

## Mighty Man

Coming home was always the worst part. No matter who was there, it was empty.

Leslie Green stumbled into his kitchen late into the evening, his body wrecked by the echoes of the day's pain. Without stopping to turn on any lights, he opened the fridge and rested his throbbing head onto the top shelf next to the orange juice and last night's pasta. He rested there for three minutes, letting the chilly air soothe the ache in his skull. Then the bright kitchen lights snapped on and his headache returned.

"Dad?" asked Micah, Leslie's son. He was getting older now, nearly a man grown.

"I didn't know you were home yet."

"Yeah, well, I am." He moved his gym bag from his left shoulder to his right and stared accusatorily.

"Mmm." Leslie looked at the pot which held the pasta. It was a light, electric blue. He hated the color, he always had. But it hadn't been his decision. Now he couldn't bring himself to get rid of them.

"Dad."

"No."

"Why do this to yourself? You don't need the money."

"I am your father."

"This isn't healthy. You know--"

"I am your father!"

Micah stared, eyes burning. Leslie put his head back into the fridge.

"I won today."

"Again? How many have you done now?" asked Leslie.

“Nine.”

“Nine in six months. And nine wins.” He turned his head so his voice aimed in the direction of his boy. “I’m proud of you.”

“Mmm.”

“How many rounds?”

“Two.”

“How did you catch him?”

No response.

“How did you catch him?”

Leslie slowly took his head out the fridge and looked at his son. Agonizingly familiar eyes looked back, eyes Leslie had known for twenty-five years, though his son was only nineteen. Moving with care, Leslie poured himself a glass of water, took a seat at the wooden kitchen table, and looked up tiredly.

“He got me good near at the beginning of the round. I exaggerated how good though. He got greedy and tried to end it, but he got lazy too. I took one more to sell it, then countered when he opened to finish me.”

“He caught you twice?”

“Yeah.”

“Bad?”

“Eh.”

“Where?”

“That’s not the right question.”

“What? Let me see.”

“I’m fine.”

“Micah--”

“You’re not going to ask me how I countered?”

Leslie looked at his glass of water.

“How did you counter?” he asked.

Silence.

“I’m sorry. How did you counter, Micah?”

Leslie rested his head in one hand and sighed. “Did you email the Dean yet?” he asked.

“No.” Micah folded his arms.

“Classes start soon. You should get on that.”

“He launched a power right. Telegraphed that shit for miles. I slipped it perfectly and caught his kidney clean. Textbook. He bent a little and I followed to his chin. Done.”

Leslie took a sip.

“I wish I could have seen it.”

“You could have.”

“I had to work.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Sure. I had it recorded. It’s online.”

“I’ll watch it.”

“Okay.”

“I promise. I want to see it.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry, Micah. I mean it this time.”

“Okay.”

“Tomorrow night. Let’s talk about it. Word is bond.”

“Sure.”

A moment passed. A moment of repeated promises, of rehashed conversations, and of lowered expectations. “Are you going to email him, Micah? The classes start in a few weeks.”

No answer.

“Micah? You have such a bright future ahead of you. You’ve talked about college for years. This was the dream, and it’s here. I don’t understand, what are you waiting for?”

Nothing.

“Micah Josiah.”

They locked eyes. Micah did not speak.

“Boy I don’t know who the fuck you think you are but this is my goddamn house and I’ll be damned if you just gonna stand there and disrespect me in my own goddamn house! You speak when you are *fucking* spoken to!”

The effort completely exhausted the energy Leslie had left, but he stood firm and stared down at his son. Micah silently glared back for a minute more before dropping his gym bag on the ground and walking away. Anything more and there would be no turning back.

Leslie watched him go, a tempest frothing inside him. He glanced down at the open gym bag and noticed his son’s faded electric blue MMA gloves. Leslie sucked in a breath. He hadn’t known; he had never seen the gloves before. Slumping back into his chair, he drained his water and examined the white mug for a moment. Painted on it was a sailboat gliding before a fiery sunset. It had been a promise first, and a memory second. He flung it at the kitchen window.

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At work the next day, Leslie studied a nearby new vase of gaudy plastic sunflowers as his arms and legs were strapped to the chair. He frowned in disapproval at the hue of yellow, which was several shades too harsh. The cold fluorescent light made the flowers stand out in a room of too much grey. Eleven grey chairs circled the room. Each chair had darker grey straps hanging loosely off its sides and a bevy of wires hooking it up to an adjacent computer. Leslie had been working there for about six months, and his status as the longest tenured veteran meant his chair was the closest to the door. Stan, the greying caretaker of the Swaps, checked the various instruments, muttering quietly to himself all the while. Leslie wondered how much more of this his body could take—the statistics said he was past due for a breakdown. Know yourself, all the experts warned. The body can only be pushed so far.

“Alright Les, let’s go over the prelims.” said Stan, who carefully placed the final electrodes on Leslie’s bald head. Stan monitored and maintained Swap health during a session, and was the only person in the company older than Leslie.

“I know the terms, Stan.”

“Do you, Leslie Green, freely consent to accept the physical pain of another person for-” he swiveled in his chair and squinted at the grey computer monitor through his glasses, “Nine hours and thirty minutes?” He raised his eyebrows in surprise. Most sessions were over in a couple hours, and rarely went longer than four.

“Yes.” Leslie had picked out the most excruciating session available. He had yelled at his son last night, had cursed at him even. He deserved this, even more than usual. And usually, he really deserved it.

“I see in your contract that you are Guaranteed for this session. Do you understand that you will be given medication which will prevent you from blacking out, and furthermore, once your session begins, only your death would cause its premature end?”

“Yes.” Leslie shivered unconsciously.

Being Guaranteed was the money maker in his profession. Anyone could be a PainSwap, but wealthy clients seeking to be free from severe pain for long periods of time needed a Swap who had given up their right to early release.

“The client has indicated that they are in extreme discomfort due to-”

“I don’t want to know.”

Stan hesitated. “The intensity rating on this client is really high, scaling in at 8.9. You don’t want a head’s up.” It was a question, though he phrased it as a statement.

“Not knowing helps.”

“O-kay. Your death liability waiver has been filled out and all of your insurance paperwork is up to date. Are you ready to proceed?”

“Yes.”

Swaps had died before; Leslie had been in the room for the first one. Eric was the perfect encapsulation of traditional masculinity, all beard and mountain and quiet strength. He had a soft, bass voice and dressed in checkered wool long-sleeve shirts, dark jeans, and heavy boots. He looked like every man who had been casted for a whiskey commercial. Before swapping, Eric had been an amateur weight lifter and liked to do his sessions shirtless. Vividly tattooed on his chest were two bright emerald dragons in a vicious and bloody fight over a chest of gold drawn over his heart. Many people saw his death as heralding the end of the Swap business. But as Eric’s body convulsed in the chair, as his full-throated screams sliced through the air, and as

the twin dragons desperately clawed for one final piece of the treasure, Leslie looked around the room and he knew he would be back. This was his temple, and he made his atonement here.

They all came back.

Stan stood up. “Alright, lie back and try to relax. When it comes, let it flow over you. Be a river, not a wall.” Stan paused, concern briefly creasing his weathered face. He patted Leslie’s shoulder twice in an almost fatherly gesture.

Leslie nodded appreciatively and constructed his mental analogy. He quickly built small sailboat in his mind and placed it in an ocean. Then he brought in Mighty Man, a navy blue superhero action figure that was his constant companion while swapping. Mighty Man posed so that he was looking off into the distance. His left hand rested on his hip and his right hand pressed perpendicular against his forehead, shielding his face from the sun. A cape of electric blue hung loosely from his back and he bore a remarkably realistically grim look of determination. Leslie couldn’t help but marvel at how lifelike the figure’s face looked, as if a master sculptor had, for years, spent the first six hours of his day working on Mighty Man’s face. His cheeks were slightly pocketed, his eyebrows thick and textured, and his nose flamboyantly wide. Leslie himself stood in front of the ship’s rudder, so he placed the figure on the railing next to him, drawing inspiration from the Mighty Man’s expression. His ship was named the Monica.

Something went wrong with his left hand. Leslie noticed that he had lost feeling in his fingertips and a throb was steadily building in his wrist. He looked at the water and saw that it had grown choppy. Mighty Man also looked troubled, posed now with both hands cupping his mouth and his head turned back and to the right, giving orders to an invisible crew. His

expression of determination, however, had only intensified. Leslie pulled down his sailor's cap tight over his head as the wind whipped up around him.

Then his wrist exploded.

The storm came suddenly, the sheer force of it nearly breaking apart the ship instantly. The Monica shuddered against the thundering waves, barely cresting one before another crashing against another. For what seemed like an eternity Leslie survived on the edge of failure, just able to keep the tiny boat from capsizing. It was dangerous work, demanding his full and constant attention. Sweat poured down his face, his knees shook spasmodically in the straps, and blood trickled inside his mouth from where he had bitten off a piece of his cheek. The first few minutes of swamping were always the hardest, as his body struggled to adjust to the agony. His wrist felt as though it had been sawed off, and then cauterized with burning iron. An hour passed without the smallest let up in intensity.

After a while, Leslie lost his sense of time. He could no longer discern whether the pain had just started, was just ending, or had always been there, lying under the surface. The pain in his wrist had blended with the pain in his soul, and he became one with it. Over the next few hours he would come to know the pain intimately, he explored its every crevice and caressed its every curve. He was in pain all the time, had been in pain for months, but it was only during sessions when he could touch it, could name it. And by naming it, he could take away its power. Leslie cried, softly to himself, as his body trembled in agony. He was human again. Oh God, he was human again. And he was so lonely.

Something else must have happened to Leslie's client because, without warning, the intensity of the pain spiked. For a moment, for the first time in a long time, he wondered if he would be able to see it through. Blacking out was impossible, he knew, but he had heard of



several cases where Swaps finished their session with permanent brain damage, if they finished at all. The waves, once scarcely manageable, now seemed bigger and maleficent, looming over him like the pent up fury of a vengeful god. A roaring wall of water slammed into the boat and swept him off his feet. He staggered back to the rudder, manically gripping the wheel.

Somehow, even the water was now heavier, and he could swear an ominous presence dwelt inside the wind. He was getting weaker. Seconds later, his sail was ripped from the mast. He glanced at Mighty Man and saw him down on one knee, arms extended outward and his palms forward, his face distorted by effort.

Without warning, Leslie lost control entirely. He screamed and then slumped in his chair, nearly blacking out despite the meds. His boat shattered from beneath him and he was hurled into the raging ocean. What little refuge the Monica provided was utterly obliterated as Leslie's brain strained under the uncut power of the pain. He clawed his way toward the surface, hacking up salt water and blood as he emerged. Dazed, he splashed around, seeking Mighty Man. He dipped his head underwater and stared into the churning depths, but his eyes couldn't see through the blackness. Dizzying pain racked his mind, clouding his mental vision and jacking up his heart rate. He couldn't think clearly anymore; he could barely think at all. And he deserved every second of this.

Insanity was close. He could feel its nearness, the gentle pulse of its comfort slowly embracing him like fur coat on a snowy day. It would be so easy, he knew, to let it have him. As easy as slipping into bed after a long day and a hot shower. But no, not yet. Frantic, Leslie turned and twisted, desperately searching for a glimpse of the superhero. He spotted Mighty Man drifting helplessly away about a hundred feet to his left. The figure's hands were raised high above his head and, though Leslie couldn't make out his face from where he was, he knew

intuitively that he was panicked. With one final effort, Leslie swam to Mighty Man as fast as he could, struggling against the ripping currents. He sighed with relief when he reached him.

As soon as he had the action figure in his grip, he built a sturdy submarine in his mind. Immediately his whole world changed as he and Mighty Man now safely plowed through the storm under the ocean. This was no priceless cheat, however. Mighty Man rested on the submarine floor. He was sitting down, leaning back on his hands and his legs stretched out in front of him. He appeared to look relieved, even grateful, but he was worried. His face, which had appeared so authentic on the boat, now seemed plastic. Also, his cape had faded a bit, and some of the edges were fraying. He looked like he was shivering slightly, and he had wrapped the cape around himself for warmth. Wild eyes looked suspiciously at the submarine. This submarine, this solid wall Leslie had put between himself and the pain, wasn't right. The refuge it provided was so sweet that it tasted of chamomile tea and honey, the muted silence accompanied it like buttered toast, but *it wasn't right*. There would be a price to pay for this sanctuary, and Leslie wasn't sure if he could afford it. He tried to build a new boat on the ocean, but it was like opening a door in the face of a gale—he only cracked it a few inches before the pain slammed it shut. Even Mighty Man tried to help, curling his little fists and raising them as if to strike on the submarine's walls, but to no avail. After a few minutes, he gave up, drained from the effort.

Then it was over.

Leslie kept his eyes closed until he felt Stan undoing the straps that held him in the chair. As he came to himself, he knew immediately that something was very, very different.

“Jesus Les! The hell was that? I thought I lost you!” Stan handed Leslie a bottle of water and placed a cool towel over his forehead.

“I’m alright. I’m alright.” He cringed. Taking a sip of water, he gingerly tested out the feeling in his fingers against the bottle. “I had to go deeper.”

“Deeper.” Another question statement.

“Yeah. Like, deeper. Like...” Leslie sighed. “I’m done for the week.”

Stan pursed his lips. “I wasn’t gonna say anything,” he said, “but you’ve been in this business a long, long time. I think you’re the last original still working.”

Leslie nodded silently, downing his water.

“How long are you planning to do this? I’ve seen a lot of good people get ruined by this job. A lot of good people. And the intensity you sign on for... maybe you should think about retiring, or at least not take on so much.”

“The money arrive yet?”

Stan looked at Leslie long minute. His eyes were cold, hard, and grey. Grey eyes on a grey face on a grey man in a grey chair in a grey room with flowers that were far too yellow. He eventually turned to face his computer and did some typing. “Yeah it’s here,” he said a few moments later. “9.5 hours of 8.9 scaled pain at the standard Guaranteed rate comes out to \$8,695. Looks like the client left a tip as well making it an even ten. Your take home after agency, equipment, and insurance fees will be \$2,800. It’s already been deposited.” Stan paused. “You sure you don’t want to know what happened to the client?”

“I’m sure.” He got out the chair shook Stan’s hand. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Hey,” called Stan as Leslie headed for the door. “They’re looking for a couple more people in Mental. If this is getting to be too much, maybe head over there. I can make a couple calls. Not that that place is any easier,” Stan chuckled, “I know they hate the stereotype.”

“No thanks.” Leslie shut the door behind him.

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Coming home wasn't so bad today. Leslie sat on plush loveseat facing the TV and put his feet up. He hadn't sat on this couch in months, hadn't planned on sitting on it ever again. But today, he sat. And why not? It was a thick sofa, inviting and honest. It had been bought to last, and it was comfortable. He was comfortable. There was barely any residual pain today. That was a first. He should still be feeling the pain; he always felt the pain. It was there, he knew, hovering just outside his vision, lingering over him and triggering the sense one has that he is being watched. But whenever Leslie turned his head to face it directly, the pain slipped out of sight. Leslie was too tired to think on it more. He was nearly asleep when he heard the front door close.

“Dad?”

“Hey.” Leslie didn't open his eyes.

A pause.

“You're on the couch.”

“Yeah.” Seconds ticked.

“Are you alright?”

“What's wrong with you? Don't you see I'm sleep.”

“You're sleep. On the couch.”

Leslie opened his eyes then and looked his son over. Bandages flaked with dried blood covered both sets of knuckles.

“What happened to you?”

Micah glanced down, silent and embarrassed.

“Well?”

“I got into a fight at the gym today.”

Leslie closed his eyes again. He was tired. The couch was comfortable. “Who won?”

“Dad. Can we talk?”

“We are talking.”

“No, I mean...”

“You mean what?”

“Dad.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Micah stopped, mouth open. Their eyes met. Micah seemed to reset himself and began again.

“I got into a fight at the gym today.”

“You said that.”

“They suspended me.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, did you win?”

Micah didn't respond.

“You spent all that motherfucking time training in the gym and you lost?”

“They're...in the hospital.”

Leslie grinned devilishly. “That's my boy.”

“Dad.”

“Wait, 'they'? How many did you fight?”

“Dad.”

“What?”

“You’re not asking the right questions.”

“Huh? I’m taking an interest. This is what you wanted right?”

“But you never ask the right questions.”

“We talking. I’m asking questions.”

“Ask me why I got into a fight today.”

“Fine. Why did you get into a fight today, Micah?” asked Leslie in a sing-song tone. He closed his eyes again, melting into the inviting couch.

When Micah didn’t reply, Leslie peeked at him with one heavy eye. He was so tired.

“Why are you crying?” asked Leslie.

“Why don’t you know?”

“Man the fuck up.”

“What? Who are you? I don’t even know you right now.”

“What you mean who am I? The fuck you crying for?”

Another pause.

“Why do you do it?” asked Micah.

“Do what?” The question nudged Leslie awake.

“PainSwapping. Why?”

“It pays well.”

“That’s it? You didn’t do it before.”

“All these years you been talking about college. Since you were damn near eleven.

Someone has gotta get the money so your ungrateful ass can go. If not you then I suppose it has to be me. And,” Leslie’s voice started to rise, “now you won’t even get your shit together so you

can start! Have me looking stupid asking my friend to give you a hook-up and you won't even fucking send him fucking email!"

"Oh."

"What?"

"We don't need the money."

"Boy, that's all you heard me say?"

"You haven't gone sailing in a while."

This stopped Leslie cold and triggered something inside him. It was a lifeline, a way out of the submarine and into the ocean. Leslie tried to crack open the door, to push against the gale, but once again it crashed shut. And, to tell the truth, he was happy about that. This new place was cozy. He could stay here forever, him and his doll.

"Don't want to."

"It used to be all you talked about."

"I don't have time. I have to work."

"No, you don't. You should go."

"Can't.

"It could help."

"You don't understand."

"Help me understand."

Leslie closed his eyes, hoping his son would take the hint.

"You don't want to talk about it?" asked Micah.

"What?"

"We've never talked about it."

“About what?”

“About last night. About everything.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

“Dad. Can we talk? Please.”

“We are talking!”

A pause. A pause of months and years. A pause of bloody knuckles, unwanted pots, sinking ships, agonizingly familiar eyes, and pain. A pause of so much pain—pain inflicted upon others, and pain received from others. A pause of waylaid dreams. A pause of a room filled with too much grey. A pause of a favorite color. A pause of electric blue.

“I love you, dad. I love you. It wasn’t your fault.” whispered Micah finally.

Leslie’s submarine started to leak. He had to rush to plug the holes.

“Did you watch my video?” asked Micah.

“No. I forgot. Sorry.”

“Oh.” And the world ended.

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll watch it. Promise.”

“Okay.”

“Word is bond.”

“Okay.”

“Micah.”



“Yeah?” Micah was weeping now. And, if Leslie summoned all his strength, he could almost care. Micah’s tears were so far away though. How could he care about something so far away?

“Send that fucking email.”

Leslie fell asleep then. He had drawn a blanket over his body, had enveloped it around himself like a cape and he felt snug in the safety of its cocoon. The blanket was old, preciously, thankfully old, and still smelled like happiness. It was the only thing left that did.