Hand of Tomorrow

Her hair was the white of snowstorms and withered bones.

Age lined her hands, wrinkles too deep for her dark, youthful complexion. Her grip on his shoulder was heavier than he could bear. “Digory Dolgoon,” she whispered, voice as rough as sandpaper.

 Digory’s heart jumped in his chest.

 *Thump.*

 A monitor beeped. He threw off the bedcovers and fled. Sharp light cut through the room, blinding him as he ran for the doorway, heart pounding. Sunlight replaced the harsh glare and pavement met his bare feet as he stumbled forwards. The greened brick of his first apartment froze him in his tracks. A sight he hadn’t seen in decades, but everything was the same, even the rustle of wind in the trees and the distant raucous of children playing in the street.

 “Digory Dolgoon.” Her fingertips sank back into his shoulder with an unbearable grip. He yelped and clawed at her hand, twisting to meet her eyes. Her horrible eyes, cold and clear, like breath frozen in time. The color of everything and nothing at all. Behind her the world warped, trashcans overflowing and decomposing, trees browning and rebirthing their leaves in a timelapse. Everything changing too fast, and yet it all seemed frozen. Like a stop-motion film. The only thing not moving was him. His heart pounded louder in his ears.

 *Thump. Thump.*

 He wrenched away from her grip and bolted down the street, but everywhere he went, she was already there, two steps in front of him and two steps behind. There was no escape from her inevitability. “No. *No*,this can’t be happening.” He backed up as far as the woman’s iron grip allowed. He attempted to swallow, but his throat was stuck. Frozen, like him. His heart hammered his ribs with painful reality. He was still alive. That much he knew.

 “Digory Dolgoon,” the woman repeated.

 He looked at her, wild-eyed. “This isn’t my fault. I’m not ready. I need more time.”

 The woman shook her head slowly. “Too many bargain with me, Digory. I cannot listen to every plea.”

 “No, no, you don’t understand. There is so much I still have to do! I–Please, you have to see this is a mistake!” His lips snapped shut of their own accord. His eyes widened.

 She looked on with tired eyes. “Always dragged by the arm and never walked by the hand,” she lamented. “No one ever comes peacefully anymore.” Behind her, the children playing on the street aged too fast. Birds twirled in the skies above and blinked out of sight.

 His stomach twisted and dizziness swept over him like a great wave. His heart beat faster and more furiously than ever before, panic spreading. The world swayed and Digory Dolgoon collapsed down on the pavement and buried his head in his hands. *Of all the times for this*, he mourned. *It was finally my turn. A masterpiece someday.* Success was in his grasp. Or it had been…

 Now all his hands held was his heavy head.

 “There isn’t anything I can do?” He looked up at her.

 “You deserve life more than all the others that barter and beg when I come? You have potential? Then prove it, Digory Dolgoon. Answer one simple question, and I will let you go.”

 His heart twisted and tripped an unsteady rhythm. “A question?”

 *Thump. Tha-Thump.*

 The lump in his throat tightened. He shook his head, “No. No, there has to be something else. I-I am in no state to answer anything. I won’t risk that. I can’t, I—”

 She snapped her fingers and his lips clamped shut again.

 His heart skipped a beat entirely. *Oh dear god, I wasted my chance.*

 The woman studied him with her empty eyes. “You have not yet heard my question and you panic. If you love life so dearly, Digory Dolgoon, that the thought of losing it has you crippled…why did you waste it?”

 His eyes shot up to meet hers, but no words left his tongue, and not because she had sealed his lips. His lungs and mind were empty. He shook his head and stammered, “I…I still have things to do. Good things.”

 “You deceive yourself.” She stepped back, pulling him after her by the wrist. His heart pounded harder, faster. Sweat broke out on his skin.

 He fumbled with his words. “N-Someday I was–”

 “*Someday*?” She snapped, empty eyes flaring. “You were never promised someday. It is a miserable lie otiose dreamers wrap themselves in, praying to be kept safe from me.” She shook her head and sorrow overtook her fury. “You and your sorry lot of romantics who think they are earth shakers because of their good ideas. All the good intentions in the world are worth dust beneath my feet,” she hissed, pulling him close. “You wasted your present on a forever fleeing tomorrow and all you can do is stare on in jealousy at those who learned to use their wings. No, Digory Dolgoon, you are a forgotten man wasted on ambitious dreams and shooting stars.”

 “I was just waiting on the right time! But the opportunity finally–” he began but she cut him off with a swipe of her hand.

 “Day after day, year after year, you people insist that I am not here. You refuse to acknowledge me and you cling to your illusions—this mirage!—of your *someday*. But you all end up here no matter how hard you try.” Something in her eyes aged so quickly that the deep wrinkles in her complexion no longer seemed strange. “Someday was once so beautiful a word, but your kind made it a dangerous trap. A bitter wish of those too scared of the future to free themselves from the present. Someday is never promised, Digory Dolgoon. No, not even today. Only this moment.”

 His chest tightened, pain spreading like fire under his skin, lips still sealed tight.

 *Thump. Thump.*

Blood pulsed behind his eyes.

 *Thump. Thud. Thump.*

He wasted his chance. Offering no answers to her question, just excuses. Excuses that tasted now like acid on his tongue.

 *Thud.*

He clutched a hand to the heart he felt was about to buffet itself free from his chest. The world tipped. He collapsed on his side, shuddering against the cold concrete. “I was afraid,” he answered her with the last bit of strength on his tongue. He squeezed his eyes shut and stifled a sob. “I’m sorry.”

 The woman knelt down next to him and breathed a sigh. “Never have I asked for grandeur and titles, Digory Dolgoon. Just that you can sit with me in peace.” She lifted his aging hand to her weathered brown lips and kissed the inside of his wrist, above the blue blood that pulsed stubbornly.

 A strange drowsy peace washed over him. He tried to lift his head but couldn’t seem to move. The cold press of bedsheets replaced the rough pavement. His eyes dragged up to her kind, crystal-clear gaze and whispered a final request.

 She nodded solemnly and reached out a hand and closed his eyes.

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 The grass rustled around her feet, dying and rebirthing with each brush. Time rested a withered hand upon the simple headstone. She brushed away dust already settling on the engraved words—*A Father, a Dreamer, a Good Man*—and knelt to run her fingers over the freshly tiled earth, blessing seeds that would grow diligently in their given time. She dusted off her hands and turned to face the family gathered around the young garden, dressed in black. With gentle fingertips, Time brushed away the tears staining the face of a grieving daughter, leaving a promise of comfort upon damp cheeks. “I will heal you in season,” she whispered before a soft cry turned her attention downwards. She leaned down to press a soft kiss to the forehead of the baby cradled in his weeping mother’s arms.

 The wind carried the final words of the dearly departed.

 *Mind your days wisely.*

 She slipped away, leaving the family to a moment trapped in time.