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Opening extract from

Pongwiffy and the Holiday of Doom

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Prologue

In Witchway Wood, there is no noise. Only the faint hissing of rain falling lightly on to waterlogged leaves and sodden branches. No noise at all except . . .

Except the rhythmic sound of bicycle wheels sloshing through mud, accompanied by some enthusiastic bell dinging and a burst of cheerily horrible singing. And through the trees comes a small, furry Thing in a Moonmad T-shirt, sporting a bright yellow baseball cap and with a large bag slung over his shoulder.

He is the Paper Thing.

The Paper Thing really loves his job. He has taken ages to master all the necessary skills and subtle tricks of the trade, such as the art of Balancing the Bike, the

art of Stopping, the art of Steering, the art of Fiddling the Takings and so on – but my goodness, it was worth it. Not only did he get paid to zoom around like a maniac all day, HE GOT A FREE YELLOW CAP! The Thing adores his cap. He wears it to bed sometimes.

The Thing sang cheerily to himself, as he cycled on, splattering mud all over a couple of glum rabbits who had unwisely decided to eat out this wet morning. Ha, caught you on the hop there, carrot crunchers! Yahoo!

He rounds the corner, screeches to a halt, dismounts and throws his bike in a puddle (not yet having mastered the art of Propping). He rummages in his bag and brings out a cellophane-wrapped magazine. Or is it? No, in fact closer inspection reveals it to be a brightly coloured holiday brochure! It is addressed to The Occupier, The Hovel, Number One, Dump Edge, Witchway Wood. The Paper Thing stares in puzzlement at the front cover on which a group of grinning Banshees in bathing costumes are leaping in an azure blue sea. Splashed across the top, in a great sunburst, are the words:

SLUDGEHAVEN-ON-SEA
Where Fun, Excitement and Olde Worlde Charm
Combine to Create that Special Holiday Magic!

The Thing is puzzled because exotic holiday brochures are seldom seen in Witchway Wood. Newspapers, yes. Spell catalogues, yes. Badly wrapped newspaper parcels full of soggy herbs, yes. Final reminders, definitely. But *holiday brochures*?

After a long inspection, the Paper Thing gives a shrug, rummages deep in his bag and brings out a stout wooden clothes peg which he proceeds to clip on to his nose.

He has delivered to this particular Occupier before. He is prepared.



CHAPTER ONE

Cooped Up

In Number One, Dump Edge, a heavy silence reigned. It was the sort of silence that descends after Sharp Words have been spoken – which, indeed, they had. Witch Pongwiffy had let the fire go out, and Hugo (her Hamster Familiar) was not amused.

It was very depressing in the hovel. Not only was the fire out, the roof was leaking. Big drips gathered on the blackened rafters and fell with dull *thunks* into the army of old saucepans and cracked basins littering the floor. Hugo was picking his way between them, armed with twigs and little pieces of screwed-up newspaper. He was wearing his HAMSTERS ARE ANGRY T-shirt, and right now you could believe it.

'Anyway, it wasn't my fault,' muttered Pongwiffy after a bit. She was slumped in her favourite rocking chair, sulking. 'It's not my job to see to the fire.'

'Oh no?' snapped Hugo. 'Whose job is it, zen?'

'The Broom's. Always has been.'

'Ze Broom is off vork, remember?' Hugo reminded her.

It was true. The Broom was down with a severe cold and had taken to its sick bucket (which was the same as its usual bucket with the addition of a spoonful of honey dissolved in warm water).

'Well in that case, it's your job,' said Pongwiffy firmly. 'I'm the Witch around here, remember? I do all the important, Magical stuff. You're just my helper. If the Broom's off, the fire's up to you.'

'Oh ya? Along viz ze shoppink and ze cookink and ze cleanink, I suppose? I only got two pairs of paws, you know. Who you sink I am? Superhamster?'

Pongwiffy considered. It was true. Hugo was a treasure and it was all her fault that the fire had gone out. Now would be a perfect moment to admit it gracefully and apologise. On the other hand . . .

'Ah, go drown in an egg cup, shorty!' she snarled, and the perfect moment was gone.

We have to forgive her. It was the rain, you see. It had been raining incessantly for weeks, driving Pongwiffy slowly but surely round the bend. She was a

Witch of Action, who hated being cooped up. The sort of Witch who liked to be out and about, swapping gossip and recipes, popping in on people unexpectedly and inviting herself to tea. That sort of Witch.

It had been ages since anyone had invited her to tea. It seemed that the entire Coven had taken to their beds and were refusing to answer their doors, despite her plaintive cries and loud bangings.

Hugo sat back from arranging his twigs with an exasperated little sigh. One more day of Pongwiffy mooning about the place starting arguments was more than he could bear.

'Vy you not make some Magic?' he suggested. 'Little bit of cackling, hmm? Mix up a brew? All zis rain, plenty of frogs about. Turn some into princes or sumsink.'

'Don't you think I'd *like* to? There's nothing I'd like better. But we've run out of all the basic ingredients. There isn't a speck of newt vomit left, and all the recipes call for that. I tried to get some from Malpractiss Magic, but as usual he didn't have any. "Call yourself a Magic Shop," I said.'

'And vot he say?' asked Hugo, struggling with a box of matches that was bigger than he was.

'He said he didn't call himself a Magic Shop, he called himself an Umbrella Shop. And he took me outside, and there it was. Malpractiss Umbrellas Ltd, right

across the shop front. Trust him to cash in on the bad weather.'

'Did you buy umbrella?' enquired Hugo.

'Of course I did. It was raining.'

'Zere you are, zen! Take it and go visit a friend!' cried Hugo.

'No one wants me,' explained Pongwiffy with a hurt little sniff. 'Everyone's got colds. No one's answering their doors, even Sharkadder. Yesterday I took her round a lovely Get Well card and Dudley scratched me and wouldn't let me in. Huh. And she calls herself my best friend.'

'Does she?' asked Hugo doubtfully.

'Certainly she does. And she was mine. Until yesterday. 'Now she's my worst enemy, and I'm never speaking to her again. I'm going to tear up the card I bought her. On second thoughts, I'll cross out the "Well" and write "Knotted" instead. Where's a pencil?'

She sprang from her chair, marched to the kitchen table, pulled out the drawer and upended it on the floor. Hugo shook his head resignedly as she scrabbled about on hands and knees, hurling things over her shoulder and muttering, 'A pencil, a pencil, where's a flipping pencil?'

Then, all of a sudden, she stopped, sat back and rubbed her eyes.

'Oh, Hugo,' she said weakly. 'Just listen to me. I've

done nothing but shout at you all morning. You, my very own little Familiar who's been so good to me. And now I'm about to send my very best friend a Get Knotted card. Whatever is happening to me? I'm changing personality.'

'Is because you cooped up. You bored, zat's all.'

'I am, I am, you're absolutely right. I need a change of scene.'

'Vell, tonight you get ze chance. It ze monthly meetink in Vitchvay Hall, seven-thirty sharp, remember? See all your friends. Have little chat, Ya?'

'I don't mean *that* sort of change. Who wants to turn out on a rainy night to go to a boring old Coven Meeting? Half of them probably won't turn up anyway, specially as it's Gaga's turn to bring the sandwiches. If I wasn't Treasurer this month, I don't think I'd bother to go. But Sourmuddle says I've got to take along the Coven savings.'

She glanced at her bed, under which the official Coven money box (labelled COVEN FUNDS – DO NOT TUCH) was hidden, in case of burglars. And a very good place it was too. Any burglar who would remove something from under Pongwiffy's bed would have to be *really* keen.

'She wants to check and make sure I haven't spent any,' continued Pongwiffy, sounding slightly miffed. 'I don't think she trusts me, can't think why. No, I mean

a *real* change. Just go away for a few days, get away from all this rain . . .'

Right on cue, there came an interruption. The letter box flapped, and something flopped on to the mat. From outside, there came the sound of receding footsteps and the faint strains of tuneless singing, which soon mercifully died away to nothing.

'Oh, goody!' cried Pongwiffy, leaping to her feet. '*The Daily Miracle*'s arrived. At least I can do the crossword puzzle!'

And she scurried across to pick it up. But it wasn't the paper. It was something much more interesting than that. There it lay, all glossy and gleaming, contrasting strangely with the surrounding Wilderness Where No Broom Dare Go (Pongwiffy's floor). A small, square, sunny, bright blue island of paradise amidst a sea of squalor.

'Well now,' said Pongwiffy, a gleam in her eye. 'Here's an interesting thing! Look what's just arrived, Hugo.'

Excitedly, she held it up.

'"*Sludgehaven-on-Sea – where fun, excitement and olde worlde charm combine to create that special holiday magic!*" Oh, Hugo. Doesn't it look lovely? Look at the colour of that sky! Not a cloud to be seen. Just think of it. Kippers for breakfast. Strolls along the prom. Sunshine. Sea breezes. That'd blow the cobwebs away.'



'It take more zan sea breeze to blow *zose* cobvebs avay,' observed Hugo, glancing grimly up at the shadowy ceiling, where dozens of cheeky spiders were currently running around with thimbles, trying to prevent their rafter from flooding. 'It take a typhoon to shift zat lot.'

'I meant the cobwebs in our brains, silly. Oh, imagine going to the seaside, Hugo, you and me. Better still, what if we could all go! The whole Coven. Familiars, Brooms, everybody! Wouldn't it be fun?'

She scuttled across to the kitchen table and settled herself down, thumbing through the glossy pages.

'There's even a pier, Hugo. I've always wanted to visit a pier, There's a Hall of Mirrors and a Haunted House – and it says here "*Star-studded entertainment in the Pier Pavilion*". Oh my! Do you know what I think, Hugo? I think I'm going to suggest it. I shall take this along to the Meeting tonight and persuade Sourmuddle that what everyone needs is a holiday.'

'You'll never do it,' said Hugo flatly. ''Olidays cost money. You know Sourmuddle. She don't like to part viz ze money.'

'Ah,' said Pongwiffy. It was a meaningful sort of ah. 'Ah. But she hasn't *got* the money, has she? I'm Treasurer this month, remember? And what's done can't be undone, *if you know what I mean*.'

Hugo looked up sharply. His eyes widened.

'You vouldn't dare! Not vizout Sourmuddle's permission!'

'Why not? There's loads in the money box.'

'But zat not ours! It ze official Coven savinks!'

'So? What are we saving it for?'

'A rainy day. So Sourmuddle say.'

'Well, there you are, then!' cried Pongwiffy triumphantly. 'You couldn't get a rainier day than this, could you? No, Hugo, I've made up my mind. I'm going to go right ahead and book it up. I'll spring it on them as a lovely surprise. "Pongwiffy," they'll say. "'Trust you to come up with yet another brilliant idea . . ."'

'Are you sure?' asked Hugo doubtfully.

'No, actually,' admitted Pongwiffy. 'But I'm doing it anyway.'