

A painting of a weeping willow tree with a glowing orb on its trunk and small figures in the distance. The scene is set in a dark, atmospheric environment with a path leading into the distance. The tree's branches are heavy with green leaves, and a bright, glowing orb is attached to its trunk. Small figures are visible on the path, and the overall mood is somber and contemplative.

**HOW THE
MOURNING WILLOW
CAME TO
SAUNDERBIR**

A Griefborn Story

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The happy little faces of the children looking enthusiastically up at him made Quentin wish he were dead.

He should have been by now, he thought. He'd been ten when Lord Ranger Musa Brody had defeated Grief and ended the last Cycle. That had been sixty-three years ago, and he'd always hoped he'd have passed on before the horror of the next Cycle started all over again. Unlike the other people of Terra Lumina, Quentin never held out much hope that Lord Ranger Brody had initiated the Final Reprieve. Hope wasn't really much of an option for a Ranger.

"What story would you like to hear today?" He asked. He felt tired. His voice and body were strong despite his age, but his soul couldn't feel it.

The kids shouted out names of their favorites. "The Ugly Duckling!" "The Sun Queen!" "The First Ranger!" The kinds of stories that were a little bit sad but always finished up with some version of "and they lived happily ever after."

"The Sad Tree!" The green-haired kid called out. Quentin never bothered to learn their names. There wasn't any point.

The Sad Tree? What in Grief's name...?

"That one's too sad," one of the kids protested.

"You only like that one 'cuz the wizard has green hair!" One of the other kids accused.

Ohhh!

"The Mourning Willow?" Quentin asked. Of course the green-haired kid would like that one. Maybe it was because he was feeling sorry for himself, or maybe it was because he was already a little bit drunk, but he thought that one was a damn fine idea. A perfectly miserable story to fit his perfectly miserable mood, and a perfectly miserable lesson for the kids to learn. "Okay."

"Awwwwwww..." Most of them whined.

"Once upon a time," he ignored them, "a long time ago, before there were even Rangers, there was a little town called Saunderbir."

As he spoke he looked for the glowing ribbons of magic, purple and white, to cast an illusion to help him tell his tale.

"And in it there lived a woman who asked the same question every day for five years. Her name was Safiyyah Broadwater, and every time the coachman pulled his carriage into town, she watched as everyone got off, then she approached and asked her question. And everytime she asked, he always told her the same thing..."

“No,” he answered, looking into her sad, brown eyes. “There’s been no word.”

And every time, she stood tall, took a deep breath, and said a quiet “thank you” before walking away.

One day, though, he didn’t tell her no. Maybe it was because it was spring and the air was warm and the birds sang in the trees. Or maybe it was because Grief had been defeated and everyone had their whole lifetimes ahead of them.

“We’re five years into the Reprieve,” he said. “If he’s not back by now, he’s not coming back.”

She looked at him with dark eyes heavy with loneliness and hope. A playful spring breeze blew a long strand of curly black hair across her brown face and she casually brushed it aside.

“Five years ago, my Jarrod left to fight,” she answered. Her musical voice rivaled even the sweetest of songbirds. “Before he left, he promised he would return to me, and I promised to wait for him. He *is* coming back.”

The coachman started to say something, then stopped. There was no arguing with that kind of conviction.

“Maybe he’ll be on tomorrow’s carriage,” he said. “Maybe you’ll only have to wait one more day.”

The spring flowers seemed to pale compared to her sad smile.

“That’s all I’ve ever had to wait,” she replied. “Just one more day.”

The coachman shook his head as he watched her walk away. The Cycle of Grief took its toll on everyone. Some worse than others.

When the little bell rang above her door, the healer had assumed it to be just another of Saunderbir’s farmers seeking some remedy to ease sore muscles or a bad back. She came out wiping her hands on a towel and stopped in shock when she saw *her* standing in her shop. She’d been dreading this moment for five years now – ever since the people of Saunderbir had returned from the final battle and Jarrod Broadwater hadn’t been among them. As the days went by, she had even started to think that she would never have this visit.

“Safiyah,” She said. “What can I do for you?”

“Doctor Cage,” Safiyya asked softly. Tentatively. As though just being there

prepared to ask the question she was going to ask was some kind of betrayal of her promise. “Is... Is Jarrod coming back? Can your magic find him?”

The healer swallowed hard. This was it. Her magic had already tried to find Jarrod Broadwater. Five years ago when everyone else had come back and the question was on everybody’s lips but no one dared ask it because they feared how Saffiyah would take the news that Jarrod had been walked to the Seas of Life. Her magic hadn’t found anything, but that wasn’t surprising. Renee’s lay with the green magic of healing, not the violet of information.

She opened her mouth to speak when a movement outside her window caught her eye. A crowd had gathered at her door – the townspeople following Saffiya to the healer’s shop because it was so strange for her to do anything besides return home after greeting the coach. They stood there now, waiting and watching to see what Renee would tell her. And for that moment, Renee hated the people she had sworn to care for. Hated them because they lacked the courage to do what they were making her do.

“I’m not good with violet magic,” she said, wrenching her attention from the cowards. “Finding information is a long way from healing wounds and curing illness. My magic cannot find him.”

Saffiyah stood silent for only a moment before she asked, “Do you know anyone whose magic can?”

Outside, the crowd’s collective gasp drifted in through the open windows. There was one man nearby who could answer her question, but none spoke of him if they could help it.

Renee struggled against the urge to lie, but her oath was to relieve suffering. She pointed out the window, above and behind the gathered townspeople, at the dark forest sitting cold and forbidding atop Mistwood Hill.

“You would have to talk to the wizard on the hill, Safiyah,” she declared. “You would have to go see Verdigris.”

And maybe, that would be enough to make Safiyah forget her question.

Outside, the townsfolk murmured and muttered.

“Did you hear what she said?”

“...go see Verdigris...”

“Is she mad?”

Inside, Safiyah squared her shoulders.

“Thank you, Doctor Cage,” she said to Renee.

She walked from the shop and through the crowd with a dignity that no lesser person could have managed.

* * * * *

It was because of the great rocks and boulders that the farmers of Saunderbir had never touched Mistwood Hill looming behind their town. Rocks and boulders that stuck out at harsh and odd angles from a lush covering of thick grass that bloomed with the prettiest white and purple and yellow flowers in the height of summer. Here and there, a solitary oak stood alone as though it were trying to escape from the ominous forest that crowned the hill. In just a couple more months, their royal crowns would be full of glossy green leaves and young couples would come picnicking away from Saunderbir to sit beneath the shade and enjoy a pleasant day of love and happiness. Now, though, they stood still and cold and resolute with only yellow-green buds just opening into spring.

Safiyyah strode past them, her breath heavy from the climb. The air around her seemed to grow colder as she made her way to the dark woods atop the hill. She didn't pause as she pushed her way into the forest itself; quiet and muffled as though it were holding its breath. Her footfalls made no sound on the thick mat of fallen pine needles. The sounds of the town at the base of the hill – the mooing of cows, the barking of dogs, the laughter of children – had disappeared. Even the songbirds of spring had been left far behind. No sound found its way between the crowded trunks of the forest except for the harsh caws of an irreverent crow.

As she made her way deeper in, the forest managed to grow somehow darker and quieter. Soft tendrils of the ever-present mist that gave Mistwood Hill its name reached out along the ground, caressing the trunks of the trees and glimmering in silvery white like liquid pearl as it bubbled and roiled with its own hidden currents.

Safiyyah Broadwater took a deep breath and stepped forward into a world that even foolhardy crows didn't dare to enter. The pearlescent mist clung to her dress and legs, chilling her brown skin. The silence here was more complete than even that of the forest left behind as strange shapes played in the cloud. Images not altogether human nor animal formed and dissolved. Hovered just at the edges of vision and vanished as mirage when viewed directly. Odd ripples and waves, as of some great creature swimming beneath the sea of mist, rushed towards her only to dissipate around her ankles in a bone-chilling breeze. But Safiyyah squared her shoulders despite her fear and marched on, determinedly fighting her way through mist and misdirection until she found herself at a large wall.

Some twelve feet tall, it was built of black stone never before seen in

Saunderbir. A fence of wicked, wrought-iron spikes stuck out of the top of it. A large gate, once made of the same iron but now rusted and pitted hung half-open on one corroded hinge. Somehow, the courtyard beyond was even gloomier and colder than the rest of the woods. Trees long dead, their branches long cleared of leaf and twig, clawed at the sky from the glittering ocean of fog.

The courtyard was not large, however, and Saffiyah soon found herself at a ramshackle door of rotting wood and rusting hinges set into the far wall. It protested loudly as it swung open beneath her gentle fingers. She gasped in awe at the beauty beyond; as different from night as day compared to the dark gloom of the Mistwood.

A garden filled with trees and flowers in full leaf and bloom thrived under the warm summer sunlight of a land that had never been held in winter's frigid grasp. Violets of royal purple carpeted the ground beneath the trees while rainbow-hued roses climbed ornate trellises mounted to the whitewashed walls of a stately manor. Hyacinths, daisies, azaleas, sunflowers, and others too numerous to mention blossomed in well-tended flowerbeds. Songbirds sang in the trees and crickets chirped in the grass. Bees buzzed busily from bloom to bloom while butterflies of all shape and color danced in the air. A small brook burred its happy way across the garden. Paths of smooth, river stones in various shades of brown wound around flowerbeds and fountains, past benches and across small wooden bridges.

Yet even this seeming paradise bore its own dark heart: a sad, brooding tree that was somehow outcast by the rest of the plants. A tree in which no bird nested or sang. A tree sitting by itself at the edge of the brook near the end of a path. A tree such as had never before grown in any of the lands near Saunderbir. So rare was such a tree that Saffiyah had only ever seen one other in her life, in a land far to the south and east when she had been just a child. The people there called them "Mourning Willows", and with good reason, for they always seemed somehow sad, with squat trunks and sprawling, wiry branches that dropped low – "wept" one might say – to the ground in flowing runnels of small, yellow-green leaves.

This one seemed sadder still amidst the garden's rampant exuberance of growth and blossom. No flowers bloomed at its feet. The branches of other trees gave it wide berth. Even the light breeze that played through the leaves didn't disturb it at all as Saffiyah walked past it and climbed the cold marble steps to knock at the front door of the Wizard of Mistwood Hill.

"Why have you come?" A voice asked from behind her. It was as rich as fresh-turned earth. As soft as the petals of a rose. As deep as a blue autumn sky.

"I have come to speak with the wizard on the hill," she said as she turned. "I have come to see Verdigris."

A slender man stood on the path she had just trod. His kind face was smudged with soil. His skin tanned from working in the sun. His clothes were the simple overalls and cotton shirt of a gardener, and a sturdy leather belt of gardening tools hung about his waist. He looked like any farmer or workman from Saunderbir. A bit taller, perhaps. A bit more handsome in a strange way Safiyyah couldn't quite put her finger on. The only strange thing about him was his short hair, which was the same yellow-green as the mourning willow she had passed on her way to the door.

“Why?”

“There is a question I must ask him.” She explained. “The town healer said he might be able to answer it for me. Please, may I see him?”

“Come back tomorrow.” The man commanded.

“But I've come all this way...”

“If your question is not important enough for you to return tomorrow, then it doesn't matter. If it is important enough then it can wait a day. Or a week. Or a month.”

“It's already waited five years!” She protested, angry and embarrassed at being treated in such a way by a mere gardener.

“Then it can wait one more day,” he answered calmly.

And with that he turned his back on her and went back to work tending to a bed of purple coneflowers.

Saffiyah stood only a moment more, listening to the sound of his trowel in the soft dirt, before walking back the way she came. She struggled against the wetness in her eyes, determined not to let the vile man see her cry.

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She left the town at dawn the next day, making it up the hill to the edge of the Mistwood just as the faint echo of the town's bells tolled out the hour of ten in the morning. She pushed eagerly through the mists and into the garden, marveling once again at the summer beauty that held sway. She peered carefully around as she strode to the front door, hoping to avoid the gardener who she was certain would just send her away with another “come back tomorrow”. With a pang of sadness and confusion, she noted that the mourning willow was not in its spot by the stream. It hadn't been chopped down, but was simply gone as though it had never been with only an empty clearing in its place.

This time she strode up the marble steps without slowing and rapped politely on the door, which opened onto a small sitting room of pale yellow walls

and white tile. A small table with two chairs had been set for tea.

“Please, sit,” the gardener with the willow-green hair swept into the room from the house beyond. He balanced a large tray carrying a delicate porcelain tea set and a plate of small sandwiches.

Saffiyah sat as he deftly placed his burden on the table.

“Honey for your tea?” He asked. “Lemon?”

She shook her head, bewildered, as he slid into the seat opposite her.

“Verdigris does not receive many visitors,” he said. “He wishes you to refresh yourself from your journey, and he wants you to know that he hears what I hear. Ask me your question, and he will know it.”

She only looked at him, leaving her tea untouched, unsure how much to trust the wizard’s servant.

“Why is your hair green?” She found herself asking.

“Is that your question?” He responded with an earnestness that made her feel like she had been tricked.

Her eyes went wide and she shook her head. “No! Please. Do I only get one?” She feared she might just have wasted her chance. Her fear turned to irritation when she saw him smile.

“No,” he chuckled. “But I’ll answer your question, anyway, even if it’s not the one you truly wish to ask. My hair is green from a magical experiment gone horribly, terribly wrong, and no magic of the so-called wizard on the hill can seem to set it right.”

Saffiyah smiled despite herself. The laughter in his voice and the smile in his brown eyes were contagious. They made her feel more at ease. Stronger. Braver.

“Five years ago,” she began, “my husband left with the other warriors of Saunderbir to fight the war with Grief. He promised to return...” She broke off, her voice catching in her throat.

“Is...” She took a deep breath. “Is he still alive, or has he found his way to the Seas of Life?”

“And if he has?”

She froze. Looked at him as though she didn’t understand the words. “I promised to wait,” she managed after blinking the tears from her eyes. “Please. Can the wizard’s magic find him?”

The gardener waited as she composed herself. He looked as if he were thinking. Or listening. “Violet magic like you ask is difficult at best,” he finally answered. “It works well only when the one doing the seeking knows more about the one being sought.”

Saffiyah’s eyes dropped to the napkin in her lap. Her voice fell to a sad whisper. “You’re saying it can’t be done.”

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m saying that the wizard must know more about your husband. And about you.”

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They spent the next week wandering the garden and talking. At first Saffiyah told him all about her love for Jarrod, and his love for her. She told him about how they met. How Jarrod had been a woodcarver and she a seamstress and how he had come to her with an enormous rip that needed repair in the backside of his pants. How they fell in love. Their wedding. Their life together before he and some of the other men and women of Saunderbir had left to join the war against Grief. As the days passed, she began to speak less about Jarrod and more about herself.

As she spoke, her sorrow diminished and her heart grew lighter. And the two grew closer together. Shared smiles and laughter. Began to talk about things like the people of Saunderbir or the weather. The flowers and plants of the wizard’s garden.

Only two topics halted whatever happy conversation they might be having. Sometimes they were questioned directly, and other times they were chanced upon innocently. The gardener would not discuss the mourning willow, which was only there when he was not, and Saffiyah would stumble into quiet sadness at the mention or thought of her husband.

It was during one of those moments that the gardener, his face suddenly serious and sad shook his head and breathed a heavy sigh.

“It is customary for newlweds to exchange a lock of hair,” he said, his voice rough and low. “The wizard will need the hair of your husband to work his magic. And he will need something of his. A prized possession will work, but something created by his own hands would be better. Fetch these and return tomorrow. The wizard will find your husband.”

“Really!?” She breathed, unable to believe it. Her face lit up and she threw her arms around him in a tight hug that he returned stiffly and awkwardly. “Thank you so much.” And she ran from the garden as fast as she could without looking back.

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Like fallen autumn leaves, countless papers littered the floor of the wizard's study. Countless papers covered by sketches of Saffiyah Broadwater in various poses as she went about her day-to-day activities. In one corner of the study, an enchanted quill busily scribbled away by itself on yet another drawing of her. When the portrait was complete, the pencil flicked it aside before beginning another. It only ever paused long enough to refill its supply of ink from a small glass bottle before returning to its constant sketching.

The green-haired man sat cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the drawings, deaf to the dry scritch of the working pencil. His attention was focused on the wooden image before him. It was a dull, lifeless carving created by an artisan with great skill in working wood, but no talent at all in capturing the soul of his subject. Jarrod had finished it only a day before he'd left to fight Grief, Saffiyah had told him when she had delivered it. He had known he was going and had carved it as a reminder of their love. But despite the skill of its creator, the statue of Saffiyah Broadwater failed to express any emotion at all. It was cold. Loveless. Lifeless. Reaching out his hand Verdigris tenderly traced the contours of the Saffiyah-statue's tiny face that somehow smiled without seeming happy at all.

Again, the wizard on the hill found himself wishing that it could be he to make her happy again. Tears ran openly down his face, dripping on the papers and making their ink run. He had fallen in love with her during their time together, but no matter how much he wished it, it could never be. He, too, would be taken from her.

Why? He cried silently and alone. Why did she come to him now? Why when he was dying by his own hand and could not be with her had this woman come to steal his lonely heart?

With an anguished howl, he buried his face in his hands and wept with the abandon of a man standing at the newly-dug grave of his lover. Behind him, one more portrait fluttered to the floor as the enchanted quill dipped itself into its ink bottle and began to sketch another.

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For six weeks, the sad woman hadn't been there to greet the coach as it pulled into town. The coachman had begun to wonder if maybe she'd actually heard what he'd said to her. Now, however, she stood waiting in her usual spot at the coach station as he pulled his carriage into town. He sighed deeply. His eyes seeking her as he pulled his team to a stop. His mouth getting ready to tell her his usual "No". His denial died on his lips. She looked different. Happier, maybe. Or expectant. Her hands clutched a bouquet of spring flowers that wilted in the warm sun of late spring.

She held back, watching as she waited for the passengers to disembark.

“Jarrod?” She asked tentatively of the last man to clamber from the carriage; a young man with a pleasant face, blond hair, and skin as light as hers was dark.

“Saffiyah!” He cried, his mouth a beaming smile. He rushed down and swept her into his open arms.

“Burn me!” The coachman mumbled, his eyes wide. “He kept his promise!” He grinned broadly. The world seemed suddenly a happier place. The heat of the sun didn’t seem quite so warm, nor the wooden seat quite so hard on his backside. He couldn’t be sure, but even the wilted flowers in her hand seemed to stand a little straighter and bloom a little brighter as she embraced the love of her life after all this time. Miracles never ceased during a Reprieve, he reminded himself. He found himself whistling a happy little tune as he turned his carriage around for the long trip to the next town.

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A swarm of cicadas buzzed endlessly on in the stagnant, midsummer twilight as Renee Cage sweated over her mortar and pestle. The eerie drone stopped abruptly, and the healer raised her head into a hot breeze that carried along a strange sense of something bad in the deepening gloom. Fireflies blinked and flashed above the yards and gardens, and a single soulsprite shimmered into existence on the sidewalk outside her open windows. It sang its sorrowful song as it drifted down the street. More of them appeared and joined their song to the first. They bobbed up and down in the air on magical currents only they could feel as their sparking flames shifted slowly through the colors of the spectrum, leaving streaming trails of light behind them as they wafted away.

Renee stood erect, her eyes wide and her ears alert, as she scanned the twilight darkness. No one really knew what the creatures were, or if they were even creatures at all. That they were made entirely of magical energy was certain. That they were drawn to strong emotion was equally well known. And tonight was the kind of sticky, hot summer night that honed people’s tempers and raised their sensitivity to insult and aggravation. Aggravations and emotions that were already simmering since the return of Jarrod Broadwater. Cautiously, dreading what she already knew, Renee turned her face to follow the soulsprites in the direction of the Broadwater’s small farm.

Carefully setting the pestle back in its bowl, Renee padded silently from her shop and into the deserted streets of the town. As she followed the drifting sprites, a louder sound grew louder over their wordless tune – the sound of a mob gathered outside the whitewashed fence of the Broadwater home.

“You’ve seen their crops!” A man said, his voice low and strained with anger. “Why should theirs do so well in this drought when ours suffer?”

Renee breathed deeply to calm her nerves. “What’s going on here, Blaine?”

She interrupted loudly.

Almost as one, the townsfolk turned and opened a path between the two.

“Evil, Doctor Cage,” Blaine hissed. “Evil in our midst that *your* magic was useless to detect!”

“Evil?” Renee struggled to remain cool. Emotion couldn’t be used to snuff the fire of emotion. She ignored the soulsprites drifting around the crowd. “Grief is gone. This might even be the Final Reprieve.” She addressed the townspeople, hoping to remind them of what was truly important. “This is a time of happiness. Of life and rebirth. There is no evil here.”

“I’m talking about Jarrod Broadwater, Renee,” Blaine advanced on her, towering over the smaller woman. “I’m talking about how his crops thrive while ours die from lack of water. I’m talking about a man who was missing for five years and who suddenly returns like nothing ever happened and looking like he hasn’t aged a day since he left. A man who can’t answer for his whereabouts since the Grief Fall. I’m talking...” his voice went dangerously low and rough, “about a woman whose unnatural loyalty can only stem from some foul enchantment.”

Renee blinked up at the man. So that was it then. For five years Blaine had sought the hand of Saffiyah Broadwater, and for five years she had rejected him. And for as long as Jarrod Broadwater was presumed dead in the war, the chance still existed that she might one day relent. The two months Jarrod had been back in Saunderbir had obviously been too much for Blaine’s fragile self-worth.

“What are you suggesting, Blaine?” She asked. “That he is a Sliver, maybe? Or that he died unwalked to the Seas of Life and has returned to haunt our town?” She whirled on the crowd. “Go home, everyone! Return to your own happiness. There’s no monster here but the monsters of ego and envy.”

Blaine stepped forward in an attempt to intimidate the woman through sheer bulk and size.

“I am suggesting,” he said coldly, “no such thing. I am suggesting that Jarrod is Grief Scarred.”

Renee stepped back, not out of fear but of shock. She raised an eyebrow as she scanned the man’s face. “You can’t be serious!” She scoffed. “Scarred? Don’t you think the people might have noticed if a ravening monster had been set loose in the town?”

She whirled on the crowd. “Let’s have it then! Has anyone been attacked without bothering to tell anybody? Had animals slaughtered and failed to mention it? Step up! No need to be shy! You can tell us if your children have been mauled on their way to school.”

The people shifted uncomfortably. Some looked around at the others. Some looked at their feet.

“No?” She turned back to the big man. “There we have it, then. Nobody here seems to have been attacked, and certainly Saffiyah...”

“Saffiyah may already be Scarred herself!” Blaine shouted. “Who knows if the taint of Grief carries on and passes from one to another if given enough time?” It was his turn to address the crowd. “Do you plan on finding out?” He asked them. “You’ve all seen the strangeness. You’ve all seen how he’s changed.” He pointed to the house at the end of the long walk past the gate. “Whatever that *thing* is that came back, it is *not* Jarrod Broadwater. Do you plan on cowering fearfully while your friends and family are changed into whatever Grief-scarred thing has claimed Saffiyah?”

He shouted now above the loud song of the soulsprites, gathered in a swarming multitude that lit up the night. And the crowd shouted back to him in agreement and defiance.

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Beyond the fence’s heavy gate, up the long, winding walkway through Jarrod’s new garden, the angered mob stood in silent awe amongst mirror images of themselves. The entire town’s populace had been sculpted from solid blocks of wood. Every person, every personality, forever locked in the wooden images of man, woman, and child. Renee’s serious yet friendly gaze. Ishi’s meek shyness. Paulo’s simple joy. Even down to the frowning sneer and arrogance of Blaine Fisher who stood before his own likeness, matching it scowl for scowl as the whine of a saw cut its way from some hidden workshop behind the squat house at the far edge of the courtyard.

Anger rose like bile in Blaine’s throat. His hatred burned white hot before his eyes. In one smooth motion, he unsheathed the sword he’d used in that final battle against Grief and he flew at the carving of himself. Stroke after stroke he chopped at the wooden effigy, howling his rage and wrath into the night sky. And with each blow, angry questions and accusations hurtled through his thoughts.

Why had Broadwater returned after so long? What had happened to him in that last battle? Why had he created these mockeries of them all? Why had he taken *her* from him, not once but twice? Why had he turned her against him? Corrupted her? Destroyed her? Why? *Why!?*

Through clenched teeth, Blaine grunted that last question as each strike of his weapon hewed into the statue in a shower of wood chips and splinters.

“Enough, Blaine,” Renee said softly. She stepped to the front of the

dumbounded throug.

But Blaine heard nothing above the roar of his own anger. His own hatred. The crying song of the soulsprites surrounding him. The song he heard over and over every night in his sleep from that final, hellish battle five years ago.

“What are you doing!?” Saffiyah’s voice practically thundered across the courtyard. All eyes turned to her as she ran to meet them. “What’s wrong with you!?”

Wherever Blaine’s rage had taken him, he was beyond her words.

“Stop it!” She shouted, grabbing his shoulder.

Blaine whirled, blindly striking out against the evil he knew had attacked him. Monster! Sliver! Grief-scarred horror! His naked blade bit deeply into flesh and Saffiyah’s dark eyes went wide in shock. Her beautiful face went ashen. Her mouth worked soundlessly as she slid from the sword and slumped to her knees. She knelt there a moment, her eyes questioning, before she slumped silently to her side, her life spilling onto the grass.

The whine of the saw stopped abruptly. Instantly. As though some hidden link had been severed. All time seemed to stop with it.

Blaine stared dumbly at his stained blade. At the single, crimson drop that grew fat at the tip before falling with a splat onto the dead woman’s cheek.

The townsfolk of Saunderbir, once so eager to see blood shed, found themselves sickened now that it had been.

“Scarred do not die so easily,” Renee said with great sorrow.

“She... She was a monster,” Blaine stammered. “She was!” Even standing over the body of the woman he’d once loved, slain by his own hand, some part of him refused to accept the truth.

“You murdered her, Blaine.”

“No.” He muttered. “No.”

“Saffiyah?” Jarrod’s voice rang out like a knell of doom.

Blaine looked up abruptly, tormented by monsters only his eyes could see. His face twisted into a sneer. “Him!” He muttered just loudly enough for the healer to hear.

“Blaine...” Renee warned softly.

“He made me do it!” Blaine stood straighter. His knuckles turned white as

he tightened his grip on the hilt of his weapon.

“Blaine. Enough. Don’t let one mistake turn into another. No more deaths tonight.”

She thought she might be getting through to him. His shoulders slumped. His breath came ragged and heavy.

“Saffiyah?”

Jarrold Broadwater emerged from behind the house. He wore only a pair of cotton shorts and a leather tool belt. His sweat-covered chest glistened in the moonlight. His hand still clutched his carpenter’s hammer. He froze only a moment as he spotted the grisly scene on his lawn.

His gaze lingered over Saffiyah’s unmoving form. It moved to the blood-stained blade gripped tightly in Blaine’s hand. It flicked up to the face of the man who’d slain his beloved. A thousand emotions flickered across his face in the space of a heartbeat.

With a strangled howl of grief and sorrow and loss, Jarrold Broadwater raised his hammer high and rushed madly at the larger man. But the hammer was too high. The attack too clumsy.

At the last possible moment, the healer recognized it for what it was: not an attempt at vengeance, but an attempt at suicide. “No!” She cried out.

Blaine’s sword flashed.

Jarrold’s arms went wide in acceptance of the blow.

The blade buried itself deeply in his chest, hungry for his heart, but there it struck something hard and jarred itself from Blaine’s grasp.

Tears welled in Jarrold’s eyes as he sank to his knees on the blood-stained grass beside his fallen wife.

“I was made only to love you,” he whispered hoarsely as his skin darkened to the color of rich loam. “To make you... happy...”

His body grew still as flesh changed to rich clay. His tears became a steady stream, washing him away. Fire flickered around his eroding, earthen form. Silver-white sparks launched into the night sky as a cold blackness oozed into the ground and killed the grass beneath him. A gust of crisp, fresh air blew outward from him, ruffling the hair and clothing of the stunned watchers. And with a great song, a swarm of soulsprites burst from the crumbling mound, joining their brethren as they drifted away into the darkness. Their song faded as they did, and the flowing stream trickled to a stop, leaving behind only a mound of

damp, dark earth.

With no flesh to hold it, Blaine's sword slowly tipped hilt-first onto the dead grass, dislodging from the mud a small, hand-carved wooden statue of Saffiyah Broadwater. It was split cleanly in the center from the blade still stuck in it.

"Do... Do you see?" Blaine muttered. "He was a monster."

"It was no monster," Renee said through her tears. "It was a simulacrum. A creature created by powerful magic out of the colors of the eight magics. Created to perfectly duplicate a living person."

She looked briefly to the dark woods sitting atop Mistwood Hill, a squatting blackness in the night. Certainly the wizard on the hill had both the power and the skill necessary to create the thing, but why? Had Saffiyah asked him to? Or had the plight of the sad, lonely woman now lying dead before them been enough to move even his Griefborn heart to pity?

"Then it wasn't human!" Blaine insisted. He looked at the townspeople. "Ishi, you saw! Tamir! Beryl? You have to see! It was carving duplicates of all of us!" He waved his arms to take in the statue-studded yard. "It would have replaced us all with more of its kind if I hadn't killed it! Gunther? You saw it, too!"

But Gunther turned from him. They all did. Numb. Sorrowed. Frightened. They all turned and walked away, locked in their own loss and confusion. First just a few, then in steadily growing numbers, they turned their backs and returned to their homes to hide from the events of the night.

"Seek atonement, Blaine." Renee shook her head sadly as she also left him behind in the yard among the carvings.

Even their wooden eyes seemed to glare accusingly at him.

A stale, hot breeze wandered its way across the yard.

The statues seemed to whisper with its passage. Accusations. Mockery. Laughter.

A single soulsprite flickered into being before the large carving of Saffiyah, lighting her face in its multi-hued dance. It drifted toward him and he screamed, fleeing into the countryside, running as far and as fast as he could away from his crime. His broken mind as shattered as his own ruined effigy lying in chips and splinters on the grassy floor.

Later that night, as the moon climbed higher in the sky, it looked down into a silent yard, empty but for a town of wooden people and the body of Saffiyah Broadwater. There, the pale light found in an earthen mound a thin, wiry twig

covered in small yellow-green leaves that had gone unnoticed by the people of Saunderbir. A twig that had been bathed in the magical essences of all that was. Beneath the light of the moon, the twig began to stir. To grow. To reach for the moon itself.

And when the next day's summer sun dawned bright and hot upon the town of Saunderbir – when the townsfolk came to claim Saffiyah's body to walk her spirit to the Seas of Life, they found an enormous mourning willow shading the courtyard and all its wooden people from the worst of the summer's heat. Up on Mistwood Hill, however, the beautiful garden of the wizard on the hill was slowly being covered by a thick blanket of snow falling heavily from the leaden clouds of winter.

* * * * *

“**A**nd some people say,” Quentin said, letting his illusion slip away, “that if you could find Saunderbir today, the tree still grows protectively over the grave of Saffiyah Broadwater and the statues of the townsfolk. The End.”

He looked at his audience as he took a hit from his whiskey flask. Some of them were crying. All of them looked unhappy. Even the green-haired kid. Served the little bastards right.

“Did you have a good story time?” The Silver Guard assigned to watch the kids and take them to weapon's training asked as she opened the door to the classroom. She was far too happy and far too kind with them because she was far too young. Her grandparents hadn't even been born during the last Cycle.

“Best one they ever had,” Quentin replied. He took another pull from his flask. The life of a Griefborn child was nothing but heartache and hurt. Best they get started learning that lesson early.



About the Author

As a young adult, Ryu Cope had already learned that knowledge was power and that power corrupts, so he was prepared to become a full-fledged supervillain.

Unfortunately, all of his attempts at true cartoon supervillainy have failed. Partly because he's too easily distracted, and partly because his heart isn't truly in it (it just seems like way too much work).

In the meantime, he has decided to share his knowledge and experience as an artist, a gamer (creator of the *Uncle Figgy's* gaming guides), as a writer (nonfiction and urban-fantasy fiction), as a podcaster (creator and host of the Bad Buddhist Radio podcast), and as a lecturer and guest speaker.

He's also still learning new things and accumulating new knowledge, and since knowledge is power, and power corrupts, it's only a matter of time!

Check out more of Ryu's insanity at ryucope.com.