

33 Days Before My 11th Birthday

At first, I think they're standing around a dead bird. Teenagers like to do that. I'm going to cross the street to avoid having to touch the bird this time, but then I see her.

They're hovering, saying mean things and poking with their shoes as she sits on the sidewalk, picking up the stuff that fell out of her bag. She's not looking at them or trying to escape, but they aren't giving her space to escape if she wants to. This feels like trouble.

Reagan doesn't scare easy. When there's a spider in the tub, Mom screams, Dad curses, and I do a little hop and make a noise like a kitty. Reagan asks the spider what on earth he thinks he's doing in the tub and what his plans are. Even though these teenagers are bigger than her, she's looking at them like a bunch of lost spiders.

I told Mom and Dad I wouldn't get in anymore fights after Joey Beazer broke my new pen and I slapped him. It was a quick slap and then I walked away, but apparently that's still violence.

I know Dad kind of likes that I can stand up for myself, but Mom hates violence. She always throws up her arms very dramatically when me and Dad want to watch an action movie. She'll watch the whole time with her arms crossed muttering that the poor guys were going to feel that in the morning. I figure Mom likes those movies because we only choose ones where the guy beating up all the other guys was doing it for a good reason. Stuff like saving a girl, or saving a kid, or saving a country, or avenging his brother.

We watched the movies together, and then she always made me promise I wouldn't fight. But, I don't think Reagan getting surrounded by jerks came to their minds when they told me not to fight.

Reagan doesn't watch the fighting movies. She says fighting is dumb. She told me the hero could avenge his brother by living the kind of peaceful life his dead brother wishes he could. I get her point, but I couldn't live a peaceful life if I let my big sister get picked on by a pack of greasy teens. They'll understand when they hear about this.

"Leave her alone." My voice sounds deep. I hope.

"Get out of here, dork." Greasy hair and pimples says, pushing my shoulder.

"You're the dork, picking on a girl." This response gets all the greasy hairs turned my way.

"You want some of this?"

"You're toast, punk."

"Gonna make you touch a dead bird."

"Andy, I got it." Reagan doesn't look up, doesn't uncross her arms, but rises to her feet like an action hero. How does she know how to stand up like that if she doesn't watch the movies? The yellow nail polish on her thumbs pops against the white skin pressed into tight fists.

"They know each other."

"Boyfriend girlfriend?"

"Nuh uh, I think this dope is her widdle brother."

That's fair. Even for my age, I'm widdle. The teens widen their circle to surround us both. I look at Reagan and she glares back. "I thought fighting was dumb?"

“It still is, so we’re only going to kick enough dinguses to get out of here.” Reagan rubs the toe of her shoe into the ground like a bull. No. Like a kangaroo, because she’s gonna kick a dingus. The teens look at each other, waiting for some signal. Finally the biggest, oiliest, of the group flexes his flimsy muscles and lobs a sloppy punch at my head.

Game on.

I duck, step in and jab his soft belly just like Kip Slicer does to the giant bouncer in *Last Call 2: Lights On*. The teen’s grunt mixes with shouts of bad words from the rest of his friends as they move in. I spin a back fist and jam my elbow into some ribs. A deep groan peels out over my shoulder, rising from the base of a dingus that’s been flattened.

Someone grabs the back of my shirt, yanking me off balance. This messes up my hook, but also saves me from catching a knuckle in the nose. I shove myself into the grabber and then rush forward to meet a guy only a little taller than me with a hooked nose.

His punch glances off my cheek, mine plunge into both of his cheeks wham-bam. I’m firing jabs faster than Rex Hardtack as he blasts his way through the Nazis. They’re going to regret they ever messed with the Harrells!

These guys might even admit at school they got beat up by a widdle fifth grader and his sister because they’ll all be so impressed that it bypasses their embarrassment. By the time I get to high school, I’ll be a legend. Man, I hope one of their dads walk by while I’m messing them up.

Woah.

I’m down on the asphalt, the wind knocked out of me. The first time you have the wind knocked out of you, it feels like the world is ending. Luckily, my first time was in a soccer game. I’ve had a couple winds knocked out since, so I know that you have to try not to breathe for a moment and then you’ll be able to breathe again.

With my wind back, I start to get up. One of those jerks pushed me into the street. My hands are scraped but I can still make fists. I squint back to the sidewalk where they stand in a line waiting to see if I’ll come back for more. I’m coming, because that’s what good guys do. They back up. Wait, what’s that rush of wind? Sounds almost like -

“ANDY!”

There’s an *oomph* of pressure and then nothing.

Nothing.

There’s a light.

Okay, weird. I’m standing on a..cloud? There’s a lot of other people around. Well, I think they’re people, they look like shadows made of the light. My scraped hands don’t hurt anymore but that’s probably because they aren’t hands anymore. I’m a light shadow, too. What’s going on?

“Alright, everyone hold still and we’ll assess you.”

The voice comes from all around us. It feels strong, but also tired. It reminds me of the lunchroom helpers asking my table to quiet down again. A bluish light passes over us shadow people, I feel a tingle like when you stand in front of an AC vent.

“Sending those that passed.”

Some of the light shadows blend with the bluish light and then fizzle out. I watch the person next to me fizzle, sticking my shadow hand out to see if I can feel it. It doesn't feel like anything but also kind of nice, if that makes sense.

"The rest of you hang on and I'll address you each individually."

The voice is droning again. All around the cloud, copies of the same tired man pop up in front of the shadows. He's pale and has flat hair like it's painted on. His clothes are blue and boring. Each version of him is holding a piece of paper and starts talking to the shadow in front of him.

He begins to appear in front of me and then fades. Before disappearing, he scrunches his face like he's trying to push out a poop or hold in a fart and then he comes back to being fully appeared in front of me. He lets out a big sigh.

"Hey Andy, how's it going? Great." He looks down at the paper for a moment. "Almost 11, tough break, kid. But speaking of tough, I see you died fighting some teenagers that were picking on your sister."

"I died in the fight?"

"Yep. Well, no." He shakes his head. "I mean, yes, you're dead, but, no, you didn't die fighting them. You died when one of them, his name is Doug, pushed you into the street and you were run over. If it's any consolation, those teens have a steep hill to climb to get back into the good. The driver was distracted because he was checking out his new goatee in the rear view mirror to quell any concerns that he wasn't pulling it off. He wasn't, but will wear it for the next three years regardless. He's pretty much toast."

"Where am I?" I look down at the cloud. "Is this Heaven?"

"Yes, but don't jump for joy just yet because you're going to need to hear this next part. While standing up for your sister was good, fighting is bad. You were supposed to turn the other cheek."

"And let her get picked on?"

"Apparently. We have some overarching rules that get murky with specific situations, but we are clear on violence being bad. Now, standing up for your sister probably means you were most likely a good kid overall."

"Totally. I never cheated in school, always brushed my teeth, sometimes flossed. I have great manners and even wrote a thank you card for a gift before my parents told me to. Don't you have all this stuff on your paper?"

"Well, it's like this. Following someone's whole life is a lot. This is supposed to be Heaven for me, too. So, unless you're constantly doing great or terrible things, you're considered a middle of the road case and we use the last thing you did as a tie-breaker. The last thing you did was fight, which is bad. If you had repented or wished for world peace after the fight and *then* got hit by the car, that would have countered the bad. Unfortunately, you were hit by that car before you could repent so..."

The tired man crumples up the paper and tosses it over his shoulder. It fizzes before hitting the ground. I mean, cloud? He looks at me for a long moment, his eyes are wet but not teary. This is weird, because I cry a lot more when I'm tired, but I've never been as tired as this guy looks. You know when someone's eyes are so baggy that it makes your eyes feel scratchy? Maybe he doesn't cry because he's an angel or heaven robot. I think I'm getting so fixated on his eyes because I'm afraid of what he's going to say.

"...you're going to Heck. Sorry, kid."

Yeah, that was it.

A Buttload of Years Later

Ooooooh baby, it's bad here.

All the stuff you've heard about Heck is pretty much true. Well, no. Not the details. I mean, I don't expect you've ever been told that in Heck anytime you try to scratch an itch, a dozen more itches pop up. And I'm positive church didn't warn you how no one has nose hairs down here because there's a Heck fly that loves to pull them out and eat them.

Those flies are everywhere. One is crawling towards my nostrils right now, but I can't do anything about it because its fly feet itch and, you get it. Heck has been around a long time and a lot of Demons have worked really hard to make sure it's the absolute worst. I'll fill you in as we go, but right now I'm at work.

I heave on the handle of my pitchfork, trying to dislodge the skeleton. It's probably snagged on another skeleton. Another reasonable explanation is that a Screaming Lava Aberration is holding on to be a jerk. If they can't eat you, they at least want to bug the bejeezus out of you.

Another yank and it chunks free, sloshing embers all over my face. There go my eyebrows, again. I drop the pitchfork and haul the charred old bones up onto the shore. The busted skull looks up at me with its empty eye holes but I can't help feeling thanked. Even if you're inanimate, floating in The Lake of Fire is a bummer. Adding the skeleton to my pile, I catch a quick break before Horgus turns his fat head my way. My latest crusty skeleton makes seventeen, far cry from the daily quota of a bagillion.

Over the field of loose syringes and beyond the rolling hills of infected intestines, another caravan is approaching. The Darned walking out front have rusty chains looped around their knees, forcing them to shuffle as they drag their boss's carriage. The carriage is a jibbering mass of flesh and hair that appears to be alive but, if sentient, wishes it weren't. Inside the carriage is one of the most powerful beings in Heck, an Archfiend.

Archfiends are Tier 5 in the influential evil branch of the System. Pursuing evil in this way allows them to unlock new secrets of torture in how it relates to manipulation and subjugation. This makes them full of malice, loaded with ego, and positively weighed down by the need to climb the social ladder.

Those traits become troublesome for all us Darned every time a season rolls around. The cast of Archfiends gather in one city - this time it's mine - and bring their collective evil minds together to create new forms of torture while showing off how evilly awesome their lives are. They invent tortures, but are much more interested in gossip, fashion, and being better than everyone.

Torture here is an art form, conversation, and method of self-care. While most Demons love to torture humans, Archfiends have a particular knack for it thanks to their ability to influence how we feel.

Examples might help. Last season, the Archfiends unveiled a new toenail bludgeoner that crushes toenails three times faster and five times flatter. Smashing toenails makes walking painful -

duh - which leads to a fear of moving which makes many humans stay in one place, making them an easier target for more torture. It's been a huge hit.

That was a pun. Do they still do puns where you are? I'll probably pun some more, but I'll balance that out with a decent bit of eloquence. Despite being stuck at ten years old, I've been subjected to countless monologues from haughty torturers extolling the virtues of their craft. With nothing to do but listen and wait for the pain to stop, my vocabulary has really improved since fifth grade.

That right there pretty much catches you up on the previous buttload of years. Most of my time down here has been spent enduring the horrible but, with a new season upon us, I've got some ideas that I think will spice things up. Ah jeez, I can't slow roll this, I'm too excited.

It's punching.

I plan to punch every single Archfiend on the show and then punch a hole in the ceiling of Heck to get out of here.

"Whatdjo dewin?!"

Ah crud, my boss. Horgus' lumbering steps shake my nicely stacked pile of bones, sending a humerus rolling into Kurt's collection. I gesture to the skeletons, heft my rake, and head back to the lake with a carefree, "Admiring my work, sir."

"Nodso fast." His hand weighs a ton on my shoulder. "Yew no da rules. Da work duzznt stop till da work iz dun." He shoves, sending me sprawling into the razor sharp pebbles that line the beach.

I lay there for a moment, letting myself bleed until the bleeding stops and my wounds close into angry red spots. The spots will soon fade unless another injury opens them up. This isn't so much an "if" as a "when". Heck is pretty much nonstop injuries that are always trying to heal supernaturally fast so you can be hurt again. Cool.

"Geddup."

"Yessir." I pop to my feet, giving Horgus a little fright. Six out the eight times I've killed him, it's because I'm faster. For a human I'm medium fast, but Horgus is six thousand pounds and ten feet of Demonic rhinoceros with a musk more dense than he is. The first time I killed him, I cut off his horn and sold it to his brother. Horgus has killed me 213 times.

His 'mushrooms that time forgot' breath coats my sweaty face, nestling into the pores. I make the mistake of smiling and catch an ax in the thigh. Shouldn't have pushed my luck.

"Gedback ta werk." He laughs, watching me limp.

The heat of the burning surface welcomes me back, wrapping like a flannel blanket someone is holding over your head. You know the first time someone did that and you thought you were going to suffocate? They managed to recreate that feeling non-stop whenever you're near the lake. My coworkers and I can't talk lest our lungs cook, so we've developed a complex system of nods, winks, chin waggles, and shrugs.

Offering a 'how's it hangin' nod at Kurt, who is very careful to not meet my eye, I toss my rake back into the lake. I snag the finger bones peeking out next to a beach ball-sized violet eye that's staring daggers at me. Looks like there's an Aberration after all. My rake bumps the iris, inciting a shriek from below the surface, whoops. Before the SLA can gather itself to pounce, a shiny new skeleton splashes into the lake. The searing liquid rolls in waves as the giant creature swims over to snatch and suck on the bones. I turn the other way and gratitude shrug to Bill. He

smiles and throws me one of his patented “don’t mention it” winks. For a guy with his eyelids stapled open, a wink is a big deal.

When my work day winds down, standard 56 hour shift, we’ve cleared the lake of most of the old skeletons and populated it with plenty of fresh sexy ones - Horgus’s words. Our local Archfiend, Clarissa Mindslicer semicolon Duchess of Everlasting Trauma is hosting this season and desperately wants to shame her peers. We may be a small city, but Clarissa has plans to put Horrorlando on the map.

Leg healed and feet regular bleeding from the shredding terrain, I shamble back to the 1,200 square foot home I share with thirteen other Darned, Duds, and Donut Holes to put on my comfy clothes.

“The kitchen is on fire.” Katie greets me at the door. She has what’s left of Ethan under one arm as they head out for a graveyard shift under a graveyard. Those two get a real kick out of mournful howling and making leaves rustle without a breeze to scare teens. The Darned that excel in that can eventually Tier up to Horror, granting them the ability to haunt a house or kindergarten class. Even in Heck, some folks are chasing the dream.

My job, like so many here, pays subliminal wage. This is where the money is so subtle you often miss it entirely. I’m able to afford my portion of the rent thanks to a lucrative side hustle.

I head into the kitchen to assess the damage and find a violet inferno. Purple flames are usually the work of imps. That would also explain why Ethan’s legs were eaten. Imps are nasty, vicious, barbed, cunning, and full of potassium. They used to roam free in these parts but then developers flattened the land and then made it even more jagged to hastily build flimsy homes for suckers like me. Now, the imps have nowhere to go except right up in our business.

No use trying to put out flames in Heck, so I leave them to their fiery business and look for the perpetrator. Fortunately, I have a bit of a knack for dealing with them.

“Toodle-loo!” I toodle.

“Terdle-lew.” The imp can’t help but return my merry call. Imps love an easy mark and no one’s easier than someone chock full of merry in a land of nightmares. I reach the top of the stairs and find the fella clinging the wall. That’s pretty much what I expected, because the stairs don’t lead anywhere.

“Toodle!” I smile. Hateful red eyes glare down at me, looking for the perfect place to start eviscerating. Dude has green skin, murky as vegan vomit, and studded with spikes dripping poison. Claws like fish hooks and teeth like a cow - it can’t all be dangerous. Perhaps put-off by the way I’m waiting for him to make the first move, the imp decides against direct contact and starts puffing up a plume of purple fire.

“No thanks.” I bang the wall, sending cracks racing up to where he’s dug in. His claws slip loose and he eeps a cry, poofing a tiny flame. When the imp falls, I punch it. My fist is pierced with dozens of spines but the impact is enough to squarsh his body mid-air, sending the flattened beastie back down the stairs to splat against the linoleum tile. Of course it’s linoleum.

See? I throw a decent punch. While I could provide some backstory into my punch practice and how I think it can apply to escape, those spines have injected some terrible nerve toxins into my body and it’s muddling my narrative brain.

The poison takes over almost immediately, lighting up my body with pain. I calmly take a seat at the top stair, receding into the cozy parts of my mind as the hurt runs its course. The great thing about being a person is that we can get used to anything. People spend their whole lives on

Earth in mild to moderate discomfort. We get used to our feet hurting for no reason, stiff necks, and our butts mashed in airline seats for hours. Turns out, extreme pain is the same.

Don't get me wrong, this hurts so bad I can't find the words to describe it. But perspective helps. When I first got to Heck, every injury or torment had me weeping like the almost-11-year-old I was. Then, I began to notice that the pain wasn't so bad when you realized it was always going to be there. Even dying in Heck is temporary. You learn to notlive with it, most of the humans do.

There's a lot of speculation that that's why the Devil created the Demonic Tier System of Escalating Evil. He wanted Demons to have a chance to find new ways of making our lives miserable by unlocking evil powers while also tempting humans to follow the path of evil themselves. We don't know for sure, because shortly after creating the system, he dropped out of the spotlight and got way into puzzle cubes.

Okay, I'm sure mentioning the system is tantalizing and you have a lot of questions, but I need to pass out for a little while.

Waking in a Pile of My Own Filth

Coming out of a poison coma is never a picnic. Wait. You'll have to excuse me, only after a poison coma would I be so disoriented as to imply that anything here is a picnic.

Groaning to my feet, I wobble down the stairs. My equilibrium is fine, it's the hasty construction that makes the stairs all wonked. I step over the goo where the imp splatted and grab the blood mop. Same same. Losing those hours to an unscheduled coma means I'm running late for a rather important event, but what kind of roommate would I be if I didn't clean up the mess I punched?

I replace the now fizzing mop back in the mop closet that is also Murph's bedroom...huh, haven't seen much of Murph lately. I saw his ear in the bathroom yesterday and what I'm pretty sure is his foot hanging from a section of black chain out back. Oh well, he's always goofing, I'm sure this is another goof. Murph was darned to Heck after he goofed at a professional basketball game and security shot him. He doesn't hold a grudge, the bomb looked real.

Anyway, goo mopped up I check on the fire, still burning, and zip back through the deading room to grab my stuff. Prying up a rotten floorboard, I reach into my hidey hole for the burlap gym shorts and tank top I use for exercise.

"Uh oh, someone's planning to get sweaty."

Oh jeez oh jeez, awesome! You get to meet one of my favorite Demons in all of Heck.

A millenia ago David was a Tier 7 Dark Lord overseeing "natural" disasters and plagues. He had the underworld by the jibblies, but got bored and wanted to try his claw at possession. He jumped into some kid and started puking around, talking in a raspy voice and levitating the dog. It was all innocent fun, except David didn't know that the kid's grandpa was an amateur exorcist.

Gramps gathered his old boys and shows up with a mess of crosses, holy water, a big Bible that has those metal plates on the corners with gold filigree, and they started shouting Latin. The battle waged for two days straight. All the old friends went down under David's Demonic powers and he almost won the whole thing until Gramps pulled off a sweet double baptism with a cross on the forehead touch, shutting down a lot of David's evil power. The Demon was on the ropes, getting cleansed one prayer at a time until Gramp's heart gave out. It was as close to a draw as you could get, Gramps dropping the floor with only one syllable of "evil begone" left unspoken. That hanging syllable spared David from complete destruction, but he lost pretty much everything else.

His corporeal body was shredded, powers diluted, and the only sign that he still exists is a slight gray haze. He went from Dark Lord to Donut Hole in a blink. Donut Hole refers to the hole itself and not the little ball of dough because, in Heck, a Donut Hole is next to nothing. This near-purifying experience gave David a fresh outlook. He quit before they could fire him, literally, and began drifting, literally, through Heck in search of more meaning.

We met when I was being tortured as a hat rack for Demons that wore bitey hats. As my forehead was being gnawed by a ferocious fedora, I see this little mist. At first, I thought it was my vision fading to another round of being dead, but then he spoke. He complimented how little I

pleaded and cried compared to the other Darned. Being a mist, all he could do was observe and he observed me being a little tougher than normal. He also observed that most of the hats prefer hair to skin, then gave me the idea to pull all my hair out as a way to distract them enough to escape. Bald and bleeding, I ran away from hat rack life thanks to a new friend that I could hardly see. I give you, Wispy Dave.

“Dave! Good to kinda see you.” I direct my greeting at the part of the air that’s a little foggy than the rest of the smoke-filled room.

“Like your chances today?” Dave asks.

“Yessir. Vinny promised to nab me an opponent signed up for the BKC. Want to come watch?”

“Naw, I’m planning on puffing up some nostrils. Expecting sneezes, hoping for nose bleeds.”

“Everyone needs a hobby.”

“Swing by later and I’ll hitch a ride in your ear for the big show.”

“You got it.”

Jogging through the neighborhood, I am very careful to avoid eye contact with anyone. While I enjoy the occasional chat with my roommates, most humans can be real wind bags about the ways they’re being tortured. You know how you would carpool from school with another kid and then their mom would walk you to the door and talk your mom’s ear off? She’d always have some reason to be stressed out and want to share a story about people that your mom has never met. Most randos here are that way. It’s like they think the Heck they’re in is so much worse than yours that you’ll - what - feel bad for them?

Turning onto You’re Stupid and You’ll Never Learn Drive, I jaunt down a couple more blocks and come to a stop outside a building that only looks like a laundromat. No clothes are ever cleaned in Heck and they love to throw it in your face.

I open the door, step aside for a quick deluge of blood, and walk in for the last time. Don’t me wrong, I’ve had some excellent times at Vinny’s Violence Venue, but Trip V’s is small time. I’m moving onto bigger and bloodier things.

Security at Vinny’s is tight but, as a regular, I am not subjected to the full spinal tap and cavity expansion. Instead, Daisy the sentient tricycle slash muscle around here squeaky wheels a hello, dings her bell, and twists her handlebars to indicate that I can head right in. I kick her out of the way - she’s one twisted trike that loves that kind of thing - and shove through the curtains made from rotting eldritch flesh into a well decorated parlor.

A thin figure sits on a velvet loveseat wrapped in a dark cloak that hides their face. Hands balled into fists and shoes adorned with little blades tapping impatiently on the floor gives the distinct impression that someone’s ready to go.

In a leather armchair right out of a wizard’s library lies a pathetic sack of flesh oozing with sores, parasites, and hasty tattoos. The blob has no recognizable face, only a mix of features that twist and slide into each other. A roaming eye stops its drift up a cheekforehead and squints at me.

“You’re late.” Vinny growls.

“Imp poison.”

“I’ve heard that’s like having your nerve endings dissected by junior high students that have never picked up a scalpel.”

In retrospect, he’s exactly right.

We slap a high five, Vinny's flaccid skin rippling around my hand. He jerks what counts as a head and shambles his mass out of the chair toward saloon doors etched with howling faces of torment. They're very cliché and Vinny can't wait to replace them with a pair made from *actual* howling faces.

I wait for the other figure to go first, offering an 'after you' hand that goes unacknowledged. They stomp past, shouldering me. Their fists are still fisted on their sides, white knuckles betraying - dare I say - nerves.

I place a hand on Vinny's whatever to stop him and mutter, "That the guy?"

"Definitely. He was bragging about who he's gonna wreck at the BKC."

"Don't suppose you want to tell me what he can do."

Vinny attempts to look scandalized. "And lose the integrity I've worked so hard to develop?"

Di ding Dring Ding.

"Knife kicks, got it. Thanks, Daisy!" I wave at the tricycle and head on through.

As the saloon doors *clack a lacka* behind me, the tentative murmur of an audience moves in. I scan the faces, picking out a couple of friends, some enemies, and one Phlegm Witch that is always trying to buy my hair. Fool me once.

The crowd is solid tonight with humans and Demons cozying together on benches made from the most uncomfortable surface imaginable. I'm talking magically designed material that feels like whatever is most uncomfortable to each sitter. When I sit on Vinny's benches, it takes me back to the cold concrete outside the YMCA the night my mom forgot my game was over at eight.

Stepping into the circle, I move through a little ritual. Touch the walls with my fists. Touch my fists to my head. Wipe the gore off my head that clung to my fists. Smell the gore to guess who it previously belonged to. Sandalwood and pestilence, sniffs like Vesper the Rancid was fighting tonight.

"Foul reprobates. Putrid dungslingers. Ladies. I have something special for you tonight." Mild murmur. "Our very own Handy Andy, puncher of throats with jabs that stab and hooks for the history books, is fighting well outside his weight class. While still a mere Darned, he has agreed to enter the arena against a certified Blooded."

That means this guy is two Tiers higher than me and following the path of physical evil, perfect for gladiatorial matches.

Vinny continues, "From down the Halls of Hatred and beyond the Burping Goat Titan comes a verified Cretin on loan from his Mistress Archfiend. Before he fights in the BKC, before he appears live for viewers all across Heck, he is cruelly cursing our stage." Murmurs have officially been replaced by hoots and hollers. "Undefeated, undead, and positively unrelenting. I give you...ZACK ATTACK!"

The cloaked figure throws back his hood to reveal a chiseled face, vibrant blue eyes, and tussled blond hair right off the cover of a teen dream magazine. The riled up crowd gasps, pauses, takes a big inhale, and switches to jeers.

"Sup, dork!"

"Awww little pweety boy wanna fight fight?"

"Hey gorgeous, you're so handsome!"

Zack Attack tries to block it out, keeping his perfect bone structure pointed my way. This chump made a classic mistake.

After dying, and right before you're thrust into an eternity of torture, a disembodied voice asks what you want to look like. You can choose anything; giraffe, celebrity, chair. Of course, despite being faced with this onslaught of terrible information (you're in Heck, this is forever, it's going to be awful and there's no relief) plenty of humans want to be beautiful. Surely, being able to see your perfect face in the mirror would make Heck at least a little more bearable. Right?

The problem with that logic is that in Heck, ugly is beautiful. In a boundless realm of pain and misery, those that look the most disgusting are considered handsome and those that want to look like Zack are the nerds.

When that voice asked me, I was mondo scared. Panicking, I picked a fireman that came to my school in third grade to let us get our sticky hands all over his truck. He wasn't the one that explained everything or the one that sat in the driver's seat and let us each blare the horn. This guy stood off the side, calmly watching and occasionally explaining how long the hose was and where the water came from.

I picked him because his nose was too big, his eyes were too close together, and his neck stuck out farther than his cheeks, but he didn't seem to care. His dull brown eyes were staring into the middle distance but I felt that, if one of us spontaneously caught fire, he'd step up and save the day. No big deal, that's what he does. I wanted Heck to seem like no big deal. I was super wrong, but at least I'm not a nerd.

"Now then, who's ready for some of Vinny's Vivacious Virulent Violence up in this Vicious Venuuuueeeeee?" Vinny wishes all of that would fit on his sign. The crowd gnashes teeth and clacks claws to sound appropriately enthused. In their defense, the chunks of flesh strewn around the arena gives the appearance that they've already seen enough violence to make the average alive person barf up food from three years ago.

"Then let's see someone murdered!"

Vinny schlorps into the floor cracks and the fight starts. If they rang a bell every time a death match began in Heck, the general audioscape would sound like a second grade field trip turned loose on a field of nervous cows.

Zack Attack puts up his dukes and closes the distance. In a moment, I'm going to punch his entire body, but I can't help thinking that seeing me willingly enter a blood sport makes it appear that I've learned nothing about my death and subsequent darning to Heck. Before I obliterate this nerdlinger, let me provide some context for my current afterlife choices.