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CHAPTER I

In Which a Birthday Party Takes Place, and We Learn That One Ought to Be Careful With Candles (and Dangling Prepositions).

In a small terraced house in the English town of Biddlecombe, a birthday party was under way.

Biddlecombe was a place in which, for most of its history, it seemed as though nothing very interesting had ever happened. Unfortunately, as is often the case in a place in which things have been quiet for a little too long, when something interesting did happen it was very interesting indeed; more interesting, in fact, than anybody might have wished. The gates of Hell had opened in a basement in Biddlecombe, and the town had temporarily been invaded by demons.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Biddlecombe had never really been the same since. The rugby team no longer played on its old pitch, not since a number of its players had been eaten by burrowing sharks; the voice of the captain of the Biddlecombe Golf Club could still occasionally be heard crying out from somewhere at the bottom of the fifteenth hole; and it was rumoured that a monster had taken up residence in the duck pond, although it was said to be very shy, and the ducks appeared to be rather fond of it.

But the creature in the pond was not the only entity from Hell that had now taken up permanent residence in Biddlecombe, which brings us back to the birthday party. It was not, it must be said, a typical birthday party. The birthday boy in question was named Wormwood. He looked like a large ferret that had suffered a severe attack of mange[1], and was wearing a pair of very fetching blue overalls upon which his name had been embroidered. These overalls replaced a previous pair upon which his name had also been embroidered, although he had managed to spell his own name wrong first time round. This time, all of the letters were present and correct, and in the right order, because Samuel Johnson's mother had done the stitching herself, and if there was one thing Mrs Johnson was a stickler for[2], it was good spelling. Thus it was that the overalls now read 'Wormwood' and not 'Wromwood' as they had previously done.

Wormwood was, not to put too fine a point on it, a demon. He hadn't set out to be a demon. He'd just popped into existence as one, and therefore hadn't been given a great deal of choice in the matter. He'd never been very good at being a demon. He was too nice for it, really. Sometimes folk just end up in the wrong job.[3]

[1] For those of you unfamiliar with mange, it is an ailment that causes a loss of fur. Think of the worst haircut you've ever received, and it's a bit like that, but all over your body.

[2] Technically, that sentence should read 'if there was one thing *for which* Mrs Johnson was a stickler', as nobody likes a dangling preposition, but I said that Mrs Johnson was a stickler for good spelling, not good grammar.

[3] Such as Augustus the Second (1694–1733), King of Poland and Grand

A chorus of voices rang out around the kitchen table.

'Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Woooorrrrrmmmmmwooo ood, Happy Birthday to you! For he's a jolly good, um, *fellow* . . .'

Wormwood smiled the biggest, broadest smile of his life. He looked round the table at those whom he now thought of as his friends. There was Samuel Johnson and his dachshund, Boswell. There were Samuel's schoolmates, Maria Mayer and Tom Hobbes. There was Mrs Johnson, who had started to come to terms with having demons sitting at her kitchen table on a regular basis. There were Shan and Gath, two fellow demons who were employed at the local Spiggit's Brewery as beer tasters and developers, and who were responsible for a fifty per cent increase in the brewery's profits, as well as a 100 per cent increase in the number of

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Duke of Lithuania, also known as Augustus the Strong. He managed to bankrupt his kingdom by spending all of its money on bits of amber and ivory, lost a couple of battles that he really would have been better off winning, and fathered over 300 children, which suggests that, in between losing battles and collecting trinkets, he had a lot of time on his hands, but his party piece consisted of gripping a horseshoe in his fists and making it straight. He would probably have been very happy just straightening horseshoes and blowing up hot water bottles for a living, but due to an accident of birth he instead found himself ruling a number of kingdoms. Badly. You should bear this in mind if your dad or mum has a name beginning with the words 'His/ Her Royal Highness', and you are known as 'Prince/ Princess Something-Or-Other'. Unless, of course, your name is really 'Something-Or-Other', in which case you don't have anything to worry about (*about which* to worry – darn it) as your parents didn't care enough about you to give you a proper name, and you are therefore unlikely to amount to anything. Sorry.

explosions due to the instability of the still-experimental Spiggit's Brew Number 666, also known as 'The Tank-buster', which was rumoured to be under consideration by the military as a field weapon.

And then there was Nurd, formerly 'Nurd, the Scourge of Five Deities' and now sometimes known as the Nurdster, the Nurdmeister, and the Nurdman, although only to Nurd himself. Nobody else ever called Nurd anything but Nurd. Nurd had once been banished to the remotest, dullest region of Hell for being annoying, and Wormwood, as his servant, had been banished with him. Now that they had found their way to Biddlecombe, Wormwood preferred to think of himself as Nurd's trusty assistant rather than his servant. Occasionally, Nurd liked to hit Wormwood over the head with something hard and memorable, just to remind Wormwood that he could think of himself as anything he liked just as long as he didn't say it aloud.

But in the end Nurd, too, was one of Wormwood's friends. They had been through so much together, and now they worked alongside each other at the Biddlecombe Car Testing Institute, where Nurd tested the safety of new cars, aided by the fact that he was immortal and hence able to walk away from the worst crashes with only the occasional bruise for his trouble.

Wormwood had never had a birthday party before. Until he arrived on Earth, he didn't even know there was such a thing as a birthday. It seemed like a very good idea to him. You got cake, and gifts, and your friends sat around and sang about what a jolly good fellow you were. It was all quite, quite splendid.

The singing ended, and everyone sat waiting expectantly.

'What do I do now?' asked Wormwood.

'You blow out the candles on the cake,' said Samuel.

When they'd asked Wormwood how old he was, he'd thought that he might just be a few billion years younger than the universe itself, which made him, oh, about ten billion years old.

'The cake's only a foot wide!' Mrs Johnson had pointed out. 'He can't have ten billion candles. They won't fit, and if we try the whole town will go up in flames.'

So they'd settled on one candle for every billion years, which seemed like a reasonable compromise.

Nurd was seated directly across the table from Wormwood. He was wearing a red paper party hat, and was trying unsuccessfully to blow up a balloon. Nurd had changed a lot in the time that they'd been in Biddlecombe, thought Wormwood. His skin was still green, of course, but not as green as before. He now looked like someone who had just eaten a bad egg. His head, which had formerly been shaped like a crescent moon, had shrunk slightly. It was still long and odd looking, but he was now able to walk the streets of Biddlecombe without frightening too many children or causing cars to crash, especially if he kept his head covered.

'This balloon appears to be broken,' said Nurd. 'If I blow any harder, my eyes will pop out. Again.'

That had been embarrassing. Samuel had used a spoon to retrieve them from Nurd's glass of lemonade.

Wormwood took a deep breath.

'Make a wish,' said Maria. 'But you have to keep it to yourself, or else it won't come true.'

'Oh, I think I've got the hang of the balloon now,' said Nurd.

Wormwood closed his eyes. He made his wish. He blew. There was a loud *whoosh*, followed by a *pop* and a distinct smell of burning.

Wormwood opened his eyes. Across the table, Nurd's head was on fire. In one of his hands, he held the charred, melted remains of a balloon.

'Oh, thank you,' said Nurd, as he tried to douse the flames. 'Thank you very much.'

'Sorry,' said Wormwood. 'I've never tried to blow anything out before.'

'Wow,' said Samuel. 'You have inflammable breath. I always thought it smelled like petrol.'

'The cake survived,' said Tom. 'The icing has just melted a bit.'

'I'm fine,' said Nurd. 'Don't worry about me. I love being set on fire. Keeps out the cold.'

Samuel patted Nurd on the back.

'Seriously, I'm OK,' said Nurd.

'I know. Your back was on fire, though.'

'Oh.'

'There's a hole in your cloak, but I expect Mum will be able to fix it.'

Mrs Johnson cut the cake and gave everybody a slice.

'What did you wish for, Wormwood?' asked Tom.

'And if you tell me that you wished my head was on fire, we'll have words,' said Nurd.

'I thought I wasn't supposed to say,' said Wormwood.

'That's before you blow,' said Tom. 'It's all right to tell us after.'

'Well, I wished that everything would stay the way it is now,' said Wormwood. 'I'm happy here. We all are.'

Shan and Gath nodded.

And in the general hilarity and good cheer that followed, nobody noticed that it was only Nurd who had not agreed.