

“Hey, look!” A young boy shouted as he pointed at someone walking down the sidewalk straight across the street. “It’s the walking freak of nature!”

On the other side of the street was a young girl with ivory skin slightly covered in dirt and very long, dark brown copper hair that reached down to the back of her knees.

She had heterochromia eyes, with her left eye azure and her right eye hazelnut brown, and was down to four feet tall.

The young girl wore rectangular dark blue and black glasses, a long-sleeved worn-out Phthalo blue hooded sweater with a light blue long-sleeved shirt underneath, and black tights with the hems slightly shredded at the ends and over her heels.

She is barefoot as she stares at the young boy with a confused expression on her face before sighing as she rolls her eyes with annoyance.

The kids in the village always addressed Stephanie with that name instead of the actual name she chose.

But the name did not bother Stephanie, who turned away from the child and continued walking, overhearing her mother say, “Don’t pay any attention to it, Michel. It’s dangerous for us to have it around us!”

Once again, it irritated Stephanie with how the woman called her, but she ignored it and continued walking, heading down to the center of the village.

In the village, people did not even notice her as they continued to sell profit-making objects, farm-raised food, and even advertised clothes and other products available.

Stephanie enjoyed walking down the street without being pointed out as a ‘freak of nature.’

Some people surrounding the fountain were fishing to catch the fish flowing in the river from over the hills, placing them in their spare coolers and using nets.

Pushing her glasses into place, Stephanie walked over to the fountain and looked at the fish swimming inside, deciding which one she would eat for the afternoon.

“Ma’am?” Stephanie flinched after hearing a man’s voice and glanced over to see it was a middle-aged man with white hair and wrinkled skin, looking like he was from Asia.

He wore a fisherman’s outfit but did not have a fishing rod or container to keep the fish fresh.

“I am so sorry to ask,” the middle-aged man politely replied as Stephanie listened to him. “But I forgot my fishing rod and my cooler. Can you please help me catch fish for my wife?”

“Don’t bother, old man,” a fisherman spoke after the middle-aged man asked. “That freak could not catch any fish for you and eat it for itself.”

Stephanie once again rolled her eyes after the fisherman sneered before nodding her head, deciding to use some tricks she had up her worn-out sleeves.

As she approached the fountain ledge with the middle-aged man behind her, Stephanie pushed her sleeves up to her elbows, exposing strange thin black lines around her wrists and elbows.

She waited for a few minutes as a small group of fish swam into her sight, and Stephanie quickly dove her hands into the river, grabbing at them with her hands.

With one swift move, Stephanie flung the fish out of the water and tossed them to the ground as they flicked around before stopping.

The middle-aged man looked surprised after Stephanie had grabbed the fish, while the fisherman looked surprised, as he could not believe that a young girl had caught more fish than he could catch!

But Stephanie said nothing and only picked up the eight fishes she had caught in both of her hands before handing them over to the middle-aged man.

“Thank you, young lady,” the middle-aged man politely thanked before asking, “Can you follow me, please? I can take them to my house to have my wife prepare them for lunch.”

Stephanie paused for a moment as she looked confused about the kindness of the middle-aged man before nodding her head.

“Hey, old man!” The fisherman exclaimed as he stood up slightly. “Don’t even think about letting it into your house! It will kill you just like it did with that woman!”

An uncomfortable expression appeared on Stephanie’s face after the fisherman mentioned before turning his attention back to his rod after it began tugging hard, dragging him out of his spot.

The middle-aged man laughed after watching the fisherman dragged out of his spot, while Stephanie smirked before following the middle-aged man to his home, which was close to the forest.

He opened the door and allowed Stephanie inside first, still carrying the fish in her hands as she stepped inside.

When Stephanie walked into the house, she was surprised at how beautiful it was as she looked around.

Because of the treatment she endured from the people around her, Stephanie was not allowed to live inside a house, but she considered it a wonderful moment.

The middle-aged man stepped around Stephanie after taking off his shoes and slipping on indoor shoes, as a middle-aged woman appeared from around the corner and spoke, speaking in Chinese while shaking her finger at him, “前美, 你又忘记了你的钓鱼装备!”

“啊, 我很抱歉, 我的爱人,” Stephanie understood Chinese as the middle-aged man’s name was Maemi, as he apologized as he bowed to his wife. “我只是想给你一个惊喜, 因为你在房子周围做了这么多, 但我反而向某人寻求帮助.”

Stephanie politely bowed in return and mentioned the fish in her hand, surprising the middle-aged woman and Maemi as she spoke in Chinese, “我不介意帮助你丈夫, 女士。他对我很客气, 求人帮忙, 所以我帮他抓了这么多鱼给你和你老公.”

The middle-aged woman glanced over at Maemi with a surprised expression on her face as she asked, “前美, 你知道她会说中文吗?”

“不, 我没有,” Maemi responded as he shook his head. “我只寻求帮助, 但由于她的慷慨, 她得到的只是恶作剧.”

“啊，一直都是这样。” His wife nodded as she sighed before saying, as she made a ‘come here’ mention with her hands, “你能把鱼带进厨房吗？我会做一些好的姜黄豆鱼菜！”

Stephanie smiled after Mamei’s wife made the ‘come here’ mention with her hands and followed her, entering the kitchen as Mamei started to rearrange the dining room.

Mamei’s wife took three of the eight fish Stephanie had caught for Mamei and began to shave their scales off with a clean knife before preparing the dish.

Stephanie entered the dining room and helped Mamei with the rest of the rearranging before sitting down on a cushion on the floor.

“So, where are your parents?” Mamei politely asked in English as his wife placed a plate of spring rolls for them to snack on.

“I... don’t have any parents.” Stephanie slowly answered in English as she pushed back her long hair. “All I remember is I grew up here... with all this hate and abuse.”

Mamei’s gaze softened after Stephanie explained to him, realizing he had asked a rough question to her.

But he wanted to learn more about her from her perspective, so he asked, “How long have you lived here?”

“Around ten years,” Stephanie sighs as she talks to Mamei. “Is there something about me you want to learn about other than my past that everyone keeps mentioning?”

“N-No, not really!” Mamei panicked, stuttering as he flinched. “I wanted to talk to you because I felt concerned for you and angry about how people treated you.”

Stephanie blinked after Mamei panicked and explained himself, asking, “You felt angry?”

“Yes,” he nodded as she sighed. “You shouldn’t be taking all their nonsense and abuse, 莉娜. You should do something about it.”

Stephanie paused a little after Mamei explained and asked, “That is what I have been thinking about, mister. *How* can I do something about this?”

Mamei paused a little after Stephanie asked and glanced away from her, trying to think of another way to help Stephanie.

Then, Mamei’s wife entered the dining room with three bowls in her hands, placing one down in front of Stephanie as the other two were in front of her and her husband.

“你们两个在说什么?” Mamei’s wife asked, starting to eat the food as Stephanie and Mamei began.

“我们在谈论她的问题， 蜂蜜,” Mamei explained to his wife as Stephanie politely ate her food. “我为她如何经历虐待和仇恨而感到难过.”

“我同意,” Mamei’s wife nodded. “我讨厌它看起来与日裔美国人的拘禁一模一样.” She pauses a little as she shudders. “太多太多关于那个可怕的噩梦的记忆.”

Mamei nodded in agreement as they ate their food, still thinking about what he could do to help the poor young woman.

“我们不能收养她， 对吧?” Mamei’s wife asked, glancing over at him after pausing.

“对,” Mamei nodded sadly. “我们都太老了， 这个地方对她的家人有太多的仇恨， 我们不能收养她.”

Mamei’s wife turned to her bowl as she chewed thoughtfully before remembering a little story from the local storyteller on the other side of the village.

“莉娜?” Mamei’s wife spoke, speaking to Stephanie as she glanced up from her bowl.

“是的?” Stephanie politely responded in Chinese.

“Do you remember the story about a young boy who lived through abuse and hate like you?” Mamei’s wife asked in English, mentioning the story she remembers.

“Yes, I do,” Stephanie nodded as she spoke in English. “It’s a wonderful and creative story.”

So Stephanie began the story as they ate their lunch together:

*Once upon a time, a boy lived in a small cottage in a mighty kingdom near a vast forest that no one ever ventured into.*

*The king ruled the kingdom and was fair and kind, but he was lonely in his castle, where his wife passed away a long time ago, dying of a broken heart.*

*But the boy lived through abuse and rejection from his parents, who hated him for being mentally disabled and abused him night and day.*

*The boy lived through this abuse for many years until he had enough after one night of abuse and decided to make a change for himself.*

*When his parents went out to drink, the young boy snuck out of the house and escaped into the woods, knowing that no one would even venture inside to look for him.*

*The legends of the forest range from people going missing for many years and returning at an old age or being eaten by wild animals.*

*So the young boy escaped into the woods to run away from the abuse he had gone through, not wanting to spend more years in the house he had never called home.*

*When he entered the forest, the boy soon came across an injured dragon from an attack by a knight, taking pity on the creature for being in pain like him.*

*The dragon panicked when the boy appeared, but he resisted the dragon's attempts to shoo him away and attended to the wound.*

*After mending the wound, the dragon soon relaxed after realizing the boy was helping it, deciding to give the human a chance.*

*The dragon even noticed how lonely and abused the boy was, so the dragon took him in as one of his own, taking him to the dense forest where dragons roam.*

*The boy was brave as he lived with the dragons, learning to defend himself and riding them into the skies.*



*As the years passed, the boy soon grew into a healthy and wild teenager, living among the dragons and protecting the forest from dangers.*

*However, word about the missing boy spread through the kingdom and reached the castle, alerting the king to the missing child.*

*The king took charge of a search party and searched throughout the kingdom for the missing child before turning to the forest after coming up with no luck.*

*As they bravely ventured into the forest, the teenager realized he was in danger and needed to escape, not wanting to spend the rest of his life being abused by his 'parents.'*

*The dragons understood the teenager and defended him against the knights, not killing them, as the teenager never wanted to harm anyone.*

*During the scuffle, the king weaved himself through the chaos and headed to where the dragons were guarding, discovering the young teenager hiding in the cave.*

*And he looked almost identical to the young boy who had disappeared a long time ago.*

*The king does not force the teenager out of the cave or become irritated by how the young teenager was defending himself but politely asks, "What are you doing hiding here instead of being with your parents? And why did you run away?"*

*"MY PARENTS?!" the teenager exclaimed angrily, surprising the king as he explained everything.*

*The teenager explained all the abuse he had gone through, all the hate and ignorance his parents treated him with throughout his life living with them.*

*“Would you pity a young boy like me who is mentally disabled to live a life of hatred or instead ignore and pretend that nothing is wrong when there is pain?” The teenager gruffly asks as he raises his spear again to defend himself.*

*The king did not respond after the teenager exclaimed but paused when he noticed the king had tears in his eyes.*

*Slowly, the king reached up to his helmet and took it off, revealing his face to the teenager, who looked surprised to see the king’s face.*

*“Young man,” the king slowly spoke as he looked up at him, revealing that he looked almost identical. “You’re my missing son.”*

*After the king finally answered his question, the teenager dropped his spear in shock, unable to believe what he was hearing or seeing before him.*

*The teenager stammered, “How are you my father? The man who abused me is my... father.”*

*He turned away from the king with a hateful expression on his face after mentioning the other father under his breath as the king spoke softly, “My son, that man used to be my helper.”*

*After the king answered about the teenager’s ‘father,’ the king understood the teenager was confused, so he began to explain everything to justify everything for him.*

*When the king was married to a beautiful and kind queen, she gave birth to the future prince of the kingdom but soon realized the prince was mentally disabled.*

*Instead of being angry about the prince's disability, the queen loved him for who he was, even enjoying his disability.*

*However, the king's helper, who wanted everything to be perfect for the king to gain some perfection, grew angry after realizing the baby's disability.*

*Behind the king and queen's backs, the king's helper took the baby away from its crib and hid the baby in his home, abusing the baby and making it look like the baby had disappeared or been captured by bandits.*

*The king spent his life searching for the missing baby as the queen fell into depression, giving her life away to death with a broken heart.*

*The teenager looked shocked after the king explained everything to him before turning his attention to the knights and dragons, who stopped fighting to listen to the conversation.*

*"Take me to the kingdom," the teenager spoke, turning to his father with anger in his eyes. "And bring the two into your castle."*

*The king nodded and ordered the knights to retreat into the castle, as the teenager told his dragon parents to stay until he returned.*

*As soon as the teenager steps inside the castle, he feels a strong sense of relief, as if he has finally found home.*

*Instead of expressing the emotion, the teenager repressed the emotion and waited for the two 'parents' to enter the castle.*

*When the two ‘parents’ approached the king, they were equally surprised to see the teenager standing next to him, asking angrily, “Why did you abuse my son throughout his years?”*

*The two ‘parents’ panicked and tried to reason why they took the king’s son away from him to keep their heads from being sliced, but their words fell on deaf ears.*

*The king ignored their pleas and ordered his men to keep them in the dungeon for the rest of their lives for kidnapping his son and abusing him.*

*When the two abusers were sent to the dungeon to spend their lives abusing the king’s son, the teenager felt a sense of relief again.*

*This time, he explained his feelings to the king, wondering why he kept feeling the emotion of finally finding a home and relief.*

*“That means you are finally at peace,” the king explains to the teenager as he listens to him. “You were torn between ignoring all the pain you’ve experienced or trying to escape to avoid experiencing it again. But you couldn’t find a way of making peace with your heart and mind because of the stress you are going through. Now that you are home and the abusers that abused you are finally behind jail bars, your mind and heart have finally found the peace you wanted.”*

*The teenager fell silent after the king explained to him and thought over what he had told him, asking the king if he would return to the forest to think it over.*

*The king accepted his offer and patiently waited as the teenager thought about what he had told him.*

*But he could not abandon the dragons who raised him in the wild after rescuing one of them from bleeding out.*

*So he decided to bring his dragon friends to the kingdom, asking if he returned to the throne, he would have his dragon friends as a part of the kingdom.*

*The king only smiled and agreed, allowing the dragons to be part of the kingdom on his son's commands.*

*Ever since, the king and his son have lived in the kingdom, finally finding peace among their demons and living a peaceful life, surrounding themselves with millions of dragons.*

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After telling the story to the two middle-aged couples, Stephanie felt happy that the teenager had finally found a place to call home.

She and the couple had already finished their lunch and were sitting, listening to Stephanie tell them the story.

Then she glanced over at the two and asked, “Why did you ask me about the story, though?”

The middle-aged couple glanced at each other after Stephanie asked as Mamei's wife answered, “Why don't you leave the village then?”

Stephanie perked after Mamei's answer as Mamei exclaimed, as he spoke in Chinese, “‘离开城市?!’ 这个年纪?! 你疯了?!”

“不，我不是，” Mamei's wife shook her head. “我受不了人们再把她当垃圾一样对待！她必须在其他任何事情发生之前离开!”

Mamei fell silent after Mamei's wife explained to him before Stephanie spoke, speaking up as she said, “我同意你的妻子, 先生。我讨厌这里的人对我的态度, 所以我想离开。我不能再呆在这里了!”

Stephanie's memories appeared in her mind, flashing back to the people sneering at her and abusing her at every corner whenever she came, pushing her to the side roughly and refusing to give her help.

Even trying to hunt her down like some animal, throwing rocks and aiming *guns* at her when she does not have any weapons and can only do one thing that she can only do: *run*.

Mamei continued to stay silent for a few more minutes before sighing as he spoke, speaking in English, “I understand. But if there is something wrong, come to us to speak about it, okay?”

After Mamei's question, Stephanie paused, feeling confused by their kindness to her.

But she is a kid, so they are in some type of ‘parent mode’ toward her.

So, Stephanie nodded her head yes as she said, “I'll leave today, and... thank you both for keeping me company.”

“It's alright,” Mamei's wife nodded as she stood up too. “Make sure you write letters to us to let us know how you are feeling, okay?”

Stephanie nodded and walked to the front door, opening the door before stopping when Mamei's wife wrapped her arms around Stephanie's middle and hugged her.

“Be safe, okay?” Mamei’s wife asked, gently holding her as Stephanie glanced over at her in confusion.

But Stephanie simply smiled softly and nodded as she gently patted her hand, “I will.”

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Stephanie walked down the empty sidewalk as everyone was still in the markets buying food and items for their homes.

But as Stephanie continued to walk down the sidewalk, a child’s voice spoke from behind, “Where are you going, freak?”

Stephanie stopped walking after hearing the child’s voice speak and did not glance over her shoulder as the three children were standing a few steps away from her.

“Are you going to mommy?” The second boy asked mockingly. “Oh, wait, you don’t have any parents!”

Stephanie was stung by the mockery from one of the kids, but Stephanie only ignored them as she continued walking, confusing the kids with her silence.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” The first kid asked as Stephanie walked ahead of them. “I said, ‘Where are you-?’”

A sudden low growl caught their attention, and they glanced over, seeing an angry dog as it growled at them, protecting her puppies as they were behind her.

Without warning, the mother dog charged toward the three kids, and they screamed and cried as they ran to their parents as fast as possible as the mother dog chased them.

Stephanie smirked slightly after watching the kids run to their parents, feeling glad about karma yet again giving them a hard time.

So Stephanie continued walking and finally reached the end of the town, looking at the vast expanse of millions and millions of trees surrounding Beckwourth.

It all looked mysterious to Stephanie, as she had never ventured out of town before.

And... it almost looked frightening to her because of how dark it was and how thick it was.

But Stephanie took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, gathering her courage and taking her first steps into the forest.

Stephanie is beginning to leave behind her abused life and start a new one as a wild child.