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Zero World

Written by Jason M. Hough

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ZERO WORLD

JASON M. HOUGH

TITAN BOOKS

FOR NANCY

Zero World

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THE END.
THAT'S WHERE IT STARTED.
OR SO THEY THOUGHT.

PART 1



INTEGRITY ASSURED

1

IN A LUXURIOUS FLAT overlooking Hyde Park the assassin's mind reverted.

He lay on a stiff mattress in a dark room, naked between silk sheets, cool conditioned air gentle against his face, when the rewind occurred.

Time had just been taken from him. He knew this because he'd been exhaling, a slow, measured breath that suddenly and quite inhumanly changed to a sharp inhale. He'd prepared for this, but even with all his measures to reduce the effect, the moment of reversion always left him disoriented and more than a little nauseous.

The routine he'd developed over the last dozen years involved a careful arrangement of his environment and physical state so that when his mind suddenly lurched backward to the trigger moment, the similarities would far outweigh the changes. He always used the company flat. The same bed, the same sheets, the same pillow. Set the thermostat to exactly 20 degrees Celsius. Kill the lights, draw the curtains, and send his handler, Monique Pendleton, the message: *I'm ready*.

Then he'd lie down, face up, hands at his sides. As agent Peter Caswell waited for her to trigger the implant, he would silently recite an old song lyric. Not aloud, just in his head. It was his secret anchor. His bridge across time.

Speak the word
The word is all of us

Again and again he would recite the words until the reversion moment arrived. It never took long.

This ritual was key. Days ago had been the trigger moment. Monique would activate the implant from her perch a few hundred miles above, and he'd get up and dress and go off on some clandestine job. He'd conduct his particular business, and then return here, to this same exact room, and put everything back just the way it had been. Once again he'd send *I'm ready*. He'd lie down in the same position, and he would wait for reversion.

And so here he was. Mission over, brain chemically reverted to that same trigger instant despite the days that had passed. The first half of the lyric—*Speak the word*—front and center in his mind. A bridge over the memory gap. He crossed it, silently. *The word is all of us*.

Three or four days deleted. That was the average duration, and so a safe assumption. All memory of his deeds wiped away. Conscience cleared.

To jump ahead in time like this, as any drunk would know, can really fuck with the head. To trigger in a London office and revert in an alley in Cairo produced a sensation of disorientation and vertigo that bordered dangerously on the unbearable. Even to go from day to night, or one meal to something totally different, could leave one a vomiting wreck for hours.

Caswell had learned all this the hard way, years ago. Gone from a beach cottage in Mexico, belly full of beer and fish tacos, to drifting in null gravity on an Archon Corporation ore processor with nothing in his gut but nutrition paste. That

experience had nearly killed him. It had certainly made a mess of the Archon orbital. More important, the event had forced him to do the thing he detested most in this bizarre life: plan. So he invented the ritual.

Yet preparation went only so far. In four lost days there were thousands of minute differences both to the body and his surroundings, no matter how carefully controlled. Each tiny variation was quite easy to overlook viewed individually, but added together all at once the effect could crush an unprepared mind.

Here now, in this room, the differences began to fall inside his head like sudden rain on dry pavement. A relaxed heartbeat had shifted to a racing one, the rhythm slightly off. One instant he'd been exhaling, then abruptly breathing *in*. Such things made the mind want to react, and react he did. A sputtering cough racked his body. He let it pass and forced himself to focus, to continue the catalog of differences that allowed him to acclimate.

Before the trigger he'd been relaxed and ready, and was now out of breath. Okay, he could deal with that. He must have rushed to get here in time. Not so strange. What else?

A new ache in his left shoulder. Another on his ribs, though less intense.

Stubble on his chin that itched. That was odd; he'd shaved beforehand like always. Why hadn't he had time to shave again before reversion? Because he'd been in a hurry. Right. *Focus, Peter*. He filed that and moved on.

He opened his eyes. The room was pitch black, but that was expected. A sudden shift from day to night could really disorient him, so he always pulled the thick drapes fully closed. Slowly he lifted the blackout curtain beside his left hand. Just a hair, enough to get a sense of things. Gray daylight spilled

in. Raindrops on the window. The Thames winding off into the distance between a forest of skyscrapers. London in the fall. That was good.

He let the curtain go, sat up, then stood. Muscles across his body were sore. He felt tired and hungry, yet seconds ago he hadn't been. There was something else, too: a faint antiseptic odor that reminded him of a hospital. Caswell felt his way to the bathroom and switched on the nightlight. He stared at himself in the mirror. A square patch of white gauze was taped to his left shoulder. There were sutures visible on the left side of his torso. Six stitches, recently administered. That explained the hospital smell. The stubble on his face was barely visible, representing perhaps four days' growth, thanks to the curse of Korean genes. What could he infer from a four-day beard? He'd gone somewhere where shaving had not been an option. Somewhere remote. A battlefield, maybe? There was no shortage of those around the world. Or had his cover required a disheveled appearance? His unkempt black hair said yes, maybe so.

Where'd you go this time? he asked the lithe form in the mirror. Not aloud; they'd be monitoring the room. *Do the injuries mean you screwed up? That you're losing your edge? Did you fail?*

For a minute he stared at himself, as if looking into his own eyes might reveal some hint as to what exactly he'd done in the last four days. This burning need swept through him every time, but he always battled it back. Not knowing was the whole point. And truthfully he didn't want to know.

A clear conscience was his greatest asset, the reason for his extraordinary success.

Caswell showered. First scalding hot, then ice cold. He toweled off, shaved, and dressed. Dark slacks, a maroon polo,

light gray casual coat. Comfortable Italian shoes. A tungsten biometric bracelet he slipped onto his right wrist. The band performed all the usual functions but also interfaced with the implant, automatically regulating certain aspects of his brain chemistry according to his personal desire.

Phone, wallet, passport. This last he thumbed through quickly, looking for new stamps. There were hundreds of stamps inside, but none were new. No surprise there. Wherever Archon had sent him, they would have provided the required documents. This passport was his, and he had a few more pages yet to fill.

Now came the moment of truth. Clear conscience or not, there was one thing he simply had to know. He went to the kitchenette and gripped the handle of the fridge. Steeling himself against what lay within, he pulled the door open. White light bathed him from inside, along with a rush of frigid air that brought goose bumps to his skin.

The space was completely empty save for the one thing he always made sure they stocked for him: exactly twelve bottles of Sapporo beer. They were in a neat row across the top shelf, from one side to the other. Each had its famous label facing him, save for the last three on the end. Those three were turned to face away.

Peter Caswell felt his stomach tighten. Over the last few days, under the Integrity-Assured status his implant provided, he'd killed three people. All memory of this had just been deleted. Since he'd come up with this way to keep track a decade ago, he'd now assassinated a total of 206 human beings, and the only thing he knew about any of it was the number. That's all he wanted to know.

He could have tried to learn more: taken clandestine pictures, scrawled a secret coded diary, left himself a voice

mail on some personal unlisted number. There were a thousand ways to drop such hints that fell outside the safeguards already built into the implant. But part of the reason for his top-ranked status in this career was that he'd never attempted to tell himself these things. The beer bottles were his one allowance. If Monique or anyone else at Archon knew about this, they'd never mentioned it.

Caswell removed the three backward bottles, set them on the counter, opened them, and poured each into the sink. A silent memorial to the three lives he'd taken and the widows or orphans he'd left behind. Then he took a fourth bottle out and opened it with that satisfying *tsuk*. The cap rattled in the sink.

"May someone remember you," he said for his victims, and drank.

On the elevator down he summoned an autonomous limousine on his phone. The sleek black vehicle waited for him outside the doors of the corporate-owned building. No one said a word to him as he exited. No one ever did. Friends, even acquaintances, did not suit him. Relationships were . . . difficult. Memories, the goddamn past, were not for him. He had only Monique Pendleton, the one person in the world who could understand his life, who knew what it was like to have bits of your memories stolen away for security's sake. And though he'd never met her in person, she was enough. Besides, she had the power to remove from his mind the horrors of what he'd done out there. She was the reason he could live with himself.

Peter entered the car and immediately barked, "Turn that off." The BBC news anchor on the seatback screen vanished. "Radio as well," he added. Silence enveloped him

as the car slid into traffic. He stopped on the way and bought a scone and coffee, diligently avoiding the magazines and newspapers on display just outside the café door. News was poisonous. To glimpse some headline like THREE TOP MALAY DIPLOMATS ASSASSINATED IN BALI, or something along those lines, would fill his mind with questions. *Had it been me? Was I really capable of that? What if they were the good guys?*

He didn't want to know. He wanted to stay one step ahead of his past, his own version of Mr. Hyde.

But he also wanted to give himself every chance at success. He may have killed 206 people but he gained no benefit of experience from that. To him, they'd all been the first. And the next one to fall would be no different. The perpetual rookie, that's what he was.

"Heathrow, terminal one," he said to the car. His mouthful of scone mangled the words, but the vehicle obeyed without hesitation.

Caswell parked himself on a stool at Wetherspoons, the only pre-security pub in the terminal. He'd chosen the spot, and his mark, after several careful minutes of observation. Someone roughly his size, age, and build. A weary-looking Asian businessman fit the bill this time. Caswell ordered a brandy and ginger ale, plus a burger with chips. He made small talk with the man next to him.

To be good at his job he had to keep certain skills honed. This was the only gift he could give his professional self: training. Practice. He had no memory of past missions to guide his actions in the field, so he lived his personal life in such a way as to best prepare himself for his next first assassination.

Oddly, it was not knowledge of weapons or martial arts that he prioritized. It was travel. The ability to go anywhere, under a hastily assumed identity, and survive. Not just survive, but thrive. Play the role via total improvisation. Adapt to the surroundings. Live in the moment with only his wits to guide him.

Reversion meant he had five days, give or take, of cool-down time. It was physically impossible for Monique to trigger his implant again before then. Doing so would drive him insane, or worse. So after each mission came the mini-holiday, and with his rather obscene bank account balance, Caswell could literally go anywhere and do anything. That's precisely what he did.

At the bar he ate and drank and made conversation with the mark he'd chosen. One Wei-Lin from Shanghai, a factory manager on his way to a conference in Brighton. Nice enough chap with a strong accent that Peter listened to carefully.

I am Wei-Lin, a Shanghai factory manager. That would do nicely. Caswell paid his bill and said his goodbyes. "I wish you all success in Brighton," he said to Wei-Lin, with a slight bow. The man blinked in surprise, for the voice he heard nearly matched his own.

Caswell walked across the hall, past a crowded simkit parlor, and into the nearly empty bookshop. He meandered to the travel section. In the center of the bottom shelf was a book titled *300 Thrills in 300 Pages: The Adventure Traveler's Guide to the World's Most Exciting Destinations*. Peter Caswell thumbed to page 206, one for each kill he didn't have weighing on his blissfully empty mind.

Page 206. Inland Patagonia, Chile.

"Right," he said to himself. Then he pulled his phone from his pocket and purchased a first-class ticket on the next flight

to Santiago, plus a room at a five-star hotel. Wei-Lin had worn a Rolex and fine shoes, so it seemed appropriate for this borrowed persona. Clothes and luggage Peter would get on-site. Adapt and improvise. He'd introduce himself to everyone as Wei-Lin, just in from Shanghai, and strike up dinner conversation about his life as a factory manager. Make up lies on the spot about why he was in Chile, and anything else that came up. Perhaps even have an affair. Should he ever be sent there to remove someone from this world, he'd have a little firsthand knowledge of the place.

He'd *practice*, and hope it helped. After all, 206 bottles of Sapporo facing away from him might tell him his body count, but they implied something else, too: He was brilliant at his job. Whatever he was doing, it was working.

Peter Caswell was sitting in the concourse waiting for his flight when a little chime in his ear broke the monotony.

"Status, Mr. Caswell?"

"Hello, Ms. Pendleton," he said. "I'm fine, though the shoulder and ribs are sore. But other than that, all good. I'm at Heathrow, just off for holiday, you know?"

She knew of his post-mission activities: trips taken at random to dangerous, thrilling places. She approved with open jealousy, her office being in orbit at Archon headquarters. "Well, cancel your plans. Something urgent has come up."

"Urgent?" He sat up a little. Urgent had promise, but the timing made him skeptical. "What is it?"

"Are you familiar with the *Venturi*?"

For a second he thought he'd misheard. "You mean *the Venturi*?"

"I'll take that as an emphatic yes."

Dusty memories swam through Caswell's mind. Everyone knew at least something about the *Venturi*. A spacecraft where, allegedly, banned weapons research had been conducted. The whole thing had vanished about twelve years ago, leaving behind no shortage of conspiracy theories as to what had happened. Caswell figured the ESA had been up to something truly terrifying and, given UN rulings on how international laws apply to off-Earth activities, they'd scuttled the whole operation before any penalty might arise. "Okay, you've got my attention. What's happened? Details about their research finally leak?" he asked.

"Not exactly. Not yet, anyway. Someone found the damn ship."

Caswell closed his eyes and waited for the other shoe to drop. It was the nature of the job. Archon had obviously learned of this discovery early. Maybe Monique had been asked to eliminate whoever had spotted the thing. Perhaps she had a drone rifle for him to place, pointed at the front door of some astronomer's flat in Cambridge. It couldn't be much more than that. Caswell wasn't used for trivial tasks. He was a hammer, and a hammer drove nails. In his entire career she'd sent him on only a few missions that didn't rate the Integrity-Assured status his implant provided, and they'd almost always been gimmes. Right place, right time sort of stuff, never anything sensitive. And if the rumors were true, you couldn't get much more sensitive than the *Venturi*. "Fuck," he managed to say.

"Indeed. Now listen, I might have figured out a way to get you a seat on the salvage boat."

"What do you mean? What salvage boat?"

"The one that's going to try to reach her before the wreck falls into the Sun." She let that settle in for a few seconds. She

always knew when to do that. "There's a flight leaving for Mysore in one hour. Be on it. I'll have papers waiting at our drop there. Full ident kit, plus a few other goodies the team is working on. Use the travel time to get familiar with the *Venturi*, because your cover requires you to know all about it."

"You realize I've just reverted, right? This is a lot of detail you're giving me, Mo." He felt uncomfortable knowing anything at all. It defeated the purpose.

"It can't wait five days, Peter," she said. "That salvage boat is our only shot. And anyway it's a long ride out there. I can activate your implant remotely before you reach the destination. This is, by the way, assuming they take you on as crew, which they had better, if you take my meaning."

So much for ritual, he thought bitterly. No posh flat above London, no comfortable bed, no silk sheets. No row of Sapporo in the fridge. He'd trigger somewhere off-planet on a damned spacecraft. And reversion? Who knew where the fuck he'd be. It was going to hurt.

"Triple pay," Monique added, as if reading his mind.

He snorted. "Throw in four weeks off and you've got a deal."

"Done."

Caswell puffed his cheeks and let out the breath. He glanced at the gate where his flight to Santiago had started to board. "Hell. Okay, Mo. I'm on my way."

The money didn't matter so much as the time to spend it. But it was the chance to remember, at least a little, that left his gut twisting with equal portions of excitement and trepidation.