

# Gravity of Performance

By Robert V Aldrich

Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2017

Published: 2017/03/03

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for the personal entertainment of the reader. It is copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed without the express written consent of the author.

Aaron Lafayette didn't like plastic punching bags. He preferred canvas bags. They caved more naturally to his punches. Plastic bags felt like he was hitting pillows, but harder. It felt less like he was punching something and more like his joints were just hurting.

He also preferred his old gym, not this brightly-lit, Apple-store-looking white room with state-of-the-art training equipment taking up all the space. He didn't like nice gyms. He didn't even like clean gyms. He liked gyms with some soul, with some character. He liked gyms that smelled like sweat. He liked gyms that had a blood stain.

He didn't like the ground, either. It was a textured, dense-but-spongy kind of deal, like he remembered from high school gym class. It was too textured. When he was in the octagon, fighting against another mixed martial arts fighter, he needed that feeling under his feet. feeling under his feet.

Aaron backed away from the bag, shaking out his arms. A stocky five-footer, he was a little round in the midsection, with his sides spilling over his training shorts. He'd let himself go after his last loss, losing some of the drive to keep fighting along with some self-control. Going into camp, training for his next fight, was going to be harder than usual to lose all the extra weight.

Aaron was struck on the back of the thigh with a children's waffle bat. "Hit something!" yelled Asnee. The tiny little Filipino man smacked him on the hamstring of his other leg, causing Aaron to yelp and get back into punching the hanging bag. The short man, showing the marks of a hard career as a fighter, paced around Aaron, continuing to smack him when he dropped his hands or slowed down.

A few feet away, sitting on the weight bench, a medicine ball of a man was watching the exchange, chuckling to himself. The door to the bright, white room slid open like something of out Star Trek and in walked two men in suits. "Elliot," said the big man. "Gravity Experimental's gym is a nice place."

"Yeah, I was just telling Dr Farahi here that you liked it, Walt." Elliot gestured to the dark-skinned man in the suit that had followed him in.

"Hit something" yelled Asnee, smacking Aaron again. "You don't talk; you hit stuff. Hit stuff!"

Elliot and Walt both chuckled. Even the stoic Farahi broke a smile. "We know it isn't the gym you are used to training Mr. Lafayette with but I think its characteristics will be most pronounced." The doctor spoke excellent English but had a clear Hindi-accent.

Walt tried to look convinced. He stood up with a big of a groan at the midpoint in the action. He looked around at the brightly-lit white space the size of a modest storefront. "You can actually change the gravity in here?"

"Correct," said Farahi with a bit of a bow. "We can safely raise gravity to twice earth standard, as well as lower it to almost half earth standard."

"You're not planning on making Aaron train like that are you?" Walt asked, processing the magnitude of those changes just enough to recognize the hazard.

"Hit something!" screamed Asnee, followed by the wet sting of the whiffle bat hitting sweaty skin.

"No, of course not," Dr Farahi insisted. "Per our agreement--" he began to explain before Elliot jumped in.

"As we discussed, the lab is funding most of Aaron's training camp," Elliot reminded Walt, speaking in terms he was more familiar with. "He has to do it here, but we get to use the equipment for free. We also have to incorporate their gravity fluctuation training into Aaron's program."

"How're we supposed to do that?" Walt asked, chewing on his lip like he wished a cigar was there instead.

Farahi told him. "We understand that you two," he nodded towards Asnee, "as Mr. Lafayette's coaches, prefer him to train six days a week. Therefore, two days will be at one-point-one earth's gravity, and two days will be at point-nine earth's gravity. We will monitor his progress, his vitals, and we will see if this positively affects the outcome of his next fight." We will monitor his progress, his vitals, and we will see if this positively affects the outcome of his next fight."

"Sounds good to me," Aaron said breathlessly from the punching bag.

"Hit something!" Asnee yelled, smacking him on the back.

"That's great and all," said Walt, mostly to Elliot, "But a big part of fight-training is sparring and rolling. I got to have him on the mat, wrestling and submitting guys."

"You and Asnee are the only two that can be in here during the gravity days," Elliot told Walt, something that did not sit well with the seasoned coach. "Sparring will be done when we can manage."

"When we can manage?" Walt repeated back at him, as if offended.

"All training must be done here," Farahi said firmly. "Even jogging." He gestured to a treadmill.

"Treadmills aren't roadwork, son," Walt told him with a surly tone.

"It'll have to do," Elliot little forcibly. "I cleared the sparring partners for Aaron with Farahi. They can only come in on normal-earth-gravity days, but we'll get the sparring in."

"Two days out of the week?" Walt exclaimed. "Me and Asnee can't have him cramming all his sparring into two days!"

"Look, we've got to make some sacrifices," Elliot said, while Farahi shifted from foot to foot, staying awkwardly silent between the two fighting. Elliot put his arm around Farahi like they were good buddies, which surprised Farahi. "For science!"

"We change his training program, then we can't measure how useful the gravity doohickey thing is," Walt told him. "We got to maintain the same training program, or else—"

"One test on one subject for one fight will prove very little," Farahi told Walt as he surreptitiously snuck out of Elliot's sideways hug. "We need not worry about removing all variables; only some of them. This is the first attempt to use gravity fluctuations for anything other than laboratory research. The effects and benefits, and detractions, will not be established with one test. We are merely establishing the possible benefits of training of this sort, and opening the door to further experimentation."

Walt sighed. He crossed his meaty arms and looked over Asnee. "Give him a break, As," he called.

"Not until he hit something!" Asnee called back, smacking Aaron on the calves again and again.

"Ah, okay, okay!" Aaron said, slipping away from the bag and away from Asnee. He went for his towel and water. His hands wrapped and the heavy bag gloves covering his knuckles, he looked dressed for the fight.

"Road work, bag work, mitt work, all of that gets done on gravity days," Elliot said. Farahi seemed confused. "Ring work, mat work, and floor work get done on normal days."

"I don't think that's gonna do it," Walt insisted.

"Me neither," said Asnee, leaning on his waffle bat like it was a cane.

"What's...what are...road work?" Farahi started to ask.

"?" Elliot said. He seemed genuinely surprised by the scientist's ignorance. "It's old boxing parlance. Road work is cardio; jogging and sprinting. You ran along the road? Road work. Bag work is punching the heavy bag, the double-end bag, the speed bag, etc. Mitt work is doing drills against a partner holding mitts. Ring work is sparring. Mat work is grappling and wrestling. Floor work is strength training. Comes from doing push-ups and sit-ups on the floor."

"Yeah, so, anyway," said Walt, scratching his forehead. "Point is, we can't partition off the training like that."

"Yeah we can," Elliot spelled out, both confidently and decisively. So adamant was he that Walt conceded. Feeling the case made, Elliot looked to Aaron who was chugging from his water bottle. "First three weeks, we get your wind back. Second three weeks, we focus on striking. Third three weeks, we keep your striking sharp and get your wrestling skills back. Last three weeks, we re-tighten your conditioning and get you ready."

"Sounds good," Aaron said, still panting a little, gasps which did not inspire confidence in his coaches.

Aaron tugged at his elbow pad as he rode the subway home. The rumble and clack of the car was lulling him to sleep. The vibration felt warm inside him and it seemed to make his bruises considerably

less present. The lights flickered occasionally with some of the turns and banks in the track. The heater overhead blew down tufts of hot air against the cold night of the city. Aaron was sitting between two vents, gaining the benefit of the heat without any of the abrasive blasts of air.

Across from him, a young father was reading to his son from a digital book. The little boy sat on his father's lap, tapping the screen to get to each subsequent page. In his ear, the father was narrating a story of butterflies and sunshine. The lights flickered again and the two faces were lit by the screen, the rest of their bodies silhouettes created by the passing city lights beyond the metro.

The subway stopped and Aaron disembarked into cement chill. The frigid air was churned by the subways tunnels, making the fighter shiver despite being bundled up. He jogged up the steps, passing a homeless man playing a guitar for change and a newspaper stand closing up for an early dinner. Out on the street, Aaron crossed two more streets under the blanket of cold city lights. He glanced up at the signs overhead that created the technicolor shadows for his walk home. An ad for a sports drink and heart medicine dominated his neighborhood.

Aaron unlocked the metal door into his building's vestibule and checked the mailbox by the door. Behind the long metal slate were two bills and a credit card offer. With nowhere but the leaf-filled corners to toss them, he took them with him. He bypassed the 'Out of Order' sign on the elevator and jogged up the stairs. He wasn't sure when the gravity training would start to pay off but four flights was as rough as always.

The door was blocked onto his floor and it took some effort to force it open. Inside, he found the tiles beneath the door had broken and wedged under the door again. "Jesus," he griped as he kicked away at the shards of tile, knocking them across the hallway but clearing out the path for the door. He rubbed his hands as he headed halfway down the hallway to his apartment.

Inside was the smell of queso and lightly blackened chicken. Aaron took one deep whiff and smiled. He didn't take his jacket off for a second, only fell back against the door and drank in the warm, welcoming smells. Maria's head popped around the edge of the kitchen entryway. "Hey baby," she said with a cheerful grin before going back into the kitchen.

Aaron left his jacket and sweatshirt on the rack and came into the kitchen to find a smorgasbord in the making. "What's this?" he asked his wife, wrapping his bruised hands around her slender waist.

"Game night, baby," she said, seasoning a batch of chicken. "Martine and Hex are coming over."

Aaron's optimism flickered a bit and he nodded. "Right." He stood back. Maria kept seasoning dinner. "We're 9-0 and if we play good tonight, we'll seal the playoffs, I'm sure." Aaron only nodded and leaned against the other side of the narrow counter. His muscles and joints ached and he found himself wishing for a long, hot bath. Maria turned and tossed some spice at him, making him smile. "I know you're cutting weight, but it's early. You can have some chips."

"Yeah," he said, not fully committed. He leaned down a bit to look at his wife's eyes. "Baby, why are you wearing those?" He slipped off her black-rimmed glasses held together with tape. "We got you some new glasses."

"They don't fit as well," she said. "I wear 'em to work. I'll put them on when company gets here." She took the old glasses and returned them to her eyes. "You go get a shower," she urged as she brushed her shoulder-length hair from her face. "Dinner will be ready by kickoff." Aaron nodded, tight-lipped and excused himself.

Underneath the faucet in the shower, Aaron stared at the water falling. After spending so many hours in the gravity chamber, he expected the water to fall in slow motion, but it came streaming down on him at the usual pace, even the two spouts on the right of the head which streamed off against the wall, causing the paper above the shower stall to curl.

The soap lathered like always. The shampoo bubbled like normal too. Water dripped and flowed like it always did, with no difference in how it moved. Aaron began to lose some of his luster for the gravity chamber. Whatever effect it was going to have, he didn't expect it to be much at this point.

As the first quarter came to an end, Aaron headed into the kitchen, laughing. "Kickers aren't real players until the score's tied, then suddenly they're the team mascot!" he called.

"Kickers are heroes," Maria yelled after him.

"Yeah, when they kick straight," yelled back Martine, following Aaron into the kitchen, carrying an empty tray. "Get me one too," he asked Aaron. Aaron got a bottle of water from the fridge and handed it to his friend. "How's the new gym working?" he asked as he leaned against the counter.

Aaron shrugged. "I don't know. Too early to tell, I think." He chugged the water. "Asnee doesn't seem impressed."

"Yeah, well, nothing impresses that little grouch," Martine comiserated.

"Hey, moon man," said Hex coming into the kitchen. The appliance-crowded hallway felt positively claustrophobic with three people in it. "How's the zero-g training going?"

"It's not zero-g, that'd be no gravity," Aaron defended with a smile. "They're cranking up the gravity, not dropping it."

"Whatever, man," Hex teased. A foot taller than Aaron and Martine, he had the same lithe build of both of them, of a fighter hungry in every sense.

"Asnee doesn't like it," Martine told Hex. Hex snorted and filled his water from the faucet.

"I got cold," Aaron offered.

"Cold's bad for the digestion," Hex said.

"Where do you get this stuff?" Martine laughed.

"Hex!" yelled his girlfriend. "Where are my grapes?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm bringing 'em," he yelled back at her. He helped himself to Aaron's fridge and a colander of red grapes. As he pulled them out, Aaron snagged a few off the metal bowl. "But no, cold water is bad for the digestion. Bad for the stomach."

"No it's not," Martine argued, laughing at his friend. "That's total bull, man! No wonder you're messed up for half your training camps."

"Hey, at least I'm not training on the moon!" Hex defended, pointing at Aaron. He and Martine headed back into the kitchen,

singing the Police's Walking on the Moon in multiple keys, none of which was correct. They left Aaron behind, his smile wringing out a little.

\*\*\*Ten Weeks Out\*\*\*

Aaron was struggling to find the rhythm with the speedbag.

The teardrop-shaped bag of leather dangling beneath the wood platform was flying just fine. He'd hit it and it would rebound like normal, rocketting back and forth. But for some reason, he just couldn't find the rhythm to keep the sequence going. Working the platform was all about syncing up one's hands, body, feet, and strikes. And for some reason, he just couldn't get them all in tune.

The rear door opened and Aaron turned. Asnee was waiting as the door behind him locked and the gravity in the vestibule synced gradually with the gravity in the training gym itself. The round Filipino winced and held his head, leaning against the door of the vestibule as the light turned green and the door unlocked. "You okay?" Aaron asked, abandoning the bag.

"Stupid doors," the short, stubby Filipino coach said. He sat down on a weight lifting bench by the door and breathed slowly. The gym was cramped with exercise equipment. Even pushed to the edges, there was precious little available floor space. Asnee leaned back and tilted his head up. He took several deep gulps of breath. "My doctor, she no likes me being in here." Asnee opened his eyes wide and blinked them as if he was just waking up. He sat up, his shoulders popping when he did. "My girls, they tell me to listen."

"Your doc wants you to take your heart medicine," Aaron said. He touched Asnee's neck with his wrapped fist, two fingers on his vein. Asnee grimaced at the contact but didn't protest. Aaron timed the aging man's pulse but found the numbers frustratingly adequate. "You want to take it easy today?"

Asnee answered around with a smack to the inner thigh with his plastic bat. "No!" he yelled, Aaron dancing away, holding his groin. "You got fight in ten weeks. You gonna win that fight, so help me, if I gotta kill you myself!"

"Right, right," Aaron muttered, rubbing his tender inner thigh.

"Now let's get to work!" Asnee yelled before smacking Aaron on the arm, making him yelp and jump into action.

The metal handrail stung Aaron's temple. The metallic cold felt good and hurt at the same time as Aaron drowsed on the metro. The ride seemed to be getting longer and longer each day. All he could think about was getting home and crawling under a blanket. He wrung his hands together, his fingers feeling clammy.

As the car came to a stop halfway home, he stared with drooping eyes through the windows across the station. He caught the gaze of two figures on a poster. He sat up suddenly, a hopeful smirk turning into a delighted grin. It was a poster for his fight against Hank 'the Grinder' Osama. Aaron had to lean forward a bit, his eyes taking a second to fully adjust. He didn't get a clear look at the poster until the metro kicked into motion and began to slide on towards its destination. Aaron's smile trailed the poster into the distance.

\*\*\*Eight Weeks Out\*\*\*

"It's been interesting," Aaron answered as he, Walt, Asnee, and Eliot, sat around Eliot's phone. The four were on the floor of the gravity chamber, the bright lights and stark white décor practically forcing them all to squint and hold their heads in pain. "The lack of sparring has been the biggest issue. I only get to do any sparring and rolling once or twice a week."

"That's deliberate," Walt spoke up rather suddenly. The old wrestling coach kind of glared at Aaron, making the fighter look around, confused as to what he'd done now. "I like to scale back his sparring the closer he gets to fight night. That avoids injury and makes him hungry for the..." Walt rolled his head. "...for the fight."

"And how's the equipment?" asked Ahmed 'the Big D' Delkash, the color commentator of the Jake and Big D sports radio show. "Is it all super space-age stuff?"

"Nah, not really," Aaron said, leaning forward in the circle of men over Eliot's cell phone. "It honestly looks like one of those high-end gyms, like Planet Fitness."

"But white instead of that ugly-ass purple," interjected Walt with an old-school snarl to his tone.

"Yeah, exactly," agreed Aaron. "But it's like a gym. Just, you know, a gym. I mean, all the bags are plastic and vinyl, which I'm not a fan of. The mats are really weird because they aren't the usual mats you roll on. They're...I don't know what," he laughed.

"Space mats!" exclaimed the D.

"Yeah, I guess so," Aaron laughed, as did the others.

"Have you noticed any changes in your performance?" asked Jake Tyler, the straight man of the two.

Aaron looked at Walt and Asnee but they were both reserved and silent. Aaron glanced at Eliot and saw him looking equally reserved but for a very different reason. "Absolutely," Aaron lied. "I feel amazing. I mean, it's taking my joints a little while to get used to it all but I definitely feel so much faster out in the regular world." He laughed again. "Honestly, the biggest problem has been feeling cold."

"Cold?" asked the D. "Like..."

"Yeah, cold," Aaron laughed. "I need to ask the doc about that."

A chime came from Walt's watch and he checked it. He looked across at Asnee and the little Filipino man said, "Okay, talk over. We go back to punching things." He started to get up, but had trouble, necessitating Aaron to help him get his balance.

"I think we need to call it there, fellas," Eliot said into the radio show on the other end of his phone. He got up as well and paced towards the door, thanking the radio show's host and audience.

Aaron meanwhile rolled his back a bit, his vertebrae popping. "That was...fun." He looked to Walt. "I never been interviewed for a radio show. Only podcasts and magazines."

"Beat the Grinder and it'll happen a lot more," Walt told him. "Now we need to focus on--"

The sting of a plastic bat interrupted the motivational tone. "Hit something!" Asnee yelled.

\*\*\*Six Weeks Out\*\*\*

Renee, the photographer's aid, spritzed Aaron with water from a spray bottle, making him shiver. The water beaded on Aaron's oiled-up shoulders and chest as he shivered under the bright lights. The gym was clogged full of pocket boxes, light diffusers, and other complicated photography rigs. Every square inch of space that wasn't in the carefully staged shot was taken up with stands and booms to control the lightning in order to make everything look natural.

Under said lights, Eliot was burning alive while his shadowed side froze. He was just about used to the difference in temperature when the assistant sprayed him again, this time on the neck. He jerked his head to the side and was blinded yet again by the bright photography boom lights. All but surrendered in disorientation, he dropped his hands. The photographer lowered her camera and asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's just..." Aaron watched the aid spray him again. Catching him right on the chest, it didn't bother him like the others but he still glared at her.

"We good?" asked Eliot, standing behind the photographer.

The blonde woman, her hair tied back behind her head with her own locks, flipped through the pictures on her camera. She didn't seem convinced. "I think we're good on the cover shot," she decided. "Renee?" she said to her assistant, calling the girl over. They turned to the box of photography aids situated around a laptop and began to plan the next batch.

Eliot walked over to Aaron. He took him by the scruff of the neck and shook his head paternally. "You okay?" he asked with a disarming laugh.

"Yeah," Aaron said, rolling his eyes. "This is just...just weird as hell."

"You've done photoshoots before," Eliot chastized.

"Yeah, for fighting magazines, for MMA mags," Aaron said nervously. "I've never been in Scientific America."

"Crossover comes with the territory of being a big-name fighter," Eliot grinned. "Especially when you're on the cutting edge of sports science." He looked around the gravity chamber as he did. "Come on, these shots are going to be in textbooks and history books and...and other books, I'm sure." He laughed with Aaron. "This is big for the doc. This is going to put gravity training on the map." Aaron nodded, just agreeing without too much thought.

"Okay, how about we move on to the workout shots?" the photographer said, returning to her standing mat. Positioned between the lighting booms, she was almost a disembodied voice.

Eliot checked with Aaron and smiled encouragingly. "You got it," said the manager, stepping aside so Aaron could be in the limelight.

\*\*\*Four Weeks Out\*\*\*

In the green room, Aaron texted 'I love you' to his girlfriend. As he hit send, he hit it too hard and the phone fell from his hand, rebounding on the carpeting. "Crap!" he lunged for the phone but it was batted away at the last second by the opening of the door.

Eliot led in another suited man, followed by Hank 'the Grinder' Osama. "Hey, Aaron," said the suited man.

Eliot introduced, "Aaron, this is Darrell Overns, Hank's manager."

"Hey," Aaron said with a smile, shaking Darrell's hand but still crouched over, reaching for his phone. "Nice to..." He strained to get the phone from under a chair. "To meet you." Retrieved, he stood and clapped hands with Osama. "What's up?"

"Nothing, man," Osama said, pulling Aaron in for a hug. "How you feeling, dawg?"

"Great. You?" Aaron asked.

"Like winning," Osama told him.

"Oh, that's how it's gonna be?" Aaron smiled.

"You know it," Osama retorted, smiling also.

"Word," Aaron laughed.

"This is the first time you guys have met since the fight was signed, correct?" Darrell asked. Aaron nodded. "But you guys went to the same Silat school?"

"For, like, six months or something," Osama said. "I left and went to the muay thai gym. A-a-ron here stayed with Pencack Silat."

"Oh god, A-a-ron," Aaron recalled. "Crap, man, I'd forgotten that."

"Man, I'mma be calling you A-a-ron for the rest of your life," Osama laughed.

"Hey, guys?" came a small voice. The four men turned to see the radio station intern leaning into the green room. "We're almost ready for you, but please keep it down." The four all squeaked out apologies like scolded children until the intern left. Once the door shut, they all broke down laughing.

Aaron and Hank sat at a large, circular desk with huge computer displays built into it. It felt less like a radio booth and more like mission control at NASA. The room was full of microphones, only a few of which had tiny red LEDs showing they were active. Across from them was a man who looked for all the world like a killer whale in sweatpants was saying, "And we're back with Aaron Lafayette and 'The Grinder' Hank Osama. Guys, thanks for coming on Eight Rules with Jim Cantrell."

"Thanks for having me, man," said Hank quickly.

"Yeah, thanks for the invite," said Aaron.

Jim shuffled through a few pages with startling control, making not even the slightest sound. "So I want to start out by asking, how are you two feeling about the fight? We're one month out; just four weeks from tomorrow night. How are you guys doing?"

"Great, man," Hank dove in before Aaron could say anything. "I'm primed, I'm ready, I'm in the best shape of my life, man." He spoke quickly, aggressively. He turned to Aaron and pointed down at him. "And this punk is going down."

Aaron pulled the corners of his mouth down and stuck out his tongue. Hank slapped his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

Oblivious to the face, Jim kept reading off his notes. "Wow, those are some strong words from The Grinder. Aaron Layfaette, do you have any retort?"

"He's all talk," Aaron said calmly. He checked the window into the control booth and saw both their managers watching, Eliot looking encouraged. "I mean, I know he's a good fighter, I know he knows what he's doing, but..." Aaron turned in his chair and saw Hank circling his nipples through his shirt, giving Aaron a seductive look. "At the end of the day, he doesn't have the experience." Aaron tried to keep a straight face, but was struggling.

"Experience is what a lot of people are talking about," said Jim, still facing down, his eyes never clearing past the console. "Grinder, Aaron's got a 17-6-1 fight record. This will be just your sixth professional fight. How do you--"

"Yeah, but I'm undefeated," Hank said quickly, speaking right into the microphone like it had insulted him. "I'm gonna break anybody that gets in my way." Aaron held up a fist and mimed turning a crank to slowly extend his middle finger. "I'm a machine, man," Hank said, actively trying to keep from looking at Aaron for fear of bursting into giggles. "Ain't nobody gonna stop me."

"Every fighter says that," Aaron told Jim and his listeners. "Every fighter says 'I'm unstoppable', until they get stopped." Hank reached over to Aaron and began to wiggle his finger just inside Aaron's ear. "It doesn't matter how good he feels, man," Aaron said, slapping Hank's hand away, the two fighters on the verge of breaking down into a giggle fit. "He's going in for a fight and how he feels is irrelevant."

Behind the window, watching their fighters, Eliot and Darrel both covered their faces in mutual embarrassment.

\*\*\*Two Weeks Out\*\*\*

The mitts sounded different.

Asnee, holding two mitts that extended down to his elbows, held the targets at different heights and intervals, prompting sudden combinations of punches along with the occasional knee or elbow. Aaron kept his hands up, focusing mostly on protecting himself, concerning himself less with power. Beyond him physically and his attention, the edges of the room were glowing, an unnecessary signal that gravity had been intensified. He and Asnee had used the gym for long enough now, they rarely noticed the glow.

The pop of fingerless gloves, a few ounces heavier than the real thing, didn't echo like they used to. Or rather, they echoed like they had eleven weeks ago. The mitt work they engaged in had been a new experience for Aaron. The mitts had given less and the sound of impact was no satisfying crack or pop, but merely a dry thud. It had been disheartening to hit with full power and hear little and feel even less. The return of that sound, of that reinforcement, was encouraging.

Sweat beaded on his brow as he followed Asnee around the white gym, hammering out combinations without thought.

\*\*\*ONE WEEK OUT\*\*\*

Aaron's head was swimming. He felt disoriented and tired as he walked down the narrow aisle of the corner bodega. Yellowed tiles on the floor and ugly yellow lights overhead faded the packaging of the food put out just that day. Maria selected a can of tomato sauce, then noticed Aaron staring at a box of pasta. "The diet getting to you?" she asked with a sweet giggle.

Aaron reached for the box of hard noodles and turned it over in his hand, staring at the purple packaging. He just shook his head and shut his eyes. "I don't..." He put the box away and grabbed Maria's shoulder, like he was going to fall over.

"Baby?" she said, steadying him.

"I'm fine, I just..." He gestured passed her and she helped him to the front of the store. Across from an indifferent cashier, Maria helped Aaron sit down on a metal bench next to the candy and quarter-toy dispensers. Maria put the basket aside and knelt before Aaron. "I'm fine," he promised her, his eyes shut tight. "I just...I just got real disoriented." He fluttered his eyelashes a few time, feeling himself adjust. Adjust to what, he couldn't guess.

"I'm worried about you, baby," said Maria, her big brown eyes locked on his. She touched his forehead like a mother checking her child's temperature. "This isn't like you. I seen you go through camp. This is different."

"Yeah," he laughed. "Yeah it is." The metal bench creaked when he leaned back. He opened his eyes deliberately and saw the bodega with utter clarity. He stared at the unfinished roof, bare like a warehouse. The I-beams were coated in some material that looked like foam frozen into stone. Maria was still watching him, worried. She put a finger to his throat, checking his pulse. He laughed and pulled her hand away. "I'm fine," he promised her. "I'm fine. It's passing. It's..." He waved it off. "Just...give me a minute." He blushed, a little self-conscious at her doting. "You...you go and finish shopping."

"I don't want to leave you," she insisted, only to be drowned out by his stomach gurgling at her. He looked at her, mortified, before they both broke out laughing. "Well okay then," she laughed, standing up. She returned her basket to her elbow and looked down at him. "Just take it easy, baby. I'll be done quick." He nodded and watched her head back down the aisle, selecting the final things with some urgency.

An errant glance and a spot of familiar white caught his eye. Aaron leaned passed the candy dispenser and grabbed a magazine off the rack. It was a copy of Scientific America with his training room on the cover. 'Artificial Gravity Goes Competitive' read the title. Curiosity and delight drove Aaron to flip through the magazine, bypassing high-end articles involving science well beyond his comprehension. Then, on page 34, he saw himself staring back. Muscles deeply etched, glistening with perspiration, the photo showed him striking the gym's heavy bag, the shiny plastic bending dramatically against the impact.

Aaron flipped through the six-page spread. He ignored portions about how the training center worked, about the science of tensor-boson generation, soliton waves, and how natural gravity was

augmented magnetically rather than electrically. Instead he read his own quotes. They were precious few but they were there. He co-starred in the article, top billing given to the hyper-gravity chamber, but it was still him.

Aaron put the magazine back and looked again at the roof, smiling contentedly to himself.

### \*\*\*FIGHT NIGHT\*\*\*

Aaron was sitting in the corner of the locker room, a towel over his head. He was doing his breathing exercises; inhaling twice, then exhaling once. The focusing on his breathing helped keep him from getting the jitters. He'd peek up through the towel and see the other fighters on the undercard who were burning themselves out, shadowboxing and doing excessively long warm-ups.

His hands were taped and ready. He felt like he couldn't move them like normal, that the slightest motion was a hard-wired strike ready to knock somebody out. He hadn't felt this jacked since his first fight almost a decade ago. He felt like he had an edge and it felt good. He felt ready.

Walt and Asnee came and got him. They put him through a quick warm-up, nothing he hadn't done a million times before. That was the idea. Not so much to prepare his body. It was ready. It was the familiarity, the routine, to establish normalcy. All during the mitt work and grappling drills, Aaron felt like the world was in slow motion. He felt like he was a cloud, floating through life. And every movement he made was lightning quick. He felt ready.

Elliot and the usher came and found them. Then came Aaron's favorite part; the march to the octagon. They exited the locker rooms and came down the long line of seats. It was big for an armory. The octagon was set in the middle, surrounded by a sea of folding seats. Most of the seats were empty because everybody was standing. A second-floor balcony looked down from above, though more than a few seats probably couldn't see because of the complex lighting rig hanging over the octagon.

At the steps up to the octagon, Elliot turned and faced Aaron. He did the ring-doctor thing, applying Vaseline and checking the tape

on his gloves. He said something Aaron knew was encouraging to him, but the crowd was too loud and he was too focused. Next, the official came over and checked Aaron's gloves and wrappings and patted him down. He gestured into the ring and Aaron slipped inside.

The next few minutes passed in a blur as the announcer spoke, talking about the event, the venue, thanking the sponsors, and so on. After an eternity, he finally got to A few minutes passed in a blur as the announcer spoke, talking about the event, the venue, and then finally the two fighters. Aaron looked at the banner Elliot and Walt hung over the side of the cage, where half the support for his training camp came from. Aside from half-a-dozen local businesses, the logo for Gravity Experimental was front and center.

Across the octagon from Aaron, The Grinder was staring him down. Their friendly demeanor from the radio show was gone. There was no sign of the familiar friendship of schoolmates. It wasn't Hank Osama across from Aaron; it was The Grinder and he looked ready to murder Aaron. Aaron didn't return a glare of hatred but one of dismissive indifference. In that moment, The Grinder wasn't a friend or an acquaintance or a foe. He wasn't even a person. He was just an inconsequential obstacle between Aaron and having his hand raised.

The MC stopped talking and the people grew louder. The ref came to the middle of the octagon and Aaron knew he needed to approach. He walked up to face The Grinder. The ref spoke, saying the usual stuff about 'clean fighting' and 'no this' and 'no that'. Aaron had heard it before. He didn't need to hear it now. Not that he really could, with the crowd cheering like it was.

He managed to make out 'touch gloves' and he tapped The Grinder's light fingerless gloves before backing away. He put his back to the rubber-coated chain link fence of the octagon and waited. His hands up by his eyes, he waited. The air was cold and he felt his face was flushed. The crowd made noise but it was a low throb to his ears as he focused.

Aaron saw the ref slap his hands and then throw his right fist at the ground. He heard the bell toll.

It was on.

Aaron didn't go straight in but came at the Grinder along an arc. The tall, skinny guy punched twice at Aaron with two slow jabs that stopped Aaron's advance cold. He threw a third punch, so slow Aaron

was sure he was toying with him. Knowing not to trade blows, Aaron stepped in with a hop and kicked at the Grinder's thighs. The Grinder skipped back but did so casually, easily.

Aaron followed with a quick set of fast jabs, popping right at Grinder's face. The Grinder swatted them away, slipping around the last two, but he seemed to be playing a game of slow defense, no blistering offense Aaron was expecting.

Aaron felt some panic as he heard corner men from both sides of the fight shouting, their words drowned out by the cheering crowd. Aaron threw another jab, Grinder blocking and countering ineffectively with a punch. When he planted himself to strike, Aaron dropped forward and entangled the guy's long, tiny legs. Shooting in close, Aaron took him to the ground and maneuvered out to the side. The Grinder seemed to still be reacting to being taken down and half-a-step behind the moment. As Aaron crawled atop him, getting the mount, he had a clear shot right at the Grinder's face. Aaron felt bad taking it, it was so obvious.

BAM!

One punch, right into the face, and beanpole was out. Aaron drew back his fist to punch again but instinctively knew it wouldn't

One punch, right into the face, and beanpole was out. Aaron drew back his fist to punch again but knew it would be needed. His fist hovered in the air as he waited for someone, anyone, to do something. The ref was coming in, to throw himself between the two fighters, but he seemed to be swimming through molasses.

Aaron stood back on his own accord and looked around. The crowd was cheering. He looked down at his opponent and realized he was standing and beanpole wasn't. Aaron smiled and held up his hands. "Aw yeah," he said, accepting his victory. He closed his eyes and transcended himself, becoming the moment.

Aaron was sitting pretty.

With Elliot was on his right, and a huge wad of microphones in front of him like a bouquet of flowers, Aaron sat on a throne of victory behind a cheap table with a dollar store tablecloth. He couldn't stop smiling. He was sitting pretty and enjoying every second of it. Walter came and sat down across from Aaron on the other side of Asnee, the

two men all smiles. Aaron laughed, unable to contain his delight and high. on his right, and a huge wad of microphones in front of him like a bouquet of flowers. He was sitting pretty.

"First question," Elliot said to the dozen or so reporters in the side-room of the armory.

A bunch of the sports reporters all spoke at once, but one guy verbally broke away from the pack and the others let him ask his question. "Aaron," he said way too casually, "How do you respond to the allegations of using illegal performance-enhancing techniques?"

Just like that, the whole evening spun on a dime. The pit of Aaron's stomach dropped out and he blinked in shock. "Wh-What?" he asked, not following. He looked at Elliot like he was in a bar fight and looking for backup. His manager looked like a shark, ready to attack the reporter, giving him a glare not dissimilar to the one The Grinder had given him across the cage.

The reporter seemed all too satisfied to expound. "Several of the other fighters have filed grievances that you used unapproved techniques—"

"That's pure crap," Elliot interjected, muscling Aaron out of the way so he could speak into the microphones. "Aaron Lafayette participated in a scientific experiment which the athletic commission knew well in advance AND APPROVED," he finished with tremendous emphasis, tapping the table so hard, it shook the microphones. Aaron glanced over at Walter and Asnee, his face feeling cold. Neither of them looked confident and clung to the protection of silence.

"The athletic commission's commission claims that a training program was submitted," said the reporter. "They adamantly insist that they had no substantial knowledge of any advanced technology being employed."

Aaron didn't understand what was being said, but he felt like his heart was stopping. Or about to burst, he couldn't tell.

"The use of gravity-fluctuation in training is not banned by any athletic organization or performance standard," Elliot was quick to say.

"Nowhere in the ethics of competition is there any allowance for the variations of the environment in which an athlete can be trained," called another reporter from the back.

"Then Muhammad Ali should have been banned for shadowboxing in a pool," Elliot called.

Asnee spoke up. "He never train in pool. That myth."

"You're not helping, Asnee," Walt told him with a glare.

"The training Aaron Lafayette underwent was not banned or controversial in the slightest," Elliot maintained. "We had the full support, cooperation, and approval, of the athletics commission. They knew, as soon as they fight was sanctioned, that this was the method Aaron Lafayette would be using to prepare for the fight. They knew and approved it."

"The athletics commission is claiming otherwise," said the reporter. Flashes from cameras were going off near-constantly. The strobe effect was making Aaron light-headed. "They're forming an inquiry to look into the rules violated by administering unapproved technology to a fighter."

"Unapproved?!" Elliot yelled as Aaron watched. "He was the first person to use it!"

"So then you acknowledge that your fighter employed unapproved technology in his training?" the reporter said, speaking loudly to get over his colleagues all trying to ask the same question.

Elliot stood up. "We're done," he said with a wave of his hand. "Come on," he told Aaron and the others. Walt and Asnee both stood up without hesitation. Only Aaron lingered. He looked out at the reporters, a few flashes blinding him. He felt himself choke up at the sight he'd waited so long to see.

He'd won. This was his moment.

So why were they leaving?

'Gravity' fighter stripped of win'

'Performance-enhancing training called into question'

'Probations for ethics violations expected'

Aaron clicked off the browser of his laptop. He didn't need to see anymore headlines. He hadn't slept. He'd been watching the story break all night. Nobody talked about the win. Nobody talked about how decisively he'd done it, or how hard he'd worked. Nobody talked about the ten-hour days. All they talked about was the gravity-fluctuation chamber.

Nobody had interviewed him. Not that he would have known what to say. And not that he would be allowed to say anything. Elliot had made that very clear, all the way back to his apartment. So Aaron was holed up in his one-bedroom, waiting.

Maria shifted beside him. He looked at her as she twisted up in the covers like a little rabbit burrowing in its warren. She looked so peaceful in the city lights that came through the bedroom window. The distant sound of traffic this early in the morning was more of a comfort than a distraction, an ambient and eternal reminder of life.

A chime from his phone and Aaron checked it. "You up?" wrote Elliot.

"Yeah," responded Aaron. He slipped out of the bedroom and headed to the living room and flopped down on the cheap couch. "I hit the news big," he joked.

"You mind if I come by?" Elliot wrote.

"Oh boy," Aaron said to himself, bracing. He wrote back, "Sure, when?"

There was a light knock at the door.

Aaron glanced back into the bedroom to make sure Maria hadn't been awoken, then padded to the front door. On the other side was Elliot. He was in the same suit he'd worn to the fight. "Hey," Aaron said, letting him in.

"Hey," Elliot said, in that way that always meant bad news. He hedged, then checked deeper into the apartment beyond the entryway. "Where's Maria?"

"Asleep," Aaron told him. "It's four in the morning."

That seemed to confuse Elliot somehow, but he dismissed it. "Look, man, there's no way to say this." He just surrendered. "We've been stripped."

"Yeah, I read," Aaron said, angered.

"No, not of the win," Elliot cautioned. Just like at the press conference, the very bottom of Aaron's being dropped out. Elliot closed his eyes and had to fight to open them, to look Aaron in the eyes. "We've been stripped of clearance." He gestured with his hand summarily. "I've been stripped of all licenses; you're banned from competing for three years."

Aaron stared for a half a second, then looked away. "Huh," he said. That surprised Elliot. He started to challenge the lack of reaction, but before he did, he got it. "Three years?" Aaron asked. His voice was wavering, like his knees. "Th-three..." Intense numbness took him over and Aaron had to sit down on the couch, managing to get down only with Elliot's help. "Oh god," he groaned like he was going to throw up. He bent down and put his head between his knees. "Three years?" he whispered, stammering.

"Believe it or not, it actually could be a lot worse," Elliot told him. "It could have been a performance-enhancing drug; then you'd be banned for life. As it is, because there's no specific rule banning gravity training, three years is the maximum they can assign."

Aaron groaned so loudly, it was nearly a scream. "But we got clearance!" he shouted suddenly, standing so fast that Elliot stumbled back. "We didn't break any rules! If anything, we followed them to the letter!"

"There was no rule to break," Elliot started to explain. He glanced at the bedroom, certain Maria had awoken but he didn't see her. "There was no rule to break," Elliot repeated, trying to be calm and calming, but still honest, "which means they can interpret the outcome however they want." Put flatly, Elliot just shrugged. "You won too decisively. As a result, they've decided gravity training is too effective. It unevens the playing field. They can't allow competitors to have that kind of an advantage. Upsets the sport."

"Okay, fine," Aaron said. "They ban the training from here on out. But to strip us of the win when we—"

"Darrell, Hank's manager, is insisting the victory was too decisive," explained Elliot. "They're pressuring for us to be prosecuted on charges of cheating."

"Cheating? How?!" Elliot just looked at Aaron, underscoring the obvious answer. "Why? I cheated because I used a device that didn't exist ten years ago?" Aaron screamed. "What about somebody who's got more experience, or just a better training program? Or maybe just flat-out better equipment?"

Elliot tried to reason with him. "That's different."

"Why?" Aaron defied.

"Because it is," Elliot all but surrendered with a shrug. "They make the rules and their rules go. And their rules say you cheated."

"They say we cheated retroactively," Aaron growled, fury and despair fusing with internalized rage.

"Doesn't matter to them," Elliot said with all the sympathy in the world. "You trained smarter, not harder. And they can't have that."