

## NEVER TRUST A PARROT

By Jeremy Strong

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*Dear pet problem page,*

*You are my last chance of hope. I pray that you can help me. I have a problem with my parrot. I had better start at the beginning — there is so much that needs explaining...*

Jamie had never actually met a parrot that could talk before, but this parrot could not only talk but it had a lisp and couldn't say its 'r's properly. 'I am your fwend,' it said, and fixed Jamie with a beady eye. Jamie gazed back into the black obsidian-like eye, almost hypnotised.

'I like you too,' he replied.

The parrot walked up the inside of its cage, the way parrots do, and hung from the roof. It stared at Jamie with its other eye, clicked its tongue, stretched its wings and then said, 'My name is Nemethith.'

'Nemesis,' repeated Jamie.

The parrot began screeching furiously, clattering its wings against the bars of the cage. 'Nemethith!' squawked the enraged bird. 'Nemethith!'

'Keep your feathers on,' muttered Jamie crossly.

The parrot lunged forward, grabbing one of Jamie's fingers in its beak.

'Ow! Let go, you monster!'

'I am your fwend,' hissed Nemesis through his clenched beak.

'No you're not. Let go!' At last Jamie managed to wrench his hand away from the cage. He examined his finger. There were two purple welts, clear marks of the parrot's powerful beak. Jamie shook his hand in pain and rubbed the finger. At least there was no blood. He shot an angry face at the bird. Parrots cannot smile, but Nemesis was

doing a pretty good impression. Maybe it was the peculiar shape of the beak. Both the upper and lower mandibles had a single raised point on each side. Strange, thought Jamie.

*At first I thought it would be fun to have a pet parrot, especially one that could talk. Nemesis is a South American Paradise Parrot. He bit me on the very first day I got him. He bit Mum and Dad too. I suppose I should have started worrying at that point, but how was I to know that horror was just around the corner? If it hadn't been for that little mirror I might never have known, but I'd better fill in a bit more detail first...*

The parrot had come from Jamie's aunt, who had seen him in a pet shop. Aunt Cleo was immediately seduced by the parrot's fabulous colouring, the black glitter of his eyes and the wonderful way in which he greeted Cleo's entrance into the shop. 'Hail to Her Majethy, Empweth of the Foweth!'

Aunt Cleo bought the parrot on the spot, despite the fact that she was always going away on business and so couldn't be around to look after it much. She gave it to Jamie's family to care for instead. Aunt Cleo was like that. She was always buying animals and then giving them to Jamie's family. So far they had a giant lop-eared rabbit (*Cleo: It's got ears like blankets!*), a chameleon (*Cleo: You'll never have another fly in the house!*), a llama they kept in the garden (*Cleo: A llama is the best burglar deterrent you can have, in fact it's a burglar allarma!*), and now a parrot.

But Nemesis was different. For a start he could speak, and then there were those dark eyes, as dark as the depths of a tropical rain forest by night; a darkness haunted by the soft footfall of the passing jaguar, and the silent slither of the anaconda. There was something of the night in Nemesis, especially the way he skulked in his cage, cracking open sunflower seeds and spitting the shells at Jamie while he slept. Then he'd whisper, 'I am your fwend.'

Jamie tried to teach Nemesis some *new* words. In revenge for the bite on his finger Jamie began with, 'Around the ragged rocks the ragged rascal ran.' This of course came out as, 'Aaround the waggged wocks,' which was as far as Nemesis got, before clicking his tongue in disapproval and hanging upside down. Jamie had already learnt that this

was usually a warning that the bird was about to have a temper tantrum. Sometimes the parrot seemed more human than bird.

Three days after the arrival of Nemesis, Jamie felt his injured finger itching and scratched it. That was when he first noticed the tiny fluff that had gathered round the edge of the bruising. He showed it to his mother.

‘When your skin itches like that, it’s a good sign. It shows that the cut is healing,’ she said.

‘My finger wasn’t cut. It was just sort of - squeezed, very hard,’ Jamie pointed out. ‘By a parrot.’

His mother smiled brightly. ‘I’m sure it’s on the mend,’ she insisted, and clicked her tongue, as if to underline everything.

*It was not long after Nemesis bit me that other things began to happen.*

*The apple tree in the garden suddenly put on a growing spurt. It was early summer and I put it down to all the rain we’d been having, but then the leaves began to enlarge. They fattened and lengthened and grew darker and denser. Day by day we watched the apple tree grow until it was three times size of our other trees. It dwarfed everything around it. Mum and Dad thought it was wonderful, but I thought it was weird, and then Dad actually climbed it until he was sitting amongst the high branches. I was just boggling at this when Mum suddenly whizzed up the tree and joined him.*

*As for Nemesis, he spent all his time staring out through the bars of his cage. He would make little clucking noises and sometimes let out a long, growly sigh. I thought that maybe he was bored...*

One day Jamie was passing a pet shop and on a sudden impulse he went in. He wondered what little toys he might take home for the parrot to play with. Nemesis must be getting pretty fed up, shut in a cage most of the time. Jamie bought a bell and a mirror. They were really meant for budgerigars but, as the pet shop man said, parrots are just very big budgies really.

Nemesis hated the bell. He pulled it right off its little chain and cast it out through the bars of the cage. It rolled away under the sofa, where it stayed. So that was the end of that.

As for the mirror, that was where the trouble began. If it hadn't been for the mirror, Jamie might never have known, never begun to wonder. Jamie was not sure whether to bless or curse the mirror, but there was no doubting its effect.

Nemesis did not seem at all bothered by the mirror. What Jamie noticed was this: when Nemesis looked in the mirror he didn't see a parrot looking back at him. He didn't see anything at all. *Nemesis didn't have a reflection.*

At first Jamie assumed that the mirror was no good, and he went storming back to the pet shop. 'This mirror is defunct,' he said. 'It's not a mirror. It's a piece of glass.' But the pet shop man looked in it and saw himself, and when Jamie took the trouble of peering in, was there too.

Jamie, who by this time was not only puzzled but worried, returned home, took the parrot into the bathroom and held him up in front of the big mirror above the wash basin. Jamie was there, holding up his arm, but there was no parrot. Jamie paled. He knew there was only one creature that had no reflection in a mirror, and that was a *vampire*.

As for Nemesis himself, he turned away from the mirror and gazed at Jamie with his eyes that were now like black holes in the fabric of space. 'I am your friend.' He said, quietly.

Jamie was faced with the unpleasant observation that he was harbouring a vampire parrot — a vampire parrot with a speech impediment. Then he remembered his finger.

*It was when I noticed the tiny feathers on my finger that I became seriously concerned. The fluff that had first appeared around my bruise had now turned to feathers. Of course they were very small, but they were also unmistakable. I couldn't show Mum and Dad because I have hardly seen them since yesterday. I had to make my own lunch and supper. They seem to spend all their time up in the trees that have taken over our garden. The trees sprang up overnight, a miniature rain forest. Some of them are laden with exotic fruits that are eaten by the troops of monkeys that race along the highest branches, crashing amongst the dense leaves.*

*As for Nemesis, I swear he is now grinning at me. When I went to sleep last night, I dreamed that he was talking to me in a really sweet, kind voice, so smooth and soft. I would wake, sweating, but he was always fast asleep in his cage...*

Outside the house, monkeys whooped and howled. Great birds sang and burbled amongst the dark branches, and occasionally a glimpse of yellow and black signaled the stealthy passing of the jaguar.

At night the parrot's eyes would snap open and Nemesis would stare across the room at Jamie as he slept. Then the parrot would begin his night whispers, in a soft, crooning voice. 'Thoon you will be mine. Together we thall wule the world. Thoon you will be a pawott like your pawenth. There ith no ethcape, for I am Nature'th methenger and it ith time for her to weclaim the world. Humanth have methed it up and now jungle thall cover the earth and all the wagged wocks wunth more and there will be no humanth at all. Ha ha ha ha.'

Jamie saw his parents one more time. They were sitting together on the branch of a tree at the edge of the spreading forest. Their clothes had gone, and their bodies were covered in glowing feathers. Dad cocked his head on one side and gazed at Jamie, as if he were trying to remember who he was. They made their way down from the tree and stepped on to what was left of the lawn, but they wouldn't come any closer.

'Mum? Dad?' Jamie didn't know what to say.

His mother lifted one arm, as if she was inviting Jamie to join them. She clicked her tongue several times. Jamie's father opened his mouth and cawed. The hair on his head suddenly rose up in a crest and he cawed again. Then they went back into the forest. Jamie returned to the house on his own. He wandered into the kitchen and opened another packet of sunflower seeds. He began cracking them and spitting out the shells. They crunched beneath his feet: thousands of them, in every room.

*I try not to listen to Nemesis but it is becoming more and more difficult. Part of the problem is that I am now covered from head to foot with feathers. I can no longer wear clothes. Every now and then I get this uncontrollable urge to stand on the arm of the sofa, furiously flapping my arms, wanting to jump. I keep trying to walk up walls and hang from the light fittings.*

*I have tried all the usual vampire remedies but they don't seem to work on parrots. Nemesis seems to be invincible and every hour I become more like him.*

*What am I to do? The jungle has spread right the way down our street and across the park. I haven't seen another human for days.*

*Please help. You are my last hope. I cannot write any longer. It is too difficult to grip the pen with my thin claws. I am desperate. I looked in the mirror this morning and I wasn't there. Who am I? What am I? What is going to happen to me? I am your friend. I am your friend. I am...*