.

With Leandro as my partner, I was totally fucked.