

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

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# **TIME AFTER TIME**

*A "Zero at the Bone" short story*

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*March, 2008*

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D always felt smaller at Jack's hospital. He didn't go there often, but whenever he did, he felt profoundly out of his element. He'd barely been sick a day in his life, he'd been away when his daughter was born, and most of his injuries had taken place on the job and had to be treated in the field with whatever he had to hand, so hospitals weren't places he was too familiar with, or keen to become so.

This was Jack's world, a world he couldn't share with him. A world of white-coated men and women who were much smarter than he was and could rattle off hundred-dollar words that blew by him like speeding semis on a highway. But it pleased Jack to pretend that D could ever fit in here among the Lexus-driving surgeons and the kind-faced nurses and the tiny patients bearing their terrible conditions with more courage than D could fathom, so he made himself tolerate it.

He wouldn't be here at all if he could have gotten Jack on the phone, but it had gone to voicemail all morning. He must have had surgery this morning.

D was halfway down the hall to Jack's office when he was hailed.

"D? Wait up a second!" He turned and saw with no surprise Portia jogging towards him, her red braids bouncing on her shoulders, dressed in scrubs and electric blue Dansko clogs. She grinned as she caught up to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Came home early, wanted ta come surprise Jack. You seen him?"

"Oh, he'll be thrilled! He was in surgery all morning, he ought to be back soon."

"Thought I'd take him ta lunch or somethin."

"More like have him for lunch," she said, winking. D felt the blood slam into his face at Portia's typical frankness. "He might be able to take the afternoon off, I don't think he has another procedure scheduled."

D nodded. "That'd be good." What he had to tell Jack wasn't suitable for lunchtime conversation.

Portia was watching his face. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Why'd ya ask?"

"Oh, no reason." She smiled again. "Jack's been so looking forward to having you home again. Been a long trip this time, huh?"

"Three weeks, yeah. And it ain't exactly my favorite thing neither, Portia."

D saw all the things Portia would probably have liked to say to him flicker behind her eyes, but then they slid past him. "Well, here he is now," she said.

He turned and felt that becoming-familiar swelling in his chest at the sight of Jack coming down the hallway, dressed in his own scrubs, his nose buried in a chart. Jack looked up and saw D standing there, and his whole face lit up in a way that made D wonder for the millionth time how he could ever leave town again. Jack walked faster, grinning, not slowing down as he drew near but instead throwing both arms around D in a tight bear-hug that D couldn't help but return. "You're home early," Jack said against his cheek.

"Yep," D said, pulling back. "Can I steal ya for lunch?"

"Hell, it's Friday and I'm done for the day. You can steal me for the weekend."

"Hmm. That is a steal," D said, smirking.

“You want to come for lunch, Portia?” Jack said, looking past D. D turned and shot Portia a look that Jack couldn’t see.

She didn’t miss a beat. “Thanks, but I can’t. I’ve got three pre-op consults this afternoon. Two compound fractures, one broken kneecap and a partridge in a pear tree.”

Jack nodded. “Okay. Let me just grab my stuff and we can go.” He touched D’s arm once again and walked back to his office door.

“Thanks,” D said, keeping his voice low.

“You don’t need any hangers-on.”

“You really got them consults today?”

Portia smiled. “All I have this afternoon is paperwork, D. You guys have a good time.” She winked at him again and went off down the hall.

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Jack followed D to his car. “Where’d you park?” D asked.

“Screw it, you can bring me back later. Let’s just go.” They got in D’s car.

“Yer awful impatient.”

Jack smiled, not his public-consumption friendly-doctor smile but his private, D’s-eyes-only sexy slanty smile. He reached over and slid his hand over D’s knee. “Want to find out?”

“Damn,” D said, half under his breath, the heat of Jack’s hand traveling up his leg. “Where you wanna get lunch?”

“Nowhere. Let’s go home.”

“Aw, Jack, I’m starvin.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t going to get anything to eat,” Jack said, his eyes twinkling.

D looked at him, his hunger quickly receding into irrelevance. Jack could always get his blood up, no question. He backed out of his parking spot and roared out of the lot, turning onto Livingston Avenue. Thank god it was less than a mile to their house. It felt like a lot longer, though, with Jack’s hand creeping up his thigh.

He careened into their driveway and they both tumbled out, Jack fumbling for his house keys, D crowding up behind him as he got the door open, both of them half-falling through the doorway, grabbing at each other before Jack could even get the door shut. Jack dropped his briefcase and coat, his tongue already in D's mouth before he'd freed his arms to yank him close so D couldn't even get out of his own coat. "Shit, doc," D gasped. "You been eatin yer Wheaties fer sure," he managed between bruising kisses.

Jack grinned again, the crinkle-lines at the corners of his eyes bunching up. "No shit," he said, then suddenly he bent and grabbed D around the thighs, and D let out an undignified squawk as he felt his feet leaving the floor.

"Jesus, Jack!" he exclaimed, stunned to find himself slung over Jack's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "What the fuck...put me down!"

"Make me," Jack said, proceeding across the living room.

"When'd you get so fuckin strong?" D stammered, the blood rushing to his inverted head as he stared at Jack's ass flexing as he climbed the stairs. It wasn't that surprising. D was an inch taller but Jack outweighed him by a good twenty pounds, most of it muscle that seemed to love piling itself onto Jack's body in the same way it resisted building up onto D's lanky skeleton.

"What do you think I do when you're gone for weeks on end?"

"Beat off."

Jack snorted. "Besides that."

"If I hadta guess I'd say work out."

"Damn straight." He snorted again. "Pardon the pun." Suddenly D was flying through the air, whipping back over Jack's shoulder. He landed on his back in the middle of their bed, Jack looming over him looking smug as hell. "Ask me how long I've wanted to do that."

"What, carry me off and have yer way with me like some kinda caveman?"

"Exactly." He bent and kissed him hard and all too briefly. "You stay still, now." He yanked D's coat out from under him, then opened his shirt buttons and got that off him, too. He bent and pulled off D's shoes, socks and finally pants, leaving him naked on the bed. D just lay there and let him, being a good boy and surprising himself with how much it was exciting him to just let Jack take total control of him. It wasn't the first time, but it was definitely the most insistent.

Jack straightened up and started taking off his own clothes, slowly enough to be torturous, keeping his eyes locked on D's the whole time, watching as D's breathing

sped and his chest flushed with arousal as Jack revealed himself to him piece by piece. D never tired of Jack's body, of losing himself to it, of feeling it wrapped around him. He could just hold it for hours, feeling the pulse of Jack's blood, hearing the rush of the life coursing through him, his warmth and his scent and the silky sweetness of his skin against D's. Watching Jack unwrap himself like a long-anticipated present was better than all the Christmases he'd never celebrated.

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D woke up alone in bed, but he could hear Jack's footsteps on the stairs. He rubbed his eyes and sat up as Jack came back in carrying a couple of sandwiches on a plate and two beers. "Still hungry?" he said, coming back to the bed.

"Bout ready ta eat this...what the hell ya call it?"

"Duvet."

"Fuckin blanket, Jack."

"Well, don't eat it, it was expensive. Here, it's roast beef."

D took the sandwich and devoured it, his stomach remembering it was supposed to be hungry. Jack just reclined against the pillows and watched him. "That was some hot sex we just had," he said.

"Mmm," D mumbled, his mouth full of roast beef. "Did okay fer a warm-up."

Jack's eyebrows shot up. "Just a warm-up? You got plans, cowboy?"

"Wouldn't you like ta know." He polished off the sandwich in three more bites and took a swig of beer to wash it down.

"You didn't mind?"

D looked at him. "Mind what?"

"You know. The way I just kind of...manhandled you."

D blushed. "Seem like I minded?"

"A person can not mind during the act but mind a whole lot later."

"Huh," D said, lying back and putting his plate aside. "Guess...times I jus want that."

"Want what?"

He shrugged. How could he articulate this to Jack when he could barely do it in his own head? “Fer you ta jus...ya know. Take me.”

“Really?”

“Jack, I got a lot on me, all the fuckin time. Responsible fer people’s lives and shit, wonderin when I’m next gonna get shot at, or any a my team, wondering who’s gonna be the next...” He stopped short of saying her name, but he could see by Jack’s face that he knew what D had been about to say. “Anyway. Times I jus wanna be helpless. Jus let you do whatever you want and gimme what for like I ain’t got no say. That make any sense?”

Jack nodded. “It makes perfect sense. I’m just surprised you’d admit it.”

“Well, if I cain’t tell the man fuckin me, who’m I gonna tell? Portia?”

He laughed. “She’d be thrilled to hear every detail.”

“I bet.” D reached out and twined his fingers through Jack’s. “But...thing is, darlin...I got somethin ta tell you that you ain’t gonna like.”

He saw Jack stiffen a little, bracing himself. “What?”

“I ain’t back early. Not really. Just back fer tomorrow. I gotta leave again Sunday mornin.”

Jack just stared at him, then sagged, his eyes full of miserable resignation. “For how long?”

D sighed. “Three fuckin weeks.”

“Three weeks! Anson, you’ve just been gone for three! They can’t make you do that!”

“I got to, Jack. It’s real important. Me n Frank gotta go overseas. I shouldn’t even be takin these couple days, but I told Myerson if I’m gonna be gone again fer so long I gotta see my man fer jus a bit.”

“So I ought to be grateful I get just this time with you?”

“I don’t like it anymore’n you do.”

Jack held his gaze for a moment, then disentangled his hand and turned away, getting up off the bed and pulling on his sweatpants. He stood for a moment, hands on hips, his back turned. D could almost see him getting himself under control. “If you have to, I guess you have to,” he said.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too." Jack finally faced him again. "Well, I was going to suggest we go up to Gallery Hop tomorrow, but if I've only got you until Sunday morning then we're not leaving the house."

"What's at Gallery Hop?"

"Guy I know has a show opening at the Mahan Gallery."

D's eyes narrowed, that familiar sense of cold dread stealing up his spine. *Nobody's gonna take him from me. Not ever.* "What guy?"

Jack shrugged. "Guy I met at the dojo. Does these mixed-media collages with glass and..." He broke off, seeing D's face, and then shook his head, hard. "And oh yeah, I'm sleeping with him. Is that what you're waiting to hear?"

"I ain't said that."

"You were thinking it, and don't you dare deny it."

"I don't wanna fight, Jack."

"Then you shouldn't have been looking at me like I was describing my next boyfriend. There's you and then after you there's death, got it?"

"I wish ta hell you wouldn't put it like that."

"I wish to hell there was another way to put it that'd get through to you."

"You got needs, Jack, and I'm gone so fuckin much..."

Jack whirled around from hanging up their discarded clothes from earlier. "Really? Seriously? Your job keeps you away for weeks on end so therefore I get punished?"

"Who's punishin you?"

"D, it's a punishment when I can't even mention a male acquaintance or colleague without you looking like you're imagining me sleeping with him. You have needs too, and us being apart affects you just like it does me, but do you see *me* acting like you're going to start sleeping with Frank?"

D made a face. "Shit, Jack. You know I wouldn't do nothin like that."

"Neither would I, but you sure seem to think I might!"

“Ain’t you I don’t trust, Jack, it’s the rest a the guys in the world!”

“Not every man I meet wants to fuck me, you know!” They were both shouting now.

“How d’you know that? How can anybody not want ta fuck you, Jack?”

“I’m not *that* irresistible, for Christ’s sake!”

“I’ll be the judge a that!” D roared.

Jack just stared at him, then burst into mad, near-screaming laughter. “So, let me get this straight,” he said, giggling. “We’re fighting because I’m just too damn hot, according to you?”

D tried to fight it, but the smile was stronger. He crossed his arms and attempted to look serious. “That’s right. Can ya work on that, please?”

“Sure. I’ll just stop brushing my teeth.”

“Maybe you could get an unsightly wart.”

Jack came over and slid his arms around D’s waist. “I can’t get too ugly. I need to keep you interested.”

D lifted a hand and brushed a lock of Jack’s hair back off his forehead. “I’d love ya even if ya had a third eye, Jack.”

Jack visibly melted. “How do you do that? Always say the right thing?”

“C’mon, Jack. I hardly ever say the right thing. But when I do, makes up fer all the dumbass things I say.” He pulled Jack into his arms, tucking his face down into his neck. “I’m sorry. I jus...I cain’t lose you. Cain’t help but worry bout somebody tryin ta take you away.”

Jack pulled back and rubbed his nose against D’s. “Nobody could take me away unless I wanted to go, and I don’t.”

D kissed him, slow and thorough the way Jack liked. “Even if I am a jealous, ornery bastard?”

“I never said you were a bastard.”

D grinned. “Oh, you gonna pay fer that,” he said, grabbing Jack around the middle and tossing him to the bed.

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“Sunday morning? Really?” Jack murmured. They were lying languid among the twisted sheets, twined tightly together in the aftermath of slower, less caveman sex.

D pulled him closer. “Fraid so.”

“What’s this in Europe that’s taking you away?”

He considered whether he should tell Jack the truth, but only for a moment. Jack was the only one who always got the truth. “You remember JJ?”

“Who?”

“One a the assassins got hired ta take you out in Baltimore.”

“Oh yeah. The older lady, the poisoner.”

“That’s the one.”

“What about her?”

D sighed. “She’s dead. Somebody got ta her. And she ain’t the first. She’s the third from my former profession ta turn up dead in the last month. Lookin like somebody’s pickin em off.”

Jack’s head came up. “Are you in danger?” he said, an edge coming to his voice.

“No more’n usual. Best thing for it is fer me ta find who’s doin it and shut em down.”

Jack was watching his face carefully. “How did JJ die?”

“Double tap to the back of the head.”

He relaxed minutely. “So, not like...”

D shook his head. “No. Not like Jennifer Nang.”

“I almost hoped it was the same killer, so you could catch him finally.”

“Jack...can we not, please?”

“You need to be shut of that case. *We* need to be shut of that case.”

“I ain’t gonna be till I catch him.”

Jack seemed on the verge of further comment, then he just lowered his head to D's chest again. "I just want to lie here with you until you have to leave." He stroked one hand up and down D's flank. "I love you so much," he whispered.

D kissed the top of Jack's head. "Right back ta you, baby."