Fish on the Line

by Helen E Davis

April 30, 2000

The vintage convertible—long hood, long trunk bordered by fins, bright gold in the southern Louisiana sunlight—spun up the gravel road and stopped in the otherwise empty parking lot. The driver opened the door and stepped out, then looked up at the three-story house that had once overlooked a bustling plantation. He took a suit jacket from the back seat and pulled it on over his white dress shirt, then glanced down at his dress shoes. Still shiny. Picked up his satchel and put the strap over his head. Rubbed the four thin scars over his right cheek, then touched the gold dragon on his lapel as if for luck, or courage. And walked up the steps of Je Juin's High School.

The great hall looked as it had for the four years he had been a student here, with its grand staircase and three ornate vases on their prominent pedestals. It smelled the same—a mix of old wood, cleaners, and teenage hormones. He went straight to the door at the back of the hall, beneath the stairs, and checked his watch. Moved to the side and waited.

Noise exploded from the floor above, chattering voices and running shoes. The door beside him flew open and a flood of teenagers poured out, none that he knew, none who knew him. They rushed past, more excited about the summer days ahead than a stranger in the school.

In the quiet, he walked down to the basement, then the sub-basement. Eight years on, Pascal had returned.

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Helios Gundersnatch looked down at the freshly collected tests piled on his desk, tucked beneath the sleeping silver dragon. Three more weeks. Just three more. After forty-two years of teaching, thirty of them here, he was going to do something else with his life. He would probably miss it—would certainly miss it—but he just couldn't keep up with the load any longer.

"Hello?"

He looked up at his visitor: a short man in a nice suit, close-cropped hair, scars running across his cheek, a gold dragon sparkling on his lapel. "Pascal! Pascal Isadore! Drag up a chair and sit down!"

The man gave him a thin, nervous smile and pulled over one of the classroom chairs. "I was hoping for a few minutes..."

"Of course! Chime won't let these tests go anywhere!" In response to his name, the silver dragon opened an eye, then sat up, suddenly interested. "How's fishing?"

"Good. It's good." Pascal put his hands on the knees of his black trousers. His dress shoes were flat on the floor. He seemed so different from the wild boy who had graduated—how many years had it been? Smaller than his classmates, always in a fight. His southwestern Louisiana background had set him apart from the other students, and his chaotic upbringing had robbed him

of the tools to bridge that. But now he was thick and solid. Mature. Crisply pressed suit and dress shoes instead of the worn jeans, faded shirts, and scuffed cowboy boots of his student days.

Helios folded his hands on his desk. “Well then, what can I do for you?”

Pascal took a deep breath. “I need a job.”

“I thought the fishing was good?”

“It’ll keep me fed.” Pascal nodded. And he didn’t look as if he had been skipping meals, though it seemed more muscle than fat. “But I’m looking for something else.”

Je Juin’s didn’t need gardeners or maintenance workers, or anyone of that sort. And definitely not a fisherman. Pascal knew that. “What, exactly, do you want from me?”

“A letter of reference.”

“From me?” Helios hadn’t seen the man in years and didn’t know what kind of a worker he was now. His grades in school hadn’t been that promising, though he had clearly learned the material. He just tended to show it outside the classroom.

“Yah. Yes,” he quickly correctly to proper English. Deep breath, short pause. “I just defended my thesis. I passed.”

That—Helios suddenly saw Pascal in a totally different way. He *definitely* wasn’t the wild child anymore. “Doctorate?”

“Masters. In anthropology.” Pascal dug into his satchel and pulled out a handful of papers. “My transcripts.”

The grades were impressive—Pascal had decided to work. And there was his undergraduate degree. “English education?”

“Yah. Er, yes.”

That changed—everything. “You—wouldn’t happen to have your resume, would you?”

Pascal pulled out more papers. “Here. And my letters of recommendation from my college professors.”

Helios looked at Chime, and Chime looked back as if to say, *Go on.* “And you want one from me, because…?”

“To say I can work magic. I want to be a magic teacher.”

Perfect. Helios put a paperweight on the test and set Chime on his shoulder. He gathered up all of Pascal’s papers. “Let’s go upstairs, maybe get a cup of coffee. Some of the other teachers will certainly want to see how you’ve turned out.”

“But—my recommendation!”

“You will have it. Come along.”

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Tipper Kitteridge shook her head at the piles of paper on the table in front of her. There were two: the applicants with a teaching certificate but no knowledge of magic, and the psychics, card readers, and casual practitioners who had never stood in front of a class. No overlap. She wanted to sweep them all to the floor.

“We don’t even have the best of a bad lot here.”

Vy Chhour—plump, short, and very competent in South Asian practices and cooking, nodded sadly.

Yes, Tipper *could* teach the Basic Magic classes herself, and she might have to if they couldn’t find a suitable candidate, but she didn’t want to. Her duties as head teacher were onerous enough, and she would have to give up her Advanced Magic classes—and without *those,* parents would quickly transfer their children to the trendier East Coast schools. Besides,

she preferred her students tamed, or at least not a danger to themselves and anyone within twenty-five feet of their wands.

The door opened and Helios walked in.

“Helios, you’re late!” He had probably forgotten the meeting anyway. “We’ve started without you, and— hello!”

The man behind Helios held her attention. That face, those scars, wasn’t that...? “Pascal Isadore!”

“Hello, Ms. Kitteridge.”

“He’s returned to us.” Helios gestured for the younger man to take the seat across from her, then took the seat to the right.

“What’s the occasion? Not a funeral, I hope.” Those clothes were certainly somber enough, except for the gold pin on the lapel of the jacket. Larger than the one he had worn on his collar while a student. She gestured to it. “You have a new one?”

“No, no. Same one.” He swallowed nervously.

Was it actually...? “Take off your jacket. It’s warm in here. Vy, get him a coffee.”

Pascal pulled off his jacket and folded it on the table. He hadn’t touched the pin, but now it was on his shirt collar, and far smaller.

Still, she could have sworn it was looking at her. Interesting. “So, you went on to be a fisherman, right?

“Yes. Still am, some days.” He took the mug from Vy, one decorated with the outline of a bass.

Helios leaned forward. “Pascal just got his masters in anthropology.”

“Oh?” Now they had something in common to talk about, didn’t they? Another change.

"*And* an undergraduate in English education."

Tipper smiled. "You're a—a teacher?"

"Yes. Magic, I hope."

She swept the papers off the desk.

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Pascal wanted to squirm. In truth, he wanted to run out the building, jump in his car, and fly away. But he needed this. He just had to move step by step, as carefully as if walking through a swamp with gators nearby. Only the gators knew all the stupid things he had ever done in this place. Ms. Kitteridge was looking at him with her most critical gaze, no doubt remembering what kind of student he hadn't been.

"Look." His mouth was suddenly dry. One didn't talk casually to the Advanced Magic teacher. "I have—"

"Transcripts, resume, letters of recommendation." Mr. Gundersnatch pushed over the papers he had taken from Pascal. "The whole package."

The other woman in the room, whom Pascal remembered as Ms. Chhour, stood up from where she had been gathering papers from the floor. "We need your driver's license and social security card..."

Pascal jumped. "Why?"

"Not just yet," Ms. Kitteridge said quickly. "You wouldn't happen to have that thesis on you, would you?"

He pulled out a binder. "Not a bound copy, just—"

She whipped it out of his hands. "I welcome the opportunity to read it and discuss it with you!"

“I’ve already defended it!”

She placed it with the papers, all of them out of his reach. “Tell me, Pascal—when did you decide to become a teacher?”

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The boy looked at his thesis like a fish realizing that its meal was attached to a fishing line. Resumes were handed out by the handful, while both the transcripts and letters of recommendation were sensibly photocopies of the originals. He might walk off and leave those. But the thesis, he wanted that back. His gaze was locked on it.

“Hmmm?” She reminded him that she had asked a question.

His gaze returned to her. “Out on the boats, I got hungry. Not for food, I had enough of that, but talk. Talk about things that matter. Magic—it belongs to the women, see?”

Tipper motioned for him to go on.

“So, I signed up for classes. I needed a major, and education seemed easy enough.”

Helios rolled his eyes and Vy had a coughing fit. Tipper remembered her own days of naivete and innocence.

Pascal grinned slightly, as if acknowledging the stupidity of his assumption. “But I found I like it.”

“You like teaching?” Tipper leaned forward. “Although, if I didn’t like it, at least on some days, I wouldn’t have stayed. So many challenging students, yes, but it’s *so* satisfying when they come around.”

Pascal nodded.

The door opened, letting in three teachers who had also taught Pascal. They glanced at each other, and their green dragons came out to sit on their shoulders, but they thankfully kept their

silence. After drawing coffees from the pot, they settled themselves in chairs at the edge of the room, an unofficial jury. “So, how do you handle it when students harass you? That happened while student teaching, of course?”

Another rare smile crossed his face. “I haven’t forgotten how I was, no. But one has to be clear with expectations. One must be strict at times, compassionate at other times. And sometimes, one just needs to be creative.”

“True, quite true.” She continued to ask questions, gently probing his knowledge and expertise. He seemed to have actually learned something about the job—enough to start with, at least. Slowly, she worked her way toward the idea of his teaching at Je Juin’s, though every time the door opened to admit another teacher, he jumped.

Leaning forward and giving him her most comforting look, she asked, “And how many other schools have you applied to?”

Lenore Boe—teacher of history and math—quickly bit her lip but, thankfully, kept her silence.

“I haven’t started. I’m still finishing things up, getting my papers and letters of reference in order.” He swallowed from his mug. “I’ve made a list, including—”

The door slammed open and Ms. Chevas, librarian since the dawn of time, stormed in with her brown dragon already perched atop her head. “I heard you were conducting an interview, is that correct?”

One hand on his jacket, Pascal grabbed for his papers, and Tipper got them out of the way just in time. She felt her own dragon’s tail curl around her shoulders and knew that Rattlesnake was staring down the librarian’s dragon. “No, no, Romana, this is just a friendly conversation. Pascal just came to visit us. He’s a teacher now. Of *magic*.”

“Hope to be,” he muttered, making another futile grab.

Romana stiffened her spine and hardened her face. “If you think I will approve this, this travesty—”

“I got my license from de state, tank you.” His Arcadian accent was suddenly quite strong as he glowered up at her.

“He—what?”

“And he has defended his master’s thesis.” Tipper held up his thesis. “In anthropology.”

Helios’s silver dragon stretched out on the table, several times larger than it had been, reminding Romana that, when full-sized, it was larger and stronger than hers. “And it’s not your choice anyway.”

Pascal, between Helios and Romana, shifted uncomfortably. He picked up his satchel. “I should go.”

“Wait.” Helios clamped his hand on Pascal’s shoulder. “Hear us out.”

“On?” He frowned. “This is just a friendly conversation, yes?”

“Romana, sit down,” Tipper ordered. She turned back to Pascal. “Now, considering where you might apply...”

He sat up straight, suddenly wary. Suddenly cognizant that this wasn’t just a friendly conversation. “What is going on?”

Helios steepled his fingers together. “I’m retiring.”

“We need a new Basic Magic teacher, someone who can teach and who has a good command of magic. Someone who can handle the freshmen. Having a large amount of natural magic is a very definite plus. And this person will be hired not by the faculty, but by the trustees.”

Suddenly relaxed, Pascal grinned again. “Dey won’ hire me. Dey know me.”

“*We* know you,” Tipper said slowly. *Perhaps even better than you know yourself.* “And if you apply, we will have exactly *one* suitable candidate.”

She waited for this to sink in.

He waved his hand. “But they’ll—”

“I’m now a trustee.” Helios rubbed the back of his dragon. “I promised you a reference, and you will have it—as well as my support for hiring, should you choose to apply here.”

Vy was already edging an application toward him.

Very gently, Tipper reeled in her fishing line. “Consider this, Pascal. You know the school and how we do things here. You have a lot of talents.” *Including those you managed to hide from us,* she thought as she glanced at the pin. “You would be an asset to this school, and we promise we will help you through your first years of teaching. The benefits include housing, board, medical, dental, retirement—none of which are standard at other schools of this type. We take care of our own.”

He frowned, hesitating. He glanced at Romana, and then at the other teachers. Frowned deeper.

“Just— just think about it. That’s all we ask,” said Vy, even though she nudged the blank application closer. “For now, why don’t you join us for dinner? You *do* remember Ms. Salle’s cooking, don’t you?”

“Can’t say no to that.” He smiled.

“Vy, go tell Ms. Salle that Pascal Isadore will be joining us.”

That was the net, coming up under the fish that was still thinking about the hook. By dessert, he would be signing the application. And if Ms. Salle and her ladies created the refreshments for

the meetings of the trustees, the board would accept Pascal with little question. *All in a good cause.*

Tipper stroked Rattlesnake's tail and smiled at Helios, who could now retire in peace, and then at the younger man with so much future ahead of him. And then for herself, as things would certainly run smoothly from now on.

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This is the prolouge to *Dragons on the Bayou,* an upcoming fantasy novel about a magical high school in South Lousinana. Join the Kickstarter and help bring it to life!