

For your reference, a Zero timeline.

*June 2006* - D takes the contract on Jack's life.

*Summer 2006* - D and Jack on the run.

*Fall 2006* - The trial, Jack's testimony, Jack and D part.

*Christmas 2006* - Jack goes to Redding and finds the letter from D

*May 2007* - D and Jack are reunited

*June 2007* - D and Jack move to Columbus

*November 2007* - The epilogue of Zero takes place

*March 7, 2008, a Friday afternoon* – "Time After Time"

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*A "Zero at the Bone" short story*

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*March 9, 2008 -- Sunday morning*

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Sunday morning. That mythical morning of Jack's imaginings involving lazy sunlit hours in bed with coffee and bagels, reading the Sunday paper. Slow, languid kisses amidst the warm and rumpled sheets, no need to rise, no obligations.

The number of times he and D had actually managed such a fantasy Sunday was zero point zero zero.

They didn't speak beyond what was necessary as they made breakfast in the kitchen. D made the coffee, Jack made some toast and eggs, scrambled for him, over easy for D. It wasn't even 8:00. Jack wore only his robe, but D was fully dressed. His bag was packed and waiting by the door. After breakfast he'd be leaving the house again, after about thirty-six hours home, and wouldn't return for at least three weeks. Jack was trying and failing not to feel resentful. He'd made it through the last three weeks of separation by thinking of the two weeks they were supposed to have had together now.

He'd taken time off work next week so they could go away. He'd imagined dinners they'd make, movies they'd see, walks they'd take, conversations they'd share, and sex they'd have. Now he had to find a way to get through this next separation without knowing how long he'd have after that.

He knew that D didn't like it any more than he did, but some part of him wondered. Wouldn't he find a way around it if he really didn't want it this way? Couldn't he do something else?

Jack knew that the time would come when he wouldn't be able to tolerate this lifestyle. He was trying to be supportive. D needed to do what he was doing. He understood that. But that would only take him so far. He didn't know how long it would be before his frustration with what it was doing to their relationship tipped the scales against his understanding of D's needs.

They ate in silence. It wasn't angry silence, or tense silence. It was just resigned silence. Nothing could be said that wouldn't be depressing.

Jack got up and started to clear their dishes. D reached out as he walked by and stopped him, then drew him close, his hands going to the tie on Jack's robe. He slowly pulled it loose and spread the robe, exposing Jack's nakedness, sliding his hands around Jack's waist and resting his head against his chest. Jack put down the plates and pulled D to his feet. They tilted into a gentle kiss, D's arms around Jack underneath his robe. Jack felt the heat rise in his chest, his blood pushing to the surface, his body's response to D familiar and reassuring. But they couldn't go any further than that, not if D wanted to make it out of the house before noon.

Jack followed him to the front door. He turned at the last minute, his eyes full of sadness and reluctance. *Jesus, how can I doubt that he doesn't want to leave me? Look at him.* Jack stepped forward and they embraced tightly. He felt D turn his face into his neck, breathing deeply, scenting him.

Then, out the door. Jack's arms cold and empty. The bed upstairs too large again.

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Sadness, irritation and resentment quickly gave way to boredom. Jack cleaned the kitchen, changed the sheets on the bed, did the laundry, and finally ended up reorganizing all the back issues of "Entertainment Weekly" languishing unread on the coffee table.

*Jesus. Get out of the house. Go for a run or something.*

Good advice. Jack put on his running clothes, strapped his iPod to his bicep and headed out. He ran around Schiller park three times, then back up City Park Drive to

Livingston, then turned around and headed back to the house. When he reached it he didn't feel like stopping, so he ran past and went around the park again.

By the time he finally stopped, his thigh muscles were singing opera and sweat was dripping down his face.

*Great. Now what?*

He showered, standing under the spray until the water started to cool.

*He'll probably call tonight.*

Jack toweled off, shaking his head. Was this what he'd been reduced to? Waiting by the phone like a teenaged girl for his man to call? Wondering if the next call he got would be from Myerson, informing him that D had been killed?

*I can't think about that.*

At times he couldn't help it. D's job was dangerous. The idea of losing him was so terrifying it made Jack want to throw up, then curl in a corner where nobody could see him.

He dressed in jeans and a sweater and grabbed his keys. It was dark by now. He'd go see a movie. That would take his mind off things.

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It was almost eleven o'clock by the time Jack got out of the theater. He'd come down to the Drexel, an art-house theater chain with old-fashioned marquees and bow-tied ushers. It was in one of the best neighborhoods in town, but only a few blocks west was some of the worst, so it wasn't a smart idea to walk too far alone at night.

He'd parked in a lot a few blocks away, so he buttoned up his coat and set off. Within a few minutes he was chilled to the bone. It hadn't seemed this far when he'd walked to the theater earlier.

He passed a gas station, darkened and closed up for the night. A scuffle from the darkness made him stop. A voice cried out; more scuffling.

*What the fuck?*

The voice resolved into a woman's cry. "Hey, stop!"

Jack fingered his cell phone.

The woman cried out again.

*Call the cops.*

*What would he do?*

*You're not him.*

Jack grit his teeth and ran towards the scuffle. He rounded the corner and saw a fight going on behind the gas station, dimly backlit by a streetlamp. The woman who'd cried out was being restrained while another man, maybe her boyfriend, was beat up by three men. "Hey!" Jack yelled.

The fighting men looked around. "What the fuck you lookin at, asshole?" one of them shouted, his voice rough.

"Let him up," Jack said, nodding towards the man on the ground. "What's going on here?"

The ringleader stalked a few steps toward him. "Oh, you want some too? Huh?"

Jack felt something stirring in his belly. Yeah. Yeah, he wanted some, too. "Let her go," he said to the man restraining the woman. She was staring at him with wide, frightened eyes.

The ringleader advanced on Jack, trying to intimidate him with size and swagger and attitude. To him, Jack probably looked like a regular suburban white guy, the kind who *would* be intimidated by a street thug. *Most suburban white guys haven't faced down armed assassins, though.* "Who you tryin ta be, man? Some kinda hero?" the thug snarled.

Jack shrugged. "Why not?"

The thug didn't say anything else, he just threw himself at Jack in a clumsy, lumbering lunge. His fist sailed through the air. Jack sidestepped it, grabbed the guy's arm, pivoted and jammed his elbow into his midsection, then flipped him over his hip. The guy crashed to the pavement and lay still.

He looked up. The others, victims and attackers alike, were staring at him with open mouths, as if a monkey at the zoo had started reciting Shakespeare. "Shit," one of the other thugs said.

Jack's blood was up. *Is this how it feels for you every day? Is this what you didn't want for me?* "Come on!" he said, beckoning to the others. "Come on!"

The other two looked at each other. "Fuck this," one of them said. They dropped the man they'd been beating and ran.

Red and blue lights swept over the parking lot and Jack heard running footsteps. The fleeing attackers were stopped on the other side of the gas station. A policeman came running up to him. "Hey, what's..."

Jack turned and walked a few feet away. He heard the woman's shrill voice telling the officer what had happened, she and her boyfriend were mugged, this man came along, blah blah blah. Jack let the noise fade into the background. He stood at the edge of the parking lot, listening to his heart pound.

The cop came up to him after a few minutes. "Can I see some ID?"

Jack handed over his wallet. The policeman took down his name and address and handed it back. "What the hell were you doing?"

He shrugged. "I heard the struggle. I heard her yell. Came back to see what was going on."

"So you just waded right in?"

Jack shrugged again.

"Well, pardon me for saying so, Mr. Francisco, but that was really, really stupid."

*Yeah. I know.* "Just trying to do the right thing."

"The right thing is to call us."

"I can handle myself."

The cop glanced down at the ringleader, still out cold on the ground. "Yeah, I can see that. Look, I don't know what kind of a death wish you have. You watch too many Chuck Norris movies or what? You got lucky this time. They didn't pull knives or guns on you. Probably didn't think they had to. What the hell were you thinking?"

*I really don't know.* "You're right, officer. I'm sorry. Look...did I commit a crime here?"

"No. You defended yourself with appropriate force. But you shouldn't have gotten involved. You got a wife at home? Kids?"

Jack met the man's eyes. "Husband."

The cop didn't seem fazed. "Uh-huh. And what would he say if he knew you were jumping into street fights?"

*He wouldn't say anything, because his head would have exploded.* "Yeah, I get what you're saying."

"Good. Swear you won't do it again, huh?"

Jack nodded. "I promise, officer."

The cop didn't look convinced. "All right, then." Jack started to go. "Oh, hey."

He looked back. "What?"

"Um..." The cop glanced over to where paramedics were loading the ringleader onto a gurney. "That was, uh...nicely done," he said, *sotto voce*.

Jack said nothing, just turned and continued on to his car.

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Back at home, Jack sat in his darkened bedroom in the reading chair, thinking.

*What were you thinking? Why'd you do it?*

*I just wanted to see what it felt like.*

*What it felt like to get stabbed or shot or pummeled to a pulp?*

*I wanted to see if I could do it for real. Not in the dojo. Not in a sparring session. For real.*

*Goddamn, if he knew he would blow a fuse.*

Jack's head came up.

*Jesus. Is that why?*

The phone rang. Jack jumped about a foot, then snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Damn, that was quick. You weren't sittin there waitin by the damn phone, were ya?"

Jack relaxed back into the chair. "Where are you?"

"Fuckin Heathrow. Hate Heathrow. We got four hours ta wait for our plane ta Berlin. You in bed?"

“Nah, not yet. I was kind of hoping you’d call.”

“What’d you do today?”

Jack fiddled with the tassles on the throw rug sitting on the arm of the chair. “Nothing exciting.”

“Aw, that’s just what I wanna hear. Nothin excitin. I got too much fuckin excitement.”

“Did laundry, changed the sheets. Cleaned the kitchen.” He hesitated. “Saw a movie.”

“What movie?”

“The Counterfeiters.”

“Was it good?”

“Yeah, it was really good.”

He heard D sigh. “I’m sorry ya hadta go alone, doc.”

“Me, too.” *I beat up a guy tonight, D. I did it. What do you think of that? I might do it again. You never know. I might fly off the handle and become a vigilante. Call it a family business. What would you say if I just blurted it out like that?*

“I jus...I know you were disappointed I hadta leave again so soon.”

“No. Don’t do that, D. Don’t make it all about my feelings, like you always do. You have emotions, too.”

“Mine are too fuckin mixed up ta be a much use.”

“It gets really old being the healthy one, you know. But yeah, I was disappointed.”

“I was too.”

“I know.”

“I’m jus fuckin sayin.”

“I know, all right?”

“Shit,” D muttered. “Don’t know why I even bothered callin.”

“Why did you, then?”

“Cause that’s what ya do, ain’t it? Gone away on a trip and stuck on layover? Call home ta let the wife n kids know yer all right?”

“I am *not* your WIFE!” Jack yelled into the phone.

“I know! Goddamn, it’s jus an expression!”

“You know how I feel about that, D. It isn’t just an expression.”

“I’m sorry, all right? Jesus, cain’t even make a fuckin joke...”

“Do I make jokes about *your* insecurities?”

“Jus about the ones you think ain’t important.”

*I’m not even going to touch that one.* “This sucks, D. Why are we at each other’s throats all of a sudden?”

“Cause we’re pissed off that we barely had two days. I’m ready ta bite somebody’s head off.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah.”

He heard D breathing. “I remembered why I bothered callin.”

He smiled. “Why’s that?”

“Wanted ta tell you I love you.”

Jack’s smile widened, “So you’re saying...you just called to say ‘I love you?’”

He heard D’s low chuckles. “Yeah. I jus called ta say how much I care.”

Jack burst out laughing. “Oh, praise the Lord! He made a pop-culture reference! I was starting to give up on him!”

“You know what else?”

“What?”

“I mean it from the bottom a my heart.” Jack lost it. He rolled to the side, braying hysterically, holding the phone away from his mouth so he didn’t deafen D. “Jack? Jack!” He pulled himself together, gasping for breath. “Jack, Frank’s lookin at me funny. I gotta go.”

“Okay...sorry...just...man, oh man...”

“Get a hold a yerself. Weren’t that fuckin funny.”

“It is when it’s you saying it.”

“If you say so. Look, I’ll be callin in a coupla days. You...take care, now. Watch yerself.” D always said this when he was away. It brought Jack out of his laughing fit quickly, because if there was one thing he had failed to do tonight, it was to watch himself.

“D, wait a second.”

“Huh?”

“I love you, too.”

He heard D sigh. It sounded sad. “G’night, baby.” The line went dead.

Jack hung up the phone and sat quietly for a moment, letting his mind settle. He got out of the reading chair and climbed into bed, but sleep seemed a distant hope.