

Progression Zero

ORDINARY WORLD

A slight, young man in a hooded sweater slipped into the foyer of an aging apartment building, behind one of its residents. No one took note of him under the fluorescent light, as he stalked up the stairs with purpose toward his destination. He counted his heartbeats to keep track of time.

Two minutes. The urgency pushed him forward.

He came to the apartment door he sought and ran his hand in front of it, feeling for the locks. Teasing the bolt from the lock's strike plate with a gesture and a thought, he heard the metal slide away. The knob turned with ease and he stepped inside.

The room appeared far smaller than he expected, no bigger than a walk-in closet with minimal furniture. Dresses hung from an open coat closet to his left, slacks and shirts lay crumpled across the floor, and a stack of books fell in on itself. A black-striped cat slept curled on a pile of dirty laundry in the corner. The cat wouldn't be disturbed by his presence.

Seventy seconds.

Heavy expectations to perform well weighed on him, like a stranger on his back. He recalled his instructions and the humorless voice who gave them. *Place this under the chair. Avoid all contact. You must be away before eight hours and two minutes after midday.*

He moved to the sole chair in the room and found a spot in which to wedge the milky quartz from his sweater pocket. *Hope she doesn't notice this,* he thought, as he fingered the slight lump it left beneath the cushion.

Fifteen seconds.

An unexpected surge of energy coalesced in the room as he bolted for the door. As an afterthought, he coaxed the latch to slide back into place, without affecting the tumblers. From the other side of the door he heard a distinct thump, as though someone rolled out of bed and onto the floor.

His heartbeat tolled its alarm.

Time's up.

From the foot of the stairs below, he heard the voices of two women growing louder, and sensed one of his own kind. He cursed silently, pulled up his hood, and ran down the stairs, throwing himself against the wall to avoid making contact with the women. The wet tile of the foyer made his exit that much easier as he propelled himself toward the street and into the rain. Within moments, he was out of their sight, moving back toward an awaiting vehicle. As he sped away from the area, he wondered why the task was necessary at all. *Why one of our own?*

* * *

EILA

The car's breaks squealed on impact against my leg. I tumbled, broken from knee to ankle, a pain surging white. Nearby, Jasmine screamed, "Eila!"

Before I could let out more than a gasp, a man's hands pulled at me, tugged, dragging me back off of the leaching cold of the asphalt. I wanted to cry out, to collapse in the arms holding me, but narrow fingers swept across my leg, as if brushing dirt.

I dared look down. No sight of bone breaking skin as expected, only a fast-welling blotch of purple and red where blood pooled beneath flesh. I glanced up and a pair of blue eyes stared at me beneath a stray lock of hair, the color of oats. The stranger's nose seemed too long and beakish, a bird's nose.

The car's engine roared and I caught a glimpse of the driver between the swish-swish of wiper blades. He possessed the same face as the man holding me, down to the full flush lips beneath the beak.

The driver regarded me with a mix of shock and scorn, and stomped on the gas, cutting through the evening traffic, headless of the danger. The first twin's arms remained wrapped around me. A breath caught in his throat, as though he meant to say something. A voice called behind us.

A woman with coiffed black hair soaking in the downpour sneered at me and hooked her elbow at the man. He offered a slight bow and straightened, returning to his companion and her proffered arm. The tall man's companion muttered under her breath as he stole a final glance back before the door closed.

I stood dazed staring back at him. I forgot to thank him.

Jasmine's rose brown face revealed concern. She gathered me up and helped me home. We held fast to one another, clutching tight to a meager saffron umbrella. Both of us laughed in giddy shock to have survived the evening's drama. My socks squished inside my shoes with each step, leg muscles aching from the impact of the car, as we walked beneath flickering orange streetlights and past ambient store windows.

Outside my building, the heavy pulse of a stereo blasted through the walls and window and out onto the street. The moment we came into the foyer, Jasmine shook out her umbrella, set it aside, and bent to check my leg. She lifted the hem of my skirt. "Shh! That's going to be a nasty bruise in the morning. That car came out of nowhere."

"I'll be fine. I've got something for it upstairs. Thanks for dinner, and the walk home," I said.

"You're lucky it wasn't worse," Jasmine said.

"I'm lucky you were there to give me a hand home."

Jasmine gave me a tight hug, as though still shaken from witnessing the hit and run. Her dark brown hair, tied up into twin puffs, brushed against my cheeks, and I breathed in the scent of Jasmine's jasmine oil, wishing for a little more time with her.

A young man in a gray, hooded sweatshirt rushed passed us, breaking up our embrace. He crashed into the wall in a dramatic display, as though fearing to touch either one of us. Leaping, a gazelle in the hall, he skittered across wet tiles out the door without a word.

We watched the interruption before Jasmine turned. "Will you still be up for the study group tomorrow night?"

"Yes," I said, an emphatic smile plastered on my face, despite the pain. "I could use some help phrasing things so Mary doesn't get on my case again. You've seen the comments she left on my recent assignments."

"Yet she preaches objectivity," Jasmine said, dazzling me with round cheeks and a broad smile.

"How can you objectively theorize and test human behavior?"

"Or culture?"

"Or 'define the sacred?'" I repeated Kathy's words from our class earlier, and laughed.

Jasmine's mouth turned determined as she took my hand. "What about Thanksgiving?"

I shook my head. "Can't. My sister swears she'll be coming for the holidays, and whether she does or not, I should be with Marshall. He's so little, he won't understand if she doesn't make it, and she won't understand *him* if she does."

"Is your nephew so strange?"

"No, my sister is ... too often absent."

Jasmine gave my cheek a kiss and checked her phone for the time. "Oh Jeez! If I don't run, I'm going to miss my bus."

"Thanks for dinner, and helping me home. It was nice to get a chance to talk outside of class."

"I liked it, too. See you tomorrow?"

"Bright and early. Oh, and be careful out there, it's slippery."

As the foyer door closed behind Jasmine, and the sight of her receded from view, I grinned in defiance of my leg's protest. Jasmine had made the university's pace bearable, only weeks away from finals. I wanted to drown in the pools of her eyes, to sink flesh-to-flesh into her soft body and broad arms.

I shook myself, remembering the paper on Treaty Law waiting to be written, and groaned. Normally, I'd be ready to write about injustice, but I was tired, tired, tired, and ready for the quarter to be done.

Counting my blessings, I climbed the stairs, one arduous step at a time, stopping in the hall to pound on my neighbor's wall, which pulsed with repetitive bass. "I've gotta study, Ronny. Can you keep it down?" He pounded the wall back in irritation, but turned down the volume until the music was an ignorable buzz.

I unlocked my room's door and dropped my bag and coat under the small sink, added as an afterthought when the building had been remodeled. On the adjoining counter, I set my electric kettle to high and pulled off my soaked shoes and socks, trying to warm my toes in rabbit slippers I'd long since outgrown.

Bryony stretched and removed herself from the pile of discarded clothes, rubbing against my legs, and begging for a scratch and dinner. After tending to the cat's complaints, and rubbing bruise cream into my leg, I sat at my desk with a mug of tea. It filled the room with an enlivening, green scent, inspiring thoughts of sunlight through spring leaves.

I turned on my radio and set to the task of completing my essay, only to become distracted by email. Bryony jumped up, scattering papers as she tried to gain access to a warm lap.

"Watch it!" I said, but she found her spot and purred, earning her a scratch behind the ears.

The more I tried to concentrate on the screen, the less the words made sense. Everything grew dim; a weariness hung over me, leaving me lightheaded. Too many late nights and early mornings caught up with me.

Not now! I begged my tired brain.

Just as I slipped from consciousness, I thought I saw my hands and arms lose definition, fading from sight. Bryony jumped free of my lap with a disgruntled noise. Black whirls claimed me, leaving me to dream of a candlelit room, arms thick with muscle carrying me like a child, and thicker voices speaking in a language I couldn't place.

My mind vibrated, driving away all sense and fear. Behind my eyes came bursts of color—fireworks shattering all other sensations. When the colors receded, I fell deeper into sleep, the voices ebbing away on tides of nothingness.

THIS IS A FREE PREVIEW OF *THE GRASP OF TIME*

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