

The Visitor

"It's empty," the boy said, as he bent over to touch the dirt by the tombstone.

And he was right. The reverential silence in the graveyard reminded the woman too much of emptiness, too much of cathedrals: a strange quality of light paired with vast, somehow hallowed movements of air. It reminded her of being a little girl, the first to arrive and the last to leave service on Sundays. Or waiting alone, hands clasped, for a funeral to start, on a pew that dug uncomfortably into her hipbones. The birds were quiet and the sun shone down the side of the hill that made up the cemetery, across the blocks of white stone fixed in place like so many teeth.

It felt like the world was holding its breath.

The woman had no idea what to say. Although twelve years had passed since her infant son had been taken away, the boy kneeling in front of the grave looked far older than that. Twenty at first glance perhaps, with light hair and sharp features that somehow bore marked resemblance--and not even that, she swore it must have been her memory but they looked *identical*--to those of the man in the grave before him. The man who was not his father.

She wanted to ask him what he was, but she didn't know how to phrase the question. He'd scared her, really, turning up on her doorstep unannounced in his crisp suit, and he had a cold robotic manner that seemed somehow unnatural. Inhuman, almost. Inhuman.

She thought of her late husband, the man whose features this boy was now apparently mimicking. Her husband had had a kind face, slight crinkles by the eyes, and lips that stretched easily and warmly across his teeth. She remembered the look he'd give her on the night the boy had been born, when she had shouted to him for help. It's a night she had dreamt about, over and over, as if one recurrence had led to the next, and the next, and the next. She remembers screaming and kicking and fighting and the nurses holding her down, while the men in the suits were taking her baby, sweeping the squalling bundle out of sight, out of a side door.

And as she had been struggling uselessly her husband had stood in the other doorway, looking stricken, his hands clasped together as if in prayer, as if he knew he couldn't have done anything to help. For the first time in her life, he'd seemed so small and sad and helpless. The man who was not the boy's father.

She'd never had another child before he died.

"It's strange," she finally said. "Are you-?" And then hesitated, unable to continue.

His expression remained as fixed as ever as he half-glanced over his shoulder at her. "Yes, I am a shapeshifter," he said, in response to the question that she'd let die on her tongue. "As well as many other things." As her eyes widened in

disbelief he added, "And no, I'm not human." One of his hands calmly vanished into the pocket of his suit and withdrew a glass vial with a corked top. "Or at least, my father wasn't."

"Please don't read my mind," she whispered. "It feels strange."

He shrugged. "As you wish."

Her chest was hurting, but not from the cold. "So it's true, then? If you're not human, it means--"

"That you were impregnated by someone who wasn't human?" He uncorked the vial in his hand. "Yes."

She laced her hands tightly together. "I-I really don't remember anything of it, you know. Maybe my memory was erased, I don't know, can you do that?" When he didn't answer she just continued coasting down her hopeless thought path. "When I was fifteen the doctors told me I couldn't have children. When I got pregnant it was considered a miracle. I remember what my husband was like-- he was so happy, but he was also so scared. We all were."

The boy scooped up some of the dirt from the grave and silently put it into the bottle, listening.

"They only told me that you weren't... normal when I was eight months along, nearly due. But they didn't say you were ill, they said you were *different*. And the doctor, he sounded so scared, more scared than I was. My pastor said you were the devil's child."

"But no exorcism?" he asked.

She shivered, thinking that she could feel him picking through her mind, almost. "My husband stopped him. He fought off the pastor, my family, everybody who wanted you killed and taken away. I think he understood. He believed me when I said I didn't remember anything. That I had a good feeling about the pregnancy." She looked at the boy, his neat compact form, and even though she was shaking now she remembered the absolute conviction she had had in the goodness of her then-unborn son. "I really believed in you, you know. I wasn't afraid at all."

"I see."

"My husband-- he kept asking what you looked like after the government took you away."

"So what did you tell him?" he asked.

She remembered what the boy had looked like that day, a squashed ruddy screaming blob with veins showing through the translucent skin, ten fingers and ten toes with no horns, no tail. She had managed to hold him for about half a

minute before the men in the suits had barged into the room with their dark glasses and their weapons and their brusque arms.

She took a deep breath. "I told him you were perfect."

The boy, being here, was bringing up all sorts of memories she'd thought long-buried by the motions of life in the ten years she'd lived alone, tending to the exotic hothouse plants she sold. Hour after hour spent weeding and pruning and arranging floral bouquets, pretending that she wasn't missing the husband she had lost. The son that she had had stolen.

"I think he would have liked to be your father," she said.

What she said seemed to strike a chord: the boy froze in his motions, and remained silent. Somewhere, a bird started calling plaintively.

"Did he miss me?" he finally asked.

"I..." She hesitated, her fingers hurting from pressing them together so tightly. "I don't really know. I tried not to talk about it."

He stood up, glass vial capped in his hand. "How long since he passed?"

She didn't have to count to know the answer. "Ten years this year."

"That sounds about right."

He started walking back up the hill, down the path between the gravestones that led towards the horizon. The wind seemed to follow him like an obedient dog as he passed by her without comment, gusting spring air around her ears. What else could he do, besides shapeshift and read minds? She stepped after him hesitantly. "Wait. Where are you going? Aren't you at least staying for dinner? I could make something special..."

"I didn't come here to chat," he said, without looking at her. "I was here to collect information." The words breezed past her and sent a chill into her chest.

But when he got to the crest of the hill he turned back to look at her. "You know, he could have stopped them that night if he had wanted to. He could have taken us to safety. He had that power."

There was something in that expressionless face of his that seemed to hint at life, like the shadow of fish swimming under a layer of ice. "I've always wondered, personally, what it would have been like growing up in a family."

She exhaled softly, terrified of what he was about to say next.

He looked upwards, the face that resembled his father's colder than the air around him. "It's too late, I suppose, as I'm thoroughly theirs now. His mistake."

I've always wondered why he didn't fight harder to keep me from them, but--" and here he shook the glass vial in his hand, disturbing the earth contained within-- "I guess I'll just have ask him when I find him."

And then he was gone, without another word.

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