

A MINUTE AND SEVENTEEN SECONDS

Mina Garay

“Any last words?”

It's the third time now. He doesn't understand why, or how, but he's grateful nonetheless. It's easier to accept than to ask questions. The only thing he feels is sorry for himself.

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

If he were a fool, he'd be shocked. The blade, like it had been the last three times, is against his chin.

His attacker's hair is murky and brown, so is his finely tailored suit. The first time, he thought it was the colour of death. This time, he thinks it's the colour of eternal torture.

The first time, he considered begging for mercy. The second time, he spat in his face.

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

He assesses his surroundings— on the ground, shirt collar pulled up and blazer halfway down. If his life weren't being threatened he would've made a quip about how he should've been taken out to dinner first.

The door is too far to run to without being stabbed immediately. On his left, is the velvet armchair he's been knocked off of. On his right, just shy of 10 inches from him, is a table topped with glass. It stands on one leg. If he can reach out far enough...

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

The blade is in his attacker's left hand.

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

Blade, chin (as expected). He grabs his attacker's wrist. He tries to yank him off, but to no avail. A blow is sent to his ribs. He feels as if he's been winded, most likely because he has been. He gasps. His attacker uses the knife to pierce his skin.

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

“Tell my wife I love her.”

He reaches his right leg to the leg of the table, curving his foot around the leg.

His attacker cackles. “What wife? As if any woman would take interest in you.”

His foot pulls on the leg. The table tips over. The glass lands on his attacker’s head. It shatters. The glass doesn’t do too much, too small to do much, but it’s exactly what he wants—a distraction.

His attacker lifts his hand with the knife to block the rest of the glass. His suit jacket catches most of it, but a few pieces land on his cheek.

He yanks his attacker’s hand off of his collar and rushes to the door. His foot trips on a piece of rug. He falls. The carpet hits his chin with a scratch. He can feel the cold metal against the back of his neck.

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

He wants to laugh.

A rug.

A piece of cloth.

That’s what gets him killed?

He reaches his foot out again, the table tipping over again. Glass shatters. He gets up to reach for the door handle. It twists, and then tugs. He tries again, but it won’t budge. The sound of leather shoes crunches against glass.

“Did you *really* think I wouldn’t lock the door?”

The blade is against his neck again, dripping blood onto his collared shirt.

He blinks.

“Any last words?”

So, escape isn’t an option. At least, from the room.

There *must* be some escape from it all though. If there was a way to enter into this repetitive mess, there was a way to get out of it.

Then, like turning off the safety on a rifle, it clicks.

Before he tests out his new theory, he blinks.

“Any last words?”

He grabs his attacker’s wrist, twisting until the grip on the knife loosens. He yanks it from his hands. He propels the knife forward, but his attacker dodges with ease. Like an old habit, he

goes for another hit, across his attacker's chest. He gets stopped halfway through, and his fingers are forced to unfurl from the knife. In a panicked haste, he blinks.

"Any last words?"

The solution is simple. Blade through flesh. Hands against throat. Fingers snapping bones. It's either kill or be killed.

He's a hunter, and though he can shoot a deer while staring it in the eye, somehow it's different. If his life weren't being threatened, he'd imagine his father questioning why.

What makes this man different from a rabid dog?

He can't come up with an answer. Still, despite the logic, he doesn't do anything.

He promises himself he'll do it next time around, and blinks.

"Any last words?"

He sends an elbow to the arm holding the knife, gripping his attacker's wrist to pull free the weapon. He picks it up and throws it away— a clean fight. No cheating, no weapons. Hunter's honour— all he wants (so he tells himself).

He lunges his body towards his attacker. He lands himself onto his chest, knees against his ribs. His attacker swings a hook to his face. The room slants and his head throbs. He recovers sloppily and directs a punch back to his attacker's nose. A muffled crunch of bone is heard.

They exchange beatings and pains. Blood brandishes fists and stings rise in the pores of their skins. A raw, guttural scream shreds itself from a part of him reserved for hunting.

There's a burst of hits. God, a gun would be useful right about now. A comfortable weight in his arms, and a bang loud enough to break this. As relieving as this was, it was taking too long.

His fist pauses in the air. He realises he's stalling himself.

His attacker rests on the ground, pants coming out like a dying lifeboat, nearly a body but not quite. He gets up. He creeps to where the knife landed, feet hesitant and fingers shaking slightly. He walks back to his attacker.

The knife rests in his hand, blade ready to puncture and to kill.

Purposefully, he blinks.

"Any last words?"

A coward is one of the worst things a hunter can be. Hesitate for one second and all could go wrong. One must be decisive and deliberate. You walk into the forest with the intent to kill, and you don't go out until you have. It doesn't matter who the animal was before or who it could be, you shoot anyways.

He tilts the knife up to his attacker's throat. One push is all it takes.

The blade pierces through layers of skin and veins threaded together like branches of a forest. His attacker stops breathing. He thinks he's stopped breathing too. His attacker groans, legs hitting the carpet and tripping over themselves. He lies; dead but warm.

His hands tremble. He drops the knife.

And though he doesn't mean to, he blinks.

"Any last words?"