

One month earlier, on Earth.

"Thank you for your loyal support, and please visit us again!"

A superficially cheerful voice shouted this phrase from a medium-sized grocery store. The phrase was targeted at a middle-aged man that was just leaving the store. The middle-aged man slightly waved one of his hands to show that he had heard, but he couldn't be bothered to answer.

As soon as the man left, the grocery store cashier sighed and went back to the cash register. The cashier was a young man with blonde hair, and he looked like he had just hit his 20s. A slight muscular frame was still visible when one looked at him from the back, but when looking at him from the front, one could only see a rather sizable beer belly.

Clack, thump, clack, thump!

As the cashier walked back to the cash register, the sound of his cane could be heard on the floor of the grocery store.

"Hello, welcome to Stevie's!" the cashier greeted with superficial politeness as he handled the next customer.

"Hard day at work, huh?" the young customer asked the cashier.

"It's alright," the cashier answered with a slight chuckle. "Everyone has to make a living."

However, these words didn't reflect the cashier's real feelings.

'This fucking grocery store is killing me, I swear!' he thought as he "happily" bagged the groceries. 'Every day with the same shit. Alex, do this! Alex, do that! I swear, when I've saved up enough money for college, I'm going to burn this place to the ground!'

Of course, these were only thoughts created in a stressful situation. Alex knew that he wouldn't really do it.

This cashier was Alexander Hoffmann.

Alex for short.

Alex's life hadn't always been like this.

He had had a bright future ahead of him in the past.

Sadly, life didn't go his way.

On the urging of his father, Alex started doing sports when he was 12. After all, doing sports while growing was very beneficial to the development of a teenager.

Alex's father was a huge fan of the MNFA, the Multinational Fighting Association. The MNFA let fighters from nearly all disciplines of martial arts fight each other with the least rules possible. So, in short, it was an organization that handled mixed martial arts fights, MMA for short.

Alex had also grown to like watching these fights, and when his father urged him to do some sports, Alex decided that he wanted to do MMA.

His parents' feelings were mixed on that subject.

On one hand, it was great that their child was finally doing some sports, but MMA could get pretty dangerous if something wasn't handled correctly.

However, since it was not professional MMA and since there were several coaches around in the local gym, they agreed.

Some time later, when Alex had had his first practice fight against another kid in the gym, he got his ass handed to him. Yet, this experience awakened a certain kind of stubbornness in him, an urge to win.

Sadly, he lost the next couple of practice matches too. Well, one couldn't really consider these matches a loss since they weren't real matches. They were simply some sparring between two students.

Yet, when Alex didn't clearly win a fight, he saw it as a loss.

Alex had already planned to change sports and join another one since it felt frustrating to see how everyone was better than himself. Yet, he wanted to win at least one time!

So, he continued training, and eventually, he won.

When Alex won, he felt something that he had never felt before.

It was a kind of indescribable high!

He felt like he was floating on clouds, and he felt like he was the greatest in the world!

The feeling of fighting, which had always annoyed him since his body hurt after it, transformed into the polar opposite.

This feeling of fighting others wasn't annoying.

It was simply a clash between men!

They were showcasing their power in a very primal fashion!

Alex wanted to feel this feeling again!

Alex stayed in the gym and even came more often. MMA had transformed from a chore into a hobby. The pain of sore muscles became a familiar pain that Alex even started to enjoy. It sounded cheesy, but the common phrase of every single sports

coach in the world resonated with Alex.

"Pain is simply weakness leaving your body!"

As the years passed, Alex completely focused on MMA. Even his grades started to drop, which had already been average to begin with. Alex wasn't stupid, but he never paid attention in school and didn't learn anything.

Stuff like math and physics was still okay since he could often deduce the correct answers logically, which was why those grades didn't suffer much. However, subjects like history and foreign languages had it far worse since one had to actually learn for these things.

Alex had a ton of arguments with his parents over this, but Alex always said that his future was MMA. He would join the MNFA, and he would earn a ton of money!

Alex barely passed high school but decided against going to college.

MMA was his future!

Alex trained as hard as he could!

His entire life depended on his success!

If he didn't manage to get into the MNFA, he would lose!

And one day, just after Alex's 20th birthday, he got accepted!

This was the greatest day of his life!

His dream was about to become a reality!

Alex won his first match pretty easily since his first opponent was pretty weak. His horrible win-loss record proved that.

Alex also won his second match, but it was a close one.

Yet, tragedy struck at Alex's third match.

The fight had been going fine. There was some back and forth, and he and his opponent were pretty evenly matched.

And then, the accident happened.

Alex and his opponent had been fighting from a distance since no one managed to find a good opening to tackle the other one to the ground. Alex saw an opening in his opponent's defense and performed a roundhouse kick.

CRACK!

His opponent barely recovered before the kick struck, and he managed to block it haphazardly.

His opponent's elbow hit Alex's ankle.

Alex's ankle immediately broke, and the medics jumped into the ring.

A day later, Alex got the news that his bones had damaged the nerves and muscles

in his leg.

They could only fix it to the point that would allow him to walk somewhat normally with the support of a cane, but that was it. There was nothing more they could do.

Alex's career was over.

From the highest high of his life, Alex fell to the lowest low.

Alex had earned quite a sum of money from his three fights, but he basically wasted all of it in a drunken haze of destruction over the next year.

His life was over.

There was nothing anymore.

After a year, his family held an intervention for him, and Alex finally realized that he had to stop being such a pussy. One year was more than enough to wallow in self-pity!

So, Alex planned to save up some money for college.

Right now, Alex was 22 years old, and he was working in a grocery store precisely for this reason.

Even though his past was filled with incredible highs, and even though he fell into the lowest low, Alex was still young, and he knew that he could still make something of his life. He only had to work his ass off for the foreseeable future.

Then, he would go to college, and everything would turn for the better!

Time passed in the grocery store, and after helping close up the place, Alex left at around 10 pm. It was already dark out, but the streets were well lit. After all, Alex lived and worked in a less savory part of a big city.

As Alex stepped out of the grocery store, his nose wrinkled. No matter how long he had lived here, he simply couldn't get used to the disgusting stench of the dirty streets.

This part of the city was for low-income families, and the state of the streets reflected that very well.

Garbage, cigarette butts, old newspapers, old furniture.

This was a common sight on these streets.

Alex tried to ignore the stench and walked home. His home was barely a kilometer away, a distance where people argued if they should drive or walk.

Alex was walking since he wanted to keep his living costs as low as possible.

Additionally, Alex somewhat enjoyed the walk since he was used to doing a lot of physical exercise.

After some minutes, Alex stopped as he looked at a couple of cigarette butts on the

street.

And the cigarette bin right beside them.

'Oh, come on!' he thought. 'The bin is right there!'

Alex used his cane to push the cigarette butts to the side of the closest building. He hated these people that treated the streets as their own toilet, but he didn't hate them enough to pick up the cigarette butts to throw them away.

After some minutes, Alex heard the sound of a whining dog, and he stopped.

This wasn't the usual sound of a whining dog.

The dog's whining was very loud, high-pitched, painful, and desperate. Obviously, the dog was in a ton of pain.

The sound of dogs was normal in this city, but that sound definitely wasn't normal.

Alex searched around for the dog and found it in a dark alleyway between two buildings.

The dog could barely be seen at the edge of the streetlamps' lights.

Blood.

Bone.

A concerned look appeared on Alex's face as he saw the dog. Both of its hindlegs were severely broken. He could see blood coming out of its legs, and he could even see its bones poking out.

No wonder it was in so much pain.

Alex thought about if he should help it or not. He didn't have a pet, but he also didn't hate animals. It was nice to look at and interact with them, but he didn't want to bear the responsibility of owning a pet of his own.

On top of that, pets were expensive.

Yet, when Alex saw the broken legs, he got reminded of his own injury. A slight pain came from his ankle as the scene of being rushed into the hospital returned to Alex's mind.

In the end, Alex sighed.

'Fine, I'll bring you to a vet, but I won't pay much for your care.'

Alex slowly walked into the alleyway and closed in on the dog. The dog didn't move and only continued crying in pain as Alex came closer.

"Don't move!"

Alex stopped as the familiar feeling of adrenaline rushing through his veins assaulted him.

There was a knife at his throat!

Alex didn't dare to move as panic took hold of him, but he calmed down somewhat when he felt a hand hurriedly searching through his pockets.

'A robbery,' Alex thought.

Alex had only been in panic for two seconds, but his old fighting instincts kicked in.

Yet, Alex didn't attack.

It was essential to analyze the opponent first. Otherwise, mistakes were bound to happen.

As the hand of the robber searched through Alex's pocket, Alex slightly glanced at the robber. He wore a black hoody and black sweatpants. It was hard to make out his facial features in the darkness while looking at him from such an awkward angle.

Alex glanced at the arm that held the knife.

'He's gripping the knife with so much force that his arm is shaking, and the knife is also not directly touching my neck. He's probably new at this. Additionally, his arm is basically touching my shoulder.'

Alex also noted the appearance and condition of the dog.

'They injured the dog to lure me into this alleyway. A clever but cruel trick.'

However, a slight smirk appeared on Alex's face.

'Sadly, you chose the wrong target!'

BANG!

Alex's head shot backward and hit the lowered head of the robber. At the same time, Alex violently shoved his shoulder upward, pushing the knife away from him.

The robber became disoriented. It was never a good feeling to butt heads with another person.

Alex was in just as much pain, but as a former fighter, he could still make rational decisions under pain.

Without hesitation, Alex lifted his cane.

BANG!

And hit the side of the robber's head with full force.

The robber immediately lost his consciousness under the attack. Alex hadn't fought in over a year, but his muscles were still more powerful than average.

The robber fell over as Alex smirked.

CRACK!

Alex's smirk froze as it slowly transformed into terror.

'No! I didn't want to do that!'

Since the robber had lost consciousness, his body simply fell over to the side.

And his head violently hit the hard pavement.

A pool of dark blood was quickly forming below the robber's cracked skull.

Alex's world stopped.

He couldn't comprehend what was happening.

Did... did he just kill someone?

Alex began hyperventilating in panic as his mind tried to comprehend the magnitude of what he had just done.

CRACK!

And then, Alex's mind vanished.

Alex's body landed beside the robbers.

A huge crack could be seen at the back of his head.

Behind Alex's body stood another man dressed in black, fury on his face. In his hand, he carried a blood-smeared crowbar.

This was the robber's friend, who had been hiding behind some trash in case something went wrong.

When he saw the corpse of his friend, fury took hold of him, and he hit Alex on the back of the head with his crowbar, full force.

Alex died instantly.

He didn't even know how he had died.

"Fuck! FUCK!" the second robber shouted as he didn't know what he should do now.

He had two corpses on his hands now!

While the robber was panicking, two invisible, azure wisps left the corpses.

The azure wisps traveled into the sky and seemingly left the realm of earth.

Alex didn't feel alive nor dead.

He was awake but also not awake.

One could liken the state of his mind to dreaming. His mind didn't work properly, but there were still some rudimentary thoughts that appeared.

The azure wisps entered an empty void, and they stopped.

Many other wisps were there already, and new ones joined every second.

After a minute, a bright, white light suddenly appeared in the nothingness, and all the wisps flew to it.

They were inherently drawn to it.

This was where they were supposed to go.

These were the souls of the dead, and Alex was just one insignificant soul among

many.

Suddenly, the void shook!

It was like reality was being torn apart!

However, the wisps only continued to travel to the light. They didn't even notice what was happening.

Reality seemingly broke like glass as an even darker hole appeared.

Then, a gigantic hand shot out of the hole.

It was the hand of a young, adult man.

With unreal speeds, the hand shot at one particular wisp, Alex's soul.

The hand used its thumb and index finger to clamp down on Alex's soul, and Alex felt clarity return to his mind.

'Wait, what happened?'

Yet, before Alex could look at his surroundings, he felt himself being pulled into the distance.

Before the hand vanished into the closing rift of reality, Alex could hear a voice, and that voice only spoke one word:

"Yoink!"