

The Visitor

by MoonlitMeda

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"Will you let me?"

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The pearly grey moonlight seeping through the gap in the curtains fell across Andromeda's face, and she stirred uneasily. Even now, years later, she woke at almost nothing. She turned away from the window and buried her face in the pillow, but she had come too close to consciousness to escape it now. Her mind was inexorably piecing together the world, dragging her out of a dream of better times and into the present. Therefore, when a small arm touched her wrist, she did not jump quite as badly as she might have had she been fully asleep.

"Grandma?"

"Hmm?" She sat up and turned to look at the small boy to whom the hand belonged. He was about seven or eight, tall for his age, with hair which stuck up in tufts all over his head and an expression of perpetual curiosity.

"There's a strange woman at the door."

"Why would there be a woman at the door at this—ouch!" She broke off as he scrambled onto the bed and unwittingly put all his weight on her feet.

"Sorry." He wriggled backwards. "I don't know why, but she's there. She's standing outside the door, but she's not knocking, just watching the door."

"I think you've been dreaming."

"I'm *not* dreaming. Come and see, Grandma, please."

"Well, I suppose I might as well, since I'm awake now."

She slid out of bed, and he seized her hand and dragged her to the window, pointing to the street below. "See!"

She was silent for a long, long time.

"Grandma?"

"Teddy, go back to bed," she said. Her voice was steady, but it seemed to him weaker than usual.

"But Grandma—"

"Bed! Now."

He fled, not daring to argue with such a tone. Andromeda closed the curtains and took a long, shuddering breath. Then she dressed quickly and left the room. Before going downstairs, she checked Teddy's room. He was already asleep again, his breathing deep and even, having offloaded his problem onto another's shoulders. She closed the door softly.

"Narcissa."

"Andromeda."

The two women stood facing each other, either side of the door frame. One was tall and dark, her hair loose around her shoulders, the echoes of her disturbed dreams still glimmering in the corners of her eyes. The other was smaller, more fragile, with bones that seemed to jut too sharply. She gave the effect of hovering around the place she stood rather than filling it with a secure presence.

"Are you coming in?"

"Will you let me?"

Andromeda stood back silently to let her pass, and closed the door behind her.

"A drink?"

"No, thank you."

"I thought not. Sit down then." She led the way into the kitchen and seated herself at the wooden table. Narcissa sank rather hesitantly into the other chair.

"I thought you wouldn't let me in."

"Well I can't say I'm entirely enthusiastic about talking to you, but I didn't think you were likely to go away. Besides, you were frightening my grandson."

"Sorry."

"For that, or in general?"

"For everything. Andromeda, I—"

"No, Narcissa," she cut her off firmly. "I don't want to hear it. You and I chose different paths many years ago, and it's too late now to try and join them back up. There's a reason that this table has only two chairs, and you know what that reason is. It's not something I will ever want to hear apologies for. A single sorry, or any number of them, is far too little, far too late."

"I know."

"You don't know. That's part of the problem."

"I do know. I know what I did. I know it was wrong. Very wrong."

"Narcissa," she looked wearily at her sister, "what's the worst thing you have ever lost?"

"I—"

"No, don't. It was a rhetorical question. There's no point, Narcissa. Whatever you might say, you have lost nothing compared with the child sleeping upstairs. Nothing at all."

Narcissa looked her sister full in the face. Andromeda gazed steadily back. They sat for a long time in silence. Narcissa blinked first. Then she stood up and walked from the room. Andromeda did not move. The front door opened and closed softly. A flurry of leaves fell from the tree beside the window and shivered noiselessly to the ground. The wind whistled, singing a melancholy lament for times past. Andromeda rose and passed like a ghost through the house to Teddy's room.

All through the long hours until dawn, she watched him sleep.

"Grandma?"

"Yes, Teddy?" She turned from the frying pan to look at him.

"You know that woman who came in the night?"

"I thought you'd forgotten her. You fell asleep so quickly."

"Who was she?"

Andromeda paused. She did not want to lie to him, but nor did she want to open up the vista of questions and painful answers that the truth would unleash.

"She was just a dream, Teddy."

"But, Grandma," he said indignantly, "you saw her."

"She was my dream. From the past."

"But... / saw her."

"I didn't say she wasn't here. She just wasn't real."

"I don't get it."

"No. You wouldn't. When you're older, look back on your life. See if things don't sometimes look more like dreams than reality."

"So was she really there or not?" he asked, determined to get the conversation back onto a level that he could understand.

"Yes, she was there," conceded Andromeda.

"And what did she want?"

"I don't know. I never asked."

"Didn't you want to know?"

"Not really." She put a plate of food before him.

"But—"

"Teddy, eat your breakfast."

"But—"

"Teddy, eat your breakfast. It's going cold."

Teddy ate his breakfast. It was reassuringly real. He let the woman on the doorstep slip out of his mind and away. People who might or might not have existed in the dark probably did not exist in the light and were not worth bothering about in the end. Not in comparison with bacon and eggs, anyway. He did not quite forget her, but filed her away in his mind with other unexplained but unimportant questions. Life was too short to find out everything, and some things were beyond comprehension.

It was enough to be able to say that, to the best of his knowledge, she never came back.