

Maxfield Perish: Zombie Fighter  
by  
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My name is Maxfield Perish.  
I am fifteen years old.  
I am a zombie fighter.

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You'd think the zombie fights were exciting, but they're all kind of the same. I really wish Lemonjello would do something else, come up with some other kind of way to keep the folks here entertained, or at least busy. Isn't there enough shit to do around here without taking time away from the middle of the day to watch some dopes fight zombies?

I'm standing in the shadows of the doorway to the bathrooms. One thing to remember is that Stateville used to be a men's prison, so there's no women's locker room. It's all dicks, all the time here. The ladies have had to kind of adapt to that.

But see? I'm already losing focus. I need to be focused on the fight. Stay on the fight.

So. Bathroom. Shadows. Standing.

Elliot Ghoul is our announcer. I don't know how he does it, but the dude is still fat. A whole year on regular servings and healthy foods and the guy still weighs more than three of me. It's a fucking mystery.

Elliot says he used to be in the theater, an actor somewhere in Chicago. He was in Joliet the night of the evacuations, slumming at the riverboats, losing at blackjack. That's how he got here. He's got a hell of a voice, which is good, because there's no PA system. He needs to have everybody in the stands hear him do the introductions.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Wednesday edition of Zombie Fights! I'm your announcer, Elliot Ghoul.

“Let's get ready to *shammmmmmmble!*”

The applause are kind of light today. Sounds like the stands are less than half full. I can't tell if it's that or if the crowd's finally getting sick of Elliot's lame-o jokes.

“This afternoon's entertainments are a three-fight card. These are battle-to-the-death events, ladies and gentlemen. Two combatants enter, one combatant leaves. Please be advised these contests are not for the squeamish or faint of heart. Infants and the elderly are strongly urged to remove themselves from the premises. If these patrons wish to

remain, the management cannot be held responsible for any damage — physical, psychological, or emotional — experienced, today or in the future.

“Now, please stand and join me in singing our National Anthem.”

I don't even know why Elliot bothers with the disclaimers any more. It's not like anybody's going to sue him, right? It's not like what we're doing is illegal. Maybe it is somewhere, but here, in the Land of Lemonjello, it's all good.

*“ . . . The bombs bursting in air . . . . ”*

And what's with the National Anthem? There is no National anymore, no nation. But if I peeked around the corner, I'd see everybody there with his hat off or a hand over her heart. Kind of weird and pathetic. Even weirder, the people singing the National Anthem and saying the Pledge of Allegiance? A lot of them are the ones who told God to fuck off. Well, if God didn't save them, what makes them think the United States Government will? It makes no fucking sense.

*“ . . . and the home of the braaaaaaaaaaaaaave! ”*

*PLAY BALL!*”

The first two bouts are just all right. Standard stuff, fairly harmless: ToneDef vs. something in a suit, then Sandwich took down a SoccerZom.

Tone's still a little green, so instead of putting on a show, he went in swinging and bashed Z's head within the first twenty seconds. I know how it goes for him, though. That twenty seconds is like the longest in your life.

Sandwich did a little dance, toyed with his some. He likes to use a samurai sword. It's not a real one. Are you kidding? I'd love to have one of those babies. A real samurai sword cuts through squishy like a bird through air. It's beautiful to see that tool at work. But Sandwich's came from some junk-ass pawnshop. He likes to say it's real, but he's full of shit.

Sandwich knows how to put on a show. The brother takes risks, though. He gets close, lets Z grab at him, maybe lets them get a handful of shirt — then he whips around, blade up, and lops off the arm. Then, with the dead hand still dangling from his shirt, Sandwich starts to bob-and-weave around Z, slicing at its face and hands with the tip of the sword.

*Oops!* There goes an eye.

*Whoops!* There goes the nose.

Somebody once said his moves were almost 'surgical,' meaning he could cut like a doctor. I don't know about that. But he does put on a good show.

Pretty soon it's over and Boyle's dragged away the big chunks.

I don't know who Boyle was before or what he did to piss off Jello, but whatever it was must have been bad. Not bad enough for LemonJello to toss Boyle over the wall, but bad enough to make him the poor fucker who has to clean up after the fights. Boyle has to drag off the zombie parts, scrub down the pool, clean out the pipes, and get rid of all the mess. This is the shittiest job in the joint, worse than taking care of the bathrooms, which, by the way, is also Boyle's job.

I don't know anybody who talks to Boyle. I don't know anybody who wants to. Maybe it's because they don't want to piss off Lemonjello by talking to Boyle or maybe they're just too creeped out by him, think something's wrong with him, that he's got zombie cooties and he might be contagious. I don't talk to him because I don't like the looks of the guy. He's a nasty little fucker. Jello has to keep him around for a reason. What that is, I can't even guess.

Elliot walks to the edge of the pool.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! It is time for our final match of the afternoon. At only fifteen years old, the next contestant is one of Zombie Fight's most enduring champions. Standing five feet nine inches tall, weighing one hundred thirty-two pounds, and with a record of one hundred ninety one, zero, and zero, he is Stateville's winningest fighter ever. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our very own *Maxfield Perish!*”

Coming out from around the wall, I can see I was right — the stands are empty this afternoon. Only thirty or forty people. I wonder what's going on . . .

Whatever it is, the die-hards are all here, the Super Fans. I make a lot of eye contact and wave to everyone. Cassandra, my favorite “bath assistant” is here, too. I give her a wink; she bows me a kiss.

All of my gear is strapped on: full protective headgear, gloves, boots, long shirt and long pants.

My weapon is kind of hard to describe. It's called a mace. Not like that pepper spray shit the cops used to use. This thing has a handle wrapped in heavy-grit sandpaper. The length of it is round, about two feet long and as thick as my big toe. The business end is about as long and wide as my hand. There are four faces to the thing, each sticking out from each other at right angles and shaped kind of like long diamonds. The top and side points and the thick edges are all sharp as shit and will crack a melon better than Sandwich's knock-off samurai. It has a name, too. It's called SkullCrusher.

“And in this corner — weighing in at two hundred nineteen pounds, Fast Freddie Thommmmmmmson!”

The way the wranglers hook a contender is they clamp a steel collar around it's neck. The collar has six loops welded to it so the wranglers can hook on chains or, what they usually use, long steel poles with hooks on the ends. There's a trigger system in the poles that lets the wranglers work the catch-and-release from a safe distance.

Thompson looks like he spent some time in the water. Bloated, baggy, kind of saggy around the face and hands. The hair is all gone and his eyes and lots of his face skin have been eaten away by fish or birds, or both. All that would have happened between when he got bit but before he turned. Once a body goes full-metal Z, nothing will go near it. Nothing with any survival instinct, anyways.

Thompson has no lips, so I can see all his teeth, shiny white and perfectly strait, all the way up to his rotten black gums. The crowd loves this kind. Makes them look scarier than the little old ladies, goth grrrls, or skater boys we sometimes get.

I look for ears but don't see any. Most of his clothes are still on, which is unusual lately. Looks like he was mowing his lawn or playing golf when he got chomped.

Once they get Z on the line, the wranglers bring it in and chain it to the wall where they go over the body looking for stuff: money, drugs, guns, watches, jewelry, cell phones, iPods, crackberries. You wouldn't believe some of the shit they find. The wranglers skim some of it, a perk of the job. Most of the rest goes strait to the vault where Lemonjello takes a look, picks his picks, then distributes the rest.

This is how we find out the names of the Z we're up against. I don't figure the wranglers are able to get ID off of every one they hook, which means some of the names would have to be made up. Not that it matters. Whoever they used to be makes no difference now. At least not to me, anyway.

Along with SkullCrusher, I have a couple of other tools, like a machete, a hunk of filed rebar, an aluminum baseball bat. I still keep the machete and the rebar on me as a back-up pieces, but the bat had to retire. It's still hanging in my cell, kind of a trophy.

On Elliot's signal, the wranglers lead out my fighter. They've got Freddie on the trigger poles, shoving him ahead of them. Once Freddie catches wind of the rest of the crowd, he starts to rear up, flail around, trying to get loose, get to me, to the wranglers, to the warm and crunchy snacks sitting in the stands. Ohh, he's a scrapper, this Freddie Thompson.

The wranglers swing Fred around and kind of drag/shove him to the door. It's a three-foot drop to the bottom and Z don't use ladders. Stairs, yeah, but not ladders. They get him right to the end, unhook the poles, then use them to shove him in the back. Zombies always go down face first. They never use their hands to break the fall, just their jaws. We've lost some contestants that way, when a soft-skulled Z splits a head open on the pool bottom. Nothing we can do about that. I've had it happen. It's always was nice to have a night off. And, since Z technically forfeited, I get another WIN tacked on to my record. Yeah, it's kind of a cheat, but what the hell?

Maybe Engineering should build some stairs for the pool. It'd save on Z damage and might make it a little safer for the wranglers. I think I'll mention it to the Sarge or Lemonjello himself. He likes that kind of innovative shit.

I'm in the deep end, waiting for Freddie to peel himself off the ground, dark oozy something smeared from his face onto the bright blue pool bottom. It hits me as wrong, like seeing a single sneaker, torn and bloody, laying in the middle of a street and you just know some kid got killed. People die every day, some deserve it, some don't. Some just do. But black blood on the bottom of an empty pool, it's just somehow kind of wrong.

I stand here, hands empty, SkullCrusher still strapped to my back. I look relaxed but I'm all tensey. Why? What the fuck is all this shit going through my head right now? I ought to be clear and focused. My heart pounds against my chest, like it wants to run away, get the fuck out, get back to the cell, or, better yet, get to Cassandra.

I look around the pool, around the stands, into the yelling, jeering faces of the Die-Hards. They're really in a whip today. Their mouths wide, their lips stretched tight across shiny white teeth, yelling. And they all look like Z, man. Every last one of them, even Cassandra. They all look dead-eyed and hungry, like they want to eat me.

*What the fuck?*

A moan in my face. Freddy Thompson's hand crushes my right shoulder while he bites for my neck. I tilt my face plate, deflect his snapping teeth into the soggy meat of his own hand. He takes a bite, tears off the flesh, doesn't even notice he's eating himself.

I try a rolling shoulder block, but my right arm is tingly—useless. Jab left thumb into Freddy's right eyehole, wrap my hand around the back of his head, lever his face away. His loose scalp slips, letting him turn into the jam-up, teeth snap at my left wrist, missing, thank Christ. Fucker almost got out my tendons.

The crowd is going nuts.

What the fuck is the matter with me?

Freddy's not slow. He's not fast either, but not slow. He's what we call a Pack Leader. Not that he has any smarts or leadership ability; he's just the type of Z that walks a little quicker than the others, moves a little faster than the others. Nobody knows why that is. Mangy Joe says it has to do with standard distribution. He says it's kind of like taking a test in school. Some people get As and Bs, some get Ds and Fs. Most get a C. Same with being a zombie: some move faster than the rest, others move a lot slower. So, in short, Freddie gets an A in Zombie. So, good for him. Gold stars all around.

My thumb is still stuck in Freddy's eye while he moves in for another bite at my wrist. He won't be able to get through the gloves and shirt, get any skin or infect me — but

those teeth will do major damage to my moveables. I'll be damaged beyond repair and that I don't need today.

I rotate my arm up and over Freddy's head then shove him under and spin around behind him, my thumb still jammed in his skull. It looks like we're dancing now, for christssake. The crowd loves it, going nuts, cheering their throats out for a bite or a bashing, I don't know which.

Face-to-face now, I get my thumb back, along with a lot of Freddy's eye juice, brain puss, and at least a third of his scalp. He gets a Shaolin Wonder Palm to the middle of the chest, where the bones should still be strong. No point in caving in his ribs just yet.

I shouldn't have worried, though. The Wonder Palm from the left is weaker than my right, which has feeling coming back to it, but it still ain't working right. The Lefty sends Fred back two feet, then he's at me again, rawling and growling, showing me those nasty, nasty zombie teeth packed tight with somebody else's rotting flesh and skin.

Step right, block his left arm with my left, spin him around again so that he's facing the deep end. A shove in the spine and a boot in the ass gets me a little more space, gets me a little more time to pull myself together, a little more time to get my arm working again, a few more seconds to decide which tool I'm going to use to finally waste this undead motherfucker.

Another boot in the ass sends the rest of Freddy's face scraping along the bottom. If he looked bad before, he looks like total shit now: Cracked skull, skin flaps and broken teeth. He gets up. They always do.

The arm feels better. I can make fists and probably swing it all around my head by now if I want to, but I don't. I leave it hang at my side, even drop the shoulder a little to make everybody think it's hurt, that I'm at a disadvantage, that, I don't know, that I might not be a match for this pus-head, that this might be my last fight, that I might bite it here, in the bottom of this gore-slicked pool? Gasp. Oh, no.

It's all part of the show, man. This is what they're here for. Me, too, in a way.

Freddy's at my face again. Shamblers always go for the face and neck. I don't know why. It's not like it's the easiest place to get at. Whatever. Meatless fingertips scrabble at my headgear. I step just out of their reach, then again, again. Foot into something squishy, a little skid but I'm safe, my eyes never leaving Freddy T's death mouth.

Right arm still limp, I reach across with my left, grab Freddy's left shoulder and sweep-kick his legs out from under him. He goes down hard with skull-bounce off the cement bottom that sounds like somebody knocked on a door. Crowd cheers. I wave then reach over to massage my right shoulder. I wince, make it look bad, milk it, milking the tension.

Freddy on the ground. Freddy reaching for me, his mouth already wide-wide, anticipating that sweet, yummy Leg Of Max. I grab his left wrist, step to the outside and dislocate his shoulder. Two more good yanks and it's free from the socket. One more and it's out of his shirt. Freddy doesn't even know it's gone.

I step behind, stand there and wait. He's still facedown on the ground. He tries to get up with two hands, face-plants twice, then somehow figures out how to get up with the one arm. On his feet and facing away, he's already forgotten about me and starts for the meat crowding the stands.

I yell, "Yo, man! You forget sump-un?" and smack him in the head with his own hand. Freddy turns back to me, immediately forgets about the fans.

Whether he sees me with his one good eye, or if he senses me somehow, I don't know. I've seen lots of pus-brains with no eyes track a guy doing nothing but standing still. Do they key into heartbeats with some kind of super-hearing? Some kind of ESP?

I guess it's one of those things. I want to know but I don't want to know. You know?

Freddy's arm is now a toy sword. I swashbuckle his face, poke him in the melon with his own fingers, slap his face, tickle his chin. Crowd roars. Laughs and cheers all around.

There are no rounds in a Zombie fight. Bouts last as long as you have the crowd, which with their short attention spans, is about six minutes. six minutes is a fucking eternity when you're up against Z, no matter how well you're protected.

A few seconds of fuck-around, then I get to it. Boot to Freddy's chest then toss his arm in the air with a flip, catch the wrist, then whip the knob-end across his skull. Freddy's head cracks left, the rest of him follows by a quarter turn.

He comes back, grabbing for my face again. Backhand/forehand combo to his head with all the juice I've got, enough to snap his neck, but it stays attached, goddamnit. Another backhand swing, rushed, so there's not enough power and, Freddy's in the wrong place so all he gets is a glancing blow off his empty sleeve. He stumbles forward into my gut, gets his arm around my waist and I go down hard.

I take it on my right shoulder — again, *goddamnit!*

Freddy's on top of me, leaning in for a bite. I jam his right hand into his mouth. This buys me two seconds, long enough to drop the arm and grab for his broken neck, which, even through my thick gloves, feels like squeezing a water balloon full of chicken bones. The only thing keeping his head on is a few layers of rotten meat.

I start yanking, hard. Every pull drags Freddy's mouth across my faceplate, gag-nasty teeth, the hungry moan, the smell coming from him — the smell of dead thousands, the rotting bodies packed within his putrefied bowels, augh, the *fucking smell!*

Freddy's neck tears through mid-yank. I used the rest of the momentum to throw his head to the other end of the pool. Over the crowd I don't hear it bounce.

The body goes insta-limp, collapses on me like rotten beef, dead juice leaking out from somewhere, out and onto my faceplate and gear. I roll the body off, stand, and signal Elliot for a towel.

Freddy's head lays ear-down on the center drain, left eye socket weeping puss while the right slowly circles it's orbit searching for the meat, his hideous mouth still chewing the air.

I force my right arm up and back, make it work, make it reach for SkullCrusher. Then she's in my hand, the Super-Grit sandpaper biting into my leather gloves. I raise her high, high to the crowd, the crazy, fucked-up, fickle crowd who's only there to see one thing: Somebody die.

But they don't fucking get it: This isn't a battle to the Death. By the time we get here, somebody's already dead. He just doesn't know it.

I turn SkullCrusher over so she's tip down and pointed at the gaping head. With both hands wrapping her grip, I steady the tip over Freddy's temple, then let gravity do all the work.

I say, "*Vaya con Dios*, Freddy," but I don't mean it. After all the shit He's pulled lately, God doesn't deserve anybody to go with him.