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Fiction
Approx. 2,000 Words

Carved of Shadow, Crept from Darkness

Three. "A charmer till the end," she says. Her face is pallid, her voice cracked as the tiled porcelain beneath their feet. Listless, she weighs no more than a ragdoll in his arms.

"Your fate is not yet finished. Remain steadfast." *For Terratus, for Tunon. For me.*

If he speaks with enough conviction maybe, just maybe, by the grace of Kyros, he can make it true. Can really, truly bend reality to his will. To save her life. Her lips split in a fleeting smile, her teeth tinged red. She bleeds rivers from her back, drenching his hands.

He's never felt so useless as a Fatebinder.

He slips on the slicked, split porcelain tiles of the bathhouse floor as he lunges forward. In his haste, he nearly forgets his halberd. The steam stings at his eyes. Clogs his throat.

This is unfamiliar territory for a battlefield.

"Where is it?" he asks. His muscled body surges like a thrust spear through the steam. With each damp, panting breath, he tastes perspiration and mead.

For Nunoval, Fatebinder of War, death takes the form of a Beast.

A shadowed silhouette rises like the jut of a mountain, hazed before him. Blocking the door.

Layla takes a ragged breath but doesn't scream. She rattles in his grip as he crashes into the wall. The entire right side of his body throbs acutely, numbed. Soon he won't be able to feel anything. Not panic, not grief, not the haft in his hand. Not heat nor anger nor love.

"My dagger," she says as it skitters across the floor.

How she'd maintained a clutch on it before is beyond him. Even draining like a split boar, she's tough as bronze. Had always been the toughest of all of them.

"Rademos!" he howls.

"Did you see it?" she asks. "It slunk from the shadows."

"Rademos!" Nunoval shouts again. "Rademos!"

Layla's head lolls, and the darkness draws closer. Hunched and hulking, it moves inhumanly on elongated hands and feet, crawling, creeping, no, stalking across the room, its saber-like claws tap-tap-tapping slowly, deliberately, against the mosaic tiles. It is hunting. And they are its prey.

Cold sweat beads Nunoval's brow. His pulse pounds in his neck, thump-thump-thumping to the clawed beat of their coming death. For a skip of several heartbeats, everything feels surreal.

When the creature, the form of darkness, is only a few yards away, it rises once more and, ambling, drags its black claws along the wall, casually but deeply furrowing the stone.

It's savoring this, toying with them.

"Do not close your eyes," he says to Layla and jounces her to force her awake, but maybe he says it as much to himself, and all the while his thoughts are racing, thinking—*where is Rademos?* Gaien and Evander and Niccol he knows already are gone. Branwen, as well, cannot help them, and if no one can come, he will have to set Layla down in order to fight, and then she will be dead. Behind his back, she will slip away like the sands in an hourglass, while he savagely hacks their attacker to bloodied chunks in his fury and anguish.

"Wouldn't dream of sleeping now, might have nightmares," she says. She jokes, teasing him unbearably to the end, but her lips are ashen and grimaced as she speaks. "Might dream of you, mewling and pawing at my breasts, kissing my clavicle in that sloppy way you do."

She is looking at him, eyes half-focused and bluer than the northern sky. So he offers her the softest quirk of a smile, though he cannot decide what to do.

Fight or die?

It is a decision he should have no problem answering, has never had a problem answering before.

Fight or die?

Yet now he asks himself again and again—

Fight or die?

And where is Rademos?!

Blessedly, in answer, the door in the crook of the far wall splinters. Finally. A thud, a beat, and it bursts fully inward, slamming against the stucco wall before hanging askew in its frame.

"Commander?" Garbed in a rucked tunic, leather trousers, and flaking, mud-caked boots, flaxen hair mussed with sleep, Rademos strides into the room. His eyes dart about before settling on the pair of them. "Shit, Layla." His fingers falter mid-sigil.

Help is near, but so far away.

"Careful!" Nunoval shouts. "It's among us!"

"In here?! How?"

Layla simply says, "It's a clever one," as if that explains everything.

Nunoval surges again for the door. He shifts Layla more to one arm so he can better heft his weapon. The dark Beast swipes again, but this time Nunoval halts the attack. One-handed, muscles straining against the force, he holds the brute at bay. It is no easy feat. Black claws like scythes score his fingers before he returns the slash, the blade of his halberd lancing across the Beast's thigh.

Then he is moving again. And with a rumbling chuckle, the creature disappears into the steam.

Rademos raises his staff, knuckles blanched where they grip the helve. "I thought we lost it at Lethian's bridge."

"Clearly, we did not."

Rademos swears profusely before invoking the name of his Archon, fingers contorting into the form of a familiar sigil, a rune he's favored a hundred times and more in battle, but now hesitates to cast, holding back the acrid swell of energy, jaw

set grimly as he waits on his commander and squad-mate to slip past, and the air pops with accumulated power.

"Forget the Beast," Nunoval gasps as he skids into the doorway. "Help her."

Rademos glances to them sidelong before releasing a whiplash of lightening arching throughout the steam-clouded room. Behind the haze it looks like a distant thunderstorm. "You know I can't mend flesh and blood," he says.

"I don't care. Do something, whatever you must," Nunoval counters. "Save her."

"Do you hear it?" Layla asks, eyes closed as she listens, and the men fall quiet as well, panting and straining to hear over the rushing of their blood in their ears.

Rademos is the first to speak. "No."

"I didn't either," Layla says. She reaches for her hip, fingers fumbling for the dagger that isn't there. "But that's the trick, isn't it? Not to feel it first."

In the moment before the Beast struck, she'd been laughing deeply, abs bunching beneath taut, bronzed skin, water swirling her navel. Then her drink sloshed as she pitched forward, face twisted in confusion and pain, and his arms outstretched to catch hers, grasping desperately to hold on.

Five. The Beast had been hunting them for days. He'd issued orders for caution. He'd tightened their formation and altered their route. He'd taught them, for so many years, how to survive no matter what, how not to fear or falter, how to strike hard and bury their foes in the dirt.

Evander and Niccol went to take a piss in pairs, but only Niccol stumbled back, swearing and shaking. Nunoval stared down the line of his soldier's arm, rent red from shoulder to elbow. Then he rolled his eyes to the sky.

Kyros have mercy. His soldiers had turned to mewling piglets in the face of a single Beast. Even he was beginning to worry, to wonder. Yet had he not, himself, cut down an entire pack with tawny fur and citrine eyes less than a fortnight before? Beastmen were nothing to be feared.

A Beast was nothing he could not best, yet despite his efforts, both Gaien and Evander had carelessly gotten themselves killed. And now Niccol was injured.

"Branwen! Stitch Niccol before we eat. Layla, Rademos—with me."

He did not wait for a reply as he set at a sturdy pace for the edge of the clearing. Withered leaves crunched beneath his boots. With each step, he felt his pulse quickening as he approached the spot where Evander's corpse would forever lie.

What should have been a simple scouting expedition had become a tepid and drawn-out bloodbath. Forget mapping Haven's marshes. He was tired of soaking in the blood of his own men. It felt unbearable to lose them now, when the invasion of the Tiers had yet to even begin, when they were only just preparing a military stratagem for Tunon the Adjudicator. At least, if they were to die honorably in battle, he could accept the loss. But like this? Like this he would have only failed them.

He was going to confront the Beast that night. And barring his assured victory, they would head for Lethian's Crossing—the closest human settlement to their position in the realm.

The three of them stood silent, nearly elbow to elbow as they peered down at the hewn gore that was their former companion.

Nunoval gritted his teeth as he barked a single command.

Lethian's Crossing was protected by a well-known band of mercenaries. No Beast would dare follow them there.

"Dig."

One. His chest heaves as he runs. The Beast slams into him, pitching him to the ground. Layla tumbles from his arms and rolls, a twisted heap, her hair spilled around her like a golden crown, her damp skin caked with blood and mud from the road. She's gone.

Aching, he crawls to his forearms, palms and knees. He scrapes his hand over the haft of his halberd, so livid he can't even speak. He feels it looming over him before its dusky, gnarled foot steps into view. With a low, rippling growl, it drops Rademos's severed head before him, and he screams, stabbing it in the gut. He twists the blade, cursing it back to the darkness from whence it came, forcing it backwards as he shoves to his feet.

"Damn you!" he chokes, "Kyros damn you all!"

His voice breaks, but he doesn't stop. He's wounded the Beast. He can barely distinguish it from the surrounding shadows, but he can smell its blood. He hacks and slashes and thrusts, pressing his advantage. He will end this.

He *will* kill it.

It tries to block an upward thrust, and triumphantly, he stabs straight through its thick-muscled forearm. A fiendish grin breaks across his face, the first outward sign of his surging bloodlust. Of his fury and raw desire. But instead of shirking or yowling, the Beast chuffs with a dark amusement. It stalks forward, pressing further onto the sharp, speared tip, closing the distance between them. Swiftly, he moves to rip the blade back, but it grabs onto the helve of the staff and with a monstrous strength wrenches it away. It tugs the barbed blade from its flesh with a snick, and then his weapon is tossed, clattering, into the darkness.

The Beast is on him in an instant.

His back hits the ground, hard, the wind painfully jarred from his lungs. His fists lash out, but its massive, calloused hands grab his wrists, and he realizes with a shock that it's a woman. Her naked, scarred breasts brush his chest.

Her nostrils flare as she inhales his scent, and she growls deeply, purpled lips peeling back to bare yellowed fangs. Her scarlet eyes hungrily rove his face. Shattered, his thoughts flee his mind, deserting him to his fate. This is how he's going to die.

She speaks. Words form with heated effort, her voice rumbling, low. "Did human think own roaming pack could hunt as wished? Could slaughter three river-whelps in Beastwomen-lands?" She licks his neck, her mauve tongue rough as wood. "Did not know Shadowhunter would take vengeance?"

When she breathes, her exhale is hot against his skin.

"How? How could I have known?!" he howls. He grits his teeth until he tastes blood. "Do it! It's because of me they're dead."

All of them. Because of his mistake.

She grins, fierce and dangerous.

For reasons he'll never understand, or maybe for no reason at all, she spares him. Unlike the others, she leaves him – alive, heart thrashing, emotionally riven but bodily whole, battered and nearly broken in the rammed-clay street, staring up through clouded eyes at a starless sky.

But before she slips as the ebb of a shadow into the pitch blackness of the night, she carves, slowly, painstakingly with one claw, a deep scar into his chest. With it, her parting words brand into his mind.

"Remember Beastwoman's vengeance. Remember Kills-in-Shadow."