

Cow's Audiobooks

THE CALLING OF IDRIS WHITTAKER

A Whisper's Bay Story
By M.p Temple

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Hello listeners.

Thank you for joining me for Season 5 of *Cow's Audiobooks*. This season is special, because I'll be sharing a story I've been working on, off and on, since 2001. Back then, I was a sad little emo kid living in Las Vegas, writing a detective novel about a man stealing people's body parts. It was gory, and bleak. I was a messed-up kid. Looking back, I think it grew out of the atmosphere of the post September 11th, and

films like Kenneth Branagh's *Frankenstein*. This idea has been fermenting in my cask of my mind, and I am thrilled it is now ready to be shared.

So what is this story about? At its heart, it's about where the line blurs between becoming a monster and stopping one.

This story is about Idris Whitaker. She doesn't know it yet, but she's a terminally ill thirteen-year-old girl about to get a second chance at life. But when a new kind of vampire threatens the town of Whisper's Bay, Idris must decide what her true calling really is.

If you enjoy this story, I encourage you to also check out *Whisper's Bay* for its backstory.

The following has been rated PG-13 for violence and dark themes. Listener discretion is advised.

Episode 1: Stage 4 Club

**Doctor's office, Sawyer County Hospital, Whisper's Bay,
Oregon**

"If you don't stop asking me if I'm pregnant, I will punch you in the nose. I'm thirteen, you creep."

Idris was not in the mood to mess around. A normal kid might have been excited to get a day off from school for a doctor's appointment. But she knew something was not right. Like the ugly neon green walls in the room she sat, something felt off.

The doctor snorted and rolled his eyes. Idris thought he smelled weird and didn't like that he hardly acknowledged at her. The older man seemed more interested in whatever was on his phone than whatever was going on with her. He did not seem concerned about her weight loss, her pain, or her shortness of breath. She struggled to stay awake in class, and could no longer walk long distances without taking a sitting break. The once hyper child whom her father couldn't get her to stop running now sat pale and exhausted. The kid's hair was uncombed, and her outfit could only be described as "These clothes were easy to put on".

"It's depression, then, child." Dr Sentry waved her off and closed a folder with her name written crossed. "You are young, there's nothing to be sad about. I'm a doctor. If I make a mistake, it matters. No one cares what you do."

"I'm not leaving here until I get a full blood work done." Idris demanded.

"You are like the students I used to teach before I got my nurse practitioner license. They used to put their feet on the desk when I tried to lecture, can you imagine?"

Idris shook her head. "Give me my test."

The doctor turned toward the door. "Where is your father? He said he was getting some water and never came back?"

Idris frowned. "That is not important. Give me my blood test."

The doctor glared at her long enough for Idris to wonder if he was going to throw fists and burst into a fit of rage. But suddenly, he started shaking his head.

"Nurse!" he shouted.

Months later, Rosart Middle School. Whisper's Bay
Oregon.

Idris Whitaker knew she was going to die. There was nothing she could do about it. The thirteen-year-old girl with brown curly hair tossed her entire backpack into the trash can next to her locker. They had given her a box, but there was no use in keeping anything inside of it. The girl had thrown out every note and photo, including one of her father that seemed to find its way back to the top of the trash pile. Staring back at her. When the Portland doctors had told Mr Whitaker and Idris the news, he had hardly even looked at his own daughter. He had avoided her since, not coming home after work. She had not seen him for weeks.

Idris could feel everyone's eyes on her.

"I can't take it with me," Idris said. She found herself saying this or similar phrases dozens of times throughout her days. Some kids watching her laughed nervous chuckles. No one dared say a word as she tossed stacks of "Get Well Soon" cards into the trash.

When her locker was empty of all her belongings, she removed the top shirt she was wearing. One of the many layers of clothing she wore to keep warm. The shirt read simply, "Stage 4 Club!". No one had found it as humorous as Idris had. She had hoped that the obviousness would save her from explaining that she was terminally ill over and over. This did not work, as she still had to explain her fate repeatedly. She had seen so much sympathy in the past weeks, and she began hating it. Well-meaning words still mean very little with her days numbered. And she could no longer stand the smell of anything 'casserole', having been sent so many by Sunset Baptist Church. She stayed polite, of course, but Idris could hardly stand it.

"Are you ready?" She heard a voice say.

Of course, Idris was not ready. No one ever would be ready for that sort of thing. It would be the last time she would step foot in the musty halls of Rosart Middle School. She'd never make it to Whisper's High. Life was over.

She turned to face the older girl with a square jaw wearing pink scrubs. People often mistook the Navajo girl for her nurse. But she was the older kid next door to the Whitakers. Idris did find it strange her neighbour kept coming into her apartment and poking her on the head with vegetables. But somehow, even as her illness worsened, she felt better when Taylor was around. Taylor had taken care of her so often the school got permission to contact her instead of Mr Whitaker if Idris needed to be taken out of classes early.

Idris knew Taylor was trying to hide her crying again, so she looked the other way. But what she saw was a hallway full of kids, standing, trying to hold back their own tears. Instead, Idris looked to the ground.

"Yeah. I'm done here." Idris slammed the locker.

Taylor reached out and embraced her in a deep hug. Idris could hold it no longer. She cried hard, and uncontrollably. Holding onto Taylor.

The only words she could find to say were, "This sucks."

"I'm going to do everything I can for you. I promise," Taylor said. They let go of each other and headed towards the door.

"Why is there always a carrot in your pocket?" Idris asked, still sobbing but trying anything she could do to break the wave of sadness.

"I'm in a magic cult," Taylor said. "We use vegetables as wands and stick our noses up at non magic people. I've been keeping you alive with magic herbology," The two walked towards a waiting shuttle.

"I'm not in the mood to pretend." Idris said. "Why would you walk around with a vegetable in your pocket?"

Taylor smiled at this. "I said I am doing everything it takes. I've made up my mind."

Sawyer County Hospital, Whisper's Bay. 2019

As she lay in bed attached to beeping and chirping machines, she looked out the window at the rolling hills that led down to the shoreline. That is, when she could keep her eyes open. The sicker she got, the more she went in and out of consciousness. She spent most of her time this way. Sometimes she would feel well enough to tilt her head up to watch the TV mounted on the opposite side of the room. She had no idea what she was watching when she did this. Trying to focus on anything when she was that weak and in that much pain typically required too much energy.

When she could find a way to stay awake, she found she preferred watching the deer gather in the timbers. She could see that five of them would often gather near a crosswalk, and one of them would use its nose to hit the button. She could hear the deer repeatedly causing the crosswalk to say: "Wait, wait, wait!"

How do the deer know how to use a crosswalk? She thought. Why is everything in town so strange?

A man with a purple cape burst into the room. He adjusted his round glasses on his face and smiled.

"Are you here to take me and Taylor to Novelton Ridge?" Saying the words "Novelton Ridge" felt to her as if crossing a threshold. For there she knew would be her end. But she had no more tears to cry. The hurt and constant mental strain left her numb. At that moment, her only want in life was to make the pain stop. She was ready.

"It is your lucky day!" The man said.

Idris, in fact, did not feel very lucky. She resented the tone of his voice.

With all her strength, she mustered the words, "Who do you think you are?"

The man laughed. "Well, my dear, I am thee Barry

Diecknine! The trailblazer! I have a game for you to help you on your journey of getting better!"

Barry tossed a board game onto her lap.

"Don't you love the cover?" Barry said. "Double Exposed! The board game. That is something I'd want on my shelf at home to show off to all my guests! Go ahead and look inside the box. All of this could be yours for the low price of 80 dollars!"

Inside the box was a slapped together board game, with missing pieces. Someone had taken a black marker and had crossed out a lot of the artwork as well.

Barry noticed her and quickly interjected. "Don't worry! That artist got laid off. Like the rest of them. So what do you say? 80 bucks? Maybe you and your parents can play it to pass the time? This is going to fund my research, but of course you know that little girl."

"My mother is dead." Idris said. "And my father is at the bar. Always. I don't have any friends. Not since I got sick. They stopped talking to me."

"Oh," Barry said disappointingly. "You aren't my target audience. Well. No matter." The man walked over to Idris and plucked a strain of her hair.

Normally Idris would have yelled out, but moving even a finger required so much that she could not even respond. She could only watch as he inspected her plucked hair closely.

"Well. You let the nurses know if you change your mind. We have other splendid games as well. Bye now."

Days later. Novelton Ridge.

A strange man with a dozen cats in an old Buick drove Idris and Taylor to the small mountain town. Taylor had laid in the back with her, but Idris did not remember much. When she was awake, the pain and tiredness restricted her from doing anything productive.

She had been carried into a cabin along Novelton Ridge's only street. The house had little furniture other than some equipment brought over from the Sawyer County hospital. They placed her on a bed in the living room, which opened into the kitchen.

In some ways, Idris felt relieved. But scared. All she wanted to do was hold Taylor's hand, and wait for the end. Taylor tapped Idris with her pocket carrot, whispering long words of gibberish. Idris opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry your dad isn't here." Taylor choked out the words while squeezing tighter.

"You'll always be here for me." Idris said.

The strange man with the cats coughed. Taylor burst into uncontrollable tears.

"Oh Idris. I want to be." She cried. "But soon. We. Won't be able to see each other ever again. I suck at goodbyes. Idris, I'm a Yo-Yo Wizard. And I'm using dark magic to soul bonding with you. To save you. I need you to tell people how cool I was, okay? Be something for me. And the town must know about the things that Barry Diecknine has been doing. The damage he has done can not be fixed."

"What are you talking about?" Idris said. "I'm the one dying."

"No, I'm not letting that happen." Taylor shook her head. "You're going to the void. Until I can find a way to cure you. After we soul bond, only one of us can be here at one time. It's..."

Taylor stood and paced, seeming to Idris fumbling for words to say. Finally Taylor returned to her side and took hold of her icy hand again.

"There is little left of me." She said. "But I wanted to let you have the last pieces. My parents are dead. I have nothing left to give. You are my legacy. I'm going to miss you, kid. Someday, you are going to live an amazing, long life. Even. If you'll be seen as an oath breaker."

The man with the cats interjected. "Are you sure? Once you go through with this, there is no backing out. It is permanent."

"I've made up my mind." Taylor said.

Idris tried to flee. But she could not. She was not well enough to lift herself off the bed.

"What are you doing? I'm scared. I want to go home." Idris said.

"It'll be over soon," Taylor said.

She placed the carrot wand on Idris's forehead and uttered a long spell. The man looked on with his arms crossed as cats played at his feet.

The life of Idris Whitaker flowed into Taylor, all her pain and conscience dispersed from the earth. Leaving behind a stone statue of her. A place marker in some ways, since her soul and being had been sent to the void.

*The “Not a Magic Tea Shop” Magic Dispensary, Whisper’s
Bay, 2024*

Like coming out of a dream, or being put under at a dentist’s office, Idris woke after 5 years of being in the void. She lay on a wooden floor, on top of a woman she had never seen before. She coughed, feeling like her body had somehow been in storage. But her pain and illness remained.

A giant humanoid like monster with dozens of heads and mouths rose from behind the counter. “Bring the girl to me!” It said.

Chaos filled the room. Town’s people held pitchforks. People in robes and top hats held vegetable wands. Everyone seemed to be attacking each other. Idris had no idea what was going on, or why this woman was dragging her to a monster.

“IDRIS!” screamed Mr Whitaker. “Put out the flames! Everyone stop! Idris!”

The monster, Grobopalopacus, crossed in front of the sick child, being held by Luni with all her strength.

The woman held the girl up to the creature.

“Please save her!” She said. “Please!” The monster’s mouth began to open wide.

“Blabertgilious!” Idris heard someone shout out.

“No!” A man leapt in front of them. A spell rang out. A body fell to the floor.

The monster swallowed the Idris whole with one of its many mouths. From outside the beast, she heard, “Leave the girl alone, Don’t hurt her!”

“IDRIS!”

She knew that voice. It was a voice she had hardly heard before she had got sick.

“Put out the flames! Everyone stop!” Her father said.

Idris could not make out the other noises she was

hearing from the room, because the pain from within her began to disappear. There within the belly of the creature, she was healed of her illness.

She was spewed out of the monster onto the wet floor. Somehow it was raining in the room, but Idris did not care why this was. There was no longer any pain, her strength had fully returned.

"Dad?" said the girl, looking at her dad also on the floor, holding his shoulder. "Where am I? What happened to your shoulder?"

"How." Mr Whitaker said, panting and groaning in pain. "She. Died. How is she..."

"Taylor." Luni said. "Someone who out gave themselves more for love than I could. She's

Healed. She's okay."

The girl ran to her father and threw her arms around him. "I was so scared."

Months Later. Rosart Middle School.

Idris felt strange placing things back into the same locker she had cleared out years ago. To her, it felt like a few months, having been out of existence for five years. She had already realised she would be in a class with her former classmates' younger siblings. Life was weird, but she was glad to be living it. She had spent most of her time while waiting to be re-enrolled in school volunteering at the 'Not a Magic Tea Shop', the magic dispensary. Though she was not sure how she felt about magic being real. The town had been on the news sites constantly with the magic council going public, and Idris was tired of being asked about it.

Two girls showed up and began to clear out the lockers next to hers.

"You must be my locker mates, uh?" Idris said.

"Don't talk to us, Oathbreaker." One girl said.

Idris did not understand her bitter words. Before she could ask, the girls had removed the vegetables they were keeping in their lockers. They walked to the end of the hall, where a janitor stood with two new locks. Behind him, through a window, Idris saw a white cat, glaring at her.

Idris looked around. The other kids looked at her, but not like before. Instead of looks of pity, they were looks of horror. As if they were witnessing a ghost standing in the room. Throughout her middle school and high school days, this did not change.

Episode 2: The Uncreated Man

'Not a Magic Tea Shop' 2029. 5 years later.

"Move over, everyone! Out of my way! Give me my coffee before that guy, Idris." The monster, Grobopalopacus, pushed its way through the crowded magic dispensary. A man with a Navy SEAL hat, the next in line, frowned and crossed his arms. The evening light that fell upon him seemed to sparkle. Idris prepared Grobo's coffee and added two shots of espresso and a touch of cream.

She reflexed on how drastically her life had changed in the past few years. Or however long it was. Things had become to feel surreal. The longer she worked at the tea shop/magic dispensary, the worst the feeling got. She also found it odd that she seemed to know more about the flowers and teas in the shop than some of the visiting wizards. Or 'Gladorians', as Idris later found out they are required to call everyone. You obviously can't go around calling yourself "Wizards of the Coast" without certain people getting upset. Years before everyone knew magic wasn't real. Now, no other non magic user knew as much as the nineteen-year-old shop hand. Well, next to Luni of course.

In truth, she might one of the best latte artists on the coast. At least in her mind, anyway. She still didn't have friends, non work ones anyway. She hung out making drinks for people, finding ways to cure strange magical illnesses. Like the man who had come in minutes before with around fifteen chickens nudging around his heels. Idris had to explain that spells have consequences, and the cost of his spell had caused the chickens to have attachment anxiety. Tied to whomever casted them. She made her blend of milk tea and the man relaxed. The chickens, now not anxious like their caster, wandered away. This should have made her feel proud to help those in need. But it didn't.

Things had become very odd in her life. Yet, it didn't feel earned. She felt like a cheater and couldn't wash the feeling away. But there was nothing she could do to change it. In a way, she had almost found peace at Novelton Ridge.

"This is an outrage!" The man in the Navy SEAL hat yelled. "We've been waiting in line for twenty minutes!"

Grobo shrugged. "Look, I'm jealous you got to work with seals. They are so cute." The monster said. "But I'm in a hurry, and your little outburst here is costing me a lot of my precious time."

"So is everyone else here! Do you know what I am? I'm a spice vampire! If I don't get my pumpkin spice latte soon, I'm going to start craving blood. Wait your turn!"

"Nah," Grobo said.

Idris watched as the man stuck out an arm to stop the monster from leaving. "Someone should teach you a lesson, you nasty thing! You act like you can do whatever you want!"

Grobo took a sip of his coffee in one mouth, but made a slurping sound with all its other mouths. "I can totally do whatever I want. Don't make Idris use my forbidden carrot wand on you."

Idris sighed. Luni always made sure to remind her never to see the mouldy carrot wand. The one that Grobo had crafted to help Luni and Taylor send Barry Diecknine to the void. Sure, non coastal magic users could cast with only the carrot wand without powers. But at what cost? She had heard it a million times before. She'd never need to use it.

The man rolled down his long sleeves and got into a boxing stance. "Let's solve this right now! You walk around acting like you can cure cancer or something!"

Idris walked from behind the counter. The room fell silent. The man in the hat looked around at the people with

their heads hung low in confusion.

“Grobo can cure cancer,” Idris said casually. “Here you go, you magic mutation from hell. Hope you aren’t too late for your appointment at the children’s hospital.”

Grobo waved with one hand, saluted with another, then all the hands gave her a thumbs up. “See you later, Idris, my fellow sin against nature!”

The man in the Navy SEALs hat leapt out of the monster’s way. Everyone else in the packed store stepped aside so that Grobopalopacus’s path was clear to the door.

Not a Magic Tea Shop. Whisper's Bay.

Lost in her thoughts, tugging at her dozens of beaded bracelets, she closed the front glass doors of the "Not a Magic Tea Shop". She bid the people setting up tents on the sidewalk for the next day's opening goodbye then ducked into a small path between the dispensary and the shop next door that led to a parking lot. She expected to walk up the grassy hills to her home in the foothills near the shoreline. Her night was to end quietly, alone, like every night.

Ever since she was brought back to life, ever since she was forced into becoming a Yo Yo Wizard, she felt conflicted. In one sense, she felt blessed. While others marvelled at the abilities of the vegetable welding magic users, Idris worked with the world's most expert herbologist. After she graduated high school, and only a few days ago, she had received a full-ride scholarship to secret magic college of Hogsnorts. Not as a student, but as a teacher. A non-magic user teaching magic. This was an unheard-of event in the coastal circles. Idris Whitaker had a bright future ahead of her if she wanted it. The problem was she didn't want it.

A young man appeared seemingly out of nowhere, grabbing her arm. His face was pale as an onion, and his lips quivered. This did not seem the type of fan who drove from the other side of the country to get a picture with Grobopalopacus. He seemed more like the type who actually needed help.

"Please!" he pleaded.

He unbuttoned his dress shirt's cuff, folding back the blue sleeve to reveal two bite marks.

"Some people would pay a lot of money for that," Idris said. "Stay out of my personal space. I don't repeat myself."

She tried to pass him in the alleyway, but there was not enough space between the buildings. He stood firm, frantically shaking his bitten arm.

"My neck too!" he said. "I have. Urges. I can't stop. Please."

Idris gave a glare. The same kind someone would get from a fast food worker if they had just ordered a large order minutes before store closing. She changed directions to head back towards the main street, in the light where she could be seen. Yet another craved fan of the shop. Claiming to have one illness or conjuring. More often than not, these types of encounters turned out to be people struggling with things far greater than magic.

I feel so burned out. I should care. But I don't. Idris thought. *I can't be like this. I have a duty to Taylor. To the shop.*

"The cure isn't effective until pumpkin spice coffee season starts." Idris said. "Stay away from loved ones and anyone you've ever wanted to bite for fun, and you should be fine with a cinnamon boost and extra whip. Unless you get urges to howl, then that's a different bag of tea."

She felt his hand on her shoulder as he drew closer. She yanked at a bracelet. It snapped off her wrist like the crack of a firecracker. The world around them shook. Wave upon wave of frogs fell from the sky, filling the alley with amphibians.

"What part of my instructions was not clear?" Idris asked.

"I'm not a spice vampire!" He yelled as he threw the creatures off his person.

She turned back, holding a nearby trash can lid to shield herself from the falling nonstop frogs. Each one letting out a "Ribbit" before splattering on the ground. The piles of amphibians stacked up around them.

"You've taken the Swift treatment for vampirism? And that stopped the glittering, but not the cravings? Who bit you?"

To her surprise, the man cried. "I know not. It happened outside the new Spinner's pizza. I don't know how to stop hurting people. You're the only one who can help me."

The sky cleared. They stood in the alley, listening to the laughs coming from the crowd camping in front of the store. Laughing at the insane amount of frogs on the 101/main street.

"You are telling me someone is going around attacking random people here in Whisper's Bay? Who are you?" Idris finally asked.

The man stepped forward, sticking out his chest.

"Kurt. Stop playing with me, tell me what I am?" he said in a growl.

"Monsters are not my area of expertise. That's a Braylynn, the shop owner, thing." Idris said, witnessing the man's surprised expression. "I don't know. Call the shop and leave your info. Get to some place far away from people you care about until I know what to do."

"You need go find this thing." He said. "That's what you people at the shop don't understand. Not everything can be healed with flowers and good wishes."

She shook her head. Hearing the words 'good wishes' sent chills down her spine. Bringing memories of well meaning get well soon cards and gifts. "I do not hunt. Do as I say. I'll see what I can find out, and then I'll call for you."

Mr. Finkerhopper's house. Night.

When Idris needed anything dark or occult, she knew to go to Mr. Finkerhoppers. He was a frequent customer at the magic dispensary, since he transforms into a wolf every morning if he doesn't. Though he worked at a library, he specialised in abnormal book requests. He's the sort of person who keeps a few copies of "The Book of the Dead" around for his guests to read. However, that night, no one came to the door when Idris rang. Mr. Finkerhopper stayed up at all hours of the night. So, this struck her as odd. She checked the door and found it unlocked.

"Mr. Finkerhopper!" She called out, entering the house. "If you forgot to take your anti-werewolf treatment, howl three times."

No howls came. She looked around, checking under piles of magic spells and cookbooks. Just in case he had become trapped in a book and Spinners pizza box avalanche like he had a few weeks before. Dealing with the occult always comes with unintended consequences, sometimes it not taking place until much later. Some random curse or jinx could happen to Finkerhopper at any more, always happens when least expected. Since Idris was technically immortal, she enjoyed the risk factor.

"Excuse me." She heard an annoyed voice from atop a bookshelf in the dining room. A white cat squinted at her. Its hair tipped in the colour black. "You don't live here."

"I didn't know Finkerhopper had a cat. Where is he?" Idris asked, approaching the creature.

"Are you freeing me from my existence?" The cat asked. "If you aren't, I don't understand why you think I should care about whatever you asked."

Nothing about the feline looked off; other than a talking cat thing. The tip of it's hair is what made Idris recongize

what it was. "Oh. You are a magic transmutation, like Grobopalopacus. Look at us, sins against nature, rocking out alongside each other."

"You know not what I am, thank you." The cat said. "I insist you leave at once. Or I will call the police!"

Idris smirked at this and crossed her arms. "Okay then. Go on. Call the police on me. Pick up that phone with your little paws and call."

The cat stared. "I find your manners insensitive. And your existence intolerable. Mr Finkerhoper is away with Luni for something or another."

"I don't find you adorable." Idris deadpanned. "I have a college quarterback with some bite marks. Says he has cravings, and that he has fed on others. Luni was supposed to be back tonight."

"Bite marks. Cravings. This sounds normal for college football." The cat said.

"No, it's not that." Idris said. "This could be new. An unidentified strain that doesn't have a craving transfer treatment yet. If this spreads fast, this could be bad. I need to identify what kind of horror this is."

The creature coughed up a hairball. "What would I know? I'm only a cat."

"Do you even live here?" Mr Finkerpopper always had strange animals around. Most of the time, they were supposed to be there. Aside from the one time with a light bulb demon rudely woken from a hundred year slumber. It took the two of them an entire evening to capture it.

The cat said nothing. It did not move, nor did it blink. There was a long awkward silence before the cat asked. "I'm looking for something."

"Cow's?" Idris asked. "Everyone is always looking for cows. But a house is a weird place to look for those. Let's

meet halfway. I help you find whatever it is, and you help me figure out where to start hunting vampires at."

"Well. Our goals have almost aligned. So close. Yet not." The cat said. "O, the toll of living as one of the taboo. They don't suck up to me like I hear they do to you, though."

"I'm not here for group therapy, the Stage 4 club disbanded." Idris said. "You need a can of tuna opened or something before I leave?"

"How dare you!" The cat said. "You, of all people, should understand the life I am doomed to live. I challenge you to a duel to retain my honour. But we will raincheck that fight until a further time. I will take my leave. Good day."

"People don't suck up to me," Idris said. "They wanted me to be something different from what I feel I am. I have a debt to pay. And I don't know how to pay it back."

"Cryth me a river, and I shall bring my rowboat. You, of such sorrow. Everyone has a destiny. If they like it or not. Yours is coming soon, I fear." The creature vanished into a stack of books.

What was that cat doing there? She searched the rest of the house, but found nothing but more pizza boxes. Mr Finkerhopper While shifting the random things, like discounted chew toys, Idris noticed they had changed the design of the box since she and Luni used to eat there. The logo was bland, and now a giant sticker took up most of the box. This red sticker red in all caps: GARLIC FREE.

Spinners used to be known for its garlic butter crust. Why would the new owners change something so popular? Perhaps they were cutting costs, but something about this did not feel right. The only other reason for a well-liked recipe would be that one has an issue with the ingredients.

She learned after a quick call that Spinners is now open all night. Before ending the call, she asked the woman

working on the other end of the phone if she could speak with a manager to ask a question. "What is your stores association with the undead?"

Spinners Pizza and Dance Club

The DJ reached across the mixing table. Handing Idris a slice of cheese and jalapenos. She took it, but set it down a few moments later. The sub bass rumbled so loud that Idris could feel it in her toes. Dark dance music pumped through the floor. Several of the dancers were pale-skinned, but most were normal-looking people enjoying their time after work.

“He’ll see you soon.” The DJ screamed over the drop. Smoke rose from the DJ stand and lights flashed in a colourful display. The row of singing fish heads, a famous staple of their former location, still hung on the wall. Now repaired, looking as good as new. Idris missed the old location near the shop. Sometimes, when either Idris or Luni felt down, they would close the store. Long enough to enjoy a slice of pizza and a stroll in Arcadia Park before reopening. Luni would pay of course, and this irked her still that someone had to take care of her.

Things weren’t the same at the new location. Not with all the “No Garlic” signs plastered all over. There would not be the same sort of comforts here as she had experienced in the past.

The world in front of her dispersed. She could see nothing but black and thick smoke. Of course, Idris knew what this was. Transportation spell. When it cleared, she found herself sitting in a chair in front of a large oak desk. She now stood in the back office. Lit by only a lava lamp. A safety inspection notice was framed next to the window, which was drawn shut. The place smelled of tomatoes and onions.

The lava lamp erupted, breaking the glass sending its insides splattering across the walls. Idris ducked and covered her head. A match was struck, and a candle was lit.

“Oh don’t worry about that.” A voice said. “It’s sugar glass and cornstarch. Something has to break in order for

the spell to work. Spell consequences and all. Welcome to the new Spinners pizza and nightclub."

The chair spun around. A man with a handle moustache, that seemed to be always waving too her, smiled. He winked before saying. "I am Mr Todachini. Owner. Non garlic pizza lover. I understand you are inquiring about our association with the undead?"

"Well," Idris said. "I saw about five level 2 spice vampires out there dancing with some normals. I know your association. Kurt, QB from the college? Two bite marks. Deep, triangular and thin. Not like bat bites. The Swift treatment didn't work. Whatever attacked this man is unlike anything I've ever seen. I need help to find out what kind of vampire is attacking people in Whisper's Bay. Does this pizza shop have anything to do with people getting attacked?"

"We are open to everyone twenty-one and above. I am not pleased I am being questioned like this. We have no sides at Spinner Pizza," Mr Todachini said.

"You give out ranch in a cup. That is a side," Idris said. "I'm not looking for trouble. If this is a new strain..."

"Impossible." Mr Todachini stood to his feet. "The swift treatment cured it for everyone. Except those who do not partake of the pumpkin spice for religious reasons."

"No one here is attacking anyone." Idris said.

"I only now remembered. Yes, the young man attacked near the theatre, I believe it was? I've heard that certain people are dealing with it. You know how these lower life forms are. That sort of thing would be dealt with in house I would imagine."

"Wow, you're giving off some vibes." Idris said. "So the vampire council or whatever is looking for who did it, but haven't found them. Hard to believe, even for a spice

vampire. I'm here to help."

"No one said anything about a vampire council being real." The moustached man said. "Or that I was the head of it. No one said that now. I hope you enjoyed the cheese and jalapeno." The man said. "As for anything else, I have no authority. I just cook the dough. Go somewhere else. Because if this strain is new, it was created elsewhere in town. Leave us and our. Patron's. In peace. You and the shop should honour those of who do not want to partake of the Switch treatment. And not in such a hurry to dump magic on everything. Come back for the breadsticks. But don't come back asking questions. Or else there will be consequences."

The 'not head of the vampire council' rapped his knuckles on the desk, seeming to Idris that he wanted her to leave.

"Your pizza oven isn't hot enough to melt that awful North Oregon Coast cheese your store is using. I might be back to ask you a few non pizza questions. I'm not ignoring this." She said.

The man stood to his feet, both his fists clinched. Idris calmly stood. "Your choice has been made then," he said. "Our doors are always open. Last call is at 1 a.m. on weekdays."

Diecknine Manison.

After fifteen minutes, Idris found her way inside through an unlocked bathroom window. The property facing the ocean sat untouched. It had ever since Taylor sent Barry to the void five years before. Before she knew of magic and vegetable wands, Idris didn't know the place existed. When everything the Glardorian had done came to light, the town locked away Diecknine's property. Idris found it odd walking down the giant hallways. She wondered who would decorate their house with statues of themselves. The gold furniture and hand-woven rugs seemed over the top even for rich people.

Looking back, Idris was thankful she had only one interaction with Barry as far she knew. Taylor's parents had their souls and identities stripped, and morphed with 18 others to form Grobopalopacus because of Barry Diecknine. Having hair taken was weird, but it could have been worse.

After wandering in the dark, she found the library and flipped a switch. A red glow rose from the floorboards of the room, revealing several rows of scrolls and old books. Sectioned off with a Dewey decimal system number. Her first thought was Finkershopper would have a field day if he were there. They had once even considered breaking in until Luni found out about their plot.

She took the staircase by a fireplace up to the second floor. A section of the upstairs library contained a section marked only with a black dot. The binding of the books was made of animal skin. What she hoped was animal skin, anyway. She thumbed through a few of these sets, looking for anything that might be useful. Within the covers, she found dark magic spells and chants, but nothing relating to the undead. She found little until she came across an odd title in the middle of the row. In a bright cream colour sat "The Secret Garden." By Frances Hodgson Burnett.

She tried to pull the book out, but something in the bookcase shifted. The floor rotated under her feet, and the light from the room bent in a circle around her. The air left her, and she fell from where she stood.

When she came to, she was face down in dirt next to a shovel. Once she stopped crying from the specks of dry soil, she realised she was no longer in the library. But she lay somewhere in a central courtyard. Surrounded by a circular wall. Next to her was a boxcar filled with dead plants. She looked around. Nothing in the grounds seemed to be alive. But she could see a light illuminating from inside the train car.

She dusted herself off and searched the area. On a shelf in the boxcar were flowers in the shape of skulls. Red mushrooms grow in the soil beneath them. Red petals with black tips fell from the flower.

That is amazing. Idris thought, reaching for the flower. *I've never seen anything like it. This is not a Western plant.*

She felt an icy hand on her back. She turned to face Kurt, who smiled. Another man joined him, looking like another football player.

"Oh, help me, only you can save me." Kurt mocked. "You are so weak. Put your hands up. Get out and face the garden wall."

Idris did as she was told and faced the circular stone wall. She listened as the two men approached her from behind. Her eyes darted to the shovel below her.

"Drain half of her. Save the rest for when the Uncreated Man gets here." Kurt told the other player.

"What did you say?" Idris asked.

"You've heard of Uncre," Kurt said, shoving her into the wall. "The creation so foul that his castor tried to back his creation. They call him the Uncreated Man. And your soul is

going to heal him beyond what you can imagine.”

She felt the man’s warm breath on the back of her neck. His mouth opened, and his fangs touched her skin.

Idris ripped a bracelet off her wrist. The wave of sound knocked everyone back. Like a techno song on the dance floor, the waves kept pulsating over and over. Idris tried to stand, but she and the two men kept being dragged down by the force of the music. She reached for the shovel.

Kurt’s hand met hers.

They fought over it, each trying to find their footing. Kurt took hold and swung at her, hitting her side. She keeled over in pain.

Kurt circled her and spoke. “Nice bracelets.” He swung at her arms. She moved, but the edge of the shovel nicked her. It stung, and she felt her ribs cracking out of place.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Finish me. Send me to the void. My soul bond will return in my place. Taylor will gladly stake you through the heart.”

“What, you out of bracelets?” Kurt asked.

Idris clutched her last bracelet. “Funny you ask. I have one left.” She looked at the boxcar. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The bracelet snapped off her wrist. Flames erupted from the ground, catching the two men within. They yelled as Idris felt around for the weapon. She found it and followed the sound of the screams. Enduring the pain, she opened her eyes and stabbed Kurt in the chest with the end of the shovel. He let out a primordial cry before turning into floating blue dust.

Idris closed her eyes. She recognised this as an occurrence that happens when a soul is being held captive. This vampire was creating vampire clones of people it bit.

“What are you?” She said to the last remaining man, still engulfed in magic flames.

"I'm one of the ragamuffins. Like everyone else. You can end me. But we are only going to get stronger. The vampire council is going to defeat you."

"Okay, your voice is annoying. Go back to your sleeper."

The bracelet spell ended, and Idris staked the last remaining vampire clone. Smoke rose from the boxcar.

"The flowers!" She shouted. She managed to reach inside and break the thick stems of a handful of skull flowers. The dead plants around her burst like bottle rockets in the flames. With the plants in her arms, she ran back to the circle where she had lifted the book. In an instant, she returned to standing in a library.

Later. Not a Magic Tea Shop

Idris called for a messenger owl while she attended to her wounds at the front counter. Who arrived after a while, but seemed to only be interested in making it known she was part of the union now.

"I need to get word to Luni and Mr Finkerhopper right away. Whatever this is, it's going to get a lot worse."

The owl shook its head. "Then you are going to have to wait until my holiday ends. I'll be glad to take your delivery first thing for a fee, but I'm not doing anything until then."

"It might be too late by then. Then that's it. I'm on my own," Idris said, crossing to the window. The moon lit the misty forest around them, enough to see a figure standing in the street in front of the shop. He wore a tweed suit and a white mask. His forehead looked deformed, unnatural. His arm seemed sewn on, and did not match his skin tone. The man stared back at her.

"Well, that's certainly the point of being in a union, isn't it?" The owl said, heading for the door. "No one tells us what to do anymore. Not without paying us for it."

Idris withdrew from sight through the window. The man left, limping into the darkness. Leaving Idris feeling uneasy. Still peering out into the dark street.

"It's not safe here, you know," said the owl. "Tourists keep going missing. People are pointing fingers at each other all over the place. Someone should do something about it."

"If you send my message, maybe I could help." She said.

"But I'm on holiday! You don't seem to understand the work-life balance. If you work hard, you gotta play hard, you know!" the owl said.

Idris filled a vase with water and placed the skull flowers in it. But instantly the water disappeared as soon as it touched the stem of the plant.

“Fine. I’ll hunt these horrors on my own.”

Episode 3: Tap Dance

The next morning. Sawyer County Hospital.

“What do you mean, Kurt is missing his kidney?” Idris asked, closely inspecting the real body of Kurt sleeping in his hospital bed. He was pale, but not as pale as his vampire clone had been. The nurse said that she had witnessed some colour in his skin return about the time that Idris staked his clone.

“If you are asking me to repeat what you overheard me say in the hallway you can forget it.” The nurse scoffed. She shotgunned a can of iced coffee, with drink dripping off her chin. Idris might have mistaken her for a vampire if she had not been a nurse. This, of course, is common, which the two share many similarities. Having spent looking over Taylor’s books and personal things, she knew that nursing people were different. Learning about Taylor’s life after she had been to the void had been fascinating. Fearing the backlash and to flee Diecknine, Taylor fled to live with her family in southern New Mexico. She did not return to Whisper’s Bay until after graduation. After finding her own true calling in being a nurse. Likely an attempt to find a way to find Idris’s cure.

So Idris wondered if she should take offence to this nurse’s rudeness. It didn’t matter either way.

“Are there others like this?” Idris asked.

“There’s a HIPPA violation waiting to happen.” The nurse said. “Look, I’ve been on shift for 11 hours, and I am staying on a few extra because of things going on, are you done asking questions?”

Kurt’s eyes were closed, and to Idris he looked pained but peaceful. Not the troubled person his magic husk had been. Not the beast she had fought. The longer she looked at the athlete, the more she remembered her own illness. She wondered if that was how she looked when she slept. Back

when death crept at her back door. The thought was sickening. There had to be a way to make his hurting stop.

"No. If they got you staying after that long of a shift, well. I can figure that out for myself. That is all for now. But don't complain if I'm back."

"Wouldn't dream of it, yo yo." the nurse said.

"Don't call me yo yo." Idris said.

"People like you make me sick. If the shoe fits, go, go tap dancing," The nurse motioned with her hands towards the door.

Idris picked up a card that sat next to a basket of flowers on the counter. It read, "from Sunset Baptist church."

She had to get out of there, away from the sights and sounds of the hospital. Each intercom buzz and and beep of machines felt as if she were being dragged back closer to where things had almost ended for her.

Whisper's Bay Community College. Afternoon.

The whistle blew. Idris watched closely the group of students sitting in the bleachers, hardly watching football practice. The wideouts hadn't caught a pass all practice. The linemen hadn't even started their first warm ups after twenty give minutes. Students wore shirts with "Team Kurt" written on them. Idris found herself wondering what they would think of vampire like clone of Kurt she had seen. The one who had intended to drain her the night before.

"Isn't Brad so dreamy?" She heard a college student say. A perky woman who seemed to be hanging out for the sake of hanging out.

"That's not my bag of chips," Idris bluntly said.

"He's second string quarterback, but he has a chance with Kurt in the hospital." The college student said. "I'd catch some passes from that. You're that girl from the tea shop. Who sells like, potions and hangs out with the grobopalo thing right? You beat death in a chess game or something?"

"Does your question have a point?" Idris asked.

"Idris right? My name is Eden. Freshmen." The woman sat next to her. Pads clucked together, and a punter punted a high flying kick into the sky. Towards their own end zone. The head coach on the sideline plopped to the ground. Another coach approached and bent down. He gently tapped the man, deep in the state of a panic attack.

"I didn't ask for your name. You who is called Eden." Idris snapped. She stood and observed a sizeable crowd that had gathered to view the athletes trying to perform.

"Because if you are that person, you must be here to look into the strange magic going on with Kurt." She said. "Since you're one of those... weird magic people. There's more than a few men on the team with bite marks. And I

don't mean mine."

Idris turned to her in annoyance. "You are one of those. Vampire groupies. What's a girl like you doing chasing fangs like that? Don't you have a trust fund to blow?"

"My therapist thinks it's deep-rooted. Borderline maybe, definitely some manic in there somewhere. I'm at peace with my demons. We nap together and go out for ice cream sometimes. I don't think you even know you have demons. But if you are looking into who attacked Kurt. And who took his body parts? I was told to tell you to go to the black box theatre tonight. Someone in the fang club will get you backstage."

Idris shook her head. "I think not. I met a few of the ragamuffins last night. I didn't care for their company."

"They heard you were asking around." Eden said. "These are not the types you want to disappoint. Not unless you are into that kind of thing, like I am. But with consent!"

A car with a Spinners Pizza logo fit on top pulled into the stadium parking lot. Several people appreciate the car. Idris and Eden watched as the man driving handed off a pizza box, then motioned for a person to get in the car. A college aged man did as the driver asked.

"This is bigger than you think." Eden said as the Spinner's Pizza delivery car sped away. "Tonight. Be backstage at the black box theatre before the play starts. There's someone who wants to talk to you."

Black box Theatre Dressing Room 1A Evening

The white cat with frosted black tips licked its paws on the makeup desk. The bright lights in the room made Idris feel like she had gone snow-blind. Other actors put on makeup, and warming up with seemingly ridiculous vocal exercises. Such as the girl next to them who kept saying, "I'm a BIG LION!" as loud as she could before whispering, "Now I'm a little lion". Repeatedly.

"Is this a joke?" Idris asked. "You are the cat I talked with at Finkerhoppers."

"The clean horse fell in the mud. That's a joke. Sorry if it was a dirty one." The cat said, inspecting his claws. "You spoke with the Spinners' pizza new owner, They seemed to have taken my side after your talk with them. I thank you for your work. You should consider working for me."

"You're a ragamuffin? You're associated with these suckers?" Idris asked.

The cat flicked its tail, stood up and spun in a circle. "I am a cultured person, and am known in several social circles. Trust me, you do yourself no favours burning bridges."

"Cut to the chase, what are you trying to tell me?" Idris said.

"Oh, poor move, sport." The cat said, walking to a script nearby. It looked over its lines for the evening performance. "Ever heard of the art of war? Sun Tzu says that one must know their enemy better than themselves. You must study me, as I have studied you. All these years. Through school and beyond. Walking among the stray cats and the Snufferclyde spies. Arrogance is such a waste, don't you agree?"

"I don't have time to sit around looking at tea leaves. Are you saying you are my enemy or what?" Idris said.

The cat jumped down at Idris feet and rammed its head into her ankles. "Do you want to be my enemy? Under the cherry blossoms, there are no strangers. But I can be whatever you make of me."

"Who are you? For real." Idris backed away.

"You can call me Langhorn." The cat said. "That is one of many names by which I am called. There is one I am more commonly called, however."

Idris tried to exit through the door. But the actor performing lion exercises stepped in front of her. She turned back. The white cat with black kissed hair glared at her, seemingly with an unnatural smile.

"I am the Uncreated man."

Idris grabbed her wrist. But she had no bracelets remaining. Before she could realise what was going on, the creature leapt at her. She fell, hitting the wall with the back of her head. Before the world went dark, and she lost consciousness, she heard the cat speak.

"Now excuse me, I have a crowd to entertain. I'll deal with you soon enough."

"Big lion! Little lion. Big lion!" An actor went on preparing, as if no one else was in the room.

Feeding House. Evening.

"Wake up! You don't want to miss this."

Idris wasn't sure who the voice was at first, as she slowly regained consciousness. When her vision returned, she realised she was tied up alongside Eden, the woman who had approached her at football practice hours before. She could hardly move her hands or feet the ropes were so tight. They sat tied, laying on red 70s style shag carpet in an empty room next to two wooden chairs. Idris noticed the bloodstains inches away from her face.

"No, I'm fine with skipping to the end." Idris said, trying to break her hands free from her bonds. The rope was too sturdy to budge. Frantically, she kept working to loosen them.

"We are so lucky we got picked." Eden said, moving closer to Idris. Acting more like she was at a slumber party than being kidnapped. "You have to have the right blood type and everything to be chosen. I knew my chances would get better if I talked to you like they asked me to. I can't thank you enough! This is the best day of my life!"

"So the attacks aren't random?" Idris gave up and sat with her back against the wall.

"If only this would have happened to me ages ago." Eden said. "Everyone is carefully chosen, and consents."

"I sure as hell ain't consenting right now," Idris said.

The door to the room opened. The white cat walked casually into the room.

"I do admit," Langhorn said. "An all cat version of Hamlet is distasteful, but the turnout is always wonderful. You missed an outstanding performance, Idris."

"I was all tied up." She said. "Why are there two of us here? That's a lot of blood for one vampire."

Eden sat alongside Idris and gave her a slight jab in the

ribs with her elbow. "Don't ruin this for me."

In front of them, the cat morphed into a man in his twenties. Wearing a white tweed suit covered in black powder. He was the figure Idris saw from the window the night before. Yet his mask had hidden his hideously disformed face then. The gasp from Idris lips could not be helped as she looked upon the man. He looked frail, and pale. As if he could pass out at any moment. But the clawlike weapon on his left hand looked like it could account for that if need be.

"I need to recover." The man unrolled the sleeves on his arms. What was left of his forearm was flesh and bone together, being held together with pieces of magic.

"So are we doing this together, or is she watching, or how does this work?" Eden asked.

The beast of a man tilted his head at hearing this. "You... do know you are being drained so that I may heal myself with your lifeblood. You understand that, right?"

"That's hot," Eden said.

"I have plans for Idris. The grand finale, so to speak. For now, I ask for your consent for me to place my fangs upon your neck to feed."

"YES!" Eden shouted.

Langhorn bit the woman, who smiled as her skin grew pale. Idris watched in horror as she turned purple. When he had finished with her, he stood up. His arm was healed, appearing normal. Eden's arm, however, was missing, replaced with a see-through magic replica in its place. She lay on the floor. Breathing, but sleeping. Her skin was cold and lifeless. A purple cloud of dust rose from her body and formed a clone husk of her. The person now looking exactly like Eden had when she was awake, nodded at the man. She left the room.

"You literally feed on people to stay alive." Idris said, backing herself into the corner of the room.

"That's called living, yes," Langhorn said, crossing to her side of the room. Still walking slowly with a limp, every step causing him pain that Idris could see on his face. "But you are living on borrowed time yourself. Your time here means Taylor is in the void. How do you not feed on her existence? That's all this is, everyone eating each other in one way or another."

"That's not what we are." Idris said. "This is a good town with good people. They opened up magic to the entire world. My soul bond has nothing to do with it."

"The Gladorians refused to help when I needed it. No, the magic community shunned us. All of us. You included. You know this to be true. That is why I am here. To make things better. You can't see it yet, though."

"Untie me." Idris demanded.

Langhorn knelt down next to her. "Don't you understand, I need you."

"You need to stop hurting people. And get out of Whisper's Bay."

"You need to help me undo myself." Uncre said. He opened his mouth and moved to feed on her. She kicked a chair, flipping it on top of the uncreated man. Her ropes around her wrists loosened. Before she could do anything, the vampire clone of Eden entered back into the room. Just as Idris stood, the creature lunged towards her with its fangs revealed.

Idris grabbed the back of her head and used her momentum to drive her fangs into the uncreated man's shoulder. He cried out.

"My fangs are stuck!" Eden tried to say, with her mouth full of person and clothing.

The uncreated man struck Idris, who did not run fast enough. His clawlike weapon cut into her side. She did not cry, but used the pain to break out of the room.

There in the other room she found row after row of bitten sleeping people. Too many for her to count as she dashed towards the house's door. There were people stacked on top of each other carelessly. The numbers were staggering. But she could not worry about that now, not when the Uncreated man broke free and ran after her.

Holding her side, she hurried outside and ran stumbling towards a well-lit spot along the 101 highway and Main Street.

Later. Not a Magic Tea Shop Supply Closet Lake

"Those are some of the nastiest rib injuries I've ever help you recover from," Grobopalopacus had spit Idris out from one of his many mouths, healing her of all her wounds. At first, using another sin against nature as a doctor had felt odd, but Grobo seemed to understand much more than the nurse practitioner with a House complex. In the years she had returned from the void, she had been lucky to work in the same shop as the creature, or 20 souls combined into one monster, rather. The creature spent all its time going from hospital to hospital, eating children with cancer and terminal illnesses. Then spitting them back up perfectly healthy of course.

"A shapeshifting, body part stealing 'vampire' thing is creating an army of followers. To take over Whisper's bay." Idris put on her jacket and wrung Grobopalopacuses spit out of her hair over the edge of the lake.

The monster hook its head, and failed some of its arms about. "Are you sure it's a vampire? I can not cure that kind of magic. My abilities are more natural healing. There is nothing I can do to return the victims' souls to their bodies. I don't have time to fight an army either, I have places to be."

"I don't know how to defeat it." Idris said. "Worst of all, in cat form he can follow me anywhere I go. I'm a herbologist Grobopalopacus. I'm not a hunter. But I have to do this. I have to stop Uncre before he takes over. I feel like an ant trying to push a slice of watermelon up a hill. There has to be a better way."

Grobopalopacus places one of its arms around Idris, "You got this. If you can handle rush hour at the shop, you can stop a body stealing vampire like thing from controlling the town. Sometimes when things seem impossible, you have to dig a little deeper. That is all. Though maybe some advice, take some items with you next time. In case you

have to fight puss n boots again.”

“No time.” Idris said, heading up the hill to the door leading back into the shop. “I thought I found the spice vampire hive at the pizza place. But I don’t think that’s their lair. The coastal magic council isn’t going to want to get involved, since they are doing business only these days. The spicers might help me.”

“Be careful, Idris. I don’t think your yo-yo curse would mix well with becoming undead. Things get dangerous when mixing dark magic like that.”

“I know Grobo. I know. If I can find a way to cut off support for the ragamuffins, that might cut off his supply. But I don’t know where to look.”

“Take a spike.” Grobopalopacus said. “There’s an abandoned track not far from the lake in the ‘Not a Tea Shop’ basement. If I were you, I’d take that spike with you no matter where you go.”

Episode 4: The Least of These

Sunset Baptist Church Evening

A man with dreads screamed into a mic on the pulpit. The drummer on stage banged on his double bass and snare drums as the guitar distortion shredded through the congregation of pale churchgoers.

"My God is in control!" The man screamed, head banging once every word.

Idris stood in the aisle between the wooden pews, dumb struck from the sight of worshipping vampires. People held onto Bibles as they listened, bopping their heads along and flipping through the pages. The hymnal ended. An old man with grey hair stood in a thrift store suit and tie. He walked to the pulpit, and after embracing the worship leader with a hug, addressed the church. Idris felt her railroad spike attached to her belt as she sat down.

"Thank you all for that wonderful song. As I always say, any song unto the Lord is a good song, can I get an amen!"

The congregation screamed "Amen!" back in union in a death metal like scream.

"Before I dismiss you all, I wanted to remind you there will be a breakfast prayer meeting tomorrow at 6 am."

The room grew silent. A few awkward coughs could be heard.

"Y'all can walk around in the daylight, you can make it to prayer breakfast." The preacher scolded. Still, the awkward silence would not leave the room. Finally, the man shook his head before going on with his closing reminders. "Those of you who need to take 'communion' can stay after. And for the rest, there are refreshments in the fellowship hall. Lastly, I would like to welcome someone if they aren't too bashful. Idris over there, folks know about her. I am glad you are here. And I welcome the chance to

speak to you. You fellow Ragamuffins are dismissed.”

To Idris’s shock, the churchgoers began to shake her hand and welcomed her. A few of the faces she recognised, one even being a classmate from years ago. They were not of the bitten either, some were spice vampires untreated. Others seemed mortal, and there for the heavy metal music and the strong community outreach program. Idris knew the church donated to Whipper’s Bay events and charities, even sending out checks when a fire had swept through a few years before. How could a place like this be supporting something like the Uncreated Man?

“Pastor Branson.” Idris waved the man down as she walked towards him. “Can we speak?”

“I sure hope so. We can write it down if we can not.” The preacher smiled.

Pastors Office

The framed cow photos hanging on the wall might have been the strangest thing Idris had ever seen. He had row upon row of them. Along with photos of him holding large cups, standing next to cattle with sponsored saddles on them.

Idris touched the gold frame of one of these pictures. The preacher looked happier to her. He now looked emotionally drained.

"There is no need for weapons here." He said, pointing to her railroad spike. He leaned back in his desk chair. "We aren't that kind of Southern Baptist church."

"I've been jumped a few times by members of your group. Why are you supporting this uncreated man?" Idris said, taking a seat on an old sofa facing the preacher's cluttered desk.

"I. Am the pastor of the church. I do not support anyone, which way or another. My job is not telling people how to think. That's how you get your tax exemption pulled now. I'm the shepherd."

Idris laughed at this. "Your sheep are getting sucked up, and used. The uncreated man has to be getting help somewhere, needing to regenerate as much as he does. And here you are, a church full of money and resources to help him. What are you getting in return?"

"I don't care for these accusations." The preacher said. "Always have I helped everyone who has needed it. And I am not the kind of person who would go about getting people hurt willy nilly. I think we can all come to some sort of agreement. You give the uncreated man what he wants, we all live in peace. Now, that's an easy way of putting it. It's not complicated, it's complex you see."

"What does uncre want?" She asked.

The preacher shrugged. "If you ask me what John 3:16 is I could do that. But anything beyond that is out of my realm of expertise. Anything dealing with Barry and his experiments is out of my ballpark. If you were to ask about the creation, that is all I know. Barry created Langhorn. That is what we have going on here. I work with the vampire council, you see, and all the different vampires and monsters hiding in Whisper Bay. The entire city is healing, and doing what Langhorn says this is best."

"That's a firm no from me, preacher." Idris got up from her seat. "I find it hard to believe Jesus would be thrilled about any of this."

The preacher smiled. "Jesus is in the loving monster business. In fact, I don't think Jesus would be too happy seeing all of these homeless people starving and dieing on the street. It is despicable that this is allowed. But things have got to chance. You've seen all the pain in this town. The magic people sat by for years, with power to heal locked away. Saved only for social status. We need abolish this pay to live system. Like Jesus would have wanted. And only we can do it. No matter what it takes. If you do not agree to what he wants, the town is going to look down upon you more so than they do already. And from what I hear? That's a lot."

"Are there waffles at the prayer breakfast?" Idris asked.

"No, toast, muffins and coffee." The preacher said.

"That's a no that for me as well. Get some sunlight, preacher. Might do you some good."

Whisper's Bay streets, off the 101. Morning.

She walked the streets in the roaming mists for hours, looking for any sign of a ragamuffin's or their feeding house. After walking the entire length of the town, she doubled back. There had to be something. The Sunset Baptist parking remained empty, and Mr Finkerhoppers home was void of pets. The town's park contained nothing but the songs of seagulls nesting on top of a light pole. She knew she had to be missing something. The town was small. Something this big could not remain this quiet. Yet it did. She knew somewhere the ragamuffins were acting.

Suddenly she heard a scream from behind her. She turned and saw two figures smoothly hovering towards her in the fog. The scream rang out again. Idris grabbed her railroad stake and drew it back, ready to fight.

A scream came again, but this time Idris realised it came from a child. In front of her on a scooter, a thirteen or fourteen-year-old boy's knees buckled as he started to hyperventilate at the adult holding a weapon against them.

"I'm sorry! I won't scream again! Please! Please!!! Don't hurt me!" The frightened kid yelled.

A kid on a bike not far behind him shouted. "Get away from him, you monster!"

Idris slowly dropped, returned the spike to her waistband. The sea spray grew thicker around her as the kids ran off in a panic. Leaving her in the middle of the street.

She had been called a monster. To her face. While she knew what the kid meant, she felt as if for the first time in years someone had said it to her face. It was a confirmation that, to her, she had a mission to be fulfilled at all cost. To everyone else, she was a devil, brought back to life from dark magic. People feared her.

How can I fight the monster if everyone thinks that monster is me? She thought.

A raven cawed nearby. Hearing the sound of an engine, she returned to the sidewalk. She saw a familiar face in a brown car. Thankfully, she was able to duck behind a tree and, with the of the fog, was not seen by Mr Todachini. In the back seat of the old car was a blanket covering something large.

She waited and watched Mr Todachini and another carry the large wrapped object into the house. When they left, and she felt she had not been seen while watching in the mist, she entered unlocked house.

Feeding House

The sleepers were stacked on top of each other on wooden boards throughout the entire house. From the bathroom to the kitchen, Idris found sleeping people who had been bitten by the uncreated man. Some missing arms or more. Every time she looked, she found more people in the room than she has seen last. Like trying to count hay barrels. She could feel a cool breeze drift in from the open window in the living room, giving a little relief from the heat from all the people.

If this is only of their house. Idris thought. How many vampire clones do they have? How many people has Uncle hurt? I can't fight an entire army and town by myself.

A door on the other side of the house opened. Idris hid herself among the sleepers in the back bedroom of the house.

"Do you know what the best part about this job?" She heard the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Not having to work in an office?" Another man said.

"That, and the pay is great! I was about to steal an RV and move to New Mexico to cook drugs, but then that Pastor Branson guy offered me this job. Now I'm clean, my bills are paid and we are helping out those in need. How lucky are we? I wonder how that Branson guy made all his money. Dude is loaded."

"I also almost turned to a life of sin." The other man said. "I had it all planned out. I'd steal every toaster in the neighbourhood and sell it back to everyone."

"Dang it, that's a really good idea. I wish I would have thought of it back during my life of crime."

Idris could believe what she was hearing. Did the men not understand the sheer number of people in a coma like state? That no matter how willing, that this was not natural? How long had these people been like this? How

could these men not know?

She clutched her rail stake. There were only two of them. She could easily send the husks' souls back to their sleeper. But a horrible thought struck. How was she to tell the magic clones from real people? There was no outward difference between the two. She could not risk attacking them without hurting someone real.

The two men leapt back at the sight of Idris appearing in the hallway. She flashed her wallet with her thumb over her driver's license.

"I'm here about a house fire safety check." Idris said, snapping her wallet shut and placing it back in her pocket. "Can I speak to the owner, please? This is an extreme health and fire risk."

"This is private property, you can't be here." One of the men said.

Idris opened her cellphone and dialled the fire department. "I'm calling this in. And taking this notebook of addresses!"

One of the men pushed the other to towards Idris. "Get her, Bob!"

"Dude, do you see that spike in her belt?! I'm not 'getting her'. The pay isn't that good. Run!"

The men bolted out of the door.

"Yes," Idris said into the phone to the dispatcher. "Something horrible has happened here." She gave the address and ended the call. A clank came from the other room. Idris checked to see what had caused the noise. She saw in the living room a metal counter below the window. On it, she saw a paw print.

"Hurry." She said.

101 Main Street.

When she saw smoke coming from the building downtown, she panicked. She had driven in and out of traffic down the 101 and parked the truck blocking half the highway. A large blasted explosion from the dynamite history museum, sending pieces of building flying her direction. She braced herself behind her truck as the blast grew. Pieces of the “Not a Magic Tea Shop” flew off the building. Clouds of colourful magic smoke rose and cracked. A crack rang out, and a vortex formed in the sky above the shop.

She heard a voice that sent chills down her spine despite the intense heat of the flaming chaos reigning around her.

“Hello. Idris O. Whitaker. You tried taking something from me, I thought I’d remind you the rules of the game. You strike, I will strike back. Swiftly.” The white cat said. He crept slowly as the streetlights above cracked and bursted into flames. It landed as ash on the ground.

“The tea shop had nothing to do with it!” Idris said.

“Then don’t touch my food.” The cat said.

The museum kept burning, but the “Not a Magic Tea Shop” stopped. Its walls were now black, and the roof and Luni’s apartment had caved in. All of Luni’s positions were gone. The skull flowers she had collected were now ashes. The circle was now complete. Because of Idris, Luni had lost everything in the blink of an eye. The stone statue of Taylor had fallen from its place in Luni’s apartment.

Idris tried to kick the cat, but Langhorn gracefully sidestepped. He sprang back out of reach and said with a huff. “Tsk tsk. Of course, you would attempt to duel me in my feline form. Wise tactic. But I think not. Til we meet again, sister.”

An angry Idris picked up a piece of hot debris and flung

it towards the cat. With a rage unseen from within her, she hurdled object after object towards the slippery creature. Sirens roared behind her, with firetrucks and ambulances racing down towards them.

“What did you call me!” Idris shouted.

“Til next time.” The cat ducked into a sewer. Idris tried to go after him, almost getting stuck in the hole in the street.

“I AM NOTHING LIKE YOU!” she shouted after him.
“Nothing! I have no siblings!”

Episode 5: Sister

Hotel room, noon

"Before I met your mom, it could have been with the dancer in the green top in Ada Oklahoma. Or after your mom, with the fake magic performer in Vegas. I know I had some wild parties back in my younger days that would put some rappers to shame. But you do not have a brother. Unless I messed up somehow."

They had rented a room for her father to stay until things calmed down. She brought up the last of his bags and wiped the sweat off her face. Containing mostly hunting and fishing books. Idris sat at the coastal inn desk with her arms crossed and her brow lowered. She hated having any sort of conversation with her father when it came to the past. Anything post her assumed death was fine. Anything about her mother felt to her like being branded.

"You are not inspiring confidence." Idris said to her father. She did not like that Mr Whitaker had already finished a second cup of hotel coffee and was filling the pot from the bathroom sink to make more. But after her mentor Luni told her about his behaviour when she was ill as a kid, the coffee addiction was a vast improvement.

"I haven't always been perfect. Or. Good. Even. I'll look up some of... the women I dated, and will double check. And I've been a really bad father. You sure this vampire feller, Uncre, wasn't telling a lie to get a rise out of you?"

"No." Idris headed towards the door. "Not with how Uncre said it. This is somehow personal. I need to find out why. Stay in the room, don't tell anyone where you are. This vampire is dangerous. I have to go talk to the sheriff about the shop damage. Dad, most importantly, don't let any cats in here!"

"Let me capture the cat, if we get that sucker in a steel cage there is no escape. Let me help you somehow. I need to

help you, I owe you. I'd do anything to make up for abandoning you." He said.

"I'm not risking you getting hurt. No cats!"

Police Station Interrogation room

"That's what I hate about this magic stuff, I can't tell what's real and make believe anymore." The detective said, lifting up his pants. "So we have your statement, and we will look into these, what you call them? Feeding houses? Have you heard from the shop owner since the building went ghostbusters?"

"I haven't heard from Braylynn in five years." Idris said. "No one knows how to get a hold of her. She told Luni that she was off fighting monsters or something. Are you going to do anything about the uncreated man? A threat to the public?"

"I told you I'll call animal control. They'll be on the lookout for a white cat who's stealing body parts. Now, no matter what you do. Promise me you aren't going to take things into your own hands. The shop's loss is big. But it can be rebuilt. You can't be."

Idris sighed. "I can actually. I'm immortal technically. You can't search your big brother is watching computer system to see if there's any family member of mine out there?"

"That's not a real thing." The sheriff said. "Unless you and whatever family member it is have a record that isn't going to show on our system. I can't help you. That's not what you want to hear, I get it. But Whisper's Bay PD has a unique problem with all the craziness that goes on around here. We try to take everything seriously, but a complaint like that against a well-respected church? I don't think..."

"They are building a literal army, and you still won't do anything. You won't even take the stupid address book. I can't listen to you keep rambling. I'm out of here. If I'm free to go." Idris finished her cup of coffee. She didn't really want anything to drink, but she always wondered if they really brought you something if you asked for it. It felt simple. In a

strange way, she found that act satisfying.

"Tell your daddy I said hi. We miss him at the bar, but we never want to see him again. Don't forget your railroad spike." The man tipped his hat to her.

"Sure," Idris said.

As she exited the station, her thoughts dwelled on her father. She had hardly known him at that point, even though she lived with him. So, hearing the sheriff's reaction started something in her. If someone in a small town suspected something as juicy as someone having a secret child, it would be discovered. Part of her wanted to go check family records. But if the sheriff seemed to doubt it, it seemed unlikely. But where did this leave Idris?

Barry had to be the answer, but how did Idris factor into his experiments? Why was she dragged into this? Any of it, even. She wished she were a child again. Before the yo-yo wizards and the knowledge of the magic world. But the life she longed for she could no longer live.

She opened the address book she had recovered from the feeding house and placed her finger under the second house listed. She headed for her truck.

Buffie River RV park.

The abandoned cars and train tracks sat near the wide river's edge. Idris lowered herself from a high branch toward the forest floor of pine needles. She watched the massive numbers of vampire clones and fans clubbers go in and out of the encampment. Their little village stretched throughout the mountains. This was many more than she had ever seen attending a Portland Trail Blazers game. They all seemed to live there, some in tents, others in the abandoned rail cars. From one boxcar, she spotted flowers covering the entire reach its windows.

"Uncre recreated the secret garden room from Diecknines Mason. She thought. I'm never getting to him through all of those people. If I have to fight everyone myself, I don't stand a chance. This is impossible.

She spotted smoke rising from pots, and pans stacked on warm stones by a large bonfire. There, she could make out old man Pastor Branson handing bowls of soup out to everyone. Of course, he had a stack of Bibles and flyers nearby.

Having seen enough, Idris climbed down the tree. When her foot reached the ground, she felt something jabbed into her back. Idris raised her hands.

"Don't move unless you want to become a pineapple," she said.

The woman behind her took the spike off its clip and remove it from her person. Soon she was facing a tree as the person patted her down.

"Actually, I'd rather be the pineapple." Idris deadpanned.

"What did you think you were doing, hunting Dracula? You're lucky all those tin foil wearing people didn't see you." The person said. At first, the voice seemed familiar to Idris.

But she couldn't place this to any memory of anyone.

"Dracula would be easier." Idris scoffed. "Stop frisking me, please."

"The ring around your wrist, those are hand charm marks aren't they? Did you have something to do with my shop blowing up?"

Idris turned around. A woman with shoulder length dark hair and a top hat examined the weapon. She recognised her from cleaning the "Not a Magic Tea Shop" basement print shop. The building had no basement, of course, the space existed else where but everyone understood it easier that way.

"Braylynn? What are you doing back in Whisper's Bay?"

"That is a name I have not been heard in the ever scapes of time. Now, the people call me the Rerockha."

"No," Idris said. "You're not called that. No one seriously can call you that."

Braylynn, or Rerockha rather, crossed her arms. "Don't tell me who I am. Let me have my cool nickname. Who are you, why are you packing heat?"

"I work for you. The Rerockha."

"The shop has more than one worker? I thought Luni did everything, her and that little kid. Oh you are the kid. Oh my Kama. I'm getting old. Let's get out of here, I'm not a happy wookie right now."

Truck parked at beach access 2.

"See, you have to belittle the kitty a lot, and say something like 'My pot pie!' That's the way to top off the kettle."

The two sat in a truck filled with different rocks and trinkets gathered from across the country. Like the dream catcher on the dashboard or bottles of sand art in the back seat. A salty breeze blew in through the cracked truck windows.

"I tried that." Idris said. "Uncre is too quick and has too many followers to fight."

Braylynn stuck out her tongue while she flipped through a CD case. She picked one and inserted it into the truck's player. French pop music played through tin sounding speakers. "Then you are going to have to find a way to trap him next time he is in cat form. Cause what we got here is a vampire with hive tendencies. If this spreads to anywhere but the coast, there is no stopping it until it gets too big to control then collapses, bringing back the old traditions and ways of life that were snuffed out. Always how that works if you have ever read a history book."

"I've mostly read your herbology notes from working at the shop." Idris said. "Your handwriting sucks, by the way. We don't have time for that. How do we kill this monster? I haven't been close enough to try it, but I don't think those spikes would do it. I found some flowers that looked like skulls at Barry's in a garden portaled away. Could that be something?"

Braylynn slammed her fist on the console, ejecting the CD. Her mouth dropped, and she let out a nervous cough. "You. Found. Skullflowers? Not 'thunder brew' but real ones that you can't water? Cause the water vanishes the moment they touch the thorny stems? Grown with mushrooms? Where is it?"

"Why are you getting excited? They were in the apartment when the explosion happened."

Braylynn hit the horn and cursed. She got out of the passenger side and walked towards the shore. Idris followed after her. The waves crashed as they walked.

"What I say? What are you doing?" She called out to Braylynn.

"To look for that boot. The one who's soul was trapped by a health insurance company owner." She said, walking faster in the sand. "Because the only chance we had at breaking your yo-yo bond and getting my friend back? Went up in flames because you're an idiot. Why didn't you protect them!"

"I put them in the safest place I could! Never once have your notes mentioned anything about those flowers."

"'Cause it's dark magic, stupid. Some magic we Oregonians don't talk about," Braylynn said. "The council might be all chill now, but they still aren't cool with that sort of thing. First, do you know how much someone would pay for one of those flowers? Everyone thought that species was extinct since the 12th century. Second, the accounts we have say they are hard as hell to grow, like we are talking master gardener sort of stuff here. And lastly."

Braylynn paused.

"Luni didn't want you knowing about certain things. She thought it would bring you trouble."

"Trouble found me anyway." Idris said.

"That confirms Barry was trying to find a way to break his bond." Braylynn went on. "But what was he going to do with it? That kind of magic has been believed dead for hundreds of years. No, I recommend a Grobopalopacus blessed item. Not the carrot wand, never use the carrot wand. Only true magic users should use that. Remember we

don't always see every spell consequence right away."

Braylynn looked away and turned off the music. "... Luni using it once could have caused a lot of damage. Here is a wrist charm. Don't use this one unless you mean it. It's designed to literally suck souls from people. It's awesome. But try a stake first, railroad spike is a good choice. Untreated vampires can break the wooden stakes in a fight. I almost didn't make it out of that one."

Braylynn opened her battle bag and handed her a wrist charm. At first, Idris did not accept it.

"I don't know if I can do this," Idris said. "I'm not this person."

Idris watched Braylynn pick up a smooth rock and fling it into the ocean. "The worst monster I ever faced made me feel like that. He made me question everything I was. When I figured out I was in trouble, it was too late. No one understands the seriousness of the situation."

"How did you defeat the beast?" Idris asked.

"I broke up with the loser." Braylynn said. "But walking away from a monster is never easy. If Luni has kept you around all these years, and if Taylor gave up everything for you? You are that person. An idiot destroyed a possible source of magic in unsafe levels. Just. Reminding you of that little thing. Anyway. Get the 'vampire' close enough to touch you, and when you are close enough, pull the charm. That's all you need to know. It works on the undead too."

"Why did you say vampire weird?" Idris asked.

"You haven't figured it out?" Braylynn said. "We can't say what this creature really is. That gives it power." Braylynn said, raising her hand. "Taylor would have told you the same thing. This isn't a vampire. Barry Diecknine must have spent some time in Ganado or Window Rock exploring some taboo stuff. This uncre is dark magic OP evil

thing. Just like my ex.”

Hotel Evening

Idris gasped at the sight at the door. There was the lid of a can of chips filled with milk. Leading into the room were red paw prints.

She ran inside, but tripped over something in front of the door. A metal cage had been placed with its opening facing the outdoors, as if placed in an attempt to trap the cat. She tried to kick it out of the way, but the cage was heavy. Giving up, she stepped up on it and leaped over.

On the hotel's velvet sofa lay her father. His skin was pale, and his eyes were closed. Two fang markers shone bright red on his neck. He had been turned into a sleeper.

Idris cursed.

The closet door swung open. She turned to a vampire clone of her father, grabbing her by the throat. Her other father screamed in a voice she had never heard before. A raw, desperate cry. He pushed her back onto of her sleeping father.

The bracelet. Idris thought. She remembered what Braylynn said about what would happen when she would pull it off of her wrist: *Get the 'vampire' close enough to touch you, and when you are close enough, pull the charm. That's all you need to know. It works on the undead too."*

She, being on her father's legs wrestling his vampire clone, was close enough to both of them. Whose soul would the bracelet suck out? The life of her father was not a thing she should risk. She knew this. But as the clone's mouth got closer to her skin, something had to be done. She prolonged it as long as she could, holding back the undead beast from draining her. But her might was running out. She felt the clone's fangs on her warm neck.

She yanked the bracelet. A deafening snap rang out. The clone above her became limp and dropped to the floor. For a

moment she caught her breath before turning to her father.

The hell did I do this for? She thought. What have I done? What have I become?

The Tv was turned onto the weather station, and a forecaster squinted on screen.

"It's uh. Going to be raining, I guess. Does that say storm, Carl? I can't read that!"

"Hello Sister. Your father was a delicious snack." She heard a voice say. It came from somewhere inside the hotel room. Frantically, she looked about. The voice sounded small, which led her to believe that the uncreated man was in cat form. All she had to do was find him.

"Show yourself." Idris shouted as she felt her father's faint pulse.

"You'll have to forgive me. I only stopped in for a bite."

Idris checked the ceiling. There were vents running the length of the room with the opening grate left open.

"Why are you calling me sister?"

"Barry created me from you. Have you not read the journal? How he took your hair at the hospital? Or did that go up in flames as well? Like everything else in your life ever has. Oh, yes, Idris. I know everything about you. Cause in a magic sort of way, you are like a sister."

"That's an interesting interpretation. How about hell no?"

She heard a noise coming from the bathroom. Slowly she crept and opened the door. The bathtub shower curtain was drawn, and the window was open. She pulled back the rose patterned plastic. From above, she saw something move. There on the shower head the white cat sat.

"You found me. Now it's my turn to find you. Count to 100." The cat sprang towards the window. Idris caught it in her arms before it could reach.

“Release me!”

She wrestled with the cat, knocking over the fold-up table and sending her father’s playing cards everywhere. The cat bit her and cawed trying to free himself.

With one hand, she squeezed as hard as she could to hold him in place. With her other hand she reached for the charm. The cat broke free and rocketed out of the hotel. Idris ran after him but was helpless as he crossed traffic and vanished in the night. The sound of a siren grew louder. She ran back to her father, searching for a pulse. She found none.

I am the monster.

Encampment outside of Whisper's Bay

Idris arrived at the smouldering ruins of the "Not a Magic Tea Shop." She approached Braylenn and swept dust into a pan.

"Where is it!" Idris yelled. She searched through the wreckage and ashes, throwing pieces of wood and crumbled brick as she went. She is cursing and spitting. Her face was red.

"Calm down, kid. What's wrong?" Braylenn said.

She did not answer. Her search went on. Braylenn followed her as she rushed pile to pile, looking for something.

"What," Braylenn said. "Cat got your tongue?"

At this, Idris grabbed both of Braylenn's shoulders, giving her a shake.

"The cat got my father! THE CAT GOT MY FATHER AND I AM GOING TO GET HIM."

She threw Braylenn down. "That's a great way to treat your boss! Help me clean up so we can rebuild the shop. Then we can track down the vampire. You have to be patient."

Idris did not listen. A flash caught her eye. Where the counter had once stood, sat a metal box in a pile of burned wood. She blew off the soot and opened the container, revealing a large petrified carrot wand.

"You're not supposed to touch that," Braylenn said. "Normals using magic is dangerous, you don't understand the responsibility..."

Idris pointed the carrot at a nearby streetlight, shouting the word as if it were a curse.

"Blaburtgilocus!"

A bright beam shot out from the tip of the gar, rocketing towards the wooden pole, snapping the structure in half.

The air around the light was pulsating like a subwoofer cranked to 11. The people waiting for the store to reopen ran at the sound of the streetlight crashing.

Idris began to walk away, but Braylynn stepped in front of her.

"If you leave here with that weapon, you are fired. You can not do this. What would Taylor think? This is what we have been fighting against, Barry's magic and the entire magic world. This is not what we stand for at the 'Not a Magic Tea Shop' magic tea shop!"

"You don't care about the shop at all. Or else you would have been here. This is the only way."

Idris walked away from the shop ruins toward Sunset Baptist Church.

Episode 6: Soul Break

Sunset Baptist

The walls crashed and crumbled as Idris used the carrot wand to make herself an entrance next to the front doors of the church. People and spice vampires fled in a panic as she made her way to the pulpit in the sanctuary.

The pianist, who had been playing, grabbed her music book from the piano. "Are we not playing the third verse then?"

Idris screamed, "Where is the Uncreated Man!"

The preacher entered from an adjoining hall, dressed in a silk suit with a floral pattern. He looked at the wreckage Idris had caused and shook his head.

"Why in heaven's name didn't you use the door?" Pastor Branson asked. "There is no need for such..."

"Blaburtgilocus!"

The shot from the wand cracked the edge of the sanctuary open. People screamed. Where windows had been was a clear view of the Wanderer's mountain range. Full of rolling forest inhabited with sky-reaching conifers.

"Where. Is he?" Idris demanded.

"You are making a big mistake." The preacher said. "We are trying to build something here. Don't you see, you can be a part of it! You can set all the sleepers free."

"Don't lecture me on ethics, you of all people." She said. "Tell me, or the entire building goes. I'll give you three more seconds before this becomes an outdoor worship centre."

The preacher stuck up his hands. "Stop. He's in a cabin in the mountains. Take the trail at the end of town up to Novelton Ridge. It'll lead you there. You don't understand, you can not harm him."

Forest Path

Old world trees surrounded her as the sun began to set. The grass swayed back and forth with the wind, and crickets chirped nearby. The mist had again taken the mountains and swirled above Idris, who walked along a rocky path. She reached a point on top where, on one side of her, through the timber, she could see the vast curvature of the ocean in the distance. For an instant, the light above the water flashed green. The rare phenomenon did little to pull her from her state. She continued on the path, with her fists clenched and teeth gritted.

When the last light of the day had faded and the stars came out, she reached a cabin at the end of a steep slope. Its roof was full of moss growth that weaved along the wooden shingles. The air felt damp in the fog.

She opened the door to the cabin and shouted, "Show yourself!"

But when she took a step in, she found there was no floor beneath her. Unable to find her balance, she fell through the darkness until she landed on cold, wet stone. From above her, she heard chuckling that echoed through the hollowed-out stone tunnel.

"Greetings, sister. Have a nice trip?" She heard.

"You think of that all by yourself, Langhorn?"

"Unless you randomly decided to take up hiking, I assume that you are here to end me. I thought we were only starting to get to know each other. You and I need to listen to each other."

Idris pointed up with her wand and sent a curse up the tunnel. When she did, the tunnel lit up in front of her. It broke off in several directions, each one running deep into the mountain. Close by were cans of applesauce and crackers, along a bed made of ragged clothing. She thought

she saw squares on the stone wall. She fired off another curse. When the light returned, there her face was. In hundreds of photos that were posted everywhere. Some were of her working in the tea shop and graduating from Whisper Bay High. One was of her professional prom picture of her standing in a black dress scowling her eyes.

"What is this?" She said, tugging at the railroad spike attached to her jeans.

"I've been watching sister," Uncre said from above. "It is with a heavy heart that things must end. It is fate. With your essence, I can uncreate myself. My followers have already marched on Whisper's Bay. It is only a matter of time before we establish our rule. Our better world can start. Please. Just give me your hand, sister. And I will pull you up. And we will do our part."

There was no way up. Her hands slipped too much on the stone walls to climb. She could flee into the mountain, but she did not know where it led. There was no escape.

She looked at the ground. She pointed and screamed the curse with her carrot wand as long as she could. The beam blast sent her flying upward. She landed on the other side of where the floor had been hollowed, with the uncreated man standing, expecting her. In his human, disfigured form. With his large claw-like weapon readied.

"Your blood doesn't need to be warm for me to drink it." He said. "Soon I'll be free of this non-stop existence of endless having to recover from feeding from my followers. Let them wake! Make Taylor's sacrifice worth it. This is your purpose. This is your calling, Idris Whitaker!"

She sent a curse at him, sending him flying back into the cabin wall. It shattered the wood framing and sent him through to the outside. The earth shook. Repeatedly, she sent curse after curse at him, striking him over and over. Until suddenly, she could no longer stand. The mountain

rumbled, and the ground shook so hard it felt like water under her feet. A deafening roar sent both of them covering their ears. The surrounding air got hot, the mist turned into rain. Rocks, dirt and debris flew from everywhere.

"Stop using that!" The Uncreated man shouted over the chaos while holding his ribs. He was broken and bruised and swayed side to side in his stance uncontrollably. "It is doing something to the mountain. Spells have consequences!"

She sent another curse and came to stand over him. The mountain above them erupted, and flames and lava could be spewing from its blown top. Bits of fire and lava fell around them.

She removed the railroad spike dipped in white ash from her buckle and knelt beside him. She drew the weapon back and aimed at his heart.

"Wait!" he shouted, too frail to fight or run. "If you send me to the void, then everyone I have fed on never wakes up again. The only way I can wake them is if we uncreate each other."

"I learned something that Barry Diecknine never did. I understand the cost. Even if the price stings."

The forest filled with black smoke. The surrounding air grew hotter, and she could feel sweat rolling down her spine.

"Your bond can not be broken unless a willing person exchanges places with the two. Let me save all the people I had to hurt to live. Let me try to break the bond. This might heal everyone. So that I no longer have to wake up every day with the feeling that I have to pay them back!"

The mountain erupted again. Idris reached out her hand and helped him to his feet.

"I am not your sibling. And if your soul is willing, I can

use you to end my bond. Freeing everyone you hurt. And to bring Taylor back.”

Arcadia Park, Whisper's Bay

Idris and the uncreated man stood under the large tree in the centre of the park. Most of the blue-green needles had fallen from branches of the volcano. The main street of Whisper's Bay was packed with traffic heading both ways out of town. Cars honked. Children cried. The forest above them burned brightly in flames. Panic filled the air. Lava spewed from the top of the mountain and rolled into the ocean below. Vampire clones and the Ragamuffins ran helplessly, lost in the panic.

The two stood on the magic circle that surrounded the tree. The man's gaze was glued to the bare cherry blossom trees nearby.

"Under the cherry blossoms, strangers are not really strangers," He said.

"By accepting to break my bond," Idris seemed to pay no attention to him. "You absorb both Taylor's and I's curse. And will be trapped in the void for the rest of time. Do you wish to do this?"

"I submit."

She passed the cup of mixed Drygonanats root and Yopersian Artifetal leaves, brewed in water and handed it to him. He lingered for a moment, looking into the bone cup at the swirling black liquid.

"I wish we could have known each other." He said. "In a different world, maybe. In a place where we don't have to be the monsters."

He lifted the cup to his lips. She stared into the man's sad eyes, seeing a reflection of herself.

"Stop." she said.

He did not. He brought the cup back to drink. She slapped the cup out of his hands with all her might. Forcing him to drop it. He shapeshifted into his cat form and tried to

lick the tea from the ground. She picked up the creature and held him tight in an embrace.

"Let me drink!" He shouted. "I can't leave all those people like this!"

"This is not my calling." She said with tears filling her eyes. "We can find another way."

From the sky, a voice came hurling out of nowhere above Idris. She dropped to her knees and covered the cat with her body.

"Hello Idris!" a white owl said. "I'm back from holiday. Have a letter from Grobo... err. Grogoba..."

She let down the cat and took the letter. She read it.

"Yo Idris.

Nice find on the skull flowers you put in Luni's apartment, but those feed on living plants in order to survive. I thought you might want them to fade away, so I took them to the lake and placed them in the mushroom patch. Congrats on your once in a lifetime find. The unknown abilities may keep you studying them for years. Also, I owe Luni one gallon of milk and 23 frozen chicken nuggets."

Idris stared at the letter.

Hogsnorts College of Fine Magic Arts, Animal Studies, Gar Craft, Potion and Herbs, and Competitive Walking.

"Hello class. My name is Idris Olivia Whitaker. And I'm a herbologist and vampire hunter. I am also a manager of the "Not a Magic Tea Shop" in a coastal town," she steadied herself on the speaker's podium in front of her. The class was filled with magic and non-magic students taking the non-credit course.

A girl in the front row eating a bag of Cheetos sneered. "You're my age. What makes you qualified to teach this class?"

Something furry rubbed against the legs of the girl. She screamed and jumped onto her seat. A white cat leapt onto the desk and spun in a circle. It morphed into the uncreated man, who opened his mouth to reveal his fangs. Everyone panicked, and people began to flee the classroom.

Suddenly, Langhorn laughed. Idris joined in his laughter.

"Everyone sit down. I need you to write down the most important lesson you will learn in this class."

Idris walked to the whiteboard and wrote on the board, *"There are no monsters but the ones we let live inside us."*

"My brother, Langhorn, an magic experiment gone wrong is here with us today. He'll be dropping by to help out. With his help, I learned the Skull flower, origins unknown, is a cure for dark magic. We don't know what counteracts the consequences of the spell. And we can't be sure that the flowers react to everyone the same. We have seen it repel and reverse a number of different curses with the small sample I've used since I rejoined the shop. And no. It did not break my yo-yo bond. It did nothing to me. But to Langhorn, it broke his curse. And woke up everyone he had feed on. They are all home now, safe. Except. My father. And

that is something else I will have to live with until I pass on my time to my soul bond."

Idris paused to take a drink of water from a cup labelled "Sister." She went on. "But that is for other time. Does anyone have questions?"

Langhorn raised his hand.

"Yes, brother?"

"Can I take a picture with everyone and you in the class??? I have a sister!"

"After class, I think that's a good idea. Oh. And I will be grading on a curve."

The class moaned.

And there, Idris learned her true calling. To be a healer of all, and a destroyer of none. Though she still felt a weight on her, she chose to find a way for life instead. And while Luni and she had not seen eye to eye on that yet, she was proud of herself. Luni would understand in time and was being controlled by her own little monster. She was sure that someday it would blow over. From that day on, she strove to learn all she could about these flowers. And how they could help other monsters around the world with the darkness they held.

THE END