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*In Our Hands*  
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My mother says you can tell a lot about somebody by their hands. Dirt beneath fingernails means somebody's been working hard; busted knuckles means somebody's been fighting, so on and so on. That's the reason we wear gloves.

I lay in bed, listening to the hypnotizing drone of hot air wheezing through the vents of the apartment. Beneath the suffocating greenhouse of a uniform that I wear, the shallow rise and fall of my chest reminds me I'm still alive. It takes a great amount of energy to drag myself off the bed and towards my closet. I pull the door open, revealing a long slab of glass reflecting the sunlight from my window. My lip curls back as I examine myself through the two eye slits in my mask. I don't see myself, but instead the mere image of what society insists I am. In this way, I am a being disguised by a loose, opaque gray poncho covering my entire self from shoulders to ankles. I am an absence of a face, only a charcoal-colored mask. Upon seeing myself like this, I ensure no one is watching before I quickly guide my fingers to peel off the gloves. Then I work swiftly to pry off the mask and wriggle out of the poncho, until I recognize the woman in the mirror as someone different than every other person in the city. I admire the curves of my legs and hips, the deep, dark tone of my skin. I appreciate the strength of my shoulders, the bold features of my face, before my gaze falls to my throat, stained by purple bruises and marked by a jagged scar. Sometimes, I still feel the phantom hands seizing until my windpipe contracts and stars dance across my vision. I remember the fear I felt two years ago, when a figure dressed in uniform placed its paws around my neck, squeezing until certain I was dead. When one can't be identified, there is nothing to make him a hero, and of course, nothing to make him a villain. I touch my throat, the pad of my finger brushing gently against vulnerable purple skin. I pause for a moment, then pull the poncho over my body again, hiding the scars like I am told.

I collapse onto the bench in front of the plaza. Breathing requires labor as I attempt to fully inhale from behind the mask. It's a sunny day, and I'm sure the air feels wonderful from outside the uniform and mask. I suppose the break I'm taking from work is well-deserved, or at least well-needed.

While I contemplate this, I catch sight of a figure ten yards away, struggling to maintain posture as he or she limps my direction, left foot dragging behind. Sympathy erupts in my chest as I feel the bodiless hands clutching my throat again, tightening around my bruises. I know what it's like to be hurt.

I slide on the bench to create space. The figure accepts the seat and crumples onto the bench beside me, left thigh tugging for its pathetic foot to follow. As the person squirms next to me, my hand brushes against his or hers. The spark is dulled by the gloves, but I feel it nonetheless, and it's the final indication I need.

I rise and walk towards the center of the plaza, the sun beating onto my uniform. Sweat pricks my skin. I start with the hand that touched the one of the limping figure. Feeling the weight of many eyes, I peel off the glove. My slender fingers are exposed to fresh air, warm sun, and countless piercing gazes. I continue to remove the other glove. Amid the gasps and flinches, I pull my poncho over my head and take off my mask in one clean motion. The sunlight glistens off the sweat on my neck. The air feels fantastic on the skin of my limbs, stomach, and back. My face is pure, refreshed as I scrape my gaze over the citizens. I am told to feel fear or shame, but instead, this makes my being swell with pride. The bruises are visible, and there's something truly liberating in that knowledge.

The limping figure hardly hesitates. The moment ripens as he or she also removes his or her gloves, poncho, and mask, revealing hazel eyes and medium skin. Her face is kind as it looks across the plaza at me, and in silent, mutual understanding we look at each other. It's incredible seeing another human being. She proceeds to limp in my direction until she joins me

in the center of the plaza. She takes my hand in hers and lifts them both in the air. This hand of mine, raised in the air, also covered my eyes when I felt fear, touched my neck to confirm the murderous fingers were not there. The warmth from her palm transfers to mine. A new thought arises from my mother's philosophy: hands can be placed in cuffs and one's whole being is rendered useless, but hands are the same things that must free someone from chains. Hands can pull the trigger of a sniper rifle or heal the gash of an injured friend. As I keep my arm high, I wonder if the most important thing a hand can do is hold the hand of another.

The words surge from my throat effortlessly. "Uniforms do not bring peace. Pretending I am not here, am insignificant, am anything less than a beautiful individual brings nothing but violence and pain. We must embrace the glory that blooms from diversity and acknowledge the blood spilled from adversity. I look at this woman and understand I do not need to wound her to observe that she bleeds the same color red."

It is silent for a long time. Then, many yards away, a figure slowly removes his or her gloves and begins to clap, the resounding noise of two colliding hands echoing around the plaza.