

# Whisper's Bay



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# Episode 1: Not a Magic Tea Shop

Half-inflated dodge balls to the face hurt a lot more than Luni expected. Teachers scrambled out of the gym stage door. The two teenagers threw balls at each other. The other high school theatre students surrounded them, cheering and hollering. The two fought like wild beasts over a lost camper's peanut butter jar. Taylor picked up one of the dozen balls the kids tossed to her and threw it hard at Luni's face.

Luni stepped back and felt her busted lip with her tongue, tasting blood and peppermint lip balm.  
"You are a psychopath Taylor!"

"I'm the psychopath?" Taylor screamed. Her long black hair covered her eyes, she gritted her teeth in anger staring at Luni. "How could you?"

"It was an accident! I didn't give you the wrong monologue on purpose!" Luni watched Mr. Benkers and Mrs. Sanders approach to pulling them apart.

"You did this on purpose! That's why no one likes you looney freak! You bottom of the bag piece of candy corn!! You're going to end up with some loser who doesn't give a crap about you. I trusted you! I read that entire monologue you gave in front of everyone. I'll show you a dead shark you purple rose of Cairo!"

Before Taylor had the chance to throw one last ball, the teachers arrived to separate the girls. Taylor fought on. Mrs. Sanders struggled to keep her back.

"I wanted that part! You're jealous because I picked the play instead of you." Taylor said.

"YES," Luni said aloud instead of in her head.

Luni watched as Mr. Benkers let go of her and joined Mrs. Sanders in escorting Taylor away. Tears filled her eyes.

"I wanted you to fail so you would have to hang out with me." She whispered.

"I better never see you again!" Taylor screamed.

She had hopes of going back to the coastal city Taylor talked about nonstop. She had shown her snapshots she had taken. One of the sun over the beach, a massive tree in the middle of a park, and an owl walking down the middle of Highway 101. From those photos, and from when Luni and Taylor road-tripped there, she found herself in love. Of what, or where that love was placed, she wasn't sure. She didn't want to think about it. Only the thought of being close to Taylor had mattered. There was no hope of that now. Little by little the realization of the

consequences of her actions crept in. The harder her fist clenched., the more it hurt. She had ruined everything.

In the five years since that moment, Luni had remembered those words. The feeling of worthlessness lingered, and she heard Taylor's voice in her head night after night. Her dreams of visiting the coastal city of Whisper's Bay day by day, faded. She often thought of Taylor, standing by the tree in the park. And the thought every time would drag her back into the endless pit of regret.

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Don't. Panic. Luni said to herself five years later. As if she expected to take her own advice in her state of panic. She dialed his number and called for the twenty-seventh time in the past two hours. Where was Kevin?

Though Kevin was flaky, and usually was missing cabs and flights, birthday parties, even his own, or any event where her friends might be there, Luni knew he would always call back with some half-believable vague excuse. But this time felt different. And out of all places for him to do his typical thing of sucking, he had to pick the day before they planned to elope.

The hotel attendant didn't know the front desk had a phone, much less how to dial out of it. This seemed unreasonable to Luni. Who was not in the mood to watch an employee mess around with a 35-year-old phone. Luni, now in her mid-twenties, stood in an open-shouldered pink top, with a black leather skirt and black sneakers, with pink trim. Rainwater dripped from her shoulder-length black hair. She tugged at her overstuffed travel bag with New Mexico tags. Kevin had planned to fly in and meet her there. But after four hours, and countless calls he was still missing. There had been weekends he had returned home late after hanging out with friends, but this was new. Finally, The attendant pulled a vegetable out of a drawer. Luni stared, confused. The attendant tapped on the phone, whispered several words, and handed her the phone. After fumbling with the confusing rotary phone, she entered her boyfriend's number.

"It's not so easy is it?" The attendant asked. She pulled at the collar of the too-tight uniform that had seen the inside of an industrial dryer too many times. "But you have the honeymoon suite reserved. And I can't let you in until we see the credit card used..."

"Yeah, I get it." Luni snapped.

The woman waited while listening to the ringing. Something must have happened. Luni's stomach turned at the sound of "inbox full."

She shook her head at the attendant, named Lizzy if the tag she wore was to be believed.

"Maybe you can go ask people downtown if they have seen him?" Said Lizzie. "Sometimes people get lost trying to find us. There's a lot of hotels here."

"He told me not to leave the hotel," Luni said as she chewed on her left fingernails. "He must know where the building is. If I leave he might not find me, and if he doesn't find me he is going to think I wouldn't wait for me and that is the furthest from the truth. Lizzie is it? Look. my boyfriend is famous to some people, If you let me in his people will...I have nowhere to go and I can't afford to get my own room, Kevin keeps all my money for me and.. I can't lose him too!"

"I'm sure he's famous," said the attendant, not believing her story. Or being used to people's name-dropping at a popular tourist destination. "But I can't." She continued. "I have somewhere I have to be. I have to make up for something."

"He told me if he gets here and I'm not here in that room, he is going to dump me. Please, you can't do this to me. He is my one and only, please please don't do this. I can't afford to stay in this city for even a night. Or on this entire coast. Tap beer is more expensive than bottles here, I can't afford this kind of life. "

Lizzie shrugged. "The next girl is on in 10 minutes. You can ask her, or go find a "normal" in town and see if they've seen him." Lizzie went around to the other side of the L-shaped desk into the room to the right. Which was supposed to have coffee for the guests but only had old Taco Shack and salt packets out.

She found herself outside standing, frustrated, with her luggage in the rain under the hotel yawning. She spit out part of a nail she was chewing on before looking back towards the city's main street. Distant light bulbs flashed from a towering theater sign.

Why is this happening to me? She thought.

She had forty bucks in her pocket that Celestia had given her, knowing she had not a dime to her name. Luni argued she needed to marry Kevin. She was nothing without him, helpless, and the dozens of negatives about their relationship were nothing to worry about. Every couple has their highs and lows, and just because it felt like all lows wasn't a good reason to end a relationship. Celestia said she did not trust any man named "Kevin" and offered the money. Despite Luni's protests.

For thirty minutes she waited there outside the hotel until a car splashed a wave of puddle water from the street onto her face.

Breaking into deep sobs, she made herself small and sat on the sidewalk with her hands over her head.

"This is all my fault." She said. "It always is. I must have messed something up. I cooked the wrong egg. I..."

Only then did she decide to take the attendant's advice. Even though she risked angering Kevin's neurotic plans with her. She had no other choice.

She walked towards the bar, hoping to find whatever the attendant meant by "normal". The crosswalk sign barked at her "WAIT". Mist of coastal winds blew by, carrying the faint scent of salt and seaweed. She saw a sign posted on a building that read "Not a Magical tea shop." The place was tucked between an antique shop and a retro pizza parlor. Yellow flowers perked out of planter boxes on both sides of the front glass door. Melodic piano music played from inside.

Still waiting on the crosswalk, she leaned over and peeked inside. Still, she struggled with the idea of an actual tea shop. Complete with an advertisement for cucumber sandwiches. The crosswalk still had not changed, so Luni stepped closer to the shop.

As she did, someone put up a sign. Written in official-looking letters read: Closed due to violations of town code.

Luni blinked a few times, trying to figure out how a tea shop could get so dirty it would have to be closed. Were they raising and racing cockroaches? The crosswalk belted again "Cross!"

She walked into the pouring rain, getting halfway across before the light switched to red. She dodged a pickup, making it to the curb barely in time. She turned back towards the shop.

Trying not to focus on how weird the coastal city was, her mind returned to the present situation. She was stuck, with no money, no fiancee, and no place to go. In a state where a studio apartment goes for one thousand dollars at least. She rationalized. Perhaps Kevin's flight had been delayed. Maybe she was freaking out for no reason, and the dream of being married by her favorite tree in the Whisper's Bay Park would happen. They were so close to finally making their wedding a reality after so many months of uncertainty in their relationship. He had sworn that he was going to try harder and make everything okay. But where was he?

Something else troubled her. When Kevin had suggested Whisper's Bay as a wedding location, she jumped at the chance. Not thinking Taylor might still live there. Possibly with dodgeballs still.

With this in mind, she walked into what she thought was the bar. She took a seat on a stool with one leg shorter than the other. It seemed to make soft "wee" and "woo" noises every time it rocked back and forth from Luni's nervous habit. Before she could respond to this ridiculous thing happening in front of her, a woman with long blonde hair and a white tank top walked over. She asked what Luni was having. Luni put her feet on her suitcase so the chair would stop making noises.

"Anything in a lager," Luni said. "Have you seen a man about a foot taller than I am? Spiky side part? Wearing a dress shirt and slacks?"

The girl raised her eyebrows at the question. "Did I forget to turn off the charm?" She mumbled. "That's how I got this violation...I mean. Do you even know where you are?"

Luni didn't know how to reply. She looked around, realizing she had not walked across the street as she had thought. But had somehow wandered into the tea shop.

The shop had a lot of antiques displayed on the shelves above. From baseball mitts to ashtrays shaped like devils, to a clear barrel that looked like it had hardened food inside. Some items seemed to be statues carved out of bits and pieces of bone and leather. Unfamiliar scents loafed in the air, and not of tea. It smelt of excitement and mystery. The place looked disgusting though.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I thought I was going somewhere else." Luni said.

"That's what everyone says who ends up here." The blonde said, breaking one of the bone structures, and expelling yellow dust all over the room. "I'm closed. If you want some tea I can get you something if you don't tell anyone I'm serving you. I am screwed on rent if I don't sell something fast. Maybe something to mellow you out? We have camomile, green tea, thunder brew... Wait, wait wait, no, not thunder brew. That's not for sale." The woman removed the jar marked "Skull Flower Tea" from the glass display.

Something in this piqued Luni's interest, but she didn't ask about it. "My fiance isn't here. We are getting married, but he's not here and he's not answering my calls and I need help and..." Her voice trembled as she held back tears.

The girl played with about five or six handcrafted arm bracelets on her wrists before saying. "Oh. He told you to fly here to your dream location and now is not answering his phone. Is that right?"

"Yes. I tried using the hotel's phone." Luni said, "It wouldn't go through."

Something from inside a cabinet vibrated and rattled. A voice spoke from within "Delivery required! All employees of Future Treats are now required to make mandatory deliveries."

"Oof. You can't use that phone." She said, removing a white, shaking box and placing it in the back of the shop. She shouted to her customer. "Hold on, I can help you. Don't tell anyone. Your man randomly says let's get married, I'm going to send you on a plane to that one place you've always wanted to go to?" She rolled her eyes.

She returned with a small beat-up cardboard box. After placing it at the bar, she lifted it and invited Luni to look inside. She did.

The creature in the box moo-ed.

Luni leaned forward, glaring in astonishment. “Is. That a tiny breathing, tiny cow in a box? Why is it in a box???”

The girl looked horrified. “Oh. Wrong box. It was supposed to have a note in it saying your boyfriend is breaking up with you. I see this all the time here. I mixed up my joke boxes, never mind what you see in there.”

“What do you mean, my boyfriend is breaking up with me?” Luni said, not giving the box back.

The woman shook her head and zero-ed out the register. She checked that the citation notice was still on the glass doors.

“It is always why these types of things happen.” The woman finally said. “He’s married. Or has someone else in mind? He lured you here before ghosting you, giving you a nice vacation while you deal with reality.”

“Kevin would never do that to me,” Luni said.

“Oh. His name is Kevin.” She laughed. “Okay. Go ahead. Tell me how Kevin would never do such a thing. Go ahead.”

“... Actually, I don’t want to. What’s wrong with Kevin?” Luni said, leaning back on the stool, making a wee noise, slumping her shoulders.

“Cause every Kevin is. A Kevin. Duh. If you don’t believe me, Give me his number.”

What would she want with Kevin’s number, Luni wondered. She decided to find out. She entered Kevin’s number in the woman’s phone.

“Are you at least going to let the cow out of the box?” Luni asked.

“The cow is not important!” The woman put the call on speaker.

“Ello,” Kevin answered. “This must be the escort I hired, you’re late. Is this like a pizza delivered? Do I get it for free?”

“Oh hello, Kevin.” The woman said. “Funny how you answer when I call, but not your fiance. You even memorized the hotel’s number so you wouldn’t have to pick up her call. Yes. My number is out of state. No, I’m not your escort. Wow, Kevin. No, I don’t know you, you are easy to predict. She’s right here, if you’d like to tell her yourself... oh.” The girl had been having fun with the whole situation, but her heart sank when she heard he did not want to speak to her. For the first time, she looked at her, Luni knew. Her face scrunched, and her skin grew pale.

"Okay, jerk." The girl said, ending the call. "I'm sorry. I see it a lot here for some reason. Usually, the guy is named Kevin. Sometimes Chris. Guys suck."

Luni said not a word but looked at the wooden floorboards of the strange tea shop. Colorful dust swirled with the ceiling fan above.

She sat hard into her chair, which made a loud "weee" sound, and placed the box back on the counter, looking cold and lifeless. She stood and backed away towards the doors.

"Where are you going to go?" The girl asked.

Luni took another look around. Something about her appearance seemed off, unnatural.

"Who are you? What is this place?" Luni asked.

"I'm Braylynn." She said. "Knowing my name doesn't help you though. I need you out of here, I'm late for an important meeting. Meeting. Thing." At this, she placed the cow box inside a cabinet. After pressing a button on the register, something chimed. Birds flew across the room, diving to collect trash and straightening the room. Luni fell to her knees and covered her head, having watched The Birds one too many times. When she realized she was not under attack, she turned to a shocked Braylnn, unprepared for what to say next.

"Wow. I think we have a bird. Problem." Branlyn answered, her lips twitching and her tongue smacking. "It um. That was unexpected, wasn't it?"

Luni narrowed her eyes. "I knew it. There is no such thing as a tea shop. I mean, who are you even kidding? Cucumber sandwiches? That's not real. This is all fake. Kevin is not dumping me. That cow is fake!"

Braylynn shook her head. "No, Mr. Spotini is real and super not chill." Her face changed to a sour one. "No! I mean. It's. An animatronic. There's a gas leak in here sometimes, that's why I got the fine. So. This is all a figment of your imagination."

"Is this a magic tea shop?" Luni demanded.

"... gas leak. Very dangerous. Every second you stand there, a brain cell dies." Branlyn remarked, motioning to the door before looking at the clock mounted above the exit.

"Did Kevin dump me?"

Branlyn nodded. "Again, I don't have time for this. You need some fresh air before you..."

Luni broke down in tears, sobbing . Try as she may, she could not force herself to walk out the door. Instead, she stood. Crying.

Awkwardly, Braylynn leaned over for a pat. "There. There." She said stiffly. "Okay. I get it. Your entire world has been destroyed."

Luni cried harder at this. For the final time, Braylynn's eyes turned to the clock striking 11 o'clock. She knew it would take some time to get to her "meeting." There were no moments to spare.

"New plan." She said to Luni. "You are going to hang out here, upstairs in the spare apartment until I get back. Okay? Touch nothing, and don't tell anyone you were here. There's food, I think, don't touch the Chinese takeout from a month ago. And don't bother the cow. Okay? Upstairs you go, come on." She led her upstairs, let her into the spare room, and ran down the street in the rain. Luni watched her wander into the forest from the window above the shop. Braylynn went alone, carrying a stick and what looked like a carrot strapped to her waist. Although she wasn't positive of this silliness. All she knew was life was not as she knew it. And there would be no going back to how things were before.

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After bawling her eyes out on the phone to her friend Celeste, she felt drained and purposeless. All her friend said was "I told you so." which might seem blunt, but that's how she is. Things were too "perfect", she thought, looking back on everything. All the different random meet-ups in differing coffee shops, never in the same place seemed odd now. Though it's an obvious red flag to everyone else in the universe. How he used to leave the room to answer his phone, lowering his voice so she couldn't hear. The evidence of this being a bad idea had been in front of her, but she hadn't known what a warning sign looked like.

She went exploring the apartment. The two bedrooms were tiny, and the kitchen and living room weren't much bigger, but enough for a person to stand at the stove and crack an egg. Luni had seen some apartments in New York City where this would have been an impossibility. Cute figures scattered throughout the dish cabinets and granite countertops brought a crt a creepy charm to the place. They looked like charms, made from different flowers and sticks made to resemble people. It looked cute enough not to be creepy and looked like it took much skill to craft. Whatever was inside of the glass figures sitting on the window seemed to be screaming.

*Maybe there is a gas leak.* She thought. *Maybe that's why this is all surreal. Everything in this tea shop seems so. Mystical. Like Taylor.*

She noticed one of these figures sprouting leaves that seemed to wave at her. When she heard a loud moo from the shop below. She rushed to the voice coming from inside the cabinet.

*They aren't your things, leave them alone.* She thought. *But yet. It is a cow. Trapped in a box. I'd be ticked if I were trapped in a box all day. No one wants to be crammed in a tiny space.*

So she opened the cabinet, knowing what Braylynn had said, and lifted the lid of the box. The white cow looked up, almost looking to smile. It kicked with its hooves and pranced about.

The poor guy wants out. Called him Mr. Spotini. Luni Thought.

She reached out and petted the soft smooth fur of the creature. The instant she cupped her hands to lift the cow out of the box, it leaped. It made a happy moo-ing sound, danced in a circle, and headed to the double doors. It pawed at the glass, motioning with its head towards the outside world. It's a tail-wagged.

"I can't let you out, cow," Luni said, kneeling behind it. "As much as I want to let you out. You're going to hang out with me, and help me get over this awful feeling I'm having about Kevin."

The cow dashed at the door with a gallop. It slammed its body against the glass, sending shards scattering everywhere. The rain blew in from outside, and the cow leaped over the sharp pieces and crossed the road.

Luni ran out, missing an oncoming car by inches. She yelled to the driver her apologies as she finished crossing the street. She entered the bar. For real this time.

The clattering of hooves echoed off of the repurposed boat flooring. Luni could hear, but could not see the cow. A confused tall bartender looked to the woman who had walked in, who stared hard at the ground in panic.

"Did you see a cow walk in here?" Luni asked.

The bartender acted like you would expect. She placed her hands on her hips for a moment, trying to gauge if the woman was serious. A man hunched over at the bar turned. His eyes and face appeared tired. Aged with sadness, the typical bar person one often sees. The bartender gave a glance, seeing his fourth cup of Jack and Coke of the night gone.

"We all know she's not crazy." The man said, feeling the condensation on the outside of his empty glass. "We know weird things are coming out of the tea shop next door. I'll take another drink."

\*"Not now Mr. Whitaker" The woman spoke, looking at the known troublemaker.

"NO!" He stood and faced Luni, stumbling towards her. "It's about time one of us finally said something about what is going on next door!"

She spotted the cow in the back behind the counter, in the kitchen where a small oil fryer bubbled. It looked with curiosity at the burning hot liquid. Instead, she tried to focus on the emotional man, whose words were spat out in anger.

"It's magic. And you are a part of it." He said.

"Magic isn't real. It's a gimmick," The bartender said in a soothing voice.

Luni backed a step towards the door. The cow turned to her and then looked back to the oil.

"There's a gas leak," Luni said. "I don't think there's anything..."

"Gas leak!" The man spat before he reached for his glass and sucked on the remaining ice cubes. "There hasn't been gas in that building since the fire in 87. I'm tired of pretending everyone doesn't know. And I'm going to do something about it."

The others in the room talked louder and turned away. Trying to act normal. A man put some coins into a video poker machine on the far end of the bar, pretending to not hear the conversation.

"Next round is on the house, Mr. Whitaker." The bartender said. "If you'll let it be the last of the night, and if you give me your keys and let Barb take you home."

The man sat, still looking at the woman. "I won't turn down a free drink. But I'm serious. I'm going to prove it someday." He handed over his keys.

After pouring his final drink and placing his keys under a stack of glasses, the bartender motioned the Luni to the back. The cow still stared at the hot oil. She walked behind the counter, meeting the eyes of the man for a moment as she passed. The cow slipped out the back as a cook left to take a smoke break. The woman waved her on.

"Don't mind him." She said to Luni while taking the moment to start the industrial-sized dishwasher and to pull the fries out of the oil. "He lost his kid to a long illness a while back. Always comes in, cursing about the tea shop next door. He thinks they should have done something to help his kid."

Someone leaned over the counter and yelled to the back. "Hey Cali, can I get a burger and another beer? Grilled onions? In the burger, I don't want grilled onions in my beer."

"I can't, I have a thing I have to get to." She said, cursing at the late hour. "My point is, you shouldn't be talking about those things. Weird things. Cow things. Don't draw attention to it."

Luni didn't understand. "I'm not supposed to draw attention to a tiny cow running around?"

"If it came from that shop, then no." She said, "In fact, I'd never speak of it again if I were you. The people who run the town don't like it when word gets around about it. Funny talk."

"But," Luni said. "Someone is going to get upset their tiny cow is on the loose."

The oil burst into flames and reached high towards the ceiling. The cook had returned for a lighter. The cow had peeked its head inside the door, staring at the flames with a devilish smile. The embers reflected in its eyes. It smiled.

"Quick!" Cali yelled. "Wet a towel!" She ran for the fire extinguisher, but Luni had already run out the door after the cow into the street.

After running into the rain, she gave up. Tired, and confused, she felt overall not great about the general state of her life. When the rising smoke cleared from the bar, she breathed a deep sigh of relief before running on to keep searching for Mr. Spotini.

A car nearby exploded. Metal flew. She rolled behind another vehicle before realizing how horrible of an idea that was, with a fire-happy cow running around. She looked for a non-explodable cover and soon; she spotted the cow on the street near a drain of rushing water. For a moment it wagged its tail before bolting.

Luni placed a hand over her mouth and shook from the cold. "I should have left the cow in the box."

She charged at the creature, who stampeded off into an open building. Luni rushed and placed her full weight on the door to trap the cow inside. She found a piece of scrap wood nearby and jammed it between the door handles. The door jam would have to do until she returned with the creature's owner.

A sign hung over the complex. She read it. "Whisper's Bay mining and dynamite museum." A painting of a man with a tin hat giving a thumbs up on the side stared at her.

That's why I do nothing. Because I can't do anything right. Luni thought.

## Episode 2: Champion of Whisper's Bay

Luni at first wasn't sure what she was looking at. Taylor had slammed a greasy brown paper bag in front of her while she sat at the outside lunch tables during B lunch. B lunch was the cool lunch that most seniors took.

"Here's a stupid lunch," Taylor said crossing her arms.

She wondered why her friend looked so angry, and why that sour look seemed to be stuck on her face. Had she done something wrong?

"What's this?" Luni asked.

"I told you it's lunch. I made an extra. On accident you, candy corn."

"Really, you need to work on this hate of Candy Corn, it's good candy. You didn't eat either yesterday."

Taylor puffed and sat. "It's a taco. On fried bread. Thing. It's something I used to eat all the time." She sighed and hung her head. "I used to. I used to cook for my parents and I don't know how to cook enough for only a person, so."

"You don't cook for your parents anymore?" Luni asked.

Taylor said nothing, but pushed the sack closer to her. She looked inside, getting a whiff of the cumin and garlic from the black bean-heavy taco seasonings. The moment her fingers touched the bread, she realized this must have taken a while to prepare. The bread wasn't perfect, but the blend of cheese and lettuce melted in Luni's mouth. She smiled. It had been much better than fast food, and totally unexpected.

"Someday, I have to do something," Taylor said, looking away while opening up her lunch. "Like. Bad maybe."

"Do you need help? I'm good at solving problems." Luni lied while talking with a mouth full of food.

With her left foot on the ground, she pushed aside two other brown bags. Inside them contained peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. One with the name "Taylor" written on it in Luni's handwriting.

Taylor smiled, looking at Luni this time. "You shouldn't hang out with me. I'm. Not always a good person."

"If you aren't a good person, then I'm okay with being a bad person. Should we risk the teacher's lounge for coffee again?"

Taylor stared at her. "Yes."

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Luni hated how she had gotten herself into this ridiculous situation. She had sworn to keep her life afloat and balanced with happiness. And now she had nothing. While dealing with an implausible situation. But that life was gone. She understood this now. She knew she had to do something. So she did.

She returned to the tea shop and searched the coat closet upstairs. Selecting a clear raincoat from the left-hand side, which was full of strange and glowing jackets, she put it on and tugged at the zipper. It whistled at her. She tried again, pulling on the warm metal. Its voice grew louder.

"Okay, I won't zip you." She said.

It chirped to itself.

Luni paused for a moment to look at the ceiling in existential dread.

*I can't even put on a coat without something weird happening. Why can't I have simple things? I'm not good enough for anybody.* She thought.

In the middle of pondering the deepest meaning of her suffering, she spotted sparking dust on the ceiling. Not from the kind you get on those bumpy-looking popcorn ceilings, but a glowing that had a strange twinkle that varied in rhythm and pulsation. She figured she didn't want to know what caused that. She left the shop through the broken glass and headed in the rain into the forest on the far side of town, with her raincoat covering her head.

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She came to where she had seen Braylynn wander into the thick of the woods with the carrot in tow. The trees helped shield her from the wet skies as she walked. Moss hung to bark everywhere she looked, and the forest floor, even at the edge, was thick with pine needles and sticks. The rich soil scent seemed to intensify with every drop from the sky.

To her surprise, she came to a stone structure near a rocky hill. On its walls, yet, were lamps aligned in a row that seemed to stretch away with a strange unnatural glow. She walked to it and examined its fluttering light. As she touched it, the color changed to red. All the lamps flickered to the same color.

The zipper on her raincoat whined. She heard a rumbling, seeming to draw closer to where she stood. A voice came from somewhere behind the stone walls.

"You are not worthy to enter. You must fight me to gain entrance."

She blinked, still looking at the row of red lights seeming to get darker. "Excuse me?"

A door appeared in the stone. Four pieces of the slabs in the threshold became alive and crawled towards her. The threshold monster grew and changed its form. The zipper cried, and its tears dripped off the plastic coat onto the soil. Luni touched the zipper as if to comfort it as the rock grew bigger before her. It screamed, so she let go of the zipper.

The creature snarled. Its claws on its rocky bouldering body reached for Luni. She staggered back, tripped, and fell on her tush. She reached for the closest moss-covered rock.

The creature stopped. A fearful look struck its face.

"Hold on a minute." It said, "You're not going to throw the rock at me are you?"

A confused Luni said. "Since you charged at me with claws, like what else do you expect? You're not here to cuddle."

"Oh, you are crying." The monstrous beast said, "I've never seen that. People only fight me with spells. You look like you've had a rough day."

"It's. Been. Terrible." Luni said. "I'm here to find Braylynn, so I can get out of here and end this day. So I can forget it ever happened and so I can forget about somebody else."

"Hmm. You precious little meat bean bag. You can't trust others for fulfillment. That's like drinking out of a pond. You've been drinking out of stale pools. You need to drink from rushing waters unless you want to get sick."

"Um. Okay?" Luni shrugged. "There's a fire-happy cow trapped in a dynamite museum and we have little time."

The beast played with his hands for a moment. "There's always something on the loose. Or about to blow up. Look at you. You don't even have a vegetable to defend yourself with."

Luni crossed her arms. "Why is everyone getting weird with vegetables?"

"You don't know?" It asked. The claws on its hands retracted. It circled her, looking at her from head to toe. The zipper whimpered as the beast's nose sniffed at its metal. She told it that it was too close for comfort but it didn't seem to understand the concept behind the phrase. It examined her and seemed to grow excited.

"You don't have a clue what is going on here do you?" It asked. "I am like a god. You think your best bet to beat me is to fling a rock?"

"Am I supposed to say gibberish and pretend I have superpowers or something?" She said, raising her hand. "Of course, I'm throwing this rock at you."

"Woah, hold on." The Threshold monster said, "I don't want to get hit. It's rude that you would even come to fight me with a non-magic weapon. So uncivilized. You know what? Since you think you are so wonderful in exchange for you putting the stone down, I will proclaim your worthiness in this tournament. Find a rushing river. Don't drink from the Ponds."

She did as it asked and dropped the stone. The zipper shouted a noise sounding like "Hooray!"

"I'm not being nice." The beast said. "You are going to get your butt kicked in there. I declare you, a completely clueless random person, are worthy of the number one seed in this years Whisper's Bay magic brawl!"

Horns blasted in the distance. The earth shook as a door formed and opened. The threshold monster returned to its place under the massive rock frame of the door. Its voice rang out.

"Go forth and meet your competitors, Hwitloc."

Luni did not know what 'Hwitloc' or competitors meant, but she entered. The doorway closed behind her. The next thing she knew, she stood alone in the middle of a massive open cavern. There were no clouds above now, only endless stars twinkling. Crickets chirped in the distance, their long calls echoing through the cavern.

"Hello!?" she shouted. Her words bounced around.

Luni crouched behind a boulder, viewing the lushest arena full of wildlife and thriving plants. Moss and heavy leaves grew on the ceiling, leading to the opening. From above, she saw lamp posts and people standing around. Dressed in elaborate and rich suits and dresses. Drinking cocktails. Birds hooted in the distance as the people looked on. Some chuckled delightfully.

The walls glowed and spoke.

"Welcome! All eight contestants are in their starting locations. Whoever either disarms or defeats all their opponents wins a Chambers of Commerce magic license. The winner will have their violations forgiven. Best of luck. GO!"

A voice cried out. "I wouldn't have bet on the number one seed had I known it was going to be a Hwitloc! I want my money back!"

A gruff voice cried out across the way. "All bets are final!"

Her world was falling apart, and here it seemed the townspeople were having a magic fight club. Without the fragile masculinity. This made Luni feel tiny. It didn't matter. She had to find Braylynn.

Springing globes of light showed from an open fields. Their glow dancing over the tall, waving grass tickled her skin as she moved. She found cover under a tall weeping willow. A flash of light caught Luni's attention.

Being spotted would mean doom. She had no chance. But she had to get the cow back in the box.

As she had made her plan, a twig snapped nearby. Her head turned toward the sound. She moved along in the shadows the best she could past vines and branches. Someone on the other side of the willow moved.

*They know I'm here.* She thought.

"Hey." A voice said in a low whisper. "You. You're that girl from the bar, aren't you?" The female voice said.

Luni found a hiding spot near a leafy patch. It sounded like the bartender. She couldn't pinpoint the direction of the voice. She crept back further into the lily pads, noticing how they moved no matter how she touched them.

"I'm on your side." The woman said. "You shouldn't be in here. Let me help you get out." She crept low to the bushes, searching for any sign of Luni.

Luni kept still, to keep the pads from moving. One plant wafted in the breeze, hitting the metal of the zipper on the raincoat. It sneezed. Laughter came from above. The zipper cried.

"That woman is wearing the raincoat of self-awareness!"

The zipper whimpered. Someone grabbed Luni's arm. Her eyes met with Cali's, who knelt next to her.

"Don't take this personally, okay? You seem cool." She said, raising an eggplant into the air, pointing it straight at her.

Luni stood, backing away. Cali followed her.

"It's a part of the game," Cali said, twitching her nose. She shouted: "Blaburtgilocus!" Her hand jerked back as if the vegetable were a handgun being fired. The eggplant went limp, and though sparks came forth, not much happened.

The zipper laughed obnoxiously.

"Hey!" Cali shouted. "This is a hard skill to master!" She tried again. "Blaburtgil..."

Before she could finish, Luni grabbed her arm and jerked. They fought. With a swift motion, Luni ripped the eggplant wand from Cali's hand and turned it back on her. She yelled.

"Blaburtgilocus!"

Nothing happened.

Cali smiled. "That is kind of cute." She said. "But that isn't how this works for non-magic people."

Luni snapped the eggplant in two with her bare hands. It lost its glow.

The stone walls spoke. "Cali has been eliminated." Her body fell at Luni's feet. It shriveled as she screamed until it morphed into a giant seed. Etched on the outside of the tough coat read the number 7.

She stood, hand over mouth, too terrified to move.

"Please take your seeds with you." The wall said.

"No helping her!" a voice shouted. "Not fair!"

"You're the only idiot who put all their money on the number one seed!" said another.

"... Cali?" Luni said to the seed. The zipper choked out a cry. The seed, the life of a person, lay at her feet. She picked it up, unsure what to do with it. She hadn't expected this. She placed the seed in the clear raincoat pocket. What was going on? What would happen if she lost the seed? Would Cali be gone forever?

Not wanting to dwell on the situation for long, she moved on. Not silently this time, knowing the zipper wouldn't let her hide. She searched the area, taking the chance to peer out to the rest of the visible arena when the opportunity presented itself. Flashes of bright light with colorful dust bursting in the air lit the cavern, to which the zipper would "Ooo" and "Aww". From a better-elevated position, she could see people fighting from a distance. Seemingly with vegetables. It was the darndest thing Luni had ever seen. Grown adults, fighting with celery and green onions.

"Screw it." She shouted. She called for Branlynn, by name, so all in the arena and all watching above could hear.

Something flashed. A great force from nowhere pushed her to the ground. The zipper yelled in a tantrum. She saw a thin figure approach her as she tried to stand back on her feet.

"You ever find the credit card?" The voice asked.

"No," Luni said, panting. "He isn't coming.'

The hotel clerk held a turnip full of stems and roots pointed out toward her.

"Yeah, sounds like a Kevin." She said. "I'll have to give the suite to another couple. Though, it's not worth the price so it's your win on that. Flipiawiflop"

She flicked her wrist, casting something on her turnips. The zipper said something not polite. Luni reached for the vegetable. The spell hit her arm, causing an intense burning sensation. Luni cried out, kicking Lizzie's leg. Lizzie adjusted and walked back from Luni's reach.

"I only want to find Braylynn.' She said.

Lizzie patted the fanny pack around her waist. "Number 5." She said, "In my bag. I need this license so I can stop working at that stupid hotel. I am winning this thing."

"There's a cow trapped in the dynamite museum and..."

"How about you ask your famous fiance to help you? I'm not falling for that." She spoke gibberish. A gust of wind and dust sent Luni flying against the trunk of a tree.

Luni cried out in agonizing pain. The zipper on the raincoat shushed her. The attendant walked to her, turnip pointed. She mouthed several words and sent another gust of wind that pinned her to the bark.

Luni flung a rock at her hard. It struck her. She grabbed the turnip, attempting to disarm her. They each pulled, trying to take the position of the wand. The turnip snapped. Lizzy cried out and shriveled before her eyes into a seed marked number 2. The rest of the seeds she was carrying rose from the ground.

Luni took the number 5 seed in her shaking hands. She placed it in her pocket, followed by the rest until all 7 were safe in her pockets.

"She did it!" someone shouted. "A Hwitloc has gained the first level of her magic license!"

"No!" A man shouted. "Who let this girl in!"

A yellow glow surrounded Luni before she found herself transported away from the cavern. When it had cleared, she stood in the middle of a city square, surrounded by flowering trees. People rode horse-drawn carriages while checking their smartphones. The streets and sidewalks were made of diamonds and dollar bills in some sort of clear brick-like substance. The city seemed to be above the arena. A crowd traveled to meet her. She realized she was standing on a winner block.

Luni saw herself on a tv inside a magic bar across the way. Birds carrying cameras flew above her, snapping photographs.

Already someone ran around selling newspapers reading “First ever Hwitloc winner of Magic Brawl.” one person replied, looking at the paper, having been foretold yesterday and printed for today's news. “Who reads newspapers?”

The second article, under the headline, read: High Pidersmirt of Snufferclyd who survived the death touch of the Grobopalopacus. What went wrong?

“Can someone please help me with the cow who is trapped in the dynamite museum?” She asked. “And help me bring these people back!”

People in the crowd looked in confusion. “You don’t know what to do with the seeds?” Someone asked.

“Why would I know something like that?” Luni said. “Someone tell me what to do.”

“She has to figure it out on her own! If I’m not getting my money back, none of you are!” Someone shouted.

“There are people in these seeds right?” Luni asked . “You can’t stand there, someone has to tell me what they know. I need to save them.”

“Tom is right. To make the bets fair, she is not to be told anything.” A woman in her late thirties said. Her salt and pepper shoulder length hair waved in cavern breeze. She wore a blue corset with purple underbust and a round hat. “Everyone can agree to this. Send her back.” She snapped her fingers.

Luni found herself returned to the streets in Whisper’s Bay, in the pouring rain. She stood in front of the theater, showing the classic film “Dancing in the Rain.” Luni did not dance but ran into the Tea shop. Glass shards still lay on the floor. There she looked to the clear pockets, seeing all 7 seeds.

“This isn’t happening.” She said aloud. “What. The. Hell.”

The zipper whimpered, sounding cold.

Not knowing what to do, Luni took her leave upstairs, placing the seeds on the windowsill where the rain made a sharp constant thudding sound. She had tried to rest in the room for a while, but when the clock struck 4 a.m. she determined that trying to sleep in such a strange place would not do her much good. The fridge was packed with strange natural herbs and had nothing in the way of microwave pizza or burritos. She had seven lives in her hands. Which she did not know what to do with. And a cow in a dangerous place. She felt guilty for leaving the cow alone, but what were her options? Seeing nothing had exploded yet, she hoped the cow was safe.

Her cell phone buzzed. The caller ID read: ‘Honey XOXO’. She checked the time, in disbelief that he would call that early. What did he want?

“Luni,” Kevin said when he answered. “I can’t marry you. You’re great and all, and you can keep the hotel room but...”

She heard a noise in the background of what sounded like partying men.

“You can’t leave me here stranded!” She said to him over the phone.

“No, You always need someone to hold your hand. I need someone who can handle difficult situations on their own. I think we should see other people ...”

She cursed at him and ended the call. The rain fell harder. She put the raincoat back on and headed outside.

She stepped into the dynamite museum, and after searching by the light of her phone for a long time, she found the cow. Curled up by a stick of dynamite in an exhibit from 1976. She lifted it into her hands and headed back to the tea shop.

The most confusing part of the evening, besides Kevin, had been the magic license. She figured out the contestants had been members of some secret group that handed out fines. Was this a joke? Was there a gas leak? She didn’t know, and she found herself pondering this until she finally found sleep. Just as soon as the sun rose, waking her back up.

## Episode 3: Mr. Finkerhopper

Oct. 2019.

"Why don't you like my costume?" Luni asked in 5th hour. She tugged at her pointed hat, wanting in part to cover her entire face if it would make Taylor stop staring at her.

"What are you even?" She asked.

"I'm an evil witch!" Luni said, rasing her hand in the air pretending to wave a wand. Taylor crossed her arms and raised her shoulders high.

"That's not what that looks like." Taylor pouted. "The wart is offensive."

Luni found herself blushing. "I thought I looked cute."

"You are. No. It's.. Real witches are a lot darker than that. That's a very unrealistic portrayal."

"What do you mean? I bought this at the spirit barn? I think you're on the weird and occult side of the metaphorical mountain."

"Oh my god Luni, it's not you. Never mind. I hate all this magic worship stuff. Everyone wants to be a witch or wizard or to have powers that." her voice changed to a mocking tone. "Some deem unnatural. To quote Disney. Why can't people be themselves and stop wishing they were something else?"

"... You don't think I look cute then?" Luni asked, with a hint of disappointment.

"I didn't say that," Taylor answered, opening her book bag. "I'm saying if anyone actually controlled magic, they would hate it so much that they would want to be rid of it. Did you study for this quiz at all?"

"No," Luni said. "I spent the evening trying on this costume with different outfits. To see what looked better." In her mind, she added the words to you. Throughout the test, she hardly focused on her work. In part because her pencil was chipped, and she didn't want to sharpen it in front of all the other students. And because something about disappointing that girl gave her stomach butterflies.

*I shouldn't feel this way.* She thought.

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*I don't know what I'm doing.* She thought years later. The sunlight crept in over the potted plants sitting on the windowsill. After some searching, Luni found 7 vase-looking objects and filled

them with dirt she found in a bag under the store's front tea counter. Three were made of misty glowing glass, two of flimsy tin sort of material, and two looked like bone.

*Why is there a bag of dirt lying out in a tea shop?* She thought. *No wonder the city closed the shop.*

But as the thought occurred, she noticed from the view from the window a man in a trench coat and a blue top hat approaching the store. He seemed determined to enter. Remembering the front doors had been smashed, Luni ran downstairs to greet the shop guest.

The pieces of broken glass did not seem to phase the man, instead, he stood at the counter hitting his hand into his fist.

"Where is Bralynn? The sun is rising. I am late. We don't have much time. I need my..." He stopped and looked hard at Luni, who stood in an oversized hoodie still not wearing any pants. Her hair looked like a complete mess "... I need my English Breakfast tea." He said.

"I'm sorry, The shop is closed." Remembering her appearance, she moved closer to the cash register and hid her legs from the sight of the man.

"Forget the city code!" His voice grew in anger and desperation. "I need my tea now or... I get cranky!"

"I can't I..."

"Look, girl." He said. "All you have to do is heat water, put the leaves in the strainer, and hand me the cup. That's it. This isn't a college final. I am always the first customer, I come in here first thing every morning, I must have my oolong tea!"

"You said English tea, didn't you?"

"Whatever, it should be marked 'Anti-Morning Were-wolf'! ... Don't look at me like that! They are allowed to write whatever they want to advertise products these days. Hurry!"

"I can't. I don't even work here I..." She shifted and looked to the ceiling. As she did, a beam of light came through the broken door onto the man. It sent him to his knees.

"Nooo!!! My soul! MY SOUL!" He cried in agony.

"Okay! Okay!" Luni shouted, searching the tea display case. None of the bottles said anything about Anti-Morning Werewolf at all. The one marked Silver wildflowers seemed possible, but she couldn't give him something that had actual silver in it.

The man's trench coat and hat fell to the floor and he tossed and turned. He had grabbed at his chest and clenched his teeth. "Please, make my suffering stop!"

One bottle stood out. Written in sloppy handwriting read; 'Happy Morning Glory blend'. She found the water boiling machine, though it looked different than anything she had seen before. The stone oven-looking device whirled and steamed. With a ding, a cup of hot water appeared in front of her on the counter spewing sparkling dust.

While the man kept rolling on the floor, she threw the leaves in a strainer, put the strainer in the cup, and walked to the man. The water turned red.

On seeing this the man replied, still in pain. "That's not the usual color. But give it to me!"

Luni helped him sit and tried to steady the man's trembling hands to pour a drink into his mouth. As he drank, his arms disappeared and his entire body vanished. The man transformed into a wolf before her eyes.

"Woof." Said the wolf, sounding annoyed.

"Oh no."

Another man walked in, looking normal, humming a cheerful song to himself.

"Morning. You must be a fill-in. I'll have an English breakfast, please. She has one labeled 'Happy Morning Glory.'" The man saw the dog sitting at his feet. "Oh hello, Mr. Finkerhopper! Who's a good dog?"

"Woof." Said the dog sadly, walking behind the counter to a pet bed lying on the floor. The dog bit into a leash sitting nearby and looked at Luni, waiting.

Luni let out a distressed sigh. What if this other man needed special herbs too? Would he turn into a cow if he didn't get it? Even worse, this could look bad if as the champion of the Whisper's Bay Brawl, she did not help one of their magic. People. Persons. But what if she gave the wrong thing to someone and turned them into a newt? She looked hard at the waiting dog, pondering her decision.

"Tea coming right up." She said.

The dog whined.

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After putting on clothes and heading back down, the third customer walked in, one of whom had the nerve to ask for a cold brew with extra foam and a shot of cimmaron of all things. Luni found

a piece of paper and wrote "Will be back" with a feather quill and placed it on the register. She took Mr. Finkerhopper out for a walk. Before she had left, a woman hurried into the store looking in her purse.

"I need something with a kick, I have an unpleasant meeting with my ex-husband's lawyers. The scum-sucking vampires, where's my tea!"

Luni rushed back to answer the lady, who was addressing the cash register for some reason. But instead a deep silky voice came from nowhere. "I do apologize madame, but the young woman filling in today has gone on a walk. She will return in prompt time. I do apologize for the inconvenience. If you would like, you can wait and help yourself to a biscuit."

It hit Luni that the voice came FROM the paper she had written on, which somehow now had a smiling talking mouth drawn upon it.

She let out another sigh. *I need to be careful what I use in this shop.* She said.

She heard from the woman before going.

"Is the paper talking? If yes, I want the strongest biscuit you got."

The wolf pulled hard on the leash, seeming to know what direction he wanted to go. She turned back to the window above the shop, hoping some sort of magic would have brought back the 7 seeds into people. It didn't. Instead, she saw empty vases. And a line of people lined up at the shop. She let out a horrified gasp. The dog jolted her around a street corner, pulling her with him.

"Why can't you go yourself? I can't leave all those people alone in that shop!" Luni said.

The dog stopped and looked up at a sign. It read: "All dogs must be leased, or they will be impounded. City Ordinance."

"Impounded? Like a car?" Luni asked, before realizing how silly it sounded. "Okay. I'm going to trust you. If you help me. I am way over my head and I don't know what to do."

The dog took off in a run again, dragging her along until they reached the public library.

Luni panting, looked in confusion at the half-run-down-building. The dog signaled with its head to open the doors. She pointed to a sign reading "Service animals only." Again, the dog nodded at the door.

"Woof!" It said.

"Um. What kind of service do you need?" Luni said.

Giving up, she opened the doors, and the two wandered inside. The dog hurried past two suited young men reading by stacks of giant books. They walked to the checkout counter. A woman smiled at the dog before frowning.

"Oh no. He's not coming into work." She said. "His arthritis must be so bad he can't call in again. Poor thing. Thank you, Sparky, for coming to tell me."

Her voice sounded casual in talking to the creature. She looked up. "Oh. You must be the one filling in at the tea shop today. You know the whole town is talking about it, wanting to give the shop a try. Now that there's a nice fill-in. How long will she be gone? Braylynn's special book arrived."

She handed Luni a book titled *High Wizard of Snufferclyd. And the evil abomanation Grobobalopacus*.

"What's this about?" Luni asked.

"Nothing. It's blank." The librarian said. "All the pages, the cover, the back cover. Looks useless to me."

The book did not appear blank to Luni. Instead, she saw handwritten in blue ink: Level 1 Magic license required.

The pages seemed to accounting for something that resembled a tabloid paper or a gossip article. On the cover was a wild-eyed man with a blue-ish gray beard. He wore a goofy hat and looked angry at a castle sticking out of the ocean. The librarian didn't seem to see it.

"People drive from all over the coast to ask for these blank books all the time. Please bring this back to the shop for the rude girl, that would be great."

As she spoke, Mr. Finkerhopper had taken a romance book in the history section with his teeth and walked over to its correct place on the shelf. The dog shook its head. Luni took the book, thanked the lady, and went to grab the leash.

"It's okay, you can let Sparky stay here if he'd like." The librarian said. "He's a helpful boy! It's so sad his friend Fitto is so sick. His owner said she's going to have to put the poor thing down soon."

The dog let out a sigh sounding "Woof."

"Oh, Sparky... wants to come help me in the shop," Luni said.

Mr. Finkerhopper growled. She excused herself and walked over to confront the dog who stood rearranging the flower book section.

"You promised you'd help." Luni scoffed.

The dog shot an angry look and pointed with his snout towards the book Luni held. The two men with the stacks of book started arguing over historical facts. The dog let out a sharp bark. They quieted. He went back to rearranging.

"You liar!" She said. "I trusted you!"

The wolf paid no attention to her. With no choice, she hurried towards the shop and flipped through the book as she walked. She tried to comprehend its pages. Partly because of its cursive writing. Every other word was gibberish to her. But from the pictures, she guessed the book was about an evil creature summoned by a powerful magic user. The beast caused destruction, as depicted in drawings. A hero magician named Barry Deicknine sealed the creature away. But the magic in the seal can only last year. Once a year a champion must open it, inserting 7 'Pertimemtoffle' seeds. After the creature is defeated the seal can once again be enacted for the following year. The story ended with a mention of a group within the city, shown with stick figures, called the NBS who wanted to defeat the 'glorious' Barry. She read, from cover to cover, looking for any information. But she found little.

*Mr. Finkerhopper didn't help at all. This children's story isn't even well written.* She thought. 'Pertimemtoffle' seed seemed to be the only useful mention that she could correlate. But that part of the book stated that a Pertimemtoffle was 'a exeterillian parerous spell from a magical plant. From the family bertililousnaberperious.' The gibberish was not helpful to Luni. She kept walking, hoping to find better answers at the tea shop.

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All the "sorry biscuits" were gone, and a line to the next block had formed at the door of the shop. Unlike the top hat-wearing weirdo who had wandered in and rudely turned into a wolf, they looked like normal west coasters. Well, as normal as it looks there with some wearing heavy coats and beanies and others wearing shorts and t-shirts.

*How am I going to figure out how to save the other contestants I turned into seeds if people won't stop showing up at the shop?* She thought.

Sure, the store wasn't hers to open, but Braylnn had talked about how despite she was for cash. What would a better apology be for "I'm sorry I turned you into a 'Pertimemtoffle' seed." than running the shop? As long as she kept the magic stuff secret, it wouldn't be a big deal. Besides, she had won the brawl forgiving any town violations. Surely that made it okay. The thought of being worth something to someone drove her.

She placed the book near the cash register, and with the first rag she found in the sink she wiped down the dusty counter. After she had thrown the washcloth back, people clapped and cheered.

"Wow! Amazing! How did you do that!" someone shouted. "I'm going to tell all my friends about this place!"

The counter had turned to gold. In a panic, she removed the rag from the sink. She threw it towards the dog bed out of the way of grabby hands, in case someone stole it and take it home with them.

After a while, she figured out how to use the normal water boiler sitting on the glistening counter. She made Yerba Mate Tea with soy milk and brown sugar and peppermint tea with a sugary peppermint syrup. And a great number of ginseng teas in place of all the coffee everyone ordered. There was no menu with prices, so she wrote one, forgetting about what happened the last time. She placed it by the door so the people in line could see it before they ordered. She heard the menu talking to people and asking questions about the drink orders. Was 5 bucks for a green tea and a dollar per shot of syrup okay? She didn't know, especially with the high coast prices, but she had something to go off of.

"I'd like a yellow tea and a cucumber sandwich to go." She heard a woman say.

Luni froze.

"... Luni?" The woman asked.

She cursed, to the bewilderment of the people standing in line. "Taylor. Hi."

The woman, with short blond hair, wore a windbreaker and tight black sweatpants. She looked at Luni almost the same as she had in high school. Light brown skin, oval-shaped face, and high cheekbones framed her almond-shaped eyes. Looking very Dine. (Or Navajo.)

"What are you doing here?" Taylor asked. "Where is Braylynn? You can't ..." She looked behind her at the line of people. "... work here."

Luni said nothing in reply but instead fulfilled her order. Not knowing how to make a cucumber sandwich, she sliced up some vegetables she found in the bin and slapped some mayo between lettuce and white bread. She handed Taylor the sandwich and teacup.

"First of all," Taylor said. "That is a zucchini, not a cucumber. Second, that tea is used for... a love brew. That wouldn't work on me. And third, what the hell, I haven't seen you in like five years Luni. And now you randomly appear in a shop no one is supposed to go to? Where is Braylynn?"

"Hurry up! You're holding up the line!" A person behind her said.

"She's away for a while. For personal growth." Luni said, waving Taylor off. "I'm taking over for the foreseeable future. Next please?"

"You don't know what you are doing at all. Like the book you have out. Why do you have that out?"

She pointed to the book the librarian had given her.

"It's blank," Luni said.

"No, it's not, that's an account of the Grobobalopacus incident, which is NOT allowed to be seen in public!"

Luni turned her back and pretend to go wash dishes. Even though the sink in the back she turned on poured out no water.

"I am doing fine on my own." Luni yelled to Taylor.

Someone stood up shouting and celebrating. "I won the lottery! I'm rich! This is the best day of my life!"

Luni looked to the tea she had served the man, called "Day long serendipity".

Taylor made her way behind the counter and threw on an apron.

"What are you doing?" Luni asked, crossing over to her as the next person in line asked for a coffee.

"Giving you a hand, you Hwitloc idiot before the council arrives and throws me in prison. It is not safe for you to be here, much less work here. I need to know everything as soon as we get this line taken care of." She said, her head shaking at the gold counter. "And don't use that rag."

"Yeah, I figured that out." Luni puffed. "No customers behind the counter."

"Go" Taylor cursed. "... yourself and..." She cursed again. "... that sandwich you tried serving me."

"I can handle myself." Luni said.

"There's the lie of the year." Taylor started removing serval jars of obviously not normal tea shop stuff from the tea display. Such as "Get what you want but not in the way you wanted it." brew.

If you don't let me help you, I'm calling the council myself. Because I do NOT want to be send to adult magic education classes again."

"Is this payback?" Luni asked. Taylor hesitated before shrugging. Luni let out a frustrated groan. She realized there would be no talking her out of it. There was no choice but to deal with the firecracker.

"Fine," Luni muttered.

For a long while, she took orders while Taylor worked to fill them. This brought about strong feelings she could not ignore, especially when she tried to give someone tea called "exploding poppy." Taylor scolded her for the obvious magic tea Braylynn must have left in the case. This outburst from Taylor reminded her of her high school drama class fight. The one where she got hit in the face with a dodge ball repeatedly. When she had given Taylor the wrong audition piece. Confident in her performance, Taylor volunteered to go first and gave a passionate loud monologue. Luni had given her a scene from a Woody Allen film, which did not go over well. Taylor was asked to sit down, due to not having followed directions. She glared with her face red at Luni the entire audition. Luni felt that same glare as she tried to work the shop. Even with that feeling, there was another that felt misplaced to her. In some sick way, she was glad Taylor showed up. This both felt great and weird at the same time.

Not until hours later, the two finally put another sign when everyone had been served, and noon came upon them. Taylor knocked twice on a red door in the back of the shop. When she opened it, a light shone from the other side brighter than the sun.

They walked through the door, Luni found herself surrounded by tiny flowers of all colors on a grassy hill. Somehow the blue sky lay overhead, and the wind blew carrying the scent of flower petals wiffed by.

*The tea shop has a howls moving castle room? Luni thought. If Braylynn ever wakes up from being a flower maybe she would let me live here. In the teashop... closet?*

"The shop is low, so we need to pick as we talk. Quick. Why are you working here, of all places?"

Taylor collected lavender into a bag as the woman.

"Taylor. Are you? One of them? Whatever these weird vegetable-wielding people are." She asked.

"That's not important. There are a lot of dangerous things here that Braylynn attends to that only she knows about. Why do you have a book about the high wizard?"

"I don't know. The librarian gave it to me. I can't understand it. Does it contain anything about growing seeds? into people?" Luni asked.

Taylor stopped picking a petal and turned. "into people? How do you know about the Magic brawl? Did you stumble into the arena?"

Luni took a few steps away to a point overlooking a lake. Machines and tubes seemed to send lake water back to the shop.

Taylor grew impatient and placed a hand on her shoulder. Luni backed away.

"Easy," Taylor said. "I'm not going to punch you. If you know where those seeds are, you need to tell me. Forget the council members being ticked, the entire city is in danger, including those seven people if they are not handled. If the Grobabalopacus breaks the seal it will be unleashed upon the normals, and the last time we almost all died if it were not for..." She scoffed.

"Deicknine the Great Gatekeeper of magic."

"It's okay, I have all the seeds planted in vases upstairs," Luni said.

Taylor gasped.

"You. Didn't. Tell me you didn't plant them."

"What else are you supposed to do with seeds? They are going to grow again, and release the people inside them right?"

"NO!" Taylor shouted, placing her hand on her head. "Okay. I am going to punch you. How do you have them??"

"I won the brawl. I guess, what do you mean I wasn't supposed to plant them?"

"Not like that, you Hwitloc!" Taylor shouted. "You've had them planted the entire time and you let us work all morning? What is wrong with you? We have to go right now!"

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## Episode 4: Grobobalopacus

2019.

The whistle blew. Luni and Taylor stood in the gym circle facing each other. The rest of the class cheered them on as they both ran toward the only ball on the court.

*I can't let this girl beat me again.* Luni thought. She reached out. Their hands met together around the dodgeball. Something about the girl's touch felt electric. She didn't know what it was, but she wanted more. They found themselves looking into each other's eyes. Though for a brief second, Luni wished it could last forever.

They wrestled, rolling over the court, fighting for control of the ball. Taylor with a slap ripped it out, Luni stood and backed up with her hands up, still looking into her glaze. Sneakers squeezed on the court floor. Luni tried to predict where her next throw would land. Taylor threw the ball so hard that the whistling sound it made echoed through the gym stage and into the courtyard. Luni rag-dolled to avoid the hit, missing her head. She twisted and turned prone towards her opponent.

"Boundaries eliminated! Someone get out so we can leave." The P.E. Teacher shouted. Taylor ran across mid-court toward the ball. With her mouth open, standing straight panting out of breath, Luni looked for what to do in the other girl's eyes.

When she did this, an unexpected outcome occurred. What had her eyes told her to do? Those round beautiful brown eyes seemed to gleam back to her. Luni picked up the dodgeball, then tossed it up straight into the air towards the girl.

Taylor caught the snail-moving ball, but only long enough to drop it. It was obvious to everyone in the room. It was on purpose. The whistle blew.

"Kids. That was the worst dodgeball match I've ever seen. Makes me ashamed to be alive." The coach said.

Taylor deliberately walked into Luni.

"I don't need your stupid pity. Looney." Taylor said. She walked away.

Luni turned to watch as Taylor walked into the locker room.

*She knows my name? Who is that?*

\*\*\*\*

Five years later, Luni and Taylor burst into the spare room of the Whisper's Bay "Not a Magic Tea Shop". Taylor knocked over all the vases on the window sill, spilling the dirt onto the floor. Luni followed close behind. Three seeds glowed in the dirt. Two of the white containers refused to break open.

"Quick!" Taylor thrashed a vase upon the floor, trying to break it free. "You've planted these in a Marbonza trap!"

Luni grabbed the other and tried to break its bone-like structure. She smashed it against the floor, and wall, brought it to the upstairs kitchen, and threw it against the counter. But nothing would break it.

Luni cursed. "The people at the arena wouldn't tell me anything..."

"... of course, they aren't going to tell you anything! If you win they lose money. These people don't believe the grobopalopacus can come back, they think Barry will always defeat it."

"You keep saying grobopalopacus like it's a real thing!" Luni shouted.

"It is a real thing! I have faced it! Before I met you in high school."

The room went silent.

"You lied to me. About how you were the entire time."

"I tried to tell you. You didn't listen." Taylor gathered the seeds. "These need to be placed on the altar by the seal. If there is still enough life in them it might get you in so you can finish it."

"What do you mean to finish it? I'm playing mortal combat."

"You must face the Grobopalopacus, to prevent it and the High wizard of Snufferclyd from returning. Is Braylynn in one of these seeds?"

Luni shook her head. Taylor yelled an incomprehensible noise and paced.

"Your..." Taylor cursed. "...up hasn't doomed us all. Thankfully. There's someone else who can help us. The only person who knows how to dismantle a Marbonza trap is Mr. Finkerhopper. He works at the library as a... why are you making that face Luni?"

She lowered her head and looked away. "You mean. The nice doggo who walks too fast?"

"HOW DO YOU KNOW ABOUT HIM BEING A MORNING WARE-WOLF!!" Taylor shouted.  
"How do you already know all the secrets of Whisper's Bay?! You normals aren't supposed to know any of this!"

"Is that all I am to you? A normal?" Luni said. "I put up with your mood swings and aggressive affection and I'm like. Nothing to you. Still."

"Ding ding ding." Taylor rolled her eyes. "Winner Winner. Chicken dinner. Grand prize. You guessed the right price or whatever" She let out a string of curse words. "You're so good at reading people!"

"Are you being sarcastic? Cause I hate it when you are..."

"Why noooo I am not being sarcastic," Taylor said. "Where is Mr. Finkerhopper?"

"I left him at the library. Were you being sarcastic with me just then??"

Taylor checked the time on her phone. "He should be off shift by now, he's going to need a walk back if the lady who works there hasn't taken him back to his house. Let's go."

They threw the seeds and vases in a box and ran downstairs. But they both stopped when a strange light reflected from under the counter. Luni let out a curse word at the sight she saw. Mr. Finkerhopper the wolf, had been turned to gold.

"Tell me. You didn't leave the rag of riches IN the dog bed."

"Okay," Luni said crossing her arms. ". I'm not going to tell you that. And hope that you figure it out on your own. Is that sarcasm?"

Mr. Whitaker stumbled through the door. The top of his shirt was unbuttoned, and his hair was greasy. He yelled, frightening both of the women. They smelled on his breath he had spent the morning at the bar.

"Where is my bartender? You were the last one to see Cali and Lizzie alive. Where are they?"

Luni swallowed hard. "I don't know anything."

"You came into the bar yesterday. I don't know anything about the shop next door. And you are . running the place like you own it."

"That is sarcasm," Taylor said to Luni.

"And that magic of yours is why SEVEN people are missing. You have something to do with this and I'm going to prove it. I've already called the cops. They'll be looking to talk to you. As soon as I can talk them into getting someone over here!"

"Okay Mr. Whitaker, time for you to go home," Taylor said, approaching him as if he were a wild animal on the loose.

"It's time for someone to tell the dad gum truth for once. Especially you Taylor!" The light from the gold counter reflected into his eye.

"Mr. Whitaker," Taylor said in a sad, exhausted tone. "I've always tried to tell you. Always. I did everything I could. Everything. I promise. I miss Idis Mr. Whitaker."

Mr. Whitaker spit and spoke with his voice rumbling. "Don't you talk about her! You are one of those! You could have saved her!"

"I wanted to. So much... Sometimes people get sick. You weren't even there with her. I was!"

The tea shop clock struck one. Birds again flew from nowhere and cleaned. Mice and squirrels entered from the back door to scrub the floors and complain about the work as one might do. But more, a stunned Mr. Whitaker's mouth dropped. He did a double take at the two women, then to the working animals. After a few moments, all the animals had left, except for one. An owl with a mail bag limped past Mr. Whitaker, looking like each step was a pain too tolerable to bear. Yet the creature kept walking, fighting for each step forward.

"Here you go." The owl said to Luni. "Letter for you."

Before she could reply, it had turned around and closed its eyes. It walked back, holding its grunts and pains, as well as its tears, to itself.

"Come on Konigsberg." He said. "Thirty-three more deliveries to make today."

"Really?" Luni said. "This is the life I wasn't good enough for? Well darn. If only I were one of them rich crazy snobs who force animals to clean and deliver mail for some reason. All I needed for your love was to abuse animals. Like why even? This is what you picked? Over me?"

Mr. Whitaker charged at Taylor. He shouted and screamed like a man in pain.

"You don't know what I've been through! Magic should have saved my daughter!" He went at her again.

WACK.

Mr. Whitaker fell to the ground hard, knocked out. Luni stood over him holding the golden wolf statue, known as Mr. Finkerhopper.

"Luni!" Taylor said. "What are you doing? I didn't want to get anyone hurt!"

"I didn't hurt Mr. Finkerhopper!" Luni shouted. "We gotta get out of here if the...gro...bow... bow...whatever before it gets out and starts killing people!"

"It's Grobopalopacus! Help me get Mr. Whitaker into a bed." Taylor said.

Luni put the statue of Mr. Finkerhopper next to the register on the counter and went to help lift Mr. Whitaker. They dragged him to the secret flower room. They had considered placing him in the bed, but if he woke before they returned it would spell disaster.

Out of all the moments for it to happen, Luni received a text. She lifted the cell to her face with a look of sickness. The message from Kevin read: I messed up. I...

She didn't bother to read the rest. After putting the phone in her pocket, she lifted the box of vases and seeds and walked away to where Taylor's pickup truck was parked.

\*\*\*

Whisper's Bay Arcadia Park sits on the opposite side of town from the beach access. It's a wooded area where the cherry blossoms thrive in the spring and the pines seem to reach up forever. The park sat unused for most of the year. It is a cool place to hang out during the summer, and a few of the town's excessive festivals are held there when there isn't space elsewhere. It's a kind of "So the tourists don't come" sort of place. Luni could only watch as Taylor drove the pickup over the parking stop, tearing into the fresh grass.

*Of course she's that kind of person.* Luni thought. *What did I ever see in her?*

Luni recognized her favorite tree, the main one at the park's center, one she had only seen in pictures. Its trunk towering 50 feet above them with blue-green needled branches reaching out toward the sky. The massive size Luni realized could not be captured in a photo. The sight felt too incredible to feel real.

Her heart sank at realizing she was supposed to have been married there the day before.

Luni hung tight to the box of vases and seeds as she stepped onto the trucks side step. "Where do I take this?" She said, refocusing her attention. She expected to see an obvious altar or a sign saying "Place seeds here." Magic did not seem to work that way on the coast.

Taylor stepped out and searched the park, examining every object her eye passed. Luni spotted a dog, lying under a tree looking ill. This tugged at her heart to see a creature suffering, but she could not linger. She looked on.

In the middle of the park, a tent sat propped with a stake driven into Luni's favorite tree. A man with round glasses and black hair emerged. He stood, looking stoic.

"Come on. He'll know." Taylor said.

"Who?" Luni asked.

"Barry Deicknine." She said loudly in mid-stride.

The sight of her seemed to trigger something in his, and even Luni of all people could see this.

The man approached, looking tired wearing a ruffled and dusty suit. He cleaned his round glasses as they approached.

"I have wait for an entire day! I work 80 hour weeks for this council, you could at least show up when you are supposed to!"

This broke Luni. "I don't understand anything you crazy people do. How do I free these people so I can get far away from you nutcases?"

Barry spoke in a deeper, poetic voice that echoed and seemed to stretch out far into the distance with an unnatural tone. "You must follow your heart, and put aside all your fears and inhibitions. Especially if you, a non-magic user, wish to be the one who this year seals the Grobopalopus in his place. Only the champion of Whisper's Bay can defeat such an evil! Only you... whatever your name is. Forgive me, someone told me but I forgot."

Luni sat the box down, as her phone buzzed. It was Kevin. By how the texts were written, missing letters and containing fragmented sentences, he seemed drunk. Again.

"You know what." She said. "I've had about enough of all this magic stuff. Tell me what to do, in real words, I'm not here for a speech."

"No one speaks to me like that," Barry said.

"You can't make demands of Barry Deicknine," Luni," Taylor said. "This is the most famous Whisper's Bayian in town. The one who saved us all. We owe all to him. If we like it or not." She rolled her eyes.

"I bet you are fantastic," Luni said. "We got 7 people trapped in seeds and a Mr. Whitaker knocked out at the 'not a magic tea shop.' So hurry it up."

Barry scoffed. "No wonder we gave Braylnn a violation. I'll see that Mr. Whitaker is taken care of. Go, champion. May luck find you on these grand trials of..."

"Shut it already," Luni said. "I'll do it myself."

At this, Barry smiled. "Well. I hope you will be the first to survive the Grobopalopus."

Luni's face turned pale. Something inside of her wanted to drop the box and run away, far enough away so that no one in the bay could reach her. She looked at Taylor. Another feeling came. One that drove her to move her feet in search of the altar.

Luni noticed bright red mushrooms growing from the base of the pine. Weeds with tiny orange flowers grow scattered throughout the park's center. She put her hands on her hips.

*Where would an altar be? What am I looking for? Why am I always looking for something?*

"Excuse me!" She heard a tiny voice cry. Konigsberg the mail-carrying owl approached from behind her, still limping in excruciating pain. "Another letter. And a book! Ow. Ow."

The creature walked to her. Luni knelt beside him, resisting the urge to cup the top of his head softly with her hands.

"You know, you shouldn't have to do this if you hurt. This kind of life is not fair to you."

"Oh no, This is what I got to do in life! It could be worse. I'm not a cleaning bird! I'm thankful for that! Good day to you." The creature took a step, and Luni heard something in the owl's joints snap. He cried out in pain.

"I'm so lucky to do what I do." He said in all seriousness.

Luni realized she had not read the first letter either. She took it from her pocket and read it aloud.

"The answer is in the book. - NBS."

Then she read the second letter: Please read your mail so that the poor owl doesn't have to walk. NBS.

"NBS?" Luni mouthed to herself.

"What is this?" Barry asked her, drawing near.

She ignored him and looked at the one. It was the same book the librarian had given her. She flipped through its pages. Taylor stepped in front of her so that Barry couldn't see the book. She turned to a page with a familiar tree drawn on it. The drawing had 7 holes outlined in red.

She placed one seed in the tree's cavity. A root cracked through the seed and filled the space with a thick vine. A flower bloomed, and an orange orb appearing from the petals. Quickly she placed the remaining souls to their places. All, but ones caught in the marbonza traps.

She could see a person banging on the sides from inside the glass-like structure. Desprete to get out.

"Do you have a hammer?" Luni said to Taylor in a fit of panic.

"You can't get them out that way." Barry chuckled, looking at the flowery lanterns.

"Either help me or shut the hell up," Luni said.

Luni grabbed the metal toolbox and used it as a battering ram, striking the bone vases as hard as she could. But they would not budge.

"Nevermind. You did..." Taylor cursed. "...Us all."

Luni clenched her teeth. She struck the vase hard that the truck reverberated a deep rumble that sent pine needles falling. The vase snapped in. Thorny vines sprouted and a black flower bloomed, almost tulip in appearance. Realizing what she had done, she did the same to the last seed with one decisive hit of the toolbox.

Taylor stumbled back at the hideous sight of the flowers. "I don't think those are supposed to look like that."

"Why is there a carrot in here?" Luni asked. But she disregarded her question.

A red light glowed from within the center tree. The bark turned many colors as if splattered by an army of paintballs. Roots crawled, ripping the tent to shreds, and forming a circle. A light flashed. Moths with skull-like wings swarmed the park and the sunset seemed to set way before its time.

"You have found it," Barry said, motioning with his hands to the root altar. "You must face it. Alone."

"Are you coming or not Taylor?" Luni said taking a step forward.

"I said alone," Barry said.

But Taylor joined Luni, giving one last look to Barry before picking up the toolbox. They stepped into the circle together.

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The two women found themselves on a gravel path, surrounded by warm fiery rocks. The smell of suffering lingered in the air. At the end of the path below the red sky, they saw a tall rock hut.

"Barry is going to be ticked," Taylor said. "The people will not like it when they learn I went with you. He doesn't like me as is."

Luni shook her head. "I don't like being with you either."

"You think?" Taylor mocked. "The whole town worships the toe crack of that guy. We have to do everything he says now because he defeated the high wizard of Snuffercylde. It's all .." She cursed. "... to me."

"What is a Snuffercylde?" Luni asked.

"It's some wizards' fortress, a place hidden somewhere off the harbor. Come on. Let's beat this Grobobalopacus."

They drew closer to the flimsy hut, held together by mud and tiny stones. Taylor set the toolbox on the ground and drew the carrot.

"What is with the vegetable thing?" Luni asked.

"It is how we cast spells," Taylor said.

"So you are one of them."

"No, I'm vegan." She deadpanned. "That's not important."

"Admit it," Luni said.

"It's complicated."

A loud groan came from inside, a sound so terrible that stones from the hut fell off onto the ground. A voice cried out.

"It's that time of year again. Oh dear me. Hold on. I'm coming."

From inside an indescribable creature emerged, looking like it had escaped the depths of hell. It had many mouths and rotting teeth. Its claws had nails stretching far out from its twenty-some-odd fingers. The stench of the creature wafted in the air as it moved. Flowers sprouted with each step the creature took.

"Alright, let's get this over with." It said.

Luni shot Taylor a look. "I'm sorry, you're the Grobopalopacus?"

"Thank you for using my name." The creature said, coming to face Luni. "Most people call me bad names I don't want to repeat. How would you like to beat me? Should I lay down, or do you want me to pretend to fight or..."

"Wait." Luni stepped back. "I thought to free the people in the seven seeds we had to defeat you."

The creature looked concerned. "There's people trapped in seeds? How awful. I hope you can get them out before some idiot tries to plant them."

Luni coughed.

"The creature is lying," Taylor said holding out an arm. "Don't trust it. It killed my parents. You have to be the one who kills it! Go!"

The creature scratched its head with its weapon-like claws. "Lying? I don't like hurting people. You monkey-looking critters are always the ones coming here, proclaiming you're the champion of which or another. I don't even know what's going on. They want me to submit and be willing to give up my soul. I refuse. I love life too much. I want to watch every flower grow. And die. And sprout again, if it's that kind of plant. Do what you want with me. I choose. Life."

The creature sighed. "I hate this Deicknine experient. Hurry up so I can start healing and get ready for next year."

Taylor seemed more confused. "We were told if you escaped this seal you would destroy the magic world. And the universe!"

"Who?" It asked. "You don't the nice wizard with all the cats who brought me flowers? Last time I checked I couldn't bring anyone back from the dead though..."

"One moment please," Luni said to the Grobopalopacus and pulled Taylor to the side. "Look this might seem really obviously now but is it possible? That Deicknine is gaming with us? Cause I don't think his judge of character is as good as he thinks it is."

The creature waited, smiling, enjoying the pleasant company for a change.

"You have to beat it now Luni," Taylor said. "Barry is a liar. But It's trying to trick us. That thing has the souls of 20 people inside of it. Two that used to be my parents. It is an abomination and should not exist. Defeat it."

Luni picked up a rock. Her arm swung back, preparing to thrust it at the creature. But she stopped. The beast had taken a step back and flinched. Something about how it held itself bothered her. She dropped the rock.

"Pick it back up!!" Taylor yelled. "We can't let it free! It's the one time of year it can escape..."

"No," Luni said. "I'm not going to hurt it."

The creature's eyes sad eyes turned to her. "Seriously??" It asked. "You aren't going to bully me?"

"No." She said.

Taylor's face shifted with the years of pain and anger. "If you are on its side, then you are not on mine!"

"Okay, Anakin." Luni mocked before pausing and saying in an almost whisper. "Trust me."

"Like the time you got us caught in the teacher's lounge?" Taylor said.

Taylor looked hard at the creature. Something about this whole thing seemed wrong. Before the two could agree on that fact, someone came walking up the path. With a radish drawn.

"Enough." Barry cried. He pointed the wand at Taylor. "No one will be escaping here but me. Drop the carrot."

Taylor did as she asked and stuck up her hands. "Is this creature innocent? If so, whose fault is it?"

"That's a pickle that's too sour for you to taste," Barry said. "It is the only way to bring the bond. It's the only way to protect Whisper's Bay from the oath breakers! I am only righting a wrong done to me."

"You monster," Taylor said.

The creature sighed. "I'm sorry, I can't help the way I look.."

"Not you," Taylor said.

Luni picked up the carrot. He laughed. She knew she had tried it before, but she had to try something if she wanted to make it out alive.

"The wand is useless to you. You are not one of us hwhitlock. You! You might be the one to free me from the bond with the high wizard! I can't go back to being trapped in the darkness of eternity. The bond will be broken! "

Barry bit his lip and cast a blazing fireball toward Luni. Taylor grabbed the carrot and yelled something sounding ridiculous, creating an icy shield around her. Some of the fireball broke through, leaving patches of her pants incinerated.

"Flowerupercaucus!" Barry shouted, turning to Taylor. Vines sprouted from the rocks trapping her vegetable wand and arm.

Luni flung as many rocks as she could at him, but he waved the attack off with a spell of the radish. Taylor struggled to free herself of the vine, but the spell proved too strong. The creature ran to hide behind the rock hut, looking on helpless in a panic.

In one last-ditch effort to save both of their lives, Luni picked up the wand. She pointed it at Barry. Knowing nothing would happen, but hoping deep down that by some miracle something would work.

"Blaburtgilocus" Luni shouted.

Nothing had happened. Until the creature snapped his fingers with a deafening sound. A flower sprouted on the carrot wand. Seeing this Luni shouted the spell again, and a beam shot towards the man, a blinding beam. The spell knocked Barry back ten yards, ripping the back of his suit jacket.

"How!" Barry cried.

The Grobopalopacus peaked its head from around its safe hut. "I fixed your weapon. I added power to it so that the useless person could use it. Did I do a good job?"

"Yes, you did," Luni said. "Blaburtgilocus!"

Another beam shot out from the carrot at Barry. She kept repeating the word over and over until Barry no longer moved. She stood over him. The man, black and blue and one eye swelled shut tight, tried to lift his hand toward his weapon but could not.

Barry laughed through his injuries. "You can kill me now. You can bring back Rovanaugh High Wizard. But I can come back from eternity. You cannot stop this curse. Taylor knows this better than anyone else. Don't you Taylor?"

"Shut up Deicknine." Taylor said.

Luni passed the wand to Taylor. She shook her head. Instead, she picked up his radish. She cursed at him. A fireball erupted from the end of the radish. She kept cursing, over and over until nothing remained of the man known as Barry.

"Luni. We are so..." Taylor cursed. She was right.

"He's finally dead. I don't have to suffer anymore." The creature said, looking confused. "Do we still need to play checkers? I'll let you win if you'd like."

"No thanks, Grobobalopacus. Do you want to get out of here?" Luni asked.

The creature cried tears of joy. "Yes! I can get us out of here!"

"Luni," Taylor asked. "Is this a good idea? The chamber and council are going to freak out if they see him. What if...?"

"We don't have much choice. Even if Grobobalopacus was the most evil thing on the planet."

"That might be best for us," Taylor said with a frown. "Everyone thinks he is a murderer."

Grobobalopacus heard this and cried. "I try so hard to be nice to everyone!"

"No no!!! It's okay! You're coming with us, I'm sorry!!!” Taylor said. “Let's go! It's okay.” She began to walk but paused.

"When they find out Barry is dead, and the high wizard has returned? Everyone is going to come for us. We need to get out of Whisper's Bay as soon as possible."

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The three emerged from where the root circle had been formed. The creature stuck out its neck into the fresh air and cried even more tears of joy. Luni and Taylor were relieved to see seven people lying on the ground, breathing. Their eyes were not open. As if they were in some sort of deep sleep.

From nearby a woman called. "Fido!" She called the name several times before the sick dog under the tree moaned. The creature stopped and turned towards the noise. It walked over.

"You poor furry creature." It said, "You got a clump of sickness in you!"

"Grobobalopacus, we can't stay, you can't be seen or..."

A few things happened before Luni could finish her sentence. The woman appeared, walking into sight of the dog. She saw Grobobalopacus open one of its jaws wide and swallow the dog

whole, The lady screamed. She ran towards the creature and hit Grobopalopacus. It seemed too focused to notice her.

Luni and Taylor watched the sight in a state of shock and disbelief. Until Mr. Grobopalopacus spit the dog on the ground. The wet dog wagged its tail and ran to its owner, running in a circle, full of life and energy barking. The woman took a few steps back as the creature coughed. With another of its mouths, it spits a small clump of tissue.

"There you go furry thing." He said. "All better now!"

The woman had not seen the dog walk much less run in weeks. Although speechless, she tried to find words to thank the creature. The woman was so thankful that she helped load the seven people into Taylor's truck. She did not question why they seemed to sleep, or why a weird thing like Mr. Grobopalopacus existed. She looked to Luni to be happy to have a healthy dog again.

Taylor though, seemed troubled. Hopeless even. She stood crossing her arms, with her gaze staring out blankly.

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They left the magically crafted sin against nature, or Grobopalopacus in the flower room, who cried so hard at seeing all the flowers it asked to be left there. Permanently. Just like Luni had wanted.

So they left him in the magic room. And the two women soon after stood at the counter, downstairs in the shop, looking at where the door used to be. Deep in thought.

"What does NBS mean?" Luni asked.

"Not's Barry society." Taylor tried to hide a chuckle. "The group who supports the high wizard over Barry. When the town learns what we know, this is going to get even worse."

"What if this thing could have saved Mr. Whitaker's daughter?"

Taylor winced and turned away. The thought hit them both hard. But then they exclaimed together. "Mr. Whitaker!!! And Mr. Finkerhopper!"

Taylor lowered her head. "Mr. Whitaker knows everything, he's going to tell the whole town!"

"We can't do anything to stop him," Luni said.

"If the elders learn we killed Barry and the normals know their secrets, they are going to do worse to us than we did to him."

"We won't let him," Luni said, looking away. "Help me figure out how to get Mr. Finkerhopper back to a dog, so we can turn him back into a person so he can get back to his job at the library."

Luni turned to where she had placed the gold wolf statue on the counter. It was not there. Instead, a note sat where the dog had been. It read:

If you want the statue back, we can arrange a deal. I want my daughter back. I don't care what evil magic you use. You know where to find me. If you refuse, the entire town is coming for you.

With love,

Mr. Whitaker.

"Great," Luni said. "How did he get out of here?"

They both heard a fragile voice creature walking towards them. Konigsberg, now unable to hide his pain in each step he took, held out a letter.

"I forgot the second coupon the market." He said, almost in tears. "The other guy I helped out of here took the first one. I wrote a theft report but I wouldn't stay up waiting for a call. Here you go."

Luni and Taylor looked at each other.

"Hey, Konigsberg?" Luni said. The owl nodded. "I'm not letting you out of this shop. This is sad."

"But," Konigsberg said. "Who will deliver the mail?? If it wasn't for me, no one would get their letters and packages!"

"There's a thing called the internet now. And Amazon." Luni said. "It's time some of these people get with the times so that animals don't have to suffer. You don't have to carry mail anymore."

Konigsberg, to both of their surprise, wept tears of happiness.

Luni opened the secret door for the owl to join Grobopalopacus in the lake garden. After doing so, she turned to Taylor.

"Let's find a way to wake these people up so we can get out of here."

Someone knocked on the door frame of the shop entrance. A woman stood with a purple under-bust and a round hat.

"Where is Berry?" She asked, her words sharp. The woman looked around before revealing an asparagus. She tapped on the frame, creating a new set of glass double doors.



## Episode 5: That Darn Marigold

After three days of seeing the teenage girl sit alone at an outside lunch table, Luni could take no more. Crossing the entire outdoor space she walked and sat beside her. She dropped her bookbag and found her lunch half squished by her psychology textbook. A green apple and peanut butter sandwiches. The girl glared at her as Luni bite in the tart fruit.

"What are you doing?" Taylor asked with a frown.

Luni tried to smile. "Hi. You won the. Um. Lottery of friendship."

Taylor narrowed her eyes towards the girl.

"I didn't sign up for anything. I know a scam when I smell one. I almost signed up for a Future Treats job once." She said.

Luni shook her head. "Shhh, let me adopt you."

"That's a freaken creepy thing to say to someone." Taylor for a moment shifted away from her but hesitated. "You trying to be my friend or steal my kidney?"

"Why can't it be both?" Luni said. "It's good to keep spares."

"Well, you can't have my kidney. They are among my favorite body parts." Taylor said,

"We can haggle." Luni said "Why don't you have food? I can do a kidney for a peanut butter sandwich. Raisin bread spread over both pieces of bread with marshmallow topping."

Taylor closed her eyes. "I'm not hungry."

Not believing her, Luni slid half her sandwich to her. The girl looked at it, then rolled her eyes. She picked it up and took a bite, eating half of the slice in one gulp. She chewed with a smile on her face.

"Okay," Taylor said. "I won't eat you then. But don't let me win in dodgeball ever again"

Luni had a thought but decided not to voice it. Instead, she reached into her bag towards the bottom.

"I also have some candy corn if you want it?"

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"By the order of the Scirgemot, tell me where our Cyning is!" Livanna shouted across the tea shop.

Five years later, Luni's mouth dropped as her mind realized that all those strange words everyone on the coast kept saying aloud meant something somehow. She looked at Taylor who shook her head and waved her hands.

Luni, not understanding her gestures, asked anyway. "Sher-goot-mot?"

"Kima, I instruct you to keep the hwhitlock silent unless she is going to answer my question. Where is Barry."

"Why are you calling her Kima?" Luni said. "Her name is Taylor."

Taylor held her face in her hands. "That is my hwhitlock name," She said "My real name is Kimama. It means butterfly. Taylor is my Scirgemotian name. We don't know where Barry is."

Luni's eyes widen. "No. You're lying. You. Hld your name from me? The whole time? What else are you hiding?"

Taylor rolled her eyes. "Not now! Barry left after we got back, defeating the Grobopalopacus. We don't know where he went Livanna."

At hearing this Livana circled the two women, inspecting them with her rain cloud color eyes. She adjusted her purple flower stuck between her ears. "Barry Deicknine would not leave. Her purple corset seemed to glow . Biting her lip, she reached out her hand.

"Give me any gar's you are carrying." She instructed them.

Luni tilted her head, staring at Livana .Taylor took the carrot from her hands and turned it over to Livanna. The realization struck.

Taylor had Barry's radish wand.

"Why does the non-Galdorian have a gar but you do not, Kima?" She asked.

"You have said so yourself, my family are half hwhitlocks and we should not partake of the Scirgemot's traditions."

Luni's eyes shot to Taylor. "You are a half-wit?"

The two women groaned. Livana bared her white teeth. "How is the champion of Whisper's Bay so ignorant? And a full hwhitlock. I, the acting cyning, sentence you both to Glardor scol. You will be held there until you pass. Or until Barry is found, and his side of the story is told..."

Livana stopped and winced at Luni's raised hand. "... Yes? Or are you going to ask what Glardor scol is"

Luni nodded. Nervously.

"I'll let you find out for yourself. If I find out you are lying to me, and something has happened. I will make sure your last memory of life is unpleasant."

From her pants pocket, Livana pulled out a long okra and whispered, "Fiwikapapul!"

In a flash, Luni and Taylor were teleported out of the room.

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The two women found themselves in an old classroom, surrounded by other adults. Standing around, chattering, wearing 18th-century colonial clothing. Three women wore pastel garments, and the two men wore large blue and red tweed coats. Old yellowing posters littered the walls with things like "We are chosen" and "Work Hard, suppress your feelings. Don't question anything." written on them. Several old small desks sat nearby with numbered packages on them. Purple-tinted windows let in a dull light that made seeing in the room difficult.

A wrinkly-faced lady sat at a large oak desk in the middle of the room, with an old dusty chalkboard behind her. She was seated so that she could glance 360 degrees around the room to view her students at all times. She tapped on her watch and looked at the door as if expecting someone to walk through it.

Taylor reached down to pat her pocket and whispered to Luni. "If anyone finds out we have Barry's radish wand, we are F-ed in the A."

Luni blinked in confusion. "Where are we?"

The old woman rapped her knuckles on the desk to get everyone's attention.

"Magic adult education school," Taylor said. "It's sucks. There is no escape. The only way out is by passing the stupid standardized test. The town makes a lot of money off of funding and grants, so they are super annoying about it. The test is multiple choice and meant to confuse you, pick either B or C, whichever sounds better."

Luni crossed her arms. "I hate you. So much." She said, meaning every word. "I gave you everything. And you couldn't even tell me your real name."

"And you are a walk in the park on a sunshiny day." Taylor scoffed. "So glad you know everything about my everythought without having to check with me first. That really saves you time i bet."

"Oh yeah. I've learned to shorten it into Taylor speak. Which is: You suck. And never cared about me at all. You'd rather stay here and play magic with all these west coast weirdos."

"Everyone!" The woman said in a raspy high-pitched voice that sounded like nails on a chalkboard. "Get a number from the sorting Boot and sit down! Open your package, but DO NOT share what is inside with anyone!"

A loud cry followed by a whimper rang out. A black leather boot on the desk seemed to be distressed. The outsole of the boot, separated from the welt or top of the shoe, quivered.

"Please, let me die." The boot said.

The woman screamed. "DO YOUR JOB! And you better have removed that ONE package by that ONE former student! The one of whose name we no longer speak!"

One of the women with blond pony tales and a light green dress approached the crying boot.  
"4." It said.

Luni and Taylor did as the woman asked, and were assigned the numbers 5, and 7, they seated on the opposite side of the room.

Unwrapping the thin paper package, Luni found a handwritten note along with broccoli and a heart-shaped toothy leaf with a mild hint of a mint scent. The note read:

"If you are kind to them, they will forever be your friends. Even if they don't act like it."

The old lady wrote her name across the chalkboard. Forcing everyone to cover their ears to dampen the horrible scratching sound.

"I am your instructor, Ms. Darfinicous. I have been teaching the Glardor school education slash re-education class for over thirty years. You are here because you lack the basic abilities to live. The only true way is to follow the Scirgemotian rules..."

The old woman felt the need to write everything she was saying as she said it on the chalkboard. Luni's hand rose, to Taylor's horror, to stop the noise.

"What is a sher-gee-mot?" Luni asked.

Ms. Darfinicous slammed her fist into the desk. "Do not speak unless you are instructed to! Scirgemot is the old English term that means "shire assembly". This is the name of our assembly of Galdorians. I'm going to assume from the hwitlock and the half-wit in the room that you don't know what that means either. Galdorian is our term for a magic user."

"That's really dumb," Luni said, speaking when not asked to speak. "This is lame. Did anyone workshop these names at all? Why refer yourself to such a hard name to say? Couldn't you call yourselves something else? Like Wizards and Witches, or you could be the Wizards of the coast..."

A large puff of smoke burst out of nowhere in the back of the room. Golden flakes flew everywhere. A man with salt and pepper gray hair stormed Luni, shaking his fist.

"Cease and desist!" He shouted, with his face flush.

Luni looked to Taylor, who shrugged, not knowing what the man was talking about.

The man said pointing a finger in Luni's face. "That name is a trademark of my clients, the TRUE wizards of the coast, and is NOT to be used without written permission!"

Ms. Darfinicous approached the mad lawyer and put her hands on her hips. "Devin. I've asked you many times not to show up to my class unannounced. This hwhitlock doesn't know anything..."

"That doesn't matter!" He yelled to her. "The Scirgemots have agreed to this through ratified arbitration! You are a gathering of Galdorians! Not to be confused with a gathering of magic!"

"I'll take care of it!" Ms. Darfinicous shouted motioning the lawyer out of the room. "You. hwhitlock. Approach the whiteboard. Start writing 'will not use registered trademarks without permission' until your arms fall off!"

Reluctantly, Luni did as she was asked. Devin watched for a few moments before nodding and exiting the room again in a burst of smoke.

"Coastal galdorians are picky and territorial." Ms. Darfinicous said, returning to the other side of the chalkboard from Luni. "This comes from a very grave misunderstanding that took place in 1692 in the Massachusetts area. To settle that... mistake, we, being the descendants of the original Scirgemots identify as Galdorians. We are the chosen people. One's who have been gifted with the power of Glador. Or "Magic" for you hwhitlock." She gave a cold hard look to Luni.

"There will be a written test with all I have told you in it. As soon as the messenger owl shows up. Until then, using the notes and materials passed down from former students you are to bless a gar with a unique power!"

"How do you do that?" Luni asked. Taylor Winced again as Ms. Darfinicous slammed her fist down on the desk. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"STOP. SPEAKING. Return to your seat and do as I told."

“.. how? I don’t know how to use magic? Or. Glar power?” Luni asked again. Ms. Darfinicous pointed to where she had been sitting before. “No, I’m not a... gladorian, I don’t know how...”

“If you have been sent here, you must have some ability or knowledge. Champion of Whisper’s Bay. Do as I say or I’ll transfer your soul into a boot as well!”

The sorting boot let out a loud sob before whispering out: “Why won’t anyone help me?”

Luni saw Taylor’s expression on her face from across the room. She tried to look around to see what the other students were doing. But they were so fast in whatever they were saying or doing that she had no idea what was going on.

*How am I supposed to do this without any powers? She thought. Am I supposed to feel something in my veins? Or silence my mind until I am numb and don’t want anything? Like normal? Do I get down with the sickness? I’m being punished for not doing something I don’t know how to do. It feels like high school all over again.*

For several minutes Luni stared at the note, leaves, and broccoli. Hoping something inside her would awaken and make the objects do something. They did not. She watched as a man beside her used a tomato to change the top of his desk into a wet rice field. Next to him, a woman tapped an asparagus and her dress changed into a silly chicken costume, full of a wooden beak mask.

Ms. Darfinicous walked around the room, pushing up her glasses. “Yes yes.” She said. “Very nice. Artinius, is that a lamp root? Very lovely.”

Luni’s heart sank as Ms. Darfinicous approached her desk. She searched around the room, then at the objects on her desk in desperation.

“And the hwhitlock? Show the class what you have blessed. Stand up.” She said.

Luni did as she was asked. With the broccoli in her hand, she raised it towards the ceiling and said “Blaburtgilocus!”

Everyone gasped. Then the room fell silent. Taylor placed a hand over her mouth and turned red. Luni searched the faces of the students and instructor, who were acting as if she had said a curse word or fired off a gun.

“What... did I say?” Luni asked.

“The forbidden glador!” Someone shouted.

“Get in front of the class NOW!” Ms. Darfinicous said.

"I don't understand, everyone in the arena was saying it." Luni said.

Ms. Darfinicous removed something from under the desk and held it up for everyone to see.

"The stool of repentance." She said. "Stand on it."

"NO! That's messed up! She doesn't know any better!" Taylor shouted, standing to her feet. Luni shrugged, not getting why standing on a stool would be so bad. Reading her face and knowing that she did not understand how in trouble they were, Taylor went on. "When you stand on it, it forces you to admit EVERY wrongdoing! EVERY ONE."

Luni's mouth dropped. Barry's wand was still in Taylors pocket. If she stood on the stool she would blurt out that they had killed Barry.

"I won't say it again." Luni plead.

Ms. Darfinicous opened a drawer and removed a green ear of corn. She pointed at Luni. "I am not going to tell you again."

"It is messed up you treat people this way!!" Luni shouted at her.

Without moving her lips, Ms. Darfinicous caused her gar to send out a shock from the end of the corn cob hitting Luni's hand. It burned throughout her body. Luni gritted her teeth trying to fight the pain.

"I can make it so that you wish for death. Stand on the chair!"

Luni stood. "No."

Ms. Darfinicous cast the glador again. Luni doubled over in pain. Taylor ran to the front of the room, only to be met by Ms. Darfinicous burning shockwave. She fell at its touch. Taylor tried to stand to her feet, but she couldn't. The pain was so great that she could not even move her fingers. It burned within every part of her body. The other students looked on in horror as the instructor picked Luni up and stood her on the stool. Luni spoke confessing the worst thing she'd ever done.

"I don't even like Kevin," Luni said, with no control over her words. "I searched so hard for my place in life that I was willing to settle for anything. The one person I love, the one I've always loved, I can't have. I tried to destroy every trace of us from existence in every way possible. But like marigolds, it somehow keeps coming back year after year. I thought I had salted the earth, but the marigolds are back. Covering everything I try to touch. It's grown so big I don't know how to get rid of it. I don't want to get rid of it. But I don't know how. I don't want to. I keep looking for them in every relationship, knowing it's a poor substitute for that" She cursed. "marigold. My

feelings are not her responsibility. I want to stop being angry. But I can't. I want to keep you. But I know I can't."

Taylor's hands did not leave her mouth as she listened. Luni thought she saw tears in her eyes. The darkest wrongdoing of Luni's life had been told, in front of everyone. When she had finished, Taylor blew out her cheeks and let out a long deep sigh. At least their secret was safe.

"What was that gibberish about!" Taylor said pulling her off of the stool back onto the classroom floor. "You were supposed to tell your deepest darkest thing you've ever done!"

Luni blushed and hung her head. "I did."

"Enough." Ms. Darfinicus said, walking back to her desk. From another drawer, she took out a piece of lettuce and a radish. "Everyone who has blessed a wand take your lunch and come with me. I'm not waiting for that owl with the standardized tests any longer. We are going to the backup plan for passing this course. We are traveling to the abandoned Snufferclyde tower. Once we are there I will tell you what the assignment is. hwhitlock, stay here until you bless a gar. Only then will the door unlock and you can be transported to where we are. Why is your hand up again?"

Luni swallowed, ready to be shocked again for speaking. "If you can teleport anything everywhere why do you have a messenger owl?"

"We take care of our own. That is all that matters." Ms. Darfinicus grumbled. "Everyone. Get a move on. Keep your lunch light."

Luni watched everyone leave the room. She thought about how horrible these people were. Yes, magic seemed to be wonderful, but as with so many things in life, she realized that something ugly covered something so beautiful. As much as she wanted to belong to something, why would anyone want to belong to a group so mean?

*It feels like dating Kevin.* She thought while hiding her face in her hands.

"Who were you talking about? On the stool?"

Luni looked up to see Taylor standing in front of her. How could she not have known? Was she playing dumb? She must have been.

"You know which candy corn hater I was talking about." She said.

Taylor shook her head.

"You can't be honest. About anything. Can you." Luni said. "I'll be okay. Go with the others. I'll find a way out of here."

Taylor placed her hand on her shoulders and felt Luni shiver. She had always been sensitive to her touch, but something about this made Taylor bite her lip. Releasing her hand, she went on.

"You know that. I. We. can't." Taylor stopped. Luni hung her head. The feelings stirred in the pit of her stomach. She hated feeling this way.

"You heard what I said. Did you not?" Luni said. "Go before that lady freaks out."

Taylor nodded. "Promise me that when you get to the tower you will not go off on an adventure or anything. Find a way to get to me, and I'll help you pass. There's. Things you don't know about me. That would. Might. Change what you think of me."

Luni turned away and said almost in a whisper. "There is nothing that could do that."

Luni felt Taylor's hand on hers. They looked into each other's eyes.

"I only wanted to be in the play so you'd be there to help me learn my lines. I don't even like acting." Taylor said, finally looking away. She hung her head and left the room.

"I'm such an idiot," Luni said.

The boot snickered in a sob. Its color seemed drained, which seemed weird for a piece of footwear and not a person. Luni approached it.

"I thought giving you that package would work. It didn't, I'm never getting out of here." It said.

She shrugged her shoulders and bent down to face the boot at eye level.

"You know." The boot said. "The package was created by.... Rovanaugh. The High Wizard of Snufferclyde."

Something tapped at the window. Luni turned to see a cat sitting on the other side of the glass. It pawed, then walked in circles along the outside edge of the brick.

Luni turned back to the boot. "Why does Rovanaugh get to be called a wizard?"

Again the cat pawed the window and let out a loud cry.

"He is an Oathbreaker." The sorting boot. "He is pure evil. I handed out every package hoping someone was going to get a gar that could turn a boot back into a human. But your package did nothing. And now. Neither of us are leaving. I don't want to be here!" It once again broke down into tears.

Luni stood up and approached the window. The cat was black and slim with a bell around its neck. Something shiny sat next to it. Why would the creature want inside so bad? She looked around to see if there was a bag of cat food or something inside but didn't see any reason for it to be so desperate to get inside. Its black vertical slit seemed to swirl as it stared at her.

"Please don't let the cat in." The boot said. "If there are three of us trapped in here forever it'll start getting crowded. I want to keep my seniority."

Luni shook her head and unlatched the window. As soon as she lifted it the creature took hold of the shiny object in its mouth and leaped into the room. Its fur was soaking wet. It walked with long strides to where Luni had been sitting to the number 5 package. It jumped onto the desk and dropped the object. It looked at Luni, then nodded. Then the creature bent down and took hold of the leaves in its mouth. It walked, taking steps of joy along the way, out of the room and back through the window.

Luni walked to the desk and picked up the object, inspecting it. It was made of brass and curved on both sides.

"What is it?" The boot asked.

"It's a fishhook." Luni said.

The door glowed and spoke in a booming deep voice. "Good work. Your gar has been crafted. Please enter me to join the others."

Luni could hardly believe her eyes. She took the broccoli and began towards the door. But before she could reach for the knob, she turned back to face the boot. Placing her hands on her hips, she asked. "Why were you turned into a boot?"

"I wasn't turned into a boot. I'm in a boot. Cause Ms. Darfinicus is a narcissistic psychopath who teaches to tame her control kink. Like most teachers."

Again Luni shrugged and narrowed her eyes.

"My soul was transferred into this boot. Dooming me to assign seats for the rest of time. Until I can get out."

"You didn't consent to being a boot?" Luni asked.

"Who would consent to that?" The boot asked. "Please take me with you. Please please please, I don't want to look at those inspirational posters for one more minute. I'll be that thing the hero takes along with them that helps them win the day! I promise!"

An idea came. She picked up the boot and walked over to the stool, still out in front of the desk. The boot screamed.

"No! Don't do that! I didn't do anything! Okay, listen, I'll tell you the truth okay? I... am.. A king. My soul was captured so that others could steal my kingdom!"

Luni shook her head. "First of all, I'm not kissing you. Second of all, I know I'm a hhwhitlock and all but I wasn't born yesterday. You had to have done something for your soul to be, what was it? Put in an object?"

"Trapped." It pleaded. "If you release me, I'll grant you three wishes!"

"Yeah, I don't think so." She said.

She placed the boot on the stool. It confessed every sin.

"I walked across the street without looking! I cheated on my taxes! I have never tipped my pizza driver! Please please, get me off of this thing... I OWNED A HEALTH INSURANCE COMPANY!"

"There it is." Luni said, taking the boot off of the stool. "Back on the desk, you go. Enjoy assigning seats for the rest of existence as a piece of leather."

"You don't understand, I was wrong to profit on people's illnesses! I was a piece of trash!"

"Yup. And now you're a boot, that's a vast improvement. Goodbye." Luni said.

"I've been in this classroom for 30 years! You and your... whatever she is... need an expert. I've heard every lecture about everything gladorian! I'm your knowledge boot."

"You going to charge me a co-pay? Premium?" Luni asked, walking faster towards the door.

"I know how to get to the top of the castle! If you can reach the highest room, you pass the class! We can help each other out. Please! Take me with you, I beg of you!"

Luni stopped. She put her palm to her forehead and thought for a moment. There seemed to be so many magical items around. How was one supposed to know what to do with them? She didn't like making these kinds of decisions, especially not one involving an ex-health insurance company owner. But the boot had a point. If it knew in the insides of the tower she and Taylor would escape the horrible magic class. She could get back to waking Braylynn and Cali up and out of those bone vases and out of Whisper's Bay for good. But could the boot be trusted?

She decided to risk it. She sighed and picked the boot up. The cat jumped back through the window and approached her, tugging at her shoe.

“What you coming too?” Luni asked.

The cat licked itself.

“Okay fine, everyone is going.”

The door opened, growing bright with light from the other side. Luni, carrying the boot and being followed by the cat walked in. The bell around the cat's neck rang out as it walked in an ominous tone.

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# Episode 6: Snufferclyde Tower

2019

Taylor was found outside the school, sitting on the ground by a Joshua tree with her elbows on her knees and her hands on her face. Luni stood in front of her, looking down. She knelt to make herself as small as Taylor felt. Behind them, the sun was setting, sending a bright shade of orange across the desert landscape.

“Did I say something?” Luni asked.

After a low, hopeless sigh, Taylor choked out. “Not everything is about you. I’ve got issues, okay? Leave me alone.”

“But I don’t want to leave you alone like this.” Luni sat next to her.

“I don’t want you here,” Taylor said.

“Okay.” Luni fidgeted with her hands, before shifting to stand. “I’ll leave.”

Taylor abruptly reached out for her. Her fingers grasped the collar of Luni’s yellow and red polo shirt.

“No. Please.” Taylor held on harder. “Never leave me. I. Don’t know what I want. I get sad on this day every year now. But I can’t tell you why. And I want to. I trust you. Which. I hate this. All this.”

“Okay,” Luni said. She shifted her weight back towards her. “I’ll sit here with you until there’s something I can do to help you feel better.”

Luni got comfortable, and to her surprise, Taylor laid her head on her shoulder. She felt her entire weight, mental and physical fall on her. It was a feeling she liked.

“You always make me feel better,” Taylor said with a chuckle. “Happy Spiraling Day.”

“Happy emotional spiraling day,” Luni said. “I bet I have mine next week. So. Clear that up on your calendar.”

“Really though,” Taylor said. “Never leave me. Please.”

“Okay,” Luni said.

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As soon as Luni walked through the door she noticed waves crashing on the shore. Rows of white frothy water roared and splashed about on the horizon. Birds chirped like a church choir singing a special they hadn't rehearsed. She had been transported away from the prison-like classroom and into the Sullivan beach park. For a few moments, she didn't know what to do. The others could not be seen. Her feet sunk into the moist sand as she approached the waters. The black cat followed at her heel, too close for her to walk.

"I don't see Snuffercylde tower anywhere. I have to find Taylor. What now boot?" Luni said, holding the leather shoe out in front of her. The cat rubbed against her legs meowing, causing her to buckle at its weight. Where were the others? She had assumed the door would lead them to the classroom to begin the test. They wouldn't leave anyone behind, would they?

"I don't know," The boot said. "I haven't been out of the classroom in years. Getting to the tower is part of the test. Hey, what's with you and Taylor? Your confession back there seemed kind of damning"

The cat's cries grew louder.

"100 percent nothing," Luni said, dropping the boot in the sand. "Either help me out or you are staying there!"

The boot coughed up sand. "Come on, you called her your marigold. Have you knocked boots or what?"

Luni threw up her hands and vented, walking in circles. The cat still followed, pawing at her feet.

"Of course, you would ask that. Why can't two people be special to each other? Maybe we don't know what it was."

Pieces of driftwood rolled along with the wind near Luni's feet. She closed her eyes.

"But. I was hurt by it. So I have to admit it was something now. Don't I?" She said.

"I know I'm heartless," The boot said, "and my sins are unatonable so take my words with a grain of salt. But. No one is forcing you to take the test, you can run away right now. There's no gladian force field keeping you here."

Luni bent down to pet the cat, deep in thought. The cat whined even louder. A wave swept up, its murky waters reaching the boot. It cried for help.

What did the cat want? Attention? Was she hungry?? She thought of this when her stomach growled and rumbled. Before the boot could be swept out to sea, Luni grabbed it. She placed the boot in a safe place on land.

"Yes there is," Luni said. "There is some kind of force keeping me here. The further I go the closer I get to her. So. Let's feed the cat and find a way to get to the tower. Can we catch a fish somehow?"

Luni looked around. She removed the fish hook from the boot's leather and held it up towards the sun. Light reflected from its brass in rainbow patterns across Luni's field of vision.

The ground shook. Instinctively she grabbed the boot in one hand and the cat in the other. The sand beneath her shook so hard that it seemed to Hoover. A giant wave that stretched almost to the sun approached the shore.

Luni spotted a large pile of driftwood and threw herself on the other side. She held the cat and boot tight as water crashed on top of her. Salty water entered her lungs and throat before she stopped herself from taking a deep breath. Something pushed on the woodpile behind her, and large sticks and logs rolled on top of her. She found herself stuck, underwater, without breath, and without the use of her arms. Kicking the wood hard, she tried to free herself, but instead, the waves rolled more wood on top of her. Her vision blurred as the last of the sun above was covered.

With one last kick, she tried to propel herself upward. When she did she saw a speck of white light reflecting above. With all her strength she stood up, kicking her legs like a frog towards the surface.

She coughed up water and gasped for air. Something was looking at her. Right in front of her, so close that its heavy breath was blowing her wet hair behind her. It was a serpent-like creature with large silvery-blue scales and horns that seemed eel-like. Sharp fins and coral ran along its spine. Ocean water dripped off the teeth in a mouth larger than her body. Its white void eyes seemed to glow.

Luni tried to find courage. "Is this... part of the test? If so. I need an IEP or something."

The dragon roared. Luni dropped the boot and cat and covered her ears. When she realized what she had done, she was able to pick the cat up but the boot sunk like a rock into the standing water. As she dipped down the creature lunged at her. Its teeth caught some of her hair, and she found herself being dragged upwards. She reached out for the boot and took hold of a shoelace. The further she was dragged along in the water the more the lace unraveled from its eyelets.

Luni realized she was being carried towards the open ocean. The cat fought to keep its head above water. The boot was running out of laces. With a pull, she tried to move it closer to take hold. But the end of the lace yanked out. She could only watch as the boot floated down towards the sea bottom. She tried to cry out, but water rushed into her mouth.

She lifted the cat above the surface of the water with one hand and hit the snout of the creature with the other. Her punches seemed to hit with the force of a thin sheet of paper. In the corner of her eye, she spotted a flash, a reflection of the sun above. She realized the dragon held the fishhook with its tail. If she could get to it she could fight off the beast. But she was helpless.

Doing the only thing she could think of, she tossed the cat onto the creature's back. This surprised it, and it flung its body up and turned to face the object that had landed on its fins. The cat hung on for dear life. The creature released her hair, freeing Luni. She grabbed the scales, realizing they were sharper than they looked, and pulled herself up. It bucked like a wild bull. She was thrown back, but she reached out for the fish hook on its tail. The creature roared the ear-splitting sound. This time, she fought the urge to cover her ears and with both hands tried to pry the hook loose. It would not budge. The creature dove into the ocean dragging Luni with it. The cat let go. Luni saw this, and swam towards it. The creature had turned back to face her. It sprinted towards them, opening its jaws wide.

As a last-ditch effort as the dragon swallowed her whole, she kicked a hanging skin flap in its mouth. Right before the incoming water could force her down into its stomach. She felt herself being spewed from its mouth. She grabbed the cat and swam as hard toward the surface, turning around and hoping it had retreated into the water. It had not. It speeds towards her. But she saw something else above.

*Land!* She thought.

She swam the current upward, feeling dizzy and lightheaded the faster she went. Fighting to stay awake and alert, she kicked and paddled with one hand. The creature's mouth caught hold of her shoe on her left foot. Somehow, she lifted herself out, leaving her shoe behind.

For a moment she felt relieved. But then realized this thing could walk on land. She found herself on a rocky shore, with a giant tower in the middle of an island. She ran in the direction of its front doors. The dragon threw itself on the shore, twisting and turning after her. She zip-zagged, trying to avoid its mouth. When she had gained distance, it roared again. Spending out a blast of water, knocking her down.

“Oh come on!!” Luni cried aloud as she regained her footing.

Luni dashed to the tower's stone entrance, but the doors would not open. She could feel the heat of its breath on the back of her neck as it fast approached. Cutting her off from any reasonable means of escape.

Something hissed. To Luni's surprise, the black cat leaped at the dragon. Giving her only moments. She tried to slam the stone entrance, but the creature's snout pressed up against it keeping it open. The cat ran to her feet and whined. It drew back to cast another blast on her, but she slammed the door. The creature roared and snarled.

Luni panted, still holding the door shut. She let out a long deep sigh as she listened to the creature's footsteps walk back in the direction of the ocean.

"What. Was. That. About?" She asked the cat.

Warm lights turned on in the stone room. She faced a large pillar in the center of the book-shelved room aligned with dusty old tomes. Junk hung on the wall. For a moment she felt like she was in a BBQ joint, the type of place filled with license plates and old posters. In the center of the pillar was a door. A plaque above it read: N.B.S To enter solve the riddle.

*The Not Barry Society? Why is that here? Taylor didn't mention that before. She thought. Why would they have a room here? I thought the high wizard was a part of the evil they were fighting. He and Barry.*

Before she could finish reading the riddle, mysterious music played. "Welcome, students!" A voice cried. "You have passed the first part of the test. During the next part of the final, no notes or cellphones and keep your eyes on your own work. The first part is Gar safety!" A loud humming and buzzing noise filled the room. Sparks flew in the air.

Luni cursed. Books from shelves along the walls of the room fell to the floor. From them, dozens of bright flickers of light danced into the air. Luni squinted and realized that fairies holding paper targets flew in the air. A loud winding electric sound came from one creature, and a small bolt of energy came rocking towards Luni. She dodged it by jumping behind a stack of crumbling books.

"Hit all the 27 targets and gain entrance to the next room. Good luck!" The voice said.

At once all them shot at Luni. She picked up a book with a Japanese title and held it out as a shield. One of the magic bolts struck it and incinerated its paper. Still holding out her hands, with her eyes wide, she realized she was in trouble.

"Are you going to help!?" Luni cried out to the cat. After she had done so she felt foolish, since what could a cat do anyway? Even worse, she spotted the black creature duck between two books on the lower part of the shelf. Light shone past it, giving the impression that a tunnel lay behind it.

*Thanks a lot.* She thought.

She picked up book after book, using it as a shield, and crossed the room to the door. She caught glimpses of the riddle as she fended off the fairies.

"Place me at the foot of the door to enter.  
I have a "soul" but there's no heart in my center.  
I can walk a hundred miles in a sinch

But can not move an inch  
I rise above the ankle, giving support,  
I am the protector in leisure and sport  
You tighten me if I am loose  
There are two of me yet I do not reproduce  
I'm uncomfortable if I'm not dry  
What am I?"

Luni's mind danced in confusion, and she destroyed book after book in self-defense. What on earth was this riddle talking about?

*I hate riddles so much.* She thought. *It could be anything. If only I still have that Boot to help me. I bet he would have known that there are two of them that can't reproduce.*

The magic bolts came faster and faster. She took off her only remaining shoe and flung it at a fairy, who dodged and shook its fist at her.

"Hey!" It shouted. "What do you think you are doing?!"

"You're attacking me when I don't even have a weapon!" She said.

"That's not my fault!" It said, sending a blast her way. She rolled and threw books at all the fairies in the room, who all complained after being hit.

"That doesn't count!" One of them said, holding their hand to their now blackened eye.

*I can't use a Gar to hit the targets. I can't get into the N.B.S. room. How am I going to get out of here?* She thought. *And more, where is Taylor and the other members of the class?*

A voice rang out over an intercom. "You have one minute to complete this part of the test."

Luni cursed again. How can this get any worse?

A loud thud rang out from the stone entrance. Outside the dragon-like beast bellowed out, shaking the walls and sending tomes scattering across the floor. The fairies panicked and released shots even faster. One struck her arm, causing a giant burning welt to appear.

She cried out. "I did not want to play Dungeons and Dragons today!!!"

Something flashed in front of her. A man stepped forward and shouted. "Decease and Desist! That is a registered trademark you are NOT allowed to use!" As he spoke he clicked his two boots together.

"BOOTS!" Luni shouted, seemingly randomly to Devin the lawyer.

"It's the lawyer!" One of the fairies said flying to the suited man's face. "Get him!"

At once all the fairies shot their bolts towards him. Unaware of what was happening, the bolts struck him over and over. He fell on his back. The doors burst open.

"Sorry Devin," Luni said, pulling off one of his boots. "I'll make it up to you."

"Why are you stealing my boots? I will remember this!!" He cried.

She did not answer, instead; she placed the boot in front of the Not Barry Society Door. The entrance gave a chime as it opened. Devin snapped his fingers and in a flash disappeared back to wherever he had come. She rushed in before the blue and silver-scaled dragon could reach her. But it led into a hollow area in the pillar. She turned, and once again came face to face with the beast's snout. She had backed herself into a corner.

The floor dropped under her feet, causing her and the dragon to fall into a long dark shaft. She let out a scream and waved her arms as she crashed down onto the cold stone below. Her vision and mind went black from the impact.

She came back to consciousness when she heard a loud reverberating whimper. Above her, the dragon kicked and swung its tail trying to free itself. It had gotten stuck in the shaft.

"You poor thing." She said to herself trying to stand to her feet. A fire in the room crackled and flickered. She saw something in front of her and realized the dragon was still grasping the fish hook by its tail. Her hands covered her face as she dropped to avoid its frantic frailing, missing the top of her head. She crawled away to a safe distance before looking back up.

*There's no way I can get that thing out of there.* She thought.

Where was she? Stone arches lined the ceiling with artifacts and items dangling down from it. There were cells in the room's corner with iron bars with more cages inside. In the middle was a seated pit where a fire burned. The smoke rose into the air into an outdoor venting system. Luni noticed hundreds of little tunnels connecting to narrow bridges. A churning sound came from somewhere in the room, along with a high-pitched steady metal noise. The stone seemed mismatched as if the room had been pieced together over several years. By the fire stood a metal altar. On top sat a glass bottle filled with swirling purple liquid topped with a soda cap. She read written on a label read: Rovanaugh's memory-aid.

Luni backed away. A cold feeling came over her.

I want nothing to do with this room. She thought. The dragon still cried in the tunnel above. The flames rose higher. Thoughts raced through her mind. Why did the Not Barry Society meet here? If Rovanaugh was an evil oath-breaking wizard, then would that mean the group

belonged to the high wizard? As she backed away, trying to rationalize anything she could, she felt something cold and hard on the back of her neck. She jumped and turned. There in front of her stood the stone statue of a little girl, about twelve or thirteen her face frozen with a pained expression. A statue that seemed to be the same texture as Mr. Finkerhooper's had been. The girl looked as if she wore a hospital gown. That's when Luni noticed a name tag. Her eyes widened at the name.

Idris Whitaker.

Was this Mr. Whisker's daughter? The one who had died? She wondered what her statue was doing in the dungeon. Luni had heard Taylor swear to him she had tried all she could to save his daughter. It didn't look like that was the truth. Not with the horrified expression locked in the eyes of the poor girl.

There has to be some mistake. Luni thought, finding herself unable to look away. Taylor is here. In this building. Somewhere. I have to find her. And find out what is going on.

A bell rang from somewhere in the walls. Luni jumped. She looked from tiny path to tiny path, her eyes scanning the walls of the room for the origin of the noise but could see nothing.

*I've got to get out of here. She thought.*

Stone bricks dropped from the ceiling. The dragon had kicked so hard that the walls were crumbling. She searched for any sort of exit, or passage, or anything that might lead outside. She found nothing.

A large piece of ceiling fell near her feet. A voice rang out from above. "Students, do not leave the building until the test has finished, Even if the tower collapses. School policy."

*These crazy people are going to be the end of me.* She thought.

Another stone fell, hitting something hollow on the floor. A rusted trap door sat above the pit, with words inscribed on it. Luni could hardly make out what it said, but finally pieced it together:

Do not be unspoken!

Speak the password and I'll open.

If a train leaves Friday an hour past eight.

And arrives almost three hours too late

What meal will they have ate?

Luni balled her fists. *Why does everything here have to be a weird riddle?* She thought. There was nothing to be done with so little time and so little context. More stones crashed to the floor, and the dragon roared louder. The fish hook fell with a clank. The building shook. Luni's eyes darted to the memory-aid.

What's inside that bottle is my only choice. She didn't want to, but as the world literally crashed around her she feared that her last memories would be of doubt. With no time to lose she dashed to the altar in the pit.

A deep wooden basin rose from the floor as she approached. Its material seemed so pure and still smelled of fresh pine. She reached over it and grabbed the bottle. With the bottom of her shirt, she twisted the cap. But it wouldn't open. She tried again.

Her face grew red as she gritted her teeth. "Why does it have to be a pull-off cap!" She searched for something, anything to open it. She remembered the dragon's fish hook. Taking it, she used the sharp edge to pry the cap loose. Leaning back, she drank the entire thing. A glimmer of the wooden basin seemed to illuminate through the purple glass from across the room. It tasted chalky and salty, but it didn't matter. No matter how bad it was. She needed anything that could help her escape. When she had finished she looked at the label and gasped for air. That's when she noticed the words written tiny at the bottom.

For viewing purposes only. Do not drink.

"For crying out loud!" she said.

She felt woozy and weak. What had she done? Stumbling back into the pit she found a place to sit, hoping the feeling would pass. As she sat, memories came to her. Not her memories, but those of someone else. She felt as if she had sat in that room many times before, many years. She remembered faces and people, people she had gone to school with.

*That's impossible.* She thought. *I didn't go to school here. I only knew of the place because of Taylor.*

That didn't seem to matter anymore. A sharp recollection came to her. Taylor standing on top of the frightened girl, crying out for her father.

"Are you sure?" Luni remembered saying, but not in a voice like her own. A man's voice. "Once you go through with this, there is no backing out. It is permanent."

In the memory, Taylor nodded. Then Luni nodded and petted a black cat with a dangling bell around its neck.

"Please. I want to go home. I want to get better." The girl says.

"It'll be over soon," Taylor says in almost a whisper, closing her eyes. She places her carrot wand on the girl's forehead and whispers a long spell. Luni saw the life drained out of Mister Whitaker's daughter and flow into Taylor. The girl then turned to stone.

Luni bowed, though now she realized she was not in her own body but one of a man with an orange curly beard.

"You are now an oath breaker. A yo-yo Wizard. If you die, she will return to life in the exact state she left it. Sick. Dying. It will not be long before I am defeated and Barry returns. Whatever happens, you must defeat him. And bring me back."

Taylor nodded.

The real ground shook. Luni put a hand to her mouth.

"She used me," she said. Though only for a moment, she sat rocking back and forth, trying to understand what everything meant. But she had no time. She crossed to the hatch.

"Tuna sandwich." She said. The hatch opened, sending clouds of dust into the sky past the statue of Idris. Luni kept looking at the girl, trying to piece together everything she knew. About how the little girl called her Kimama, because she was at the hospital so much they became friends. Luni could see the memories. Mr. Whiakers' daughter was sick. She thought. Why Taylor? Why a Yo-Yo bond?

The dragon roared in a burst of anger. It puffed and snorted with increasing intensity.

*She soul-bonded with Idris Whitaker to save her. To give her more time. Oh my god. That's why she said we can't be. She thought.*

The walls crumbled from the trapped dragons thrashing. Still, Luni would not look away from the little girl. A thought entered her mind. A thought that excited her, but the more she thought the more she understood what the implementation of the thought could bring.

*Grobobalopacus! She thought. If Taylor and the kid switch places, he can heal her. I can't leave her down here. Unless. I don't want Taylor to have to switch places. Fading in and out of my life until I die. How can anyone make that work? But. I don't want to leave her ever again. Why didn't she tell me about this cat-loving magic cult? I don't want to let her go. But Idris Whitaker deserves to have a life.*

The stone statue of Idris Whitaker was hollow to Luni. Like an umbrella, she put the object under her arms and dashed to the hatch. What was left of the shaft cracked, sending the dragon crashing down to the floor below. Luni fell, with the girl facing up. She fell as she watched dust and rock and rain upon the dungeon.

Dang it, Marigold. Luni thought.

# Episode 7: The Yo-Yo Wizard

2019

Taylor motioned her head towards the door. Luni and Taylor knelt holding their coffee mugs while Ms. Bailey stood at the counter stirring a large pink travel mug excessively. She hummed, though that often turned into belting out high notes. The two girls were blocked from escaping. Yes the door was open, the one with the “No Students At Any Times Whatsoever” sign. If it had been any other teacher the two would have been able to sneak out, but not Ms. Bailey. An English teacher with suspiciously heightened senses. The type of person who could spot a kid with a cellphone during a test from a parking lot away.

The two slid back and she again checked around the room, twitching her nose.

*She has to know we are here.* Luni had thought. *I knew we were too close to pumpkin coffee season to not get caught.*

Ms. Bailey froze, twisting in the direction where Luni and Taylor hid on the other side of a converted shoproom table.

“I sense I am not alone.” Ms. Bailey said, returning to stirring her coffee.

Taylor and Luni looked at each other. Like speaking a foreign language they both understood each other. They had to get out. They ran.

Then stopped at the closed door. Ms. Bailey stepped between the exit and the girls with her travel mug. She took a sip and then nodded.

“I guess it is Pumpkin season.” She said. “Well. Looks like the English teacher caught the coffee bandits. How about that? Hello Taylor. And you are?”

“Just here to take out the trash miss,” Luni said.

Ms. Bailey smiled and tilted her head toward Taylor. Giving an inquisitive look. “Are you...Luni I bet, also a. West Coaster? Like Taylor is.”

Taylor shot her a sharp hard look back.

“I’ve never been to the coast... but I hope I get to visit soon.” Luni’s eyes darted from side to side as she tried to hide a smile.

“She knows you are going to Whisper’s Bay with me,” Taylor said wth a straight face.

"I do know that." Ms. Bailey said, with a finger up to her lips. "I know you two are going there after you spend every day after school helping me carry all the old textbooks to the garbage like I was instructed to. The "garbage" may or may not look like my car."

Taylor and Luni sighed, then tipped their coffee mugs together.

"To consequences," Luni said. "And detention."

Taylor smiled. "I'll happily spend detention with you. Together. Even if. Someday apart."

"Together," Luni repeated. "Even if apart."

Ms. Bailey interrupted. "Girls, I need you to stop right there. It's getting a little mushy, Idaho is going to ban you. If you aren't careful. Come on. The first round of book carrying awaits." Her voice got cheerful. "Let's go!"

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*Why am I having so many flashbacks?* Luni thought as she carried the statue down a dark tunnel that led outside of the Snuffercylde tower. *I have to focus. I have to know where I am. I can't leave this little girl behind. We have to finish this.*

But against her will, she felt herself slipping out of conscience. Falling, she steadied herself on the rocky wall. She rested her head on Idris's statue. Her eyes closed as she hugged on until sleep took her. The surrounding earth shook.

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Through the eyes of someone else, Luni saw hairy hands lifting a large sea captain's hat onto their head.

"Are you seriously going to wear that hat? A familiar voice said, "You look like you're dressed up to make a fish stick commercial."

Luni knew who it was. A young eighteen-year-old Livanna, who, instead of a purple corset, wore fish nets on her hands and black slacks. The tiredness had disappeared from her eyes and a youthful hope glimmered.

"Do you know who I am?" the voice hissed out.

*Are these the memories of the High Wizard?* Luni thought.

"Bob or something," Livanna scoffed while opening a brown paper sack. "Doesn't seem important."

The teenage boy snarled. Dozens of bells ran out from nearby. Livanna looked around, trying to find the source of the ringing.

"I am the mighty Rovanaugh. Of Snufferclyde tower." He said.

Livanna laughed loud and obnoxious. "You mean the kid who smells like cats all day? Sure, buddy."

"I told you not to call me buddy!" He said.

She shrugged. "You're my buddy. Rovanaugh. Of Snuffercylde."

Black cats with bells around their necks gathered. Each one dinged as they moved along towards Livanna.

Rovanaugh's eyes closed. "Do not speak about my friends like that. Apologize."

Livanna left her lunch and stood up, backing away. "Still can't fight your own battles, I see. You got to get help for everything you do."

A black cat rubbed up against her legs.

"Barry is going to destroy you," Livanna said. "He's the only one who cares about this town."

"I don't care," Rovanaugh said. "Please leave me alone."

"You know we can't. Not with what you are." She made a clicking sound with her mouth as she turned to slowly walk away.

\*\*\*

Daylight could be seen up a ladder that led to the outdoors. Luni still held onto Idris, dragging her stone remains. Her feet felt heavier with each step she took. She could feel an ocean mist blast through the tunnel,.

*I'm almost there.* She thought. Dragging her heels on the ground, she fought to keep moving. She gritted her teeth, trying to block everything else out except the task at hand, getting out. Tiredness came over her.

*Is this a memory?* She wondered. *Or is this my reality? I can't keep everything I am seeing together. What has this memory potion done to me? When is this going to stop?*

Luni froze. Her eyelids remained stuck open as she lost consciousness.

\*\*\*

"Who's a good girl!?" The high-pitched voice hissed. "Yes, you are! My wittle favorite furr ball in all the universe!"

The cat let out a happy purr as it brushed up against a bearded face. The face pressed up against the cat's head.

"Do you know how lucky you are little one?" He said. "Because while I'm around, I'm going to look out for you, keep you entertained and loved all day, every single day for as long as we have together."

The man sighed and stood up before pacing the floor of the garden section of the tower. The kitten spun in circles, enjoying the sunlight, chasing its tail.

"What's hard, little pumpkin is I might not be here always. Other people are always trying to bother me, pay this, pay that. It's a holiday, so buy this, oh hey the mortgage on your castle is due to be paid now or else! The world out there doesn't understand what life we want. Left alone. Without rules or things that are asked of me. But the outside world? They can't have that. They must control everything, and when I mean everything, I mean their time. They want to control how the way that they live, their daily routine, everything!"

The kitten meowed.

"My sweet little pumpkin." The high wizard said. "If only you could understand. Someday might be a lifetime away from seeing you again. Any day now, it could happen, and Barry takes my place on this planet. And if that happens? Who knows how long it could be before I see you again. I'm scared it's going to happen. And you'll be here. Alone. And there'll be nothing I can do. When that happens. My little one. Please understand. That I'm sorry I had to leave you."

\*\*\*

Luni felt a tug a tug at her shoulders, followed by a slap of a paw. Her eyes opened. She realized she had fallen, and her head was lying on gravel and stone. A black cat tried to drag and paw at Luni, still holding the statue tight.

"Is your name pumpkin?" Luni asked the cat.

The black cat crept to her face with a wide-eyed expression, as if it had not heard the name in a long time. The cat shook, letting the bell around its neck ring out once.

Luni could see her reflection in the cat's eyes. Her own eye's retina looked cloudy purple.

The cat returned to her shoulder and prodded with its head, encouraging her to get up. It mewoed.

"He loved you," Luni told Pumpkin. "That's why you followed me to the castle. He's here."

The cat seemed to understand, pushing harder against Luni's body. The truth tugged at her heartstrings. She looked at the creature, realizing how long it must have been since she last saw Rovanaugh, her friend. Not some high wizard or evil shadow over Whisper's Bay. But a person with a heart for the living.

"I might not see Taylor for an entire lifetime," Luni said. "I found the rushing streams I can drink from. But I can't drink for long. Why must everything be like this? Always? Is there a way a sound bound can be removed? Spilt? Can two people ever be separated once they have been yo-yo bound?"

The cat shook its body until its bell rang two times aloud.

She stood, carrying Idris with her. The moment she reached up to touch the gray wooden ladder out of the tunnel, her present mind faded as she fell back on the stone.

\*\*\*

"I'm so sorry Kima. About your parents. I didn't get to tell you the depths of my sorrow before we last departed." Luni heard the voice in the memory say. The ocean waves crashed on the shore as Taylor looked down to the sand. A gentle rumbling roared as icy waters crashed into the towering rock formations.

"It's been all right I guess. Living in New Mexico." Kima said, not answering the question.

The man and teenage Taylor continued to walk across the pebbles and pools of ocean water. She jumped, clearing the width of the water, causing her right foot to slam against a large stone. Instead of reacting in pain, she only stood, looking at her shoe.

She turned to the high wizard.

"When I heard you returned, I got here as fast as I could. There's something I have to know. If I break this soul bond. Could I live a normal life? Someday? With someone special? My dead shark. Away from this crazy world of sudo wizards or whatever we are calling ourselves now." She said, kicking off water from her white shoe.

Luni felt the man in the memory shake his head.

"There is no way to break a soul bound. Nothing free. The myth goes one choice is to trade a soul for another. The new soul would be trapped, and the other free of the Yo-Yo curse."

"I refuse to hurt anyone." Taylor said.

"That's the problem with curses." The man said. "You don't cast them on people as a christmas present. Or anyone you like. Normally. We talked at great length about the ramifications of putting nasty curses on people, if it's a part of our traditional magical heritage or not!"

Taylor put her hands on her hand and looked out over the ocean. A wave crashed, sending a watery mist that hovered through the air.

"I'm not sorry I bounded with Idris. Someday science might catch up, and they might find a way to cure her. But. Why did I have to meet her after? That stupid candy corn-loving dodgeball switch-a-roo con artist. I hate it. I didn't think I'd ever have a life again. Because. My parents. And because of this. Thing I'm a part of."

"It is a cruel curse." The man said. "It is only wished on one's worst enemy only as a last resort. You did it to give a little girl more time amongst the living. Until someone can cure her of her illness, you have your time. That should not change for a long time. I won't be here for very long. Deicknine's magic council is going to hunt me down at any moment. They want to send me back, but the next time someone gets him and brings me back. I have a plan. They don't know where my high tower is. There I shall return and hide in secret until my soul outlast the whole council. I'm sorry I couldn't help you. You knew what you were getting into."

Taylor flung a rock into the sea, deep in thought. "I don't think I can ever see her again. How can I expect anyone to live a normal life with me? I can't put someone through that. Not even someone who sees me. And wants to know everything about me, down to my preferred spicy cheato size. With cheese sauce straight in the bag. I caught her measuring cheatos with a ruler the other day."

Luni felt the sensation of nodding, followed by that voice.

"Even kindness has a price. Yay capitalism, am I right? Sometimes there is no right or wrong. There's just the consequences of a choice."

\*\*\*\*

2019

Luni squelled with delight as tiny drops of water carried with the breeze hit her young skin. All the photographs and thoughts, and there it was. The place she had wanted to be, with the person she wanted to be with. Yes, they were both broke, and Taylor had to beg her grandfather pretty hard to get permission to drive that far. And yes, her grandparents thought she was with a dude. But they had made it. Despite Luni's constant fears of getting annoying or "letting her stupid show for too long". The two girls talked to the point of forgetting the radio was still playing in the background. Somehow she had pulled it off, and had not been left on the side of the road.

"Is this real? Do people live here? For Reali-zees?" She shouted to Taylor, who slammed the door of the tiny blue Dodge Neon. With her hands outstretched she rushed towards the Sullivan beach access sign. In the distance, a kite flew high to skies full of the colors of the setting sun. Waves crashed, and seagulls chirped. Luni tugged at her oversized black plastic raincoat. Taylor sighed but smiled. She had tried to tell Luni that in the Pacific Northwest, it didn't rain every day, but for some reason, Luni insisted on wearing a poncho all the time anyway.

"Can you yell 'I'm a tourist any louder?'" Taylor said, adjusting the fit around the cutoff jeans and her thighs.

"It's so big," Luni said, standing towards the sea, where a sailboat journeyed across the waters.

"Let's get stuff out," Taylor said " and get my uncle's cat's feed, plants watered, and then I have some places I want to show you."

"But the ocean. It calls to me." Luni reached out with her hands as far as she could as if she could push the ocean towards her. It had been a very long drive from New Mexico, and even though she did not drive most of the way, if hardly any, her mind was that of the typical teenage girl. Tired, goofy, and nonsensical. Both of their arms hurt from the dozens of overloaded boxes of books taken to the Ms. Bailey car. Luni was afraid she might never be able to lift anything heavy again. But the two had laughed most of the way up the southern side 101, exploring ways to have entire conversations without using words. They each learned that they knew about each other a lot more than they had expected, laughing hard while trying to keep the car on the road.

"Wait, this is where you used to live?" Luni pointed to a mobile home on the other side of the beach access, on a grassy slope that overlooked the seaside. Taylor walked into the gate of a double-wide trailer filled with empty flower pots. She ran past the parking lot and into Coastal Memorles trailer park. "This is your mobile home still right?"

"Yeah." Taylor mumbled as she unlocked the front door.

Luni stopped.

"If I walk in those doors with you. I am never leaving."

"What are you talking about? My uncle is back from his trip in two days. Stop being dramatic. You can't stay here forever. Nope. Forever will have to be two days."

"If I say I am staying here with you forever, then I mean it. I'm going to do it." Luni said, reaching for her hand, knowing that Taylor knew what was coming. Something they had talked about endless times. "I can learn to be a part of whatever world you are in. I can, I don't know. Wear overalls and a Freddy mercury mustache and find a job as a plumber. Working at a Save the Seals charity. I know I don't understand nothing about your... religious beliefs? But I went to

some vacation bible schools, and I had Mormon neighbors who brought us cakes and casseroles for no reason. They liked to give hugs. It can't get any weirder than that."

"It gets much, much weirder than that, Luni. I promise you if there is ever a way. I will find it. And take it. But I wish you would stop asking. Because it's a fact of my life that I can not change. You had to get into this now? Right here? You wouldn't believe me."

"Let me be your forever." Luni pled. "Is that so much to ask? Tell me. 100 percent straight up. What is stopping us? What is stopping you?"

Taylor drew closer and to Luni's surprise, pressed her forehead against hers. She took her face in her hands and spoke. Tears ran from her eyes.

"My sweet candy corn."

Luni felt herself lean closer into her.

"You have done nothing but give me pieces of yourself, and everything I could ever need. Even when you are nothing, you fight the universe to give even more. You are a rushing stream. I'm a puddle."

"But you're my puddle." Luni said.

"Give something to yourself. Please. For me. I want forever. Whatever we are. But we can't. Someday I'll have to go. And I can't come back. For a very long time. I can't give you what you need. And I hate that about myself. But there's nothing we can do to change it. I'm bonded. Destined. To us? Forever has to be the memories we make together. No one can take those away. And that's why I wanted you here. Even though I should study my lines for the audition, and all my classes and. I needed you here. Once. Because I want that memory to live forever. Somewhere. Somehow."

Luni backed away, took out her phone, and scrolled through her contacts. Her shoes clicked on the vinyl floor as she headed to the bathroom. Bending down, she checked the cabinet. Taylor ran her hands through her hair as she followed Luni further into the house.

"What do you have to do? I have a cousin in Deming. He can do anything you need him to do. Don't ask what family he works for. How can I help you overcome this?"

"Oh my god please stop looking for bleach in my bathroom. No one can help me. Please. Never hurt anyone for me. Ever. Trust me. Let me have my forever. Right here."

"What do you want? In your forever?" Luni asked, closing the cabinet and standing.

Taylor smiled. "For you to stop measuring my cheatos. No. Tell me. What do you want? Right now."

Luni looked away. "I'd like to invoke my 5th Amendment privilege."

"You dork." Taylor said.

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Luni felt warm hands on her cold face. The sun shone from behind her closed eyelids as she regained control and stepped out of the memory. She knew that touch. Her eyes opened. She smiled at Taylor's strong jawline and soft face.

"My puddle," Luni said. "My evil little cat-loving magic cult Oathbreaker. I wish you understood how beautiful what you did was. You are a deep, loving puddle. But I don't want you to go."

Taylor held Luni straighter, releasing her fingers' grip on the status of Idris. "The rest of the class ran when the castle started shaking. I went looking for you and... why do you have her? How did you get in there? I told you not to go..."

Luni grabbed her hand and squeezed tight. "We don't have much time. I drank something to get out of the dungeon, and I have someone's memories inside my head, and I can't make them stop."

Taylor's shoulders tensed. "Please tell me you didn't drink the memory potion."

Luni placed her left hand on her hip, making a fist. The castle floor shook. "How long will I have these memories? These flashbacks?"

"Flashbacks stop within four hours." Taylor said. "The memories are forever. Those are your memories now. I was hoping we had more time before you knew. Grobocalopus can cure her. I was going to tell you. In a note in a hotel somewhere, we had rented together after leaving this place. If you didn't still hate me. "

"Never. Why is the universe always against us? Why can't we be? Whatever we need to be for each other?" Luni said.

"I'll keep telling you until you understand," Taylor said, helping her stand. "We'll make our own forever. We don't have a long time to do it. But. There is one last thing I want to do with you. Before I go."

Luni held Taylor's hand. "Anything.'

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Luni's mind was pulled from a long experience of a frat boy wizard reciting hours of song and poems, being laughed at by the others as he spoke. Instead, Luni saw Taylor's eyes close to hers.

"I wanted to be with you," Taylor whispered, laying her head on Luni's stomach under the tree. "Under your favorite tree. It's the only something I knew I could give to you."

Luni shook her head. "Tell me this isn't our last moment together."

"Not for always. For right now. As long as Idris is alive. A lifetime? Or never... I gave you something that should stop the flashbacks. Until we have to drive Idis to the shop. I want these last moments with you. Let's lie here. And pretend nothing else matters."

Taylor leaned in and kissed Luni's forehead. "Thank you. For being you. For trying to carry what you knew you could not carry."

Luni shifted her boots closer to her feet. Wrapping their legs together in what would look like a crazy pretzel to some people but comfortable to them. A gentle breeze blew by, bringing a hint of evening cool.

"I don't know what to do without you. I just got you back, I hate that I'm losing you."

Taylor smiled. "You could never lose me." They held hands, lacing their fingers together.

In the distance, a magic roar rang out. The two could see people forming lines on the sidewalks with pitchforks and burning torches.

"Burn the witches!" A man shouted. "Burn all of them!" Luni recognized the face of Mr. Whitaker.

"No," Luni said, still resting her head on Taylors belly. "Not know, I'm not ready."

"We'll never be ready," Taylor said. "That's who we are. We can't let the council get to the creature before us. He has to have to heal Idis. Here."

Taylor handed her a small leather bag. "Don't open it until I'm gone. And for the love of all that is all good. Don't drink it. Look inside it."

Luni squeezed her hand tighter. They held onto the moment as long as they could, looking at each other. Until the dreaded words, the words that would mark their end. Taylor said. "It's time."

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A rare crack of thunder echoed through the bay. Tiny droplets of rain fell from the sky onto the roof of the “Not a magic tea shop. Common people stood outside, confused at the increasing sounds of the ocean crashing on the shores below the 101. From within the shop, people sang with a group of tiny men dressed in white dress shirts and slacks who danced on their table. Half drank tea and the obvious side effects of magic could be spotted everywhere. A man crooned an operatic song in a female soprano voice. Squirrels and women from a bachelorette party played dice on the counter next to Grobopalopacus. Who wore a smiling human mask.

“Oh, hello, you two!” Grobopalopacus yelled out at the sight of Luni and Taylor forcing their way inside and to the counter. “I’ve kept the place running while you were gone! All the flowers are happy so I had some extra time! Everyone is loving this shop so much, it makes me so happy!”

“Grobopalopacus. We need you to help someone. Like you helped the dog before...” Luni said.

The front glass doors shattered. Again. People screamed. Magic creatures made a mad dash out of the shop. Some hid under the tables. One man grabbed a large stick that had been mounted to the wall.

“Luni!” The voice said.

“Hello Livanna Trenbath,” Luni said. “2nd place in the Whisper’s Bay homecoming contest in 2005. You should have gone with the high wizard, he was much nicer to you than Deicknine.”

Livanna pushed her way through the crowded room. “How. Would you know that...”

Luni laughed. Something in the tone of her voice sent Livanna stumbling back. Over the sound of raindrops hitting the road and tiny bells ring in the distance.

“I know all.” She said. “Deicknine is not who he says he is. He’s been trying to break his Yo-yo Bond using the fights with Grobopalopacus to break free. But none of the sacrifices worked. Because only a willing person can offer to break such a powerful bond. Like a person trapped in a boot lost at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Deicknine would never,” Livanana said, pulling out her gar. “He loved me. Why. How could you do it? How could you destroy him? Stand aside before this creature gets out of control. Deicknine locked it away for a reason and you morons let it out to serve coffee!”

“Sorry, we are out again.” Grobopalopcaus said in an apologetic tone. “Most popular thing not on the menu.”

“Listen to her,” Taylor said. “Please. A child’s life depends on it. Only Grobopalopacus can save...”

"Those are lies!" Livanna cried, raising her gar. "First the creature, and then I find the master oathbreaker. Then Deicknine can return."

"I think not." Taylor stepped forward. "Not Barry. Not ever."

"You! You are a part of the Not Barry Society?" Livanna said. "It can't be."

"Until my master returns," Taylor said raising her weapon. "I am the NBS."

"Excuse me ladies, gentlemen, or whatever you prefer to identify as." The voice of an owl said over the crowd. Konigsberg jumped up and down on the counter near the register, his leg now free from pain. "You don't have to go home, but trust me you don't want to stay here."

"Konigsberg! You should be delivering mail." Livanna said.

"No! I am a free owl! You lazy rich people need to learn to do your own work!" Konigsberg shouted.

People fled the shop. Chairs and tables were overturned in the process. Taylor stood with her gar readied in front of the counter. Livanna took a step towards the creature.

"This gar is strong enough to do what everyone else couldn't." Livanna said.

"I will destroy you if you harm him," Taylor said. "I have a mission. An oath to a little girl. And to my best half." She looked to Luni. The pit of Luni's stomach sank.

"Champion," Livanna said. "You can't allow this. You are the symbol of hope and truth. She is the bad guy! How can you support this?"

"Well, duh, she's the bad guy," Luni said. "We're all the bad guys. If you think you're the hero in this story of life, you're delusional. You have to root yourself. And drink from streams of running water. Deicknine is a snake. The high Wizard wants to be left alone with his cats. Let a dude have some peace. Be a part of the right thing. It feels good. Even if it's hard. Come on Livanna. See our side of this."

Before she could answer, people with raised torches approached from outside. Mr. Whitaker leads the line of angry hwhitlocks.

"You've been watching us suffer in pain for years!" A woman screamed. "You couldn't help the sick because what? You're a secret group who owns a lot of money! No more!"

The crowd joined in and shouted, "No More!"

"They could have saved my daughter!" Mr. Whitaker yelled. "But they were too selfish to do anything about it! I told you! I told everyone!"

Mr. Whitaker entered the shop and threw down his torch. "Burn it down. All of it." People threw their torches inside the shop.

The door to the upstairs apartment opened. A group of people led by Cali and Braylynn made their way downstairs. Braylynn's jaw dropped.

"What have you done to my shop?" She yelled.

"How can Luni win Champion? She shouldn't have even been there. I need this. I can't keep paying fines to the council I..." Cali rambled on.

Livanna let out a magic bolt toward the creature. Cali Braylynn and the others scrambled to find vegetable weapons. The creature ducked in the nick of time and stayed hiding low behind the counter.

Luni stood in front of Taylor, but she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked back, and Taylor shook her head.

"It's time." Taylor cried. "Make sure Grobopalopacus lives."

Luni wanted to embrace Kimama so much in that moment. But knew couldn't. And knew that would be one of her new greatest regrets. Instead, she charged at Livanna. But she felt the hard jab of a radish on her head. She fell to the ground. Taylor dashed to her feet, facing the greater spellcaster.

"Why Kimi?" Livanna asked. "I trusted you. I hoped you could be the leader of change. But you have chosen this. Evil."

"If only you could understand." She said. The men charged into the shop with their pitchforks at arm level.

"Sorry champion. You won't get to compete next year. Blabertgilous!" The magic blast cracked through the air towards Grobopalopacus. Taylor dove, taking the hit. She stumbled to Luni. With her final breath, she whispered something into Luni's ear. And smiled. Within moments her body disappeared from reality. In her place, glowing dust formed the body of a little girl with curly brown hair. Dressed in a hospital gown. She, now lying on top of Luni, coughed.

Mr. Grobopalopacus rose from behind the counter. "Bring the girl to me!" It said.

"Blabertgilous!" Livanna cast a shot at the creature. It struck him in the shoulder. The creature yelled and, with great effort and strength, made its way toward the girl.

"Leave the girl alone you besat!" Livanna shouted. "Don't hurt her!"

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

Grobobalopacus crossed in front of the sick child, being held on by Luni with all her strength. Luni held the girl up to the creature.

"Please save her!" Luni said. "Please!" The girl was heavy in her arms, but she didn't care. She held her as far and high as she could. Grobobalopacu's mouth began to open wide.

"Blabertgilius!" Livanna sent another shot.

"No!" A man shouted, leaping. Mr. Whitaker fell to the floor, with a magic wound to his chest.

Grobobalopacus swallowed the girl, leaving Luni holding out her hands.

"I'll take that," Braylynn said, snatching Livanna's radish. She yelled out a spell. "Raigivamorti." Water poured from rain clouds that formed at the top of the ceiling. The rain put out all the flames the torches had created.

"It ate the child!" Livanna yelled. She charged at the creature.

"Wait!" Luni said, checking on Mr. Whitaker. Who looked hurt, but was breathing and conscience.

The creature took a hit from Livianna hand as it spit something from its mouth. She turned, with her fist still in the air.

"Dad?" Said the little girl. "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 little girl ran to her father and threw her arms around him. "I was so scared."

"I'll get him to one of our doctors," Livanna said. "It might take more than a lime and coconut, but they'll figure it out."

Luni could not help but stare in the place Taylor had last laid. But her gaze turned to the man and the girl, who sat on the floor holding each other. Weeping.

Hundreds of bells rang out in the rain. Laughter cried out. A little man with gray hair and a large goofy hat ran into the shop, his arms outstretched, holding a giant pumpkin. Black cats ran around his feet, playing with each other and rolling about.

"Guess who has returned! People of Whisper's Bay I am here to stay. I am the panic in the winds! Rovanaugh! The HIGH WIZARD!"

"Cut it Rovey," Luni said. She turned to Livanna "You see now. Barry Deicknine is a liar. And not a great person."

Livanna closed her eyes and turned to the creature.

"How dare you call me Rovey!" The high wizard said.

"That's what your mother called you" Luni said. "I can't see you as anything else. You should call her now that you're back. She said she needed help with her garden and that was years ago..."

"Why are you talking like you know me?" The high wizard said.

Luni chuckled. "You should label your potions better."

"You mean. I can leave? And live with my cats?" The man said.

Livanna nodded.

"Really? This is great! I don't know why this woman knows everything about me, but if you are cool with it I'm going to leave and start opening cans of tuna."

"Go ahead," Luni said. "Go be free."

The high wizard raised his hands in victory and walked away, with his army of black cats with bells following him down the 101.

Taylor was gone. And her heart was gone. But she looked at the girl, still clinging to her father.

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"Luni!" The little girl cried, throwing down a printed magazine with the headline, "Dead girl appears alive and cancer-free five years later." On the cover, Idris' arms are hung around Luni, who is smiling. While uncomfortable, she looks generally happy.

"The shop is opening in ten minutes, and Mr. Finkerhopper is going to need that brew, or he's going to complain again, " the girl said.

Luni finished her toast at the sink in the apartment above the tea shop. Now with her belongings. As soon as Braylynn heard someone else wanted to run the place, she ran out the door and threw Luni the keys. Something about the store brought a strange joy to her. And now she, with her vast knowledge of magic, was more qualified to handle special items. So Braylynn left to hunt Berdorfaborkens. Luni had asked what a Berdorfaborken was, but she was told it was best not to know. As long as they were gone, the world would be a better place.

“Can I open the doors?” Idris said, tugging at what she had decided was her work uniform of brown pants and a red shirt. “Remember, we are closing an hour early to get Dad from the magic hospital. And Grobalopacus wants a break to sing to the flowers after his lunch at the cancer ward. Or something. Today and Thursday.”

“I’m on it Idris.” Luni said. “As long as you want to work and do your homeschool stuff. Until the schools accept you are alive.”

The girl nodded. “Can I ask you something? Personal?”

Luni said yes as she placed the plate of leftover toast crumbs in the empty sink.

“Where did you put her statue?”

“Taylor’s someplace safe. Until I see her again. I know I want to see her again, but can you please put on a jacket? I don’t want you getting a cold and.. You know... in this wet weather.”

“Fine.” The girl said, opening the closet door, and putting on the first random thing she could find.

“Yay!” A zipper cried.

“Maybe something warmer than the raincoat of emotion or whatever you are there, buddy.”

The zipper laughed as the girl put the coat back on the hanger.

“On second thought, get something out of my closet.” Luni said. “I need to get rid of everything in that one.”

The girl ran into the bedroom and looked through the closet. She picked one and threw it on.

“Is this better? It’s fake leather.”

Luni turned. She was not prepared to see the girl standing in Taylor’s jacket, one she had worn often in high school. The girl smiled.

While crushed, sad, and hopeless. Something made Luni smile back.

"That looks good on you," Luni said. "Fantastic. Taylor had such a good heart. I see why she liked you."

From outside a loud speaker chirped. A man belted and crooned a romantic tune. With the words: Luni I'm so sorry, I am you in my life.

Idis and Luni ran to the kitchen window. A mob of dancers pranced around a singer in a black suit and a shiny glove on his left hand. The man's voice drifted on and off key, missing the beat and sounding like the last act in a karaoke bar.

"I need you!" The man belted.

"Who is that loser?" The girl asked.

Luni rolled her eyes before running downstairs. "Kevin."

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Cars honked at the dancers who blocked traffic along the 101. Drivers yelled obscenities and held up not-so-nice finger gestures at the obvious tourists. Luni stormed out of the shop, letting Mr. Finkerhopper slip in behind her. Idris made his tea while Luni approached her ex.

"I need you. Please marry me." He crooned. "I made a mistake."

Luni felt like screaming. "Kevin, that doesn't even rhyme. You know people singing makes me uncomfortable. What are you doing? How much did you pay for this?"

The hunk of a man fell to one knee in front of Luni and pulled a ring from his pocket. One that still had a price sticker printed at the top.

He spoke, with hope. "Please. Luni. Make me the happiest man alive."

"No Kevin." Luni said. "I don't think so. I only drink from rushing waters now. I'm sorry you paid all that money for this. But please get off the road before the police arrest all you."

Police lights flashed. Dancers on the street scattered in all directions. Police officers ran after them. Some getting tackled, others being chased down to the sands of the shores below. The last Luni saw of Kevin was him trying to jump a fence between two buildings. He fell face-first on the other side.

"Okay everyone," Luni said, waving the traffic on. People gathered around the shop, some wearing "Not a magic tea shop. Wink wink" shirts and hats. She looked out at the gathering crowd, some already taking out their wallets.

*Taylor should be here.* She thought. And she was right. She was not there to join her, she had not the time long enough to experience that with her. But her memories were forever in her mind. Not only her own, but those of the high wizard of her.

Luni took a sip of a bottle of something marked "Please do not drink."

"Store is open! Come on in." Luni said. While she walked to the counter to prepare the second order of the day, a memory appeared. By now she knew how to control it, and she could work quietly and remember. The memory brought a tear to her eyes. There she and Taylor were, lying under the tree in the park.

"I don't want to leave you." Taylor had thought. "Please let this end some other way. I don't want to leave you here without me. But I have to."

And there, remembering half numb yet half hopeful. Somehow she had found a spark in life, a purpose. She had learned to give to herself as well as others. So handing a small coffee to a fidgety customer. "Here you go."

"This is the special order, right?" the pale man said. "If I don't get it, I'll start thirsting for blood."

"Yeah, it's a pumpkin spice brew," Idis said, stirring a cup of tea with four sugars. "That'll calm your thirst for blood for a year. Have a good day!"

The man sighed, relieved.

Luni looked outside. In the flowerbeds flowers had sprouted as tall as the window overnight. She smiled.

"Volunteers." Luni said, still looking out the window.

"What? Who is volunteering? The owl is pretty busy." The girl said while making another pot of coffee already.

"No." Luni said. "Those yellow flowers outside by the sidewalk. Marigolds. They aren't supposed to be there."

"They weeds?" The girl asked. "Want me to cut them down?"

"No." Luni said. "They aren't weeds. They remind me of Taylor."

The memory of them faded, and she paused for a moment to wash some dishes.

The girl laughed as she worked the hot water machine.

"I get to see my Dad today!" The girl said.

"Be careful," Luni said.

There in her memories that live forever was a window into Luni's happiness. A place she could visit when she felt sad or lonely. Like a song she could sing that gave her hope. Though increasing, she had these sorts of heavy days disappear as she learned to live with the grief. In some ways, she felt guilty for feeling so fulfilled with something so horrible in her past, her loss. She learned to see this as a life she deserves. And though life was not easy for her, she learned to enjoy the day. Though she felt an emptiness that no one could ever fill in her soul, she had found a way to live in forever. One that she and Taylor had created together.

"I'll see you again someday, my marigold," Luni said.

THE END.