



We Were Witches Once

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It was just a day job: a grueling, eight-hour shift she forced herself through six days a week in order to pay for classes at the local community college. It had nothing to do with her real career - or, at least, the career she imagined for herself in the couple minutes before she fell asleep at two, three in the morning, only to wake with the sun and do it all over again - but it was the most legitimate entry on her resume, and that was something, at least. But despite the job's undeniable usefulness, she still despised it with a passion that made her sick, crouching in front of the company toilet and vomiting before work truly began: plastic, Cheshire grins stretched ear-to-ear, aching feet forced into cheap, knockoff heels, and too-weak coffee made from the leftover dregs of her boss's unfinished cup. She endured it all, though, from faintly patronizing comments about the unforgivable cliché of being a female secretary to slowly and methodically consuming the stale sandwiches she had packed for lunch, alone at her desk instead of at the Mexican restaurant two streets over where her coworkers

celebrated yet another Margarita Monday.

By the time she arrived home in the evenings - after a bus ride that lasted over an hour because she had to switch lines twice, as well as walking almost a mile - she wanted nothing more than to collapse on the nearest horizontal surface, shutting her eyes against the arthritic slump of her front porch, the ugly yellow lights of her living room, the alarms that never seemed to stop ringing.

But it was a Friday night, and as the dreary grey sky faded into an equally unimpressive sunset, peaky and faintly resemblant of rotten salmon, that was when her real work began.

Dorian tossed her keys aside and headed into the bathroom. She showered in the coldest water her body could stand, inciting an adrenaline rush she could ride until midnight, at least. She replaced her office clothes - a faux-leather skirt, a cheap blouse that had nearly been washed to rags - with something that she might've worn five years ago: a cropped T-shirt and skinny jeans.

In the kitchen, that night's ingredients were already arranged in a neat line. It was a simple recipe - a stimulant better than any drug on the market, meant to keep the user awake for days at a time with virtually no side effects. Some users swore they felt younger, but Dorian thought that was just a placebo, a trick of the brain that only

associates an excess of energy with carefree childhood.

She got to work. This particular recipe also only worked on Friday nights, leeching the energy of the coming weekend. There was another concoction she made on Mondays, a sleeping aid she sold to some young mothers who lived a couple streets over, and then a dose of some bottled boredom she occasionally pawned on Thursdays to an ADHD high school student who could never seem to calm their mind enough to focus on homework. It was an unforgiving profession, though. Being a hedgewitch like this; like all the women in her family. But they couldn't help her now. Ingredients these days were expensive - too expensive for Dorian to use on herself. And no one believed in magic anymore, too caught up in the glitz and glamor of other, more conventional fixes.

After a couple minutes, tonight's ingredients had bubbled into a thick, opaque broth. Dorian spooned it into a mason jar, grabbed her keys, and stepped into the warm night. She felt, seemingly impossibly, more exhausted than when she had first walked through the door only fifteen minutes ago - but that was the nature of magic. In the end, it took everything from you.

Thankfully, it was a short walk to Zebulon College. The campus was a reliable source of buyers, but Dorian hated them - and they knew it, too, like bloodhounds during hunting season, sniffing out her drugstore

perfume. She, and everyone else who lived on her side of the city, were nothing more than community service projects, waiting to be snapped up by seniors so they could graduate *summa cum laude* next spring. She could feel their stares now, sizing her up as she neared the campus proper.

There was a row of frat houses on Zebulon's main road, already thudding with heavy bass and high pitched giggles. Although Zebulon was historically an all-boys school, they had no shortage of ways to sneak girls into their parties, probably revolving around clandestine donations lining someone's pockets.

Dorian approached a small gaggle of boys on the front lawn of Sigma Chi, the campus's largest fraternity. The boys were engrossed in a game involving beer bottles, their cell phones, and a girl's lacy black bra, and they didn't notice Dorian until she cleared her throat, twice, and announced, "I'm looking for Clarence Van Buren."

One of the boys finally glanced up, took a swig of beer, and promptly spit it at her feet. He and his cronies thought this was extremely clever. "Who's asking?"

This time, Dorian took a careful step back before proffering her jar. "I have something to give him, I'm here every - " "He doesn't want your girly homemade shit," Beer Boy interrupted. "Go home, princess." The boys all laughed in a sharp chorus like vultures descending.

"Just tell me where he is," Dorian snapped. She knew this was the wrong move almost immediately. As ridiculous as they looked, these boys were trained professionals, sharks jumping at the first hint of blood in water - but it was too late to backpedal. Beer Boy, evidently the leader, stepped towards her, thick eyebrows drawing together. "You better watch your - "

"There you are, Dorian!"

A sweaty arm landed hard around her shoulders. "What have I told you about talking to the locals?" Clarence joked, but she hardly heard him. She was too busy reeling at the stench of liquor and grease - and at the weightlessness of being mere inches from disaster.

"C'mon, let's talk somewhere else," he added, steering her away. He mouthed something that was probably equal parts sexist and placating at the boys in the yard, and Dorian wrenched herself away from his side as soon as they were in the house, feeling a growing urge to either vomit or shower. If the air outside had been bad, this was unbearably worse - the sickly-sweet perfume of marijuana smoke, combined with unwashed bodies and stale fast-food burgers - but Dorian gulped lungfuls of it anyway.

"Your friends are assholes."

"Boys will be boys." Clarence smiled at her, unperturbed. He was like that: the perfect fraternity president, always smiling, always laughing, but Dorian didn't trust him

for a second, and she didn't understand how others could.

She thrust out the jar. "Just pay up and let me go."

"You know, this is the reason you don't have more clients," remarked Clarence, rummaging through his pockets. "No charm. You should memorize some icebreakers. Maybe take a class. I bet the community college has one."

"I am in college."

"Oh, that's right." He bared his teeth again. "I think I left my wallet upstairs. Wait for me?"

Dorian's stomach sank. On the one hand, the last thing she wanted to do was stand here alone, music pulsing through her ears, promising a headache that only a good night's sleep could cure. The party was in full swing, the floor sticky with spilled drinks. Boys moved through the foyer like piranhas, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. But on the other hand, going with Clarence meant being *alone* with him. It was difficult to believe Clarence hadn't planned this - just one more way of getting under her skin - and she hated even more that it worked.

"Let me go up there," she decided finally, pointing to the landing.

Clarence just shrugged, not even bothering to wait for her as he bounced up the stairs. That was fine. Dorian leaned against the railing and did her best to blend in with the decor, but she had barely taken a

breath of the stale, alcohol-thick air when Beer Boy was filling her vision again, broad-shouldered and infinitely more dangerous with a fresh drink in hand.

"Look," Dorian said, forcing a smile. "I think we just got off on the wrong foot - " "Don't give me that shit," he snapped, loudly enough to some newcomers downstairs lifted their heads curiously in search of the commotion. "You're gonna tell me exactly what you are and how you're doing it, or I swear to God I'll call the cops."

When she heard cops, Dorian short-circuited. Complete tunnel vision. She couldn't help it. "I don't know what you're talking about," she tried, but her stomach was already twisting into knots, bracing for the inevitable hit.

Beer Boy scoffed. "You know exactly what I mean. You show up here - what, every Friday? Listen, I've seen drugs." That was probably an understatement. "But the shit you give him - God knows what's in it. It's not drugs. Nobody can just mix something like that. He takes it, and then he doesn't sleep for a fucking week."

"Sounds to me like you're jealous," Dorian said.

A sausage finger stabbed the space between her brows, and Dorian went cross-eyed. "I took it once," Beer Boy said. "We had a party after the hockey game that didn't end until five. He gave me some so I could make it to an eight A.M. I figured it wasn't

gonna be worse than coke, so what the hell, right?"

He was drunk enough that he was swaying in Dorian's vision, or maybe that was all her. "But I'm telling you, I know it's not just drugs. *That shit* - " he gestures to the jar - "shouldn't be real. So you're gonna tell me what it is and what you are, or the cops are gonna be all over your ass."

Some small, exhausted part of Dorian felt stupid for not realizing earlier, but the rest of her just felt sick. Of course they were using it for - for *that*. The ingredients she could never afford to waste on herself, thrown up in a dirty frat house toilet alongside some top-shelf liquor that tasted no better than the drugstore brand when it was surging in the back of your throat. With an almost dizzying rush, she realized exactly how much she hated Clarence and Beer Boy and every other boy in this awful house, the walls pressing closer and closer as if they, too, sensed blood.

"I asked you a question," Beer Boy growled. With an awful effort, Dorian wrenched her attention back to the crisis at hand.

"I'm not doing anything to your friend," she said. "This is just a - an allergy remedy my grandmother makes. Clarence must've given you something else."

Downstairs, the music reached an excruciating crescendo.

Beer Boy stared at her. "Are you fucking stupid?" Then, dreadfully, he reached into the pocket of his well-pressed khakis, withdrawing a sleek silver cell phone.

So he wasn't lying. And Dorian knew she couldn't afford that kind of disaster: a life snuffed out with just one call to the right person, a bank account drained, a house

foreclosed. She just *couldn't*.

She grabbed at the phone, and like some kind of post-bacchanalia hallucination, reeled with a vision of lawyers in well-pressed Italian suits, yachts laboring underneath the Caribbean sun, and a stack of bills threatening to tip over before Beer Boy reacted, shoving her away. Her spine cracked hard against the knobbly railing, and without thinking, she windmilled desperately to keep herself from tipping over.

Then -

The jar, thought Dorian stupidly.

It crashed spectacularly against the dirty, sticky floor. Droplets and glass shards scattered like stray dogs before a storm. Dorian's clothes weren't spared, but she hardly noticed. She gaped in horror at the mess.

Beer Boy hadn't fared much better. In fact, he looked and smelled remarkably like a sewer rat. But he was still extraordinarily rich and clinging tightly to his cell phone, and his eyes were still bright with fury when he trained them on Dorian and opened his mouth to deliver the death blow.

"Oh, dear," observed Clarence Van Buren, sweeping elegantly down the stairs despite the mess. "Tsk, tsk, Dorian. I leave you alone for - " He caught sight of Beer Boy and pulled up short, reconsidering. "What's this, Oliver?"

"I just saved your life," Oliver insisted, dragging a hand down the front of his shirt. But he finally pocketed his cell phone, adding a petulant, "*you're welcome.*"

"Actually, what you've done is made a terrible mess of my foyer," commented Clarence amiably. "And ruined a product I was just about to purchase. Are you familiar with

the phrase 'you break it, you buy it,'
Oliver?"

Clarence's voice rolled through the air like thunder. There was no music to distort his words, no raucous laughter to mask the danger seeping from every pore like poison. Nothing hid the fact that he wasn't smiling now.

"I'm not buying anything from her,"
Oliver said. "And neither are you."

Dorian glanced down and discovered why it was suddenly so quiet. The doorways were packed with curious observers, their hands filled with fresh drinks like this was a spectator sport. They had even turned off the music in order to catch every word between the two boys.

"You sound like my mother," Clarence remarked, earning a stir of laughter from the audience.

Oliver - already flushed from his beer - turned a deep, bloody scarlet. "Listen, man, I don't care what you do. I'm not a snitch. But this - this is different."

"Oh? How so?"

"She's a liar," Oliver spat, still flushing. If someone were to drag their hand across his face, Dorian thought vaguely that the color would come away like blood. "A - a *witch*."

The crowd below tittered again. In any other context, Oliver's accusation might've been funny to Dorian, too - but standing there in her soaked jeans, in the spotlight of a hundred wasted frat boys, she felt no

desire to laugh.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Clarence said.

He bent at the waist and plucked a large glass shard from the floor. A fat droplet of Dorian's concoction still glistened on the sharp edge. He held it up to the light, a couple inches above his mouth, stuck out his tongue, and shook gently.

Someone wolf-whistled, cracking through the foyer like a bullet.

Clarence swallowed hard, the knob of his throat glistening with sweat and something else underneath the greasy lights. He discarded the glass carelessly, watching it shatter against the floor. "See?"

For a moment, there was true, blissful silence - and even Dorian leaned forward, unable to help herself.

Clarence smiled widely, all teeth, and spread his hands. He hadn't changed in the slightest, and the crowd below knew it. Their disappointment was short-lived, though, as they began to disperse, on the hunt for quicker, dirtier thrills. Someone kicked the music back on, and the bass made Dorian wince. But at least she was safe.

From somewhere downstairs, a girl's false laughter bubbled like overflowing soda.

Without warning, Clarence's entire body jolted like a hanged man, the last few precious moments of life spent writhing at the end of a rope. His eyes, blown pitch-black, shuddered and rolled. It was a gruesome spectacle, his body performing

automatic tests to cope with the dose of pure energy tearing through his system - limbs jerking and flexing, mouth working in a cruel approximation of speech - and even Dorian, who knew exactly what was happening, felt a stab of revulsion. She had always expected this process to look like a superhero movie, a painful but necessary transformation reeking of electricity and power. Instead, all she could smell was beer.

But as soon as it began, it was over. Clarence righted himself and grinned again at Oliver. He did look younger, Dorian realized, but it was a malicious kind of youth. Like stealing away someone else's time for yourself.

"Well, you caught me," Clarence admitted, not sounding bothered in the least. "It's a neat trick, isn't it? One dose can last for up to twenty-four hours. Of course, thanks to you, Oliver, I'll have to manage with quite a bit less than that - but I'd still give myself five or six hours, tops."

Oliver's mouth worked soundlessly.

"That's not - "

"Not possible?" Clarence's canines glinted in the waxy light. "Sure it is, Olly. You said it yourself, didn't you? She's a witch through and through."

"Don't call me that," Dorian muttered, shooting a glance at the foyer below. It was empty, thank goodness - for now.

Oliver was reaching frantically for his cell phone again. "You're crazy," he

professed. He took a step backwards, phone in hand. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me." And another. And another. "You've gotta be- "

Glass crunched underneath his shoes. A rattlesnake's warning.

Oliver took a final step and discovered all too suddenly that he had run out of floor. He tried to propel himself forward, the way Dorian had done earlier when Oliver pushed her against the banister, but now the floor was slick from Dorian's spilled mixture.

A clawed hand scrabbled for purchase, tangling itself in the front of Clarence's shirt.

And Clarence didn't hesitate for a second before pushing Oliver away.

Stunned, Oliver's back bent like a bowstring. His arms, heavy and slow, flung out like the embrace of some deep-sea creature - an octopus, perhaps. Dorian watched as his mouth - still damp with beer - formed a comically round O.

Then it was over.

Blood splattered like breadcrumbs, a trail leading to Oliver's broken body at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, God," Dorian whispered. She was going to be sick. "Oh my God.."

Distantly, she heard Clarence sigh. "Come on, Dorian, you didn't even like him."

Dorian leaned over the rail and vomited. She didn't care. It was only a matter of time before someone saw Oliver's body, and then a puddle of vomit would be the least of

anyone's worries. She was still retching when Clarence seized her, blunt fingers digging hard into her shoulders. He pulled her close. All at once, staring into the endless eclipse of his pupils, the crooked twitch of his mouth, she was overwhelmed with the memory of Oliver's fall - and it hit her, right then, that she was staring into the eyes of a murderer.

"Oh my God," Dorian whispered again. A sick terror seized her, and if she had anything left in her stomach, it would be all over Clarence's shoes.

He was still holding her, waiting for her to calm down. She struggled futilely. Her hands went to his hair and tugged hard, but Clarence just laughed. Maybe the concoction made him harder to hurt - or maybe she was so fragile she couldn't make a dent. Either way, she finally sagged in his grip.

"There you go," Clarence soothed. "Come on, Dorian. Look at it this way. Oliver knew. He knew, and he was going to tell the cops, and then our little partnership would be over. And then how would you pay for all those classes at the community college?"

"It is over," Dorian told him. She would find another way. There had to be someone else out there, some poor, sleep-deprived student, that believed in magic, right? "I don't - I can't - "

Clarence's fingernails were leaving crescent moons in the soft flesh of her shoulder. This close, she could even smell

his breath, and it didn't reek of alcohol like the other boys, like Oliver. It stunk of magic and death.

"You're going to sell to me," Clarence insisted, his perfect calm finally beginning to fracture. Like a mask. She wanted to dig her fingers underneath the edge and rip it all away. "I need this, Dorian. I need it."

"No, you don't." She felt a hysterical laugh bubble in her chest. "Oliver told me what you do with it, Clarence. You party and then you take - you take my medicine so you can still go to class and do your homework and graduate. It's pathetic." No, it was sickening. The amount of money and precious, precious energy she had wasted on his whims... "I can't give you anything you need."

For a moment, there was nothing. Part of her wondered if this was it, if she had finally overstepped herself. Eighteen long years with a miserable, sudden end at the bottom of Sigma Chi's greasy staircase. Just like Oliver.

"Oh, Dorian," Clarence said, releasing her at last. "*Oh, Dorian.* You're so naive sometimes. It's like you know nothing at all about how the world works."

Dorian frowned, intrigued despite herself. "What are you - "

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret," Clarence said, "because we're such good friends. I know you're a witch, Dorian. Don't waste your breath trying to convince me you're not. And, unlike Oliver, I don't

particularly care who you are or what you do as long as my goods are here every Friday."

Below, someone was screaming. They had finally found Oliver's body.

"But I guarantee you that someone out there cares," Clarence continued. "Poor, stupid Oliver was right about that. There are a hundred cold cases the cops could tie you to if I put in a good word. And they wouldn't just send you to prison, Dorian. A witch, rotting behind bars? No, they'd want you up close and personal. They'd want to take you apart over and over again just to find out what makes you tick. Now tell me honestly, Dorian, is that how you want to spend the rest of your miserable life?"

She shook her head numbly. "Then you're going to keep selling to me," Clarence said, extending a manicured hand as if they were sealing a business deal despite the screams still ringing tinnily through the air. His smile was caramel and chocolate and cyanide. "Aren't you, Dorian?"

What else could she do? She took his hand.

In the distance, police sirens wailed like the laments of a grieving mother, utterly inconsolable as she mourned the loss of her only son.



By the time Dorian unlocked her front door, dawn was dripping down the sky like leftover paint.

She had work. Of course she had work. It was Saturday, a half day, but there would still be emails to answer and papers to file and an endless barrage of questions, most of them sardonic, all of them aimed at her like missiles. Already, the hum of traffic filled the air: packed minivans rumbling down the narrow streets, dodging potholes with practiced efficiency.

Dorian went to the bathroom, stripped off her pants, and held them up to the light. Yes, they were ruined - and now they stunk of cigarette smoke, too, a byproduct of the police car she'd been forced into on the way to the station. And then there had been paperwork and crisp bills flat against an overcrowded desk, and one or two calls to someone Clarence's dad knew. Dorian had curled up in a plastic chair and tried her best to doze, but every time she closed her eyes was pressing play on the memory of Oliver's death. His flailing arms. The flush of betrayal in his dark, stupid eyes. Dorian didn't bother finding new clothes. She went straight to the shower and scrubbed until her skin was raw and pink. She never wanted to go back to Zebulon again.

But Clarence would make sure she was there next Friday, as well as every Friday afterwards. Until she bored him. Until he discarded her the way boys like that discarded girls like her. More than anything, she hated being under his thumb like this - hated being *owned* by him. She might as well

wear a sparkly collar with his name in rhinestones.

She reached for a bottle of shampoo and noticed a couple strands of hair worked around her fingers. They were blonde, almost artificially so. Dorian's own hair was dark as night and chopped extremely short in order to save money on unnecessary products. These strands were long and curly. She thought she remembered how they had gotten there in the first place, although she was impressed they had stayed despite the long night.

And, most importantly, she knew exactly who they belonged to.

Very, very carefully, Dorian pulled back the shower curtain and stepped into the chilly air. She donned a towel as best she could with one hand and went straight into the kitchen, where her book of recipes was still spread-eagled on the granite countertop exactly as she had left it last night. Only then did she remove Clarence's hair from her hand, laying it across a paper towel.

Even the most inexperienced witch could tell you that tokens like hair, clothing scraps, or even nail clippings - taglocks, as they were often called - were a powerful thing in magic. They could be used for curses or blessings alike, but Dorian thought she knew which road she was going to take.

She had never tried magic stronger than the remedies and concoctions she mixed. It was too dangerous, requiring too much energy and focus. She had consoled herself before by

vowing to wait until the moment she graduated college, when she could sleep for more than a couple hours a night; when the repercussions wouldn't feel nearly as harsh.

But now, she reached for the recipe book anyway, flipping it all the way to the back and bracing her fingers against the swirling ink - a list of curses that was calling Clarence's name.

She would die before she belonged to Clarence Van Buren - but with a little bit of luck, and a whole lot of magic, she wouldn't be the first one to go.