

I am Shroud Wayfarer

I heard it even then. A low murmur in my mind, it appeared sporadically coming in the moments when I needed strength, it has always been with me, and it shall forever be part of my pattern.

I am Shroud Wayfarer, traveler of the world. My journey began in the forgotten hinterlands of Barsaive. In that forsaken terrain crude villages eke out a harsh existence. Folk there live a superstitious life, afraid of travelers and horrors, and with good reason. Some villages still remain closed in their Kaer's, their inhabitants too terrified of the scourge to emerge. It was from such a village that whence I came. I was young, not yet a man, but no longer a boy. When, on a glorious and sunny day a traveling minstrel arrived in our village. He was gay man with a thousand songs and jests ready for his audience. Most of the villagers shunned the minstrel at first but soon he began to attract large crowds to his nightly shows. I was furious when my farther ordered me to look after the herd, which required being away from the village, but I had little choice. I spent a week away from home in the barren grasslands of the hinterland. When I returned it was very strange indeed. Everyone was behaving very oddly. My fellow villagers were laughing hysterically at every turn, and went around with huge smiles on their faces. My farther beat my mother as he smiled at her and proclaimed his love. I was terrified; I had no Idea what to do, so I ran away. My mind raced with confusion, the murmur of my ally whispering for me to turn and face the danger, but my fears subsumed me.

I spent the next few days with the flock, tending to the beasts that I had spent so long with. It was then that another stranger entered my life. It was a beautiful human woman. She was stunning, clad in leather armour, and with a gleaming sword at her side. She was martial, unyielding, and like the rock itself. She said only one sentence, "where is the horror?" I pointed with a trembling hand toward the village and the valkyrie walked on. After a while the murmur began to beat within my, I followed the woman.

I arrived at my home to find my mother dead. All around the village my fellow namegivers had killed each other. Here and there a few observers exacted torturous ministrations upon hapless victims. The Valkyrie strode among the dead searching intently. The living villagers just smiled with madness-glazed eyes at her. She peered into each house she passed, looked into the meeting hall, but did not find what she sought. I found Gral, my best friend, dead in the road, multiple stab wounds throughout his body.

It was then that the horror emerged. It was the minstrel. He stalked out of a vacant house. The valkyrie snapped to a fighting stance and she stood at a restful pose hand on her sword. The mistrials human features twisted in a grotesque image as his whole body changes into a clawed humanoid with an inhuman face and large spikes protruding from his back. The Valkyrie uttered one sentence, "now Joie, you die." With that said the Valkyrie's sword became whirling death. The Horror leapt forward with claws extended, slashing with irrepressible glee. The swordswoman's blade blocked and parried with exquisite skill, her thrusts were that of a master of her craft.

Back and forth the battle raged. I looked on with rapt attention. They moved across the village square in the ancient dance of death. The Valkyrie fought with a brilliant precision and skill, and the horror with savage strength and rage. I watched for what seems a year, but was in reality only a few minutes. Then The Valkyrie made a mistake. The Horror feinted to the right, and the swordswoman took the bait. Joie tore a

large gash down her left side, and her blood flowed like the Serpent River. She managed to get in blow of her own, and Joie screamed a demonic howl and jumped back. He was clearly not as badly hit. The Horror spoke, "now my pet, it seems you found me, but to what purpose. You have only hastened your own demise."

I stood panting breathless from the excitement of watching the battle. The murmur began to increase within my head, it was becoming a loud voice whirring around and around within the confines of my mind. I gasped as Joie moved forward. The Valkyrie stood her ground in a fierce fury of combat, but she was heavily injured. The horror's attacks slipped through time and time again. The murmur had grown to a roaring shout in my mind until I could stand it no longer. I grabbed my pocketknife and ran screaming at the horror. It was then that I heard the full fury of the whirlwind. My actions were undisciplined fury. In my young heart I sought vengeance for the death of my friends and family. I thrust my knife blindly what seemed like a thousand times. Then all went dark.

The whirlwind was gone. All was dark. My whole body ached as if I had been beaten to a bloody pulp. I managed to open my eyes to see the stars above, a campfire, and the Valkyrie. She turned toward me as I stirred, "Joie escaped, or maybe I should say we escaped. You will travel with me now. I will teach you the way of the Wandering Swordsman, and perhaps we will meet Joie again one day." With that statement began my life of travel and rigorous training, and my path to the way of the Wandering Swordsman.

A Second Encounter

I was older now. A young adult elf ready to embark into the world. My Mistress had taught me well. I had become a true disciple of combat. I lived to further my knowledge of my art. Soon I would even leave my mistress and choose my own path to wander in the world.

These thought strummed through my mind as I returned to Galra, a small village not unlike the one I grew up in. My mistress had sent me on an errand to see the weapon smith Flarnon. He had taken my mistresses silver, and had begun the enhancement of her blade.

I saw the village in the distance. It looked like one of those paintings you can find in bartertown, that the rich buy so often to put in their houses. The sun shone brightly, the thatched houses stood with solid regularity, and the moving forms of the villagers could be seen. I stepped up my pace with my goal in sight. I soon arrived at the village outskirts, but I found a wholly dreadful visage.

My mind was thrust back ten years, unto when I had first met my mistress. Villagers lay dead everywhere. Many of the townsfolk moved about with deliriously happy grins upon their faces. One farther was smiling inanely as he hammered nails into his son's body. I gave a cry of rage, and the familiar low murmur began to ring within my mind. I ran into the village. I screamed for my mistress, but I heard no response. Then I heard the sound of infants wailing in the distance. I ran to find the source of the disturbance. It was the village hall. The door was open and the sound of screaming could be heard within. I drew my broadsword and advanced.

The stench of death was in the air. Many women of the village lay dead; apparently they had sought shelter in here with their children. Many youngsters and babes cried for their lost protectors, but I paid them little heed. Off to one corner I witnessed a sight that made my blood turn to ice. My mistress stood with a butcher's knife in her hand and inane smile on her face as she cheerfully carved up a young boy as he lay screaming on the ground. I ran over to confront her, yelling for her to stop what she was doing. She didn't seem to notice me. Her eyes were fixated on the young body she was mutilating. I screamed again, and finally she looked at me. Looked at me with those maddened eyes, with a smirk on her lips, and she said, "ah Shroud help me here please, get his leg will you." I just stared at her, and then I began to tell her she was under Joie's spell and to stop immediately. I screamed again and again but she did not stop. With that boy dead she moved to the next victim.

I stepped in her way. I said, "Nay mistress you will stop now." The murmur of the whirlwind was growing louder and louder within my own head. My mistress stared at me for a moment, then raised her knife and slashed. "Move," she said. I stood unyielding in her path. Her features immediately snapped to one of anger, she lashed out at me with her weapon. I called upon my magic to guide my sword hand and avoid my teacher's blows. She spoke harshly, "so young pup you want to challenge your mistress do you. Think I've lost my touch eh, well you'll find out how wrong you are," with that she launched a full assault.

We danced across the village hall, our blades swinging, and our breaths ragged. She was no longer the calm master of her discipline, but a vengeful servant of the horrors. I was forced back, and back, as her butcher's knife landed multiple blows. The whirlwind grew within me; it was at a howling pitch. My body began to thrum with the magic of my craft; the whirlwind provided me with strength. Suddenly my blows were surer, quicker, and defter. I began to drive my mistress back. She snarled with hatred. My sword moved through the air like lighting. Then I became the whirlwind. Then my sword found its target true, as I plunged the blade through my teacher's body. Her actions stopped abruptly as she slid to the floor. I barely heard her dying words, "such a beautiful dance, my young apprentice."

I ran through the village screaming Joie's name, searching in every house and building, but I found nothing. Again he had escaped. I spent the next week burying the dead, and those who had committed suicide having woken up from their horror induced stupor. I buried my mistress most carefully, asking the passions to treat her well. I knew in my heart that I would meet Joie again, there was no need to rush, I would wander into his path again. I knew it as surly as I know the sun will rise each day.

-I am Shroud Wayfarer, I am a wanderer, I am the whirlwind.