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1
Alex’s Patented Demon Tester

‘I’m hungry.’

‘And such news is supposed to surprise me how, exactly?’

‘Leave it, Spit. You know House can’t help himself.’

‘On the contrary, Alex. Where food’s involved, he’s *more* than capable of helping himself.’

Big House, Spit, Alex, Inchy and Cherry were strolling through the garden on a glorious summer’s day. Like everything else at number 92 Eccles Road, the garden was obsessively neat. Flower beds marched in precise orderly rows across a lawn that looked as if it had been trimmed with nail scissors. Large bushes stood dotted around, each one cut into unlikely military shapes, including a tank, an aircraft carrier and a very realistic cavalry charge. There wasn’t so much as a leaf out of place.

The same couldn’t be said of their destination – a tired old shed tucked away behind a thick hedge, almost as if the house couldn’t bear to look at it. The shed was completely out of keeping with the rest of the garden, and its owner had clearly forgotten about it. The windows were cracked and mouldy, the door hung off one hinge and the roof looked like it was about to collapse into a dusty rotting heap.

It certainly wasn’t the sort of place you’d expect to find five young angels.

As the gang slipped inside, Inchy – wearing huge glasses and clothes that would only fit him properly if he doubled in size – looked at Alex expectantly.

‘Well then, what is it you’re so desperate to show us?’

Alex’s blond hair flared in the sunlight blazing through the shed’s broken window as he slowly produced a bag from behind his back. It was embroidered with the words *Lucky Dip*.

‘Oh no,’ said Spit. ‘Not that.’

The others looked equally unimpressed. They had all learned to fear Alex’s Lucky Dip, the bag of stuff he collected to help him carry out pranks and generally get himself – and them – into deep trouble.

‘Behold!’ said Alex grandly, reaching into the bag. ‘Alex’s Patented Demon Tester!’

With a flourish, he pulled out a long pole that seemed far too big ever to have fitted inside. Dangling from one end was a large squarish lump that dripped slightly.

'It's really simple,' Alex grinned.

'Much like its inventor, then,' sniffed Spit, flicking his black hair out of his eyes with a twist of his head.

Ignoring Spit, Alex continued, encouraged by the wide grin slapped across House's face like a colourful sticker.

'This bit here,' he said proudly, pointing at a lump, 'is an ice cube.'

Unable to help himself, Spit interrupted again.

'Really? An ice cube? Are we having a party? Though one whole ice cube is spoiling us, don't you think? Surely half would do.' He sank back against the side of the shed and sighed. 'Could someone let me know when I'm supposed to take this at all seriously?'

Suddenly, Spit found himself suspended two metres in the air.

'Here's the thing,' said House, gazing up at Spit as he held him effortlessly above his head with one hand. 'Alex has an idea that could tell us if someone is a demon. I think that's pretty cool. But more importantly, the quicker he tells us all about it, the quicker we can have lunch. Got it?'

Spit opened his mouth to argue, but House got in first.

'I said, *got it*?'

Spit nodded, though his fiery eyes bored angrily into House as the hefty angel put him back down on the floor.

'Nice move,' said Cherry, the only girl in the gang and the only one with multi-coloured hair. The others had learned that Cherry's ever-changing hair colour and her 'interesting' fashion choices (today she was wearing a stripy shirt, ripped combats, a necktie for a belt, and walking boots) were *never* to be laughed at. Laughing at Cherry was not a good idea. Being a trainee Cherub, she came armed with bow and arrows designed to make people fall in love, and everyone remembered the time when she'd used them on Alex and a donkey. They'd all learned a lesson that day. Especially the donkey.

House sat down, a smug grin on his face. Alex looked at him, impressed.

'You know, you've changed since being kicked out of Cloud Nine Academy.'

'We all have,' replied Spit. 'Our wings were taken away, remember? And we were sent down to Earth. All thanks to you and your stupid pranks.'

‘True,’ said Alex, ‘but if it hadn’t been for my stupid pranks, we wouldn’t have been here to save Green Hill from Mr Dante, would we?’

Just the mention of the name was enough to make House shudder. Mr Dante had been a Level Four Fire Demon, cunningly disguised as a geography teacher at Green Hill School. Only a few weeks earlier, the gang had foiled his plot to hatch a demon egg in the school cellars.

‘Didn’t do us much good, though, did it?’ said House mournfully. ‘I mean, all the evidence was destroyed along with Dante, so we can’t prove it ever happened – and we’re still stuck down here.’

‘But we know that Dante said there were other demons in town,’ continued Alex, ‘so we need to find out who they are.’

Cherry sighed. ‘Why? You seem to be forgetting one teeny-weeny thing, Alex. We’re not demon hunters.’

‘She’s right, Alex,’ added Inchy. ‘We’re not down here to fight the powers of darkness. We’re *supposed* to be learning how to be well behaved, so that Gabriel will let us back into Heaven.’

‘Precisely!’ beamed Spit. ‘We should be keeping our heads down and our noses clean, not looking around for more trouble.’

Alex looked deflated for a moment. Then he rallied.

‘OK, but just say we *accidentally* stumble on another demon, like we did with Dante. We’ll need to be able to prove that it’s a demon, right? Which is where my Patented Demon Tester comes in.’

‘I give up!’ said Cherry. ‘Go on, then. Tell us all about it. But if it lands us in trouble, you’ll have me to answer to.’

‘We were up to “ice cube”,’ muttered Spit.

‘Right, yes,’ said Alex, pleased. ‘As you can see, the ice cube is attached to *this*.’

Alex wiggled the long pole in his hand.

‘Looks like a fishing rod,’ observed Inchy.

‘It is.’

‘And I think I recognize it,’ said Inchy. ‘Doesn’t it belong to –’

‘Never mind that,’ interrupted Alex. ‘Let me show you how it works. Follow me!’

Leading the gang back into the garden, Alex clenched the Demon Tester firmly in his hands. ‘Right. Imagine that bush over there is a demon.’

‘What bush?’ said House.

‘The one that looks like Gabriel,’ replied Alex, grinning. ‘With a big nose and double chin!’

The gang chuckled. The strict Head Angel of Cloud Nine Academy had never been their favourite person, but ever since he had sent them down to Earth without their wings, he’d become even less popular.

Alex coughed to get their attention again.

‘So, anyway, that bush over there is a demon, or someone we suspect might be one. And we’re here with my Demon Tester.’

‘The excitement is killing me,’ said Spit sarcastically.

‘I could help it out, if you want,’ retorted Cherry.

‘Are any of you interested in this?’ asked Alex exasperatedly. The gang reluctantly turned to watch. ‘As I was saying – bush, demon, Demon Tester, OK?’

Everyone nodded.

‘Right. Now all I do is *this*.’

With a tremendous flourish, Alex flicked the rod back and cast it forward. The ice cube at the end of the line shot off at lightning speed.

It missed the bush. By miles. And then continued towards the house.

‘I wonder when it’ll stop,’ mused Inchy.

From the other side of the garden, a dull thud and an agonized cry answered his question.

‘Oh no,’ said Alex.

‘So let me get this straight,’ said Cherry, pointing a bleach-covered toothbrush aggressively at Alex. ‘You froze a big block of ice round a fishing hook.’

She was standing in the kitchen, wearing overalls and a scowl that looked particularly out of place on her rosy Cherubic features.

‘Yep,’ replied Alex.

‘And how is that supposed to tell us if someone is a demon?’

‘Well,’ said Alex, ‘demons are hot, right? So if we dangle an ice cube over someone’s head and it melts, then we know he or she’s a demon, don’t we? Genius!’

‘Genius? Really?’

Before Alex could say ‘Yep’ again, Cherry jumped across the room and tried to stick the toothbrush up his left nostril.

‘And at what point did your sponge of a brain decide that the best thing to use to create your Demon Tester was Tabbris’s prize fishing rod? Did you really think he wouldn’t notice? Well? *Well?*’

Cherry’s rosy cheeks were more like scarlet now.

‘It almost worked, didn’t it?’ said Alex, backing away. ‘I mean, the ice cube really flew through the air, didn’t it?’

‘He’s got a point,’ added Inchy. ‘It was a very good cast, especially considering he’s never done any fishing.’

‘Exactly!’ said Alex. ‘Now imagine if I had some practice. I’d be able to detect a demon from miles away!’

‘Mind you,’ House ventured in the unimpressed silence that followed, ‘the look on Tabbris’s face as that ice cube flew towards him –’

‘When it actually hit him,’ chortled Inchy, ‘right on the nose –’

‘Just before the ice smashed and the hook caught in his moustache!’ Spit laughed out loud. ‘It really was pure genius!’

‘Well, it *almost* worked,’ said Alex rather glumly. ‘How was I to know Tabbris would walk out of the house at that very moment? And if he *had* been a demon we’d have known instantly.’

‘If Tabbris had been a demon, we’d have got off lightly,’ snapped Cherry. ‘A demon wouldn’t have us cleaning the kitchen from top to bottom with these!’

‘*Ow!*’ Alex scowled as he tried to rub away the bruise on his arm where the grubby toothbrush had this time found its target.

A firm voice cut into the moment like the sound of a flag snapping in the wind.

‘Something the matter?’

The gang turned to see a slight figure standing in the kitchen doorway. He was resting on a cane but it did nothing to diminish his presence. Retired Guardian Angel Major Tabbris was supervising them while they were on Earth, and while he may have looked a bit past it,

the gang knew the old angel was a force to be reckoned with. They each quickly shook their heads.

‘Good,’ said Tabbris. ‘Then might I suggest that the best way to complete your task is to stop arguing and get on with it. If you work together for once, it shouldn’t take you more than five or six hours.’

With that, he turned and left as silently as he’d arrived.

‘For an angel he’s pretty cranky,’ said Inchy.

‘Good job I didn’t ask him for a sandwich, then,’ replied House.

‘Come on, guys,’ said Alex brightly. ‘Let’s get this done.’

With that, Inchy and Spit turned to scrub the floor, while Alex, Cherry and House worked together to attack the sink. They continued in silence for what seemed like forever, each of them getting more and more exhausted.

‘Are we still on for footie practice tomorrow?’ asked Alex finally, hoping to lift team spirits with the mention of their favourite hobby. Instead, all he got was a tired ‘Uh-huh’ from his friends.

‘Not exactly the response I was after.’

‘Would you prefer it if we all threw these toothbrushes at you to emphasize our enthusiasm?’ asked Spit.

Cherry jumped in hastily before Spit and Alex could get into one of their usual arguments.

‘You reckon we’ve got a chance to qualify for the county five-a-side, then, do you?’

Alex nodded. ‘Of course! What’ve we got to lose?’

‘Our self-respect?’ said Spit. ‘Don’t you remember how we got hammered by The Black Crows at school?’

‘We weren’t used to Earth’s gravity, that’s all,’ replied Alex. ‘And we were a man down. But we were awesome at the Academy, weren’t we? There’s no reason we can’t be just as good here on Earth. All we need is a bit more practice.’

The gang looked unconvinced as House pulled his head out of the oven and announced through a grease-streaked face that it was finished.

‘Perfect timing,’ came Tabbris’s voice again.

‘Oh, er . . . Hi, Tabbris,’ said Alex. ‘We didn’t hear you come in.’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ Tabbris replied. ‘I wouldn’t have lasted long in Special Operations if I couldn’t get into a room without being heard, would I? Silent and graceful, that’s what we are.’

Spit looked at House. ‘Didn’t you say you wanted to join Spec Ops once you’d qualified as a Guardian Angel?’

House nodded.

‘Silent and graceful? Well, that rules you out.’

House scowled, but with Tabbris standing by, he swallowed his sharp reply.

‘Now, let’s see how you’ve done, shall we?’

The gang held their breath as Tabbris prowled around the kitchen, scrutinizing every centimetre of the floor, walls and surfaces.

‘Not bad,’ the old angel mused. ‘Not bad at all. But I wonder . . .’

And to everyone’s horror he suddenly pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves, stuck out a finger and wiped it behind the oven.

‘We’re dead,’ said Inchy.

The gang held their breath.

‘Let’s have a look,’ replied Tabbris, slowly raising his finger to the light.

It was spotless.

‘I knew he’d try that,’ whispered House, ‘so I did double cleaning round the back.’

‘Nice one, mate!’ grinned Alex.

Tabbris turned to face the gang.

‘Well, I have to admit, I’m impressed,’ he said.

‘Impressed enough to send us home?’ asked Spit optimistically.

Tabbris raised one snowy eyebrow. ‘Hardly. Let’s not forget that you wouldn’t have been in this position at all if you hadn’t seen fit to steal my fishing rod. You’ll need to do something far more impressive if you want to get back to Cloud Nine. Still, you do deserve some reward, I suppose.’

‘Please, sir,’ piped up Alex. ‘Could we be allowed to enter the county five-a-side football tournament, then?’

‘If you really feel the need to partake in mindless barbarity, then I suppose you must,’ replied Tabbris. ‘But I’ve got something far more fun as well. Community service.’

‘Doesn’t sound much fun to me,’ said House.

Tabbris carried on as if he hadn't heard.

'Gabriel and I have decided that, as part of your whole Earth-bound learning experience, you should try doing some community service. And as next week is half term, you will be visiting patients at Green Hill Hospital every day.'

'Every day? You're joking,' said Cherry before she could stop herself.

'No, I'm not,' Tabbris replied. 'If I was joking I would probably have said, "Did you hear the one about five silly young angels who didn't know how to behave and had to be sent to Earth to learn a thing or two from an old angel who was too kind for his own good?"'

Tabbris chuckled at his own unfunny joke. He was the only one.

'You will visit the patients in the hospital, practise your listening skills and get a better understanding of what makes humans tick. Which is essential if you're ever to become *proper* angels.'

'Sounds utterly marvellous,' said Spit, without an ounce of warmth in his voice.

'Indeed it is,' beamed Tabbris. 'And if you do it properly and without getting into trouble, then I will allow you to play in this football tournament. Although I think that you'll enjoy your community service a lot more than kicking a ball around a piece of grass, wouldn't you agree?'

No one dared reply.