



What's the Plural of Nemesis, Anyway?

HIGH ABOVE THE cavernous glass roof of The Poison Gardens, the crimson skies of Pandemonium swirled lazily over the city. Inside the greenhouse, the spiked black branches of the Nemesis Tree swooped and darted like kraken tentacles searching for ships. The sap oozing from the Tree's trunk was bright yellow and smelled uncannily of mouldy trainers. Any creature unlucky enough to get too close would be swept up before being slowly crushed to death.

I knew all this because I was hanging upside down from the treetop.

And the branches round my ankles were really starting to pinch.

A small crowd had gathered below. They gaped up at me, open-mouthed. In the middle stood Mr Frumble, my biology teacher. Mr Frumble was a rotund, jolly-looking demon with blue horns, blue skin, and a blue bowtie. That



jolliness did not extend to his personality.

‘Jinx D’Evil, you calamitous, cack-handed carbuncle! How the devil did you get up there?’ he thundered.

It’s hard to shrug when you’re upside-down. ‘Bad luck?’ I mumbled, trying not to dribble onto my horns.

I never did have much luck on field trips.

That morning, before we’d trooped off the school bus, Frumble had pointed threateningly at us. ‘Don’t touch anything unless I say so, and whatever you do, don’t go

near the Nemesis Tree. It's the last of its kind in Hell and a protected species. Also, it'll eat you for breakfast.'

The busload of red-skinned, black-winged twelve-year-olds muttered vaguely back at him.

'But in case of emergency, you all have the antidotes you made last week, right?'

We dutifully waved the vials of liquid we'd prepared in the previous lesson. My eyes grew wide. Oh, brimstone. *Purple*. They were all purple. Mine, on the other hand, was a sludgy brown. Oh well, it wasn't likely I'd have to use it.

Frumble clanked open the bus door. 'OK, follow me. I think you'll find The Poison Gardens both educational and exciting.'

I looked down past my dangling arms. Frumble's eyes were nearly popping out of his blue face. I don't think he'd expected quite this level of excitement.

By this point my whole class was there, every tiny horned figure hollering and jeering up at me. I'd never exactly been popular. Two voices cackled louder than the rest – Benny and Arael, the demons who'd thought it would be funny to trip me just as we were walking past the Tree. The Tree was not my only nemesis. I tried to dribble in their general direction.

'Waterfalls, Jinx,' yelled Arael. 'Think waterfalls. And

lakes, and dripping showers, and splashing waves.’

Oh, brilliant. Now I needed to pee. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse.

Another spiked Nemesis branch snaked towards me.

That was worse.

Did I mention I hate field trips?

My eyes were watering and my head felt like it was about to explode. A lone teardrop ran down my brow and plopped to the ground.

‘Aw, crying for Daddy, are we?’ sneered Benny.

I decided if I fell to my death I would aim for him.

‘Use the antidote, D’Evil!’ shouted up an increasingly panicked-looking Frumble.

The antidote. Yep. Right. The antidote which was meant to be swallowed if you were bitten by a grabbersnutch plant, or spiked by a verlinder petal. Not as a weapon against something which could actually pick you up and eat you.

But since no one seemed to be coming to my rescue with a chainsaw, I didn’t have much choice.

I reached up into my – thankfully zipped – jacket pocket, grabbed the vial and yanked the lid off. An evil smell wafted out. Ugh. Well, maybe it would startle the Tree enough for it to loosen its grip on my ankles. I took a deep breath and flung the brown mixture into the nearest branches.

Unsurprisingly, nothing happened.

Brilliant. Now what?

The Tree shrieked.

OK, that was surprising.

It shrieked again, and the branches holding me shook. Then, before my eyes, the Nemesis Tree began to change. Spikes shrivelled and dropped off, and the colour of the bark turned from inky black to healthy brown.

Then little pink flowers burst out everywhere.

‘What in Lucifer’s name...?’ squawked Mr Frumble.

The branches holding me were suddenly smooth and flowery, and smelling of...bubblegum?

Oh no. I’d really done it this time. The Nemesis was no longer a monstrous bringer of death. I’d turned the most evil tree in Hell *Good*.

But who cared? I was saved! I would live to see my thirteenth birthday after all. A broad grin spread across my face. I was so relieved I forgot I was still fifty feet up in the air.

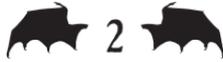
Until the tree, which was now humming gently to itself, dropped me.

Uh oh. Flying was so not my strong suit. I flapped my wings frantically, rose a foot into the air, then went into a tailspin and whirled down, and down...and landed with a crunch.

On top of a blue-skinned, blue-horned demon wearing a bowtie.

‘D’Evil!’ he bellowed. ‘I am going to skin you and make you into a handbag! A handbag, do you hear me?’

So much for being happy to be alive.



Be Careful What You Wish For

THE SECOND WORST feeling in the world is realising you've done something mammothly, brontosaurusly stupid. The absolute worst? Waiting to find out exactly how much trouble your stupid has landed you in.

And after getting home I'd been waiting in my attic bedroom, with no one but the spikemoths huddled in the rafters for company, for six long, agonising hours. I'd done restless pacing and tortured gazing-out-of-the-window, and was onto desperately-wondering-how-to-mail-yourself-to-Earth, when finally I heard it.

A knock at the door.

Not just any knock: an *important-sounding* knock. My heart sank so far into my boots I could've used it as a pair of nice comfortable insoles. This was it, then. I took a deep breath and yanked the door open quickly to get the pain over with.

A wizened grey demon stood outside, spindly wings still

fluttering like he'd arrived in a hurry. He fixed me with glowing red eyes. 'Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, Enemy of Righteousness, Lord of the Flies, summons you. Follow me and I shall take you to my master. Refuse, and the consequences—'

'Yes, yes, I get it,' I interrupted, rolling my eyes. 'You could just say my dad wants to see me.'

The messenger demon blinked at me. There was an awkward silence. 'Do you refuse to follow me, Jinx D'Evil?' he said finally.

I sighed. 'Of course not.' Who dares deny the Devil?

I stuck my hands in my pockets and trudged off to meet my doom.

My problem is I'm a lousy demon. I'm just terrible at being terrible. And a fundamental failure to be evil is not something that's supposed to happen to Lucifer's youngest son. It's not like I don't try. I really do. But things always seem to backfire when I'm around – and the next thing you know there's been a gigantic explosion of Goodness and everyone's turning pointy tail and running for cover.

The grey demon ushered me through the echoing stairwells and corridors of the palace, until we came to the regal, black marble hallway which led to Dad's study. Gold-framed paintings filled with war and gore covered the walls,

and carved busts of illustrious demons sneered down at me from their plinths. The messenger slipped inside and left me to contemplate my own total lack of illustriousness.

I kicked the wall in frustration. Bad idea. I caught the toe of my trainer in a crack in the marble, hopped about on one leg like a drunken flamingo, then lost my balance and landed with a crash. As I lay sprawled on the hard stone floor, I considered the possibility this was not my day. Or year.

I got up with as much dignity as I could muster, brushed the dust off my trousers and crept closer to the vast double doors that stood between me and certain death. They were made of heavy black wood, every inch carved into twisting snakes, cackling gargoyles and winged demons. As I leant forward to eavesdrop, a shiny black cobra flared up and hissed at me. I smacked it on the nose and peered through the keyhole into the study.

Lucifer was sulking. He sank deeper into his armchair, listlessly tapping cigar ash into the mouth of a quivering glutton kneeling at his feet. I'd chosen a bad week to get in trouble. Takings were down throughout Hell, and my mum Persephone's calming influence was nowhere to be found, since she was off on holiday again. Dad was staring at a square piece of paper in his huge red hand.

My report card. I was toast.

He glanced up. 'All right, send him in.'

The messenger demon nodded and came towards the doors. I backed away hurriedly as they swung open.

He cleared his throat. 'Lucifer, Prince of...'

I slid past the continuing litany of titles and shut the doors behind me before I lost my nerve. 'Dad, I—'

'Quiet, boy!' he roared, his black eyes flashing red with anger.

I quieted. Dad might've had the same deep red skin,



dark hair and curling horns as me, but he was a solid eight foot tall and built like a weight-lifting buffalo. As a scrawny twelve-year-old who couldn't lift much more than a bag of schoolbooks, I was in no position to argue. He rose and advanced on me like a bear about to devour its young. Which there were rumours he'd actually done to my half-brother Fremiel. I backed away, quaking, and in a wild moment of panic, gave him puppy eyes, hoping the baby blues I'd inherited from Mum might calm him down. He waved the report card at me and snarled. So much for that plan.

'What kind of half-term report do you call this, hmm? I wouldn't mind if you failed because you were playing truant, or chasing girls, or trying to set fire to your teacher with a flamethrower. Boys will be boys! But to...' He held up the piece of paper. 'To "pay very careful attention, obey all your teachers, and work extremely hard"! It's inexcusable. What do you have to say for yourself?'

I became very interested in my feet. 'I tried, Dad,' I mumbled into my chin. 'Honestly. That thing with the Nemesis Tree was an accident, I didn't mean to—'

'Ah, the Nemesis. One of Hell's most infamous landmarks, for thousands of years,' he said slowly, before exploding in a rage. 'Two minutes in your vicinity and it's

gone from a bloodthirsty venomous creature to a pink flowery plant that smells of bubblegum! *Bubblegum!* How can you get things so wrong, Jinx?

‘I’m sorry, Dad. I’ll try harder.’

‘Well, I can’t have a son of mine failing his Evil Levels, it’s an embarrassment. I’m sending you for private tuition with a master of the dark arts: Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, the most dastardly pirate ever to sail the seven seas.’

Gah. That’s what I got for the whole desperately-wondering-how-to-mail-yourself-to-Earth thing. Be careful what you wish for.

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow. You’d better get this right, Jinx, or there will be consequences. Very serious consequences, do you understand?’

I gulped and nodded.

‘Now get out of my sight, I’ve got sixteen species to make extinct by lunchtime, and I need to work on my golf swing.’ He turned his back on me.

I left his study and shuffled off down the hall. I tried so hard to be evil, but bad luck just seemed to follow me around like a lovesick zombie. A lovesick zombie who’d broken a mirror and walked under a ladder. Was it my fault

Benny and Arael had shoved me into the waiting tentacles of the tree? Was it my fault the antidote hadn't worked properly? I was only a third year, not some kind of science genius. I sighed. All I wanted to do was make Dad proud, like my big brother Dantalion had done, driving his chariot straight through the ozone layer and leaving a gaping hole. Or my sister Morgana, inventor of homework, paper cuts, and a range of bikes that automatically fell over on gravel.

At least it meant I'd get out of school for a while. I wasn't a huge fan of school. Or rather, school wasn't a huge fan of me. Surprisingly, being a disaster magnet wasn't the best way to win friends and influence demons. No one wanted to go near the weirdo who ended up with a rainbow instead of napalm in Chemistry, or the dunce who accidentally emailed half of Europe kitten GIFs instead of a killer virus in ICT. Not to mention my total lack of prowess at flying, which ruled me out of ever winning back any cool points playing Air Hockey. As a result, I didn't have a single friend there. I could hardly blame them; they were scared my horrible luck would rub off on them.

I wished it was winter. Winter meant Mum back home. *She* never yelled at me or called me a poor excuse for a demon. True, that might've been because she'd missed several of my most spectacular failures while she was busy

applying suntan lotion in Greece. Or simply because she was a goddess. Literally. But I'd have taken cheerful denial any time.

I stopped halfway up the long, winding staircase to catch my breath, and peered out of an arrow slit. The family castle, Darkangel Palace, was so big there were dozens of rooms I'd never even been in. Perched on a rocky outcrop surrounded by a moat of fire, its gleaming black turrets looked out over the looming nothingness of the Great Abyss to the north, and the twisted red skyscrapers of Pandemonium and frozen wastelands of Outer Hell to the south. It was a lovely view.

When I reached my bedroom I slammed the door behind me. An alarmed snuffling sound came from the ceiling.

'Hmph, woke me up,' said Loiter, poking his furry head out of a hammock hanging from the rafters.

'I always wake you up when I come in, because you're always asleep.'

He tilted his head to one side. 'You make a good point.'

Loiter was a three-toed sloth, which wasn't surprising since he was the Patron Demon of Sloth, or Laziness. There was a Patron Demon for each of the Seven Deadly Sins, but Loiter avoided most of his colleagues as much as possible, because, as he often complained, 'They're so *ambitious*.'

Always running around, trying to tempt humans into sin. Makes me tired just looking at them.’ Since I was useless at being evil, and Loiter generally couldn’t be bothered to be, we got on pretty well.

He scratched his belly. ‘Ah well, refill my glass, would you? There’s a good chap.’

On top of a bookcase stood a margarita glass so large, it wouldn’t have looked amiss if a few goldfish had been swimming in it. The glass was connected to a very long straw, which snaked all the way up to the hammock. I peered into the fridge and located a bottle of bright green liquid that looked like it could strip paint off a lamppost. I emptied it into the glass and watched the liquid slurp upwards. Loiter smacked his lips, then rootled around in his fur, brought out a pack of cigarettes, and lit one.

‘Ahhh, that’s better. Cigarettes were my greatest invention, you know. Makes people feel like they’re doing something even if they’re only lounging in an armchair.’

‘Killed a lot of humans too,’ I added.

‘Yes, your father was thrilled about that. Figure after such a resounding success I’m due a wee sabbatical for a few centuries.’ He blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. ‘So, where have you been? Getting into trouble again?’

I sat down on the bed and sighed dramatically. ‘It’s that

whole thing with the Nemesis Tree. Dad's really mad at me. He's sending me away to stay with Blackbeard.'

'Well, that doesn't sound so bad, I hear Tortuga's quite nice this time of year. Come on, cheer up, I'll beat you at Mario Kart if you like.'

'You got a bootleg Earth copy?' The Hellish version was called Killer Kannibal Kart and gave me nightmares.

'Yup, got it on the white market.' He dropped down to the floor and picked up a controller. 'Ready to lose horribly?'

I sat down beside him with a smirk. Maybe my only friend was a several-thousand-year-old sloth, but he always managed to cheer me up. I picked up a controller and revved up my engine. 'You wish.'



Early the next morning, I hiked my backpack up on my shoulder and made my way down the steep staircase that led to The Waiting Room, deep in the bowels of Darkangel Palace. I pushed open the creaky door and gagged, as usual, at the rotten-egg stench of brimstone. Dozens of pale fiends – temptation demons who spent most of their time on Earth – lined the wooden benches of the vaulted stone room, bickering with one another while they filled in forms to allow them passage to their destinations.

Demons came in all shapes and colours: tiger-headed, dragon-bodied, blue- and purple-tinged, although the majority were red-skinned and pointy-tailed like me. But fiends gave me the creeps a little, because their skin was near translucent, and you could see the blue blood pumping through their veins. Plus they *always* stank of brimstone.

I sighed, took a form from a table and set to work. Hellish visas were really complicated.

Twenty minutes later, shaking my sore hand, I joined the long queue snaking up to the central iron door which led to Earth. Above it, two giant brass wheels clanked and shuddered as fiends entered and exited.

When I reached the front, a monstrously fat green demon called Horslath took my form. ‘Jinx D’Evil? To Tortuga? In the year 1717?’

I nodded three times.

Horslath twitched his horns and squinted at the piece of paper. ‘Your handwriting is appalling, young man. Reason for visit?’

‘Sorry. Private tuition.’

‘With Blackbeard, I expect? Right ho.’ He took a step back and snapped his fingers at the two uniformed wheel-masters behind him.

They took hold of a lever each, and pressed down hard.

The brass wheel on the left turned slowly, past Beijing and Salem and somewhere called Little Piggleswick, then clicked to a stop at Tortuga. The one on the right followed suit, spinning through the centuries until it arrived with a jolt at 1717.

I took a deep breath. Eighteenth-century Caribbean, here I came. I made a promise to myself: when I got there, I would be the vilest demon the world had ever seen. Blackbeard himself would quake at my villainy. I would get it right this time, whatever it took.