

They were all watching her. She staggered forward, and hundreds of pairs of grey eyes followed her movement with disturbing intensity. She took another wobbling step, opening her mouth as if to say something. Then she collapsed into the dust. There was silence.

She could only be described as foreign. In a town where everything was gray and pale, she was vibrant with colors; her shirt and shorts were patchworks of any color imaginable. She even had pink streaked through her hair. In a town where everyone was unblemished she was too imperfect. Her wrists were criss-crossed with scars and bruises mottled her chocolate skin. In a town where everything was organized she was chaotic. Her glasses were webbed with cracks and her shoes and socks didn't match. Her bag bulged in an untidy shape. In a town where everyone was the same she was too different.

So different she scared them all.

They all stared for a long time. Finally a man, camouflaged among the crowd, spoke up, "What do we do?"

Several people flinched. There was more silence before someone else suggested, "We should get rid of her."

Immediately there were agreements. But no one moved forward. No one wanted to touch the strange girl.

"We're wasting time." A voice commented mildly. After some hesitation, several forms detached themselves from the crowd and moved forward to take the strange girl. It was at that moment a young man burst forward, his voice ringing, "No!"

Everyone's eyes were suddenly trained upon him. He was young, slight of build. His black hair was cropped short in the normal style and his clothes were of regulation, but there was something that made the others leery of him. Perhaps it was his newness to their town. They drew back from him. The first speaker asked, "What should we do then?"

The young man hesitated, tried to speak, stopped to clear his throat and said, "I'll take her in. Um, it would be unfair to kill her without knowing who she is. She...didn't look like she meant harm."

A few people stirred uncomfortably at his words. But no one disagreed and after several moments the crowd began to disperse. Soon the young man was left all alone with the strange girl. He wasn't sure why he had spoken up for her. Why he had distinguished himself. The young man sighed, looking down at her face. There was something...terribly compelling about her.

Biting his lip, the young man bent down and scooped the strange girl up in his arms, wincing. He held her slightly away from him and then began to walk home. As he felt the eyes of others watching him he sighed again. What had he gotten into himself?

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Days passed. The strange girl did not awaken. The young man did his best to take care of her. Her bag sat on the floor next to her bed. Every time the young man passed it he gave it a glance, wondering what was inside.

One day his curiosity overcame him and he picked up the bag, putting it on his lap. It felt heavy. Resting his hand on the buckle that held the bag together, he hesitated. Then he squeezed the buckle and opened the bag. It was so overbalanced that a few items cascaded out before he could catch the top of the bag. He peered into it.

There were dozens of knick-knacks crammed into the bag along with what looked like the girl's essentials. A box of hair dye was peeking out from under a shirt. A carry-along chopstick and spoon set was nestled alongside a lumpy tube of toothpaste. An abused jewelry box had a corner jammed into the heel of a loaf of bread. Hidden underneath it all was a worn journal with sketches all over its cover.

Gingerly the young man eased it out and set the bag back on the floor. Maybe this would tell him who the strange girl was and why she was here. He opened to the first page. Or rather, the first legible page; some of the sheets had been torn out, some had drawings sketched over drawings so the page was all ink, and some of the sheets were even mysteriously blank. Smoothing his hand over the page he began to read.

Everyone's been so good to me, but I feel an urge to leave. It's a little sad – a little scary – leaving this place, but I'm also really excited. I can't wait to go out and see the world. I wonder where I'll go or who I'll meet. I'm sure this will be a great adventure! Just like the ones in the stories~

The young man had to stop, feeling breathless. The voice of the strange girl was so strong and distinct. Even sitting in the quiet room he could feel the utter joy leaking from the pages. Sitting back, he wondered what it was that made this girl so happy.

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The young man shut the door behind him with a sigh, rubbing his temples. Somehow, although the procedures were the same every day, his job made his head hurt. Perhaps he should go to bed. He was about to wander to his room when a flash of color caught his eye from an open doorway and he turned his gaze to the strange girl, lost in her undisturbed sleep. He was suddenly filled with an unexplainable desire to know more about her. Curiosity drove the young man to pick up the journal from her bedside table. Sitting down he flipped to a random page, too impatient to read in order.

Today I came upon first town. It was so amazing to see how different it was! It was perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. It was the first time I had seen the sea. It

was...indescribable – so powerful – the waves crashing against the stone. There was a wind blowing and it felt wonderful. I could taste the salt in the air. It was brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!

But then...it wasn't.

I went into the town, really wanting to meet the kind of people that lived in such an awe-inspiring place. Mean people, that's who, cold as the water they live by. They kicked me out after a few moments, saying they were going to kill me if I didn't leave. I was so scared.

I never expected this. Not at all. How could anyone make a judgment without knowing a person? I felt pretty lonely. And hurt. But I guess there's nothing to it but to move on. The strange thing was though, that even though I was scared of them...I think that they were scared of me too.

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Sunrise, sunset. Days, nights. Mornings, evenings. The days passed on by as the strange girl continued to sleep. The young man continued to read. Every day he returned home to sit by the girl who he felt he was beginning to know and understand. One day a few of the elders came by to check upon the young man and the strange girl.

The young man sat and waited as the elders sipped their tea. Finally, they spoke, "How is the stranger?"

"Still not awake. She responds to food and water, but not much else."

"Have you examined the contents of her pack?"

"Yes."

"Were any of the contents dangerous?"

"No, nothing."

"We we like to see."

"Of course."

As the young man rose to his feet to fetch the bag, he wondered why he had not noticed how terse and formal the elders were. Picking up the bag, the young man wrapped his fingers around the journal. But he found he could not pick it up. He did not want to pick it up. Heart pounding, he slid it into a drawer instead then returned to his small kitchen and the elders.

The elders didn't even notice the young man's nervousness – his thick swallows, watchful eyes, carefully shaped answers. They lay the objects out on the table. Some they did not

care about, others they could barely bring themselves to handle. But satisfied that nothing was harmful – yet feeling disturbed – the elders started to leave.

At the door, one of them turned and opened his mouth to speak. The young man's heart leapt into his throat. But the elder simply said, "You look a little out of regulation today."

The young man swallowed his heart, "Yes. I will fix it."

But he couldn't explain why he didn't want to.

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I'm tired. I've traveled a long way and I've seen a lot of places but I still have nowhere to stay. I don't understand why, but I guess that's life. I saw a worn out pillow today, on top of a pile of trash from who knows where. It reminded me of the pillows at home we used to smack each other with. Brightly colored with the embroidery coming out because we were so rough with each other, jumping up and down on the bed feathers flying as we shouted in all our languages. What glorious fun!

I miss my friends and all the times we had together. I wonder if they've headed out to their own journeys now. I wonder if they've had better luck than me. Maybe I'll find one of them and we will reminisce about old times and have great fun again. And then we can be happy together. But...am I happy now? Aren't I doing what I was meant to do? So why...why does it feel like this?

The young man put the journal down, the strange girl's question lingering in his ears. He could practically taste the bitter sweetness of the memory, see the brightness of her old life. The change in her tone from her earlier entries was drastic. Why did she leave? Did she have some goal? Some purpose? The young man didn't know. It was too hard to say. He knew with deep certainty that she was not dangerous. Just sad. But why had she been so shunned? He glanced at her sleeping form as if to find the answers, but there was nothing but loneliness.

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"What?"

The young man swallowed, perched nervously on the edge of his seat, "I said she's not dangerous."

"How can you be sure of this if she has not yet woken?"

"I...she kept a journal."

"A journal? Why were we not informed of this when we visited?"

The elders' frowns were deep.

“I thought you might have...taken it away.”

The frowns deepened, “That is a very selfish thought.”

“I know.”

The elders were taken aback by the young man’s tone. It was neither repenting nor arrogant, but was simply a statement. Shameless.

A silence followed.

Then with a deep sigh, one of the elders leaned forward, “If she is not dangerous, then explain yourself.”

“Me?”

“It has come to our attention that you have been out of regulation for many days since the stranger’s arrival. You are the greatest evidence of the danger this stranger bring to our town. We *suggest* you rid yourself – and us – of her before she causes any more harm.”

A chill ran down the young man’s back. He understood exactly what the elders were implying and what they would do if he would not obey. Rage burned through his veins. He stood, and with the coldest voice he could muster, he replied, “I understand.”

And he left, his every echoing step watched with unfathomable, grey eyes.

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He just couldn’t remember why he had been afraid of her before, looking at her now. She looked so tired and frail and sad. Without another look at the girl, the young man picked up the journal and flipped to the last entry.

One more time. Just...one more time. I’m exhausted. My feet hurt, my head hurts, my heart hurts. Everything hurts. Time and time again I’ve been turned away. I don’t think I can take much more of this.

Sadness is kind of a funny thing. It sneaks into the quiet hours and doesn’t go away. In comparison, happiness is so brief and vanishes too quickly. I don’t think it’s possible to prevent sadness from coming down on us. How could we? It would be too much. But I think we can keep sadness at bay. We can tell ourselves things will get better and we will be happy again. Nothing really lasts in this world anyways. I think.

I’m going to try one more time. If I’m not accepted again...I’m just going to go home. I set out to share the wonder of my home with other people and to see things that I’d never seen before. But I don’t think I can do it anymore. They just want to live their dull, grey lives.

One more time.

No one is meant to hurt like this.

That was it. There was nothing more. No drawings, so scribbles, no entries. Just stark white pages, gleaming blankly. The young man closed the journal and looked at the girl. So his town had been her last chance, and they had nearly turned her away. A surge of compassion rushed through the young man, and he reached out to brush the hair out of the girl's face.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sound was seemed to thunder through the house, sharp and cold. The young man froze then stood slowly, against his will. Step by slow step, he moved to the door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The young man twisted the doorknob and opened the door, revealing the elders standing there. Their faces were solemn as always, but the young man saw the shadows in their eyes.

"The elders have agreed that the stranger must go. We've come to take her, so please--"

The young man refused to hear any more, so he did something unspeakable. He slammed the door shut and locked it. The entire house resounded with the vibrations of defiance. The young man himself trembled with rage as adrenaline shot through his veins. How dare they come and tell him what to do? He would do what they wanted. The girl had done no harm to them, and they wanted to take her away just because she was different.

There wasn't anything wrong with being different.

Ignoring the shouts of the elders outside of the door and acting on impulse, the young man marched back into the girl's room. Rifling through her bag, he drew out a marker and popped the cap off. In thick, bold letters he wrote on his arm, "I will protect her."

The color was stark against his skin and completely out of regulation. Mouth set in a grim line, the young man readied himself to face the elders, who were pounding on the door. He took a deep breath and turned to look at the girl.

She was waking up!

The young blinked in shock for a moment then dropped to his knees by her bed. And her eyes opened. Slowly, they focused upon the young man, and the girl smiled softly. The young man couldn't help but respond. Quietly, as so not to alarm her, he said, "I'm very glad you're okay. My name is Mark. I'll be the friend you're looking for, if that's okay with you. What's your name?"

The girl seemed a little bewildered at her surroundings, although the smile still lifted the corners of her mouth. The purple on the young man's arm caught her eyes. She read the pledge and her throat closed with emotion. Someone had finally accepted her. Looking back up the young man, her eyes filling with tears, she replied, "I'm Diversity."