

Legacy

Each time Max rises from his troubled sleep, another life-threatening task would be laid before him, and another slow battle with time would ensue. The fruit of his ventures would always be stained crimson and turn sour upon biting in—painful to the tastebuds. He takes a brief moment to look at his scarred face in the mirror of the spartan room, parting some long black bangs to trace a calloused finger over fading lines of dead tissue and aged stitches. Grey eyes stare into an identical pair from across an impossible divide. Methodically making his way over to the antique dresser, he pulls out the iconic outfit associated with his “character”. Like any prize fighter of the era, Max has access to a myriad of equipment, weapons, and clothing that could be used to ensure victory in the next battle, but he always chooses the same outfit: dark grey pants made of a durable material, thin-soled black shoes that stood halfway between sneakers and slippers (custom-made so he could always feel the material of the arena beneath his toes), a faded blue t-shirt adorned with the logo of a long-dead brand of imposing vehicle, and a tan coat with no pockets, zippers, or defining characteristics outside of three red letters stitched on the back. **M. A. X.** Not since his first bout did Max carry a weapon out to the arena.

Following the wild cacophony of jeers and yelling, Max makes his way to the arena, passing the cells of other fighters along the way. As was tradition, none of the other competitors so much as looked up from their individual meditation. Each “character” kept their personal lives to themselves, some living in the luxury that victory in the arena would afford, and others, like Max, only lived from bout to bout—nearly dead without the rush of fighting. Max was in his late thirties by now, having started his career, like every fighter does, as a nobody, at age nineteen. When a prize fighter stays relevant for long enough, the marketing team gets together with the higher-ups and assigns them a character—“Something for the crowd to really remember, and to place their cash on!” If a fighter takes particularly well to a proposed persona, they can lean into their role and earn some significant bonuses, especially if they have commercial ties. Most of these names take after old-world media that highlighted the most violent and absurd aspects of human nature, for instance, M. A. X. is an acronym for **Maximum Attack X-ecutor**. The name evokes a barbaric, commercialized, and thoroughly plastic atmosphere that sponsors abuse far more than Max has interest in portraying. Completely apathetic, he’ll go along with anything for another bout. Past the other fighter’s cells, finally at the end of a cold hallway, he stops.

Before Max stands the last bastion of defense against the sensory onslaught of noise, lights, and pain. The Gate. Only a single gesture will open the Gate, and each fighter has their own signature; Max’s was to gently rest his outstretched fist on the Gate at shoulder level. The Gate acknowledges the intent to participate, and with a torturous groan of grinding metal and bending rock, the pathway to oblivion opens wide, clearing the maw of its earthen teeth. This uproarious cacophony, all-too familiar to him, washes over his entire body, bathing it in white noise.

Max’s competitor today is perhaps the least threatening he has ever faced in his twelve year career of carnage and destruction. The man who stands across the dirty tile circle that the arena is floored with could be no more than twenty. This young fighter has short blond hair and an agreeable ratio of muscle to body fat from a quick scan by a trained pair of eyes; however, from his slightly shaky posture and stance, this was unfortunately his first bout. Because he had no money or resources, he was unable to purchase equipment to fight with, which is the only feasible way another fighter could have a chance of wounding Max in battle this far into his career. Prize fighters took on anywhere from one to seven fights per bout, depending on the

amount of money they wanted to win, and if they had sponsors promising them rewards or bonuses based on their performance, they usually went all the way. Max stopped filling out the bout paperwork around a year ago; this set of files detailing all the potential sponsors, odds of winning, and the number of fights one thinks they can survive in a day. He never went below the maximum, something the organizers up above took notice of to incorporate in his “character”. The business itself was not always fatal, with deaths occurring in only seventy-five percent of matches, and this percentage decreased with fighters that had lived to see past nine fights. Max had only lost twenty fights in his lifetime, none within the past year, and looked to win another tonight. The unnamed man pitted against Max clearly had never experienced a real fight before, and would likely never see another. Something was different about this match, an ambiguous energy crackled between the two men. At the very least, Max was picking it up, even if his opponent was unaware.

Max usually never spoke to his opponents, offering a simple nod of the head, or bow in the case of competing with well-known fighters. It’s global knowledge that gambling has long since been illegal in the world above, most old-world vices had been abolished or destroyed entirely, but down in the arena, only strength and money could guarantee survival. Strength and saccharinity made for bad bedfellows down here. Slowly, he approaches the figure, but instead of his usual silent intimidation, Max asks the man his name, in as conversational a tone as someone inclined to ‘*punch first and ask questions never*’ could. The man breathlessly replies that he was once called Philip, but it no longer mattered. Now that Phillip had entered the hellish pit of the arena, he might as well be a blank slate for others to place greedy hopes upon, like any slot of a roulette wheel or space on a Craps table. This was all Max needed to know about the wiry rookie, prepared to throw his lot in life down with all this spectacle and death.

The two men entered into a heated brawl, Philip holding his ground surprisingly well against the flurry of low kicks that comprised the guarded assault Max was known for. Sweeping iron legs in a frantic dance across his opponent’s footholds, sending his own knees flying for the enemy’s thighs or abdomen, and forcing out piston-like kicks aimed for turning human joints into broken, “flamingo legs” was the signature style the audience expected. The killer of Max’s techniques in the arena was well-known in the underground world: Max never slowed or stopped his pace. Fighters so often let their adrenaline rush throughout their body, expending all their energy to rush-down opponents as fast as possible, ignoring some of the damage received until after they finish for the day. The promoters understand well-enough that fighters without medical care burn out too fast to market, and spend millions in acquiring the best “under the table” services possible. After so many years of victories with diminishing challenge, Max has been able to perfect the exact pace of movement that would allow him to maintain his attack indefinitely. No spaces needed to replenish oxygen—no gaps for giving the body rest. Each sweep, kick, or knee-strike would flow into another, and another. Regardless of how fast his opponent would burn through energy, Max would keep up, and crush them like stubborn rocks fighting an ancient current.

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While fighting, Max could drift off to a time in his life that felt whole—a time above ground with people that called him by his name and gave him butterflies rather than bruises. He grew up during the transitive phase of earth, just as humanity broke past the level of technological competence to obfuscate physical labor—over half the world was unemployed, but resources for basic living could essentially be replicated infinitely. Life sped up for those on the

cutting edge of science, and grinded to a complacent halt for everyone else. Max was a simple kid, and was left behind by most, tempted to join the “sleepers” in a life of endless tranquility. To truly live at that point, Max needed something more, even in his late teens, it was clear he hungered for a real purpose. Something to cry for. A place for a simple kid to grow into a simple man. The rash of rumors spread amongst the youth with a disgusting speed, and this den of sin and physicality was just enough of a golden ticket. Max never looked back—everything was in the moment now. That bittersweet moment of living and dying was fleeting ecstasy.

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It was strange to experience such a long reverie anymore; the quality of combatants lately seems to be slipping. Philip did a fine job of holding out with his forearms and palms, occasionally catching a kick and delivering a quick jab with his elbow intended to break Max’s knees, but nothing connected with enough force to finish the job. Still, getting any connecting hits at all was more than some legendary prize fighters could say, if they could still speak, that is.

Philip was beginning to show the all-too-familiar signs of slowing down, letting exhaustion rear its ugly head, and giving his merciless opponent the openings necessary to deliver the last stages of his attacks. The rationale that Max lives with is that fighters were much better off dead than injured or too weak to finish the rest of their bout, so Max always made sure that they were finished gracefully—in the first fight. The tantalizing allure of becoming a “sleeper” was especially frightening for those injured beyond even the miracle science of stolen underground technology. If someone makes their way to this arena, they are running from something far scarier than weapons, pain, and even death.

By the time an opponent reached this stage of tiredness, their arms and legs became just sluggish enough to droop without their owner being completely aware of it, and since they already see every blow from Max coming in from his legs, they never predict the direct punches to the temples. Philip certainly doesn’t see the first blow to the head coming for the soft circles on either side of his skull. A hand becomes a surgical tool under the right circumstances, especially how Max uses it; he always sticks out one of his fingers’ knuckles at the last second before impact with the precise point he targets.

The fist hits hard and fast—exactly on target with Philip’s temple. He stumbles and his eyes lose focus for a moment, but as he somehow steadies himself by taking a much wider stance. A small streak of blood drips from his left nostril. Max is taken aback by this surprising display of willpower; memories of Max’s first bouts return to him in a rush. It becomes clear why this fight feels different than all his other experiences put together. Philip is truly worthy to be a prize fighter. Despite the emotional moment’s distraction, he is still able to resume his calculated advance against Philip’s defenses. Even with a lifetime’s less experience, Philip is able to enter a strange state of zen-like focus that allows him to stay afloat despite the torrential storm of insistent kicks and rare cracks of lightning that came in the form of fists aimed for his head. Something burns at the core of the two combatants—a fire that keeps the dark night away.

The two fight with a renewed vigor that the crowd devours like starving animals tearing into table scraps. Philip takes more strikes to the head, but never goes down completely—he is still unable to get a solid blow out, just glancing hits. Max respects his opponent, but he will never throw away his principled manner of combat, even amidst a dirge of memories. The bloody spectacle drags forward, and while the audience cannot tell what is going on in the minds of the warped fighters, Max certainly can.

The shirtless young man truly does his best, and at one point, parries a last-second attack directed at his head, swatting away a fist that opens the way to send a palm right into Max's face. While the civilized world above forgets more brutal knowledge of battle every day, the arena spreads it around like a form of contagion. The fatal information in this critical moment is the knowledge of a tiny bone surrounded by the cartilage of the nose. This fingernail-sized bit of calcium can be detached by a well-placed strike, and if it's sent up into the brain, a human will die almost instantly. Barely perceptible, but easily caught by the grey eyes that have never stopped analyzing their target, Max sees the hope in Philip's strike. Max ducks underneath the palm as time grows slower for Philip, the steady and shallow breath of the faded blue reaper becoming louder and louder in his ears. From somewhere nearby, seemingly from inside his own head, Philip can feel the words, "Thank you" reverberate, and now he feels no more.

The crowd erupts with what seems like a split-second victory—Philip's neck cracking back from an uppercut no one sees coming. The now lifeless body tumbles to the floor, followed by a few drops of clear liquid, imperceptible to the frenzied audience. However small, they are the first tears he had ever seen down in the arena, falling across Philip in time with Max's breathing. He bows to the corpse.