

01

Initiation

He held the weapon tightly in his hand. The leather grip felt warm and enticing, almost as if the weapon were an extension of his own body. He knew that beneath the warm grip lay a cold metal, waiting to shock somebody's skin with its temperature. He had come to think of the weapon as being an entity in itself. It seemed to have moods, sometimes as black as the night, but other times as warm as a hot summer's day. He found it particularly ironic. This weapon was meant to kill. The thought had been circling round in his head all day. As he stood there he could feel his own body's temperature rising and suddenly he felt sure he was going to pass out.

2 Peter Savage

It wasn't as if Oken hadn't killed before, he was an elite member of an underground culture. He was almost an ambassador of death. It was true that Oken was one of the best, but even he shuddered at this new weapon which threatened the very existence of every human being on the planet. To be truthful, he wasn't particularly interested in 'every other human being' on the planet; he was only interested in one. He merely desired to put on a good show for the crowds who had gathered to watch him fight. It wasn't the popularity that fuelled him, but the noise, the aggression, the atmosphere.

The world had become increasingly unstable during Oken's lifetime. Various governments had attempted to exact rule over territories to which they had no claim, acting like wolves from a pack, scrapping at every last piece. It had certainly made the world an 'interesting' place. Interesting, but terrifying. Oken had been one of the soldiers of a since collapsed government. Like a student without a master, he had wandered far and wide in search of a calling.

Oken's calling had been discovered in the form of illegal underground bouts, in which he was fast becoming a star, a prodigy, a ruler. He had no time for his own status amongst the people. His only driving force was to be the best and to beat the rest.

It was not as if he was unintelligent either. An accomplished physicist and chemist, Oken had been recognised as a child, as one of the brightest youths of the century. That was until the Temporal War in 2028, which had been a horrific struggle from start to finish. The world before the war was very different to the present day. Certain governments had developed temporal weapons; that is, weapons that affect time and history. These weapons were able to obliterate people from existence, not only from the current point in time through to the future, but throughout history, leaving no trace that they had ever existed. Time-lines had been altered and history had changed forever.

The assassination of Emperor Wong-Chee by a terrorist group, who had stolen a temporal

weapon in 2027, had removed him from the world forever. The removal of this man erased his triumphant victory over Al-Capor in 2024 from history. This changed the course of history, allowing the terrorist country to once again claim the right to rule themselves. To most people, this is how it would have always been. The general population would have had no knowledge that anything had ever transpired at Al Capor. The only people who would remember the events that had taken place would have been those who had been protected by a temporal shielding of some kind.

The world had finally regained some stability when the Emblem had been established. The Emblem was a governing body consisting of six continents, Alendria, Prestone, Phenley, Cantaris, Ranshaw and Liast. The governments of the world had crumbled under increasing pressure from society and had all joined forces. It was concluded at a general assembly that the collective experience of all previous governments had the best chance of bringing peace and

stability to the world and so they coalesced and built the Emblem.

Each Emblem construct had its own rules, laws and forces, which caused difficulties but seemed to offer unilateral stability. In essence, though one huge country, each Emblem effectively operated as a separate state, a by product of the differing cultures present around the globe. One law was constant however, a law above all others. This law detailed the use and development of temporal weapons.

Temporal weapons had effectively been outlawed from the very beginning, but controlling and policing this had proven to be difficult at best. A special force had been set up to try to detect and police temporal violations. The G-TEP, or Global Temporal Enforcement Programme, was created to try to detect the development of any temporal weapons and to crush their creators before they had a chance to use them, or develop them further. Many people had protested against the use of such violence but

it was deemed a necessity by the majority to protect the Emblem's way of life.

Oken had developed a temporal weapon. He had built temporal shielding around his apartment and had tried at all costs not to leave the house with anything that the G-TEP could ever detect. Today would be the day. Today he would unleash his weapon on the underground culture and perform the greatest show ever seen.

Oken had built a special scabbard, into which he had included temporal shielding. It was into this that he now slipped the deadly sword. Oken had always considered the word 'sword' as rather crude, especially to describe something as beautiful as he had created. He preferred the words 'blade' or 'weapon', as they seemed, to him at least, to be indicative of power, of might.

It was not uncommon for people to carry swords and other offensive weapons through the towns of the Emblem. In Alendria, Oken's home construct, it seemed to be more prevalent than anywhere else. As he walked along the roads he glanced at the people he passed. He wondered

about their lifestyles, about their histories. If he cut one of them down right now, would anyone realise they had gone?

He noticed a youth, terrorising another young man. His hand went for the sword, but he stopped and realised that this wasn't the time, and that here was definitely not the place. His hand still stuck to the grip of the sword, hoping that the thug would turn his attention away from the young man so he could use his 'blade' and rid the world of this terrorist nature.

Oken was not a violent human, however years and years of fighting, both in the zone and in the war, had left him with an all too strong desire to fight to survive, instead of trying to co-exist. He had never married, and had never had children. He was fast approaching his thirties and showed some definite signs of ageing. His hair had turned grey at the age of 24 and in all honesty he could quite easily be mistaken for an age of 40. There were, of course, treatments available to change his hair colour back to the jet black that it

had once been, but Oken had always opted for the natural approach.

Oken felt lonely and as he walked along to his showcase event he felt somewhat sad that he had nobody to share his achievement with. He had no idea whether he would make it out alive. In essence it was partially a suicide mission of pride. He wanted to show off his achievement, to be the first fighter to sport a temporal weapon. Yet in his heart he knew that if the G-TEP forces came, it could be the last fight he ever took part in. In fact he could scratch the 'could be'. It was damn sure to be.

His heart began pounding again. He saw the cars zooming along the road, sleek and streamlined, although largely unchanged in the last 60 years. Attempts had been made to produce hover cars, but trials in these had always resulted in deaths; occasionally on horrific scales.

One particular crash, or 'accident', had occurred when the nuclear reactor of one such hover car exploded, wiping out an entire village, in the southern construct of Prestone. There was,

at the time, talk of sabotage by terrorist groups. Some even said that the government had been involved. It was alleged that ministers were trying to stop the technology becoming commonplace. At the time, the government of Prestone had been creating large revenues by exploiting fuel workers in eastern Cantaris. If the switch was made to nuclear fuel, then a large source of Prestone's income would be lost.

As Oken rounded the corner he realised that death had become more than a way of life in the Emblem. A girl lay motionless on the pavement after being hit by a car. Crowds of people were gathering round, yapping endlessly into their phones, some even taking pictures. Oken wasn't sure if any of them were calling for help, or whether they were just relaying information to their co-workers that the main route out of the suburb would be blocked for at least a couple of hours. The girl, in her late teens, lay in a pool of blood.

The smell of death filled the air. It was obvious that she had died on impact. Her fragile

bones hadn't been able to cope with the stresses that the car had imparted upon her. Her legs were a tangled mess of bone and muscle. Blood oozed from the crack in her head and Oken was sure he'd heard one passer by exclaim that parts of her brain were visible. In the distance he could hear the wail of the emergency services siren. All too often they took so long to reach the accident scenes that victims that had a good chance of surviving usually died because they didn't receive medical treatment in time.

Oken started thinking about the young girl's family and realised how important her life would have been to so many people. On her clothes a school crest was visible and she was wearing a purple blazer, an instant indication that she was of the highest intelligence at her particular institution. Oken suddenly wished he was able to bring her back. He wished he was able to give her a second chance. Maybe one day he would be able to.

Throughout his thoughts, he hadn't stopped walking. He didn't want to be one of the hoards

of hungry panthers, craning their necks to get a good view of the corpse lying in the road. He walked by the accident, seemingly unaffected at the sight of the event, as his sign of respect for her life. It was unlikely that any of the onlookers would have classed him as insensitive for doing so. It was his way of dealing with it, and it was far better than being one of the crowd.

The driver of the car was sitting on the pavement sobbing quietly, rocking to and fro. Several passers by were trying to comfort the female driver, telling her that it wasn't her fault. Others took to screaming abuse, asking why she wasn't watching where she was going. Oken wondered if that was truly the case or not. There was no way of him knowing, for he had not seen the accident first hand.

A few more months and maybe he would be able to go back in time with Bethany, see who was really at fault; the woman, or the girl who now lay there forever more encased in death.

As he rounded the corner he smelled the freshly baked bread that the old fashioned bakers

still made and thoughts of the accident quelled. He considered going inside to get himself an iced bun or a doughnut even, but decided quickly against it. He didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he had to.

Oken walked through the park and marvelled at creation. He saw the trees standing tall, the grass as green as it could be and he could hear the birds chirping in the bushes as he walked by. Even the smaller animals marked their own territory in some way he mused. He noticed how each bird's song was intricately different and how complex some of the tones were. He saw a rabbit bounce out into the field beyond and scamper around in a wild frenzy, without a care in the world. The grass swayed back and forth in the calm breeze of the summer.

It had taken him over three years of his life to develop this blade. Over those three years people's opinions of him had changed drastically. He had first discovered the underground meeting place, popularly called 'The Zone', by accident on his way home from his regular job at the library.

He had taken a back alley, something he was unafraid of doing and when asked if he was a fighter or a spectator by a large surly man at the door to what looked like a disused warehouse, he had instinctively replied 'fighter'. It was his nature. He was immediately whisked into a small room with several other people dressed from head to toe in armour of various kinds. More worryingly he also noticed that they were armed to the teeth.

The fights normally lasted about fifteen minutes. They were not classed as bouts to the death, but several extremists believed that this was the only honourable way to conclude a battle. There were no real rules to the fights. As long as you stayed in the ring, which was a platform of a disused railway, and fought as hard as you could, you'd be fine. Defeat was declared when the opponent was either dead, or when they left the platform of their own accord. If you didn't save enough energy to make it out of the ring on your own, that was your hard luck.

Oken's first fight had only lasted thirty seconds. A skinny, stealthy looking fighter was his opponent. Oken had never fought "In The Zone" before and had no idea what was going on. He stood in the small room waiting to be told what he was supposed to do next. Before he could ask any questions, a man entered and told him that it wasn't going to be an easy fight, but that if he won, he'd receive four million credits, no questions asked. Oken, who was desperate for money, accepted. His job at the library barely paid the bills. If he could add a little extra to that, he could afford more time to work on Bethany.

He walked out into the ring and saw his opponent standing across the platform. Oken was drenched in ambivalence, feeling both fear and excitement coincidentally. The fear he suppressed, the excitement grew on him. All around the platform, spectators clawed at the reinforced glass, chanting and shouting till their lungs were hoarse.

Water dripped from the ceiling in a steady rhythm and Oken used this to retain a sense of

timing. He had no idea what weapons this guy would possess; he assumed that he would be as well armed as the fighters he had seen earlier. His heart began pounding. He felt sick, but it was not an unpleasant sensation. It was the kind of nausea one feels before their birthday or on completion of a difficult problem.

Oken tested the ground with his feet, it was solid. He looked up at his opponent. Was he supposed to kill this guy, or merely injure him? As he glanced around the platform's spectators, he noticed several banners with the words 'Hand 2 Hand Ronnie' scrawled in large friendly letters. 'Maybe this guy only used his bare hands?' Oken thought.

He was in luck. He'd stumbled, unknowingly, into one of the beginner hand to hand combat bouts. His heart raced further still. What was he doing here? Why had he said fighter? His answer was quick. Pride, and it was pride that wouldn't allow him to walk away from this fight either. He heard some music start up in a dim corner of his mind. It was not a track that he

recognised. It was purely electronic, a simple lead line designed to psyche up competitors. Ronnie began moving his arms and legs in what Oken could only describe as a Thai Chi kind of motion.

Oken dusted off his jacket and removed it. He was really going to do this. He was used to fighting, the war had taught him enough of that, but not hand to hand and certainly not illegally. Even though no one had said as much, Oken had gathered that the goings on of the Zone couldn't possibly be legal.

Ronnie was still performing his ritualistic dance of movement and mime, and Oken was sure he'd seen Ronnie gesture a twig breaking action with his hands. Oken raised his eyebrows and for the first time all of his fear and anxiety left him. He dropped his jacket on the floor and prepared to fight.

Suddenly he was unaware of anything else but the water dripping from the ceiling. Time seemed to slow down and he followed one drip from the ceiling to the floor. He could almost hear it

rushing through the air like a speeding bullet. He could see a blurry Ronnie in the distance standing stock still. He could see the crowds moving, jumping with anticipation. He smiled, this would be fun. In an instant, the water droplet hit the floor, the host screamed go, the music hit a climax and the crowd roared. Ronnie also started running very very fast towards him, funnily enough; this was the last thing Oken noticed.

The next thirty seconds were a blur to Oken, but he still remembered exactly what happened. He began to run towards Ronnie, each step making a thundering crash on the floor. He didn't consciously think about what he was doing, it just seemed to come naturally to him. There was a pillar slightly to the left of him, about three steps ahead. He put all his effort into reaching the pillar. In one fluid motion he began to run up the wall. First one step, and then with the second he thrust himself away from the pillar in the direction Ronnie was travelling. Ronnie had no time to see where Oken was and was hit completely unaware when Oken dropped from the

skies onto Ronnie's back. Oken felt the crack. Ronnie sure as heck felt the crack. The crowd heard the crack through the thumping rhythm and reeled back at the noise.

Ronnie and Oken fell to the floor in a confused union. Oken managed to quickly turn his fall into a roll and ended up standing next to his fallen opponent, who was now left groaning on the platform's asphalt. Ronnie was not dead, nor was he mortally wounded, Oken had managed to break a vertebrae or two in Ronnie's back which would definitely put him out of action for at least three months. That was the diagnosis that the doctor had given at any rate.

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The culture of the Zone was so brutal that the doctors certificates were used as trophies by the victors and copies posted up on boards next to fight descriptions, written by hopeful young journalists. The feeling Oken had experienced by winning had been indescribably good. He was a

hero. As soon as the fight was over, hundreds of people swarmed onto the platform to congratulate this new fighter on the status he had now achieved. To the present day, Oken held the record for the shortest fight ever in the history of the Zone.

It was not long after that that things had taken a turn for the worst. Fighters started arriving at the Zone with drugs and mechanical advantages to help them win their battles. It was not against the rules, but it turned the sport into a much more specialised field. Four million credits was a lot of money, almost a third of what Oken earned in a month and he realised that he could make a tidy profit by occasionally fighting here.

Since his first fight, he had spent all his spare time developing new fighting tools and weapons; after all he needed to keep up with the game. Super-Humanity was nothing new. All the new kids had it. It was the way in which it was used that made the fighter either successful or dead.

So elusive and secret was the Zone and its members that if anyone was caught using any

weapon or tool intended for battle, outside of the Zone, their membership would be revoked and it would be likely that they would be killed by Zone extremists. Oken remembered one kid using his Super-Humanity tools to rig a college basketball game on a Saturday night. The poor soul never got to see the subsequent Tuesday.

Oken reached the Zone shortly after 6pm. It was a good twenty minute walk from his apartment and he was greeted by loyal fans and ring organisers.

“So you in the Zone tonight Okie?” said one enthusiastic fan. Oken didn't answer, he didn't like being called 'Okie' or anything else besides Oken.

“Saw you last weekend man,” came one comment, “you were awesome.” Oken was used to comments like this and he'd begun to take them with a pinch of salt. If you were popular you were popular, but if you lost a fight, that was your fame gone.

“So, what you got for us tonight then my friend?” Oken looked up to see a dark skinned

man standing in front of him. It was Ruben, a long time bouncer at the Zone and one of Oken's oldest friends. Ruben gave him a pat on the back and slapped him five.

Oken returned the gesture with the words, "We'll have to wait and see Ruben. We'll have to wait and see." Ruben had known Oken for a long time, and a comment like this could only mean one thing; he had something special planned for tonight. He nodded towards Oken and quickly ran off to ask another bouncer to cover his shift. Oken was swamped by hordes of fans asking all kinds of questions and shoving electronic devices under his nose for him to sign. It was the buzz that drove him. Not the attention, when would they realise that, he thought.

Through the years, Oken had worked his way through the ranks to become one of the favoured fighters in the Zone. He had also made several enemies, usually by forcing opponents to withdraw and them subsequently losing fame and fortune as a result. Although these enemies had lost their followers, they still posed a significant

threat to him. They were driven by revenge, an extremely powerful emotion.

Oken walked slowly through the crowds of bustling people. He could feel their anticipation, their excitement. It seeped off them in waves, and Oken absorbed it all, feeling more powerful with each and every step. He'd grown to love his walk from the front door to the fighter's lounge, or the 'Chiller' as it was known.

The Chiller was a place for participants to rest before their matches. Inside, they talked about various things including new tools and weapons that they were developing. Oken was one of the most well respected oracles in this ironic little room. His knowledge was quite literally overwhelming. If anyone had a problem with their technology, Oken knew how to fix it almost instantly. He was that sort of person. He never worried that the information that he gave may lead to his defeat one day, he just enjoyed helping people. Besides, it made things a lot more interesting in the long run.

One of the barmaids walked in with a tray full of drinks. She set it down on the table in the centre of the room. It was a large round table about half a metre in height with a glass top and mahogany legs. It was definitely not the sort of thing one would expect to find in an underground fighting arena but then there were a hundred and one things that were ironic about this place.

“So Oken, I got a problem with one of my Sup-Hum devices,” said a fairly new fighter known only as Skins. He was tall and rather skinny and appeared to be covered from head to toe in technology. The term Sup-Hum, had referred to Super-Humanity devices.

“What's your problem?” replied another fighter. Oken who had been looking at the floor turned his head to look at Skins and nodded for him to continue and share the problem with the group. 'It all seemed so civilized' thought Oken as he sat there. These people were about to go and beat the life out of each other in the next few hours and here they were discussing the finer points of physics and chemistry.

“Well,” continued Skins, “I’m finding it hard to keep the reactor from topping out at 359 Kelvin. I just can’t cool it fast enough.” He took a swig from his hipster bottle and carried on. “I’m scared it’s gonna blow and take my back out with it.” He looked down at the floor rather sheepishly at relaying a fear to the others. Several of the other fighters chuckled.

“Mmmm, fried flesh,” said Oken. “Sounds like you need to vent the exhaust quicker. Try using a turbo charger on it.” He took a sip of his red wine and raised his eyebrows, awaiting an acknowledgement from Skins. After a short pause Skins nodded. He said nothing, knowing full well that it was a fairly simple solution to a fairly simple problem. He felt rather ashamed.

The door knob turned and all but one of the fighters looked up to see who was about to enter the inner most circle of the Zone. It was Jessie, an arrogant, overenthusiastic, hyperactive idiot who was despised by most of the fighters for his boyish good looks and charm. He spoke in a cool

tone which seemed to have a range of accents built into it.

“Aww man,” he exclaimed. “Did you see that accident down on Caster Street. Dumb blonde never saw it coming.”

Oken was on his feet. He lunged towards Jessie and took him by the throat. His arm extended, thrusting young Jessie's fragile body into the wall, knocking over a smaller table complete with drinks and glasses. The glasses smashed to the floor and shards lay strewn everywhere. Jessie was finding it hard to breathe. It was obvious that he'd been winded by the blow, which had taken him completely by surprise. All of the other fighters watched on in earnest. They had no quarrel with Oken. In fact, most of them thought that Jessie had had it coming to him for a long time.

“You've made quite a mess there Jessie,” said Oken in a calm unwavering tone. “Now clean it up, and watch your mouth. Have a little respect for the dead.” He emphasised the last 'd' in the word dead. Jessie nodded in between struggles

for his breath, his nose twitching in anger. Oken cocked his head to one side and raised a single eyebrow, waiting for an answer from the wimp before him.

“Y-y-y-es,” Jessie coughed. Oken dropped him to the floor and he sat for a while in a crumpled heap regaining his breath, but losing his dignity. The other fighters continued attending to their drinks unaffected by the events that had preceded. A barmaid came hurriedly through the door and as she flung it open, it connected with Jessie's head. The noise was enough to make all of the fighters wince and then laugh. Jessie got up quickly, if a little shakily, and leaned on the door handle to help gain his balance. The barmaid made a quick apology and Jessie was gone, slamming the door behind him.

No one had noticed the big black holdall that Oken had brought with him into the Zone. It now rested beside him on the floor, its contents unknown to all except Oken. He knew what was in it, and it was wholly necessary in order to preserve his dignity and pride.

The black material of the bag absorbed the light that fell on it, creating a void that seemed to be endless. The bag was fairly old, worn in places and had an odour to it which Oken had always found comforting. He had packed the bag before leaving his apartment in a routine, almost ritualistic fashion. This time however, the contents were far from routine.

Published by Peter Savage

4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

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First published in Great Britain in 2009 by
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