

*The
Substance
of
Shadow*

A Short Story

by Cat Greenberg

To Bari Greenberg,
Husband, Partner, Soulmate.
I will never stop missing you.

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THE SUBSTANCE OF SHADOW

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Anyi faced the wind, tears drying on her cheeks, storm clouds roiling above the trees.

Tollan's storm.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, filling herself with the scent of the building tempest. Tornados of long, grey hair whipped about her head. Lightning leapt from cloud to cloud as thunder shook the ground.

She opened her eyes, power burning in them as she walked toward Dead Hill and justice.

The wind changed direction, pushing her forward, her hair blowing past her face, a standard flying at the head of a one-woman army. Trudging higher up the barren hill, the wind surrounded her and helped her stay upright when knees long past their prime threatened to give out. Rain began halfway up, a steady stream of water. She reached the summit, panting, steeling herself for the task at hand. She straddled the ground on her knees, the wind buffeting her on all sides as the rain softened its attack.

There was no sense of time as she scooped and molded the form before her, arms covered with muddy clay. She flinched when lightning struck the ground nearby,

sending bits of dirt spraying into the air around her. The storm grew impatient, but Anyi could not rush. The form must be exact, a complete and perfect duplicate of Tollan's form, the shadow of his Silhouette given substance.

The wind blew from all directions at once; the lightning became so constant it mimicked the sun in brilliance, though it left the world as stark and drained of color as Anyi was drained of joy. The body finished, she began to smooth the head. Closing her eyes she saw Tollan's face again: his sun-bronzed skin, the hint of a smile which always lingered, the love in his deep brown eyes.

New streaks of tears poured down her clay-smudged cheeks. She would never again see her soul reflected in those beautiful eyes - eyes which had lifelessly stared up at her from the floor of his workshop as she'd cradled his bound body in her arms. Her grief wailed at the storm as she desperately tried to blot out the image.

She'd arrived home as dusk fell and caught but a glimpse of the cloaked figures fleeing into the woods. With a puzzled sense of dread she'd run to her husband's workshop. Falling to her knees in the doorway, her heart nearly burst as it hammered in her chest. Her beloved husband's body was tied to his chair, his head on the floor beside it with the villains' gag still stuffed in his mouth.

They must have surprised him. He was never one to set any but the most minimal wards, not wanting to risk harm to an innocent visitor. The only ward Tollan did use told him when visitors arrived and identified who they were. Strangers could not have caught him so off guard - which meant it was someone Tollan knew! With his hands tied and his mouth gagged, he could not make the incantations which would have saved his life.

As Anyi had wept, raging at the injustice of not knowing where to direct her vengeance, the Heartstone Tollan gave her thirty years ago on their Promise Day began to warm and pulse where it hung between her breasts. Thunder began to mutter in the distance as Tollan's essence pulsed within the stone and his soul whispered instructions. Anyi's magecraft was the gentler earth magics, nothing which would aid in bringing foes to justice. But Tollan had been an Archmage of the highest order, and as the storm grew, the knowledge of what she must do blossomed in Anyi's mind like a flower opening to the morning sun.

His assailants believed by taking a sorcerer's head, you stole his power. Only Masters and Mistresses of the Guild knew the tale was a skillfully crafted lie. A wizard's power lay not in his head, but in his heart. With Tollan's death, his resided in the Heartstone worn by the person he trusted most, his partner and wife.

Anyi's eyes opened and she gazed with grim satisfaction at the finished clay form, then she reached under her hair and unclasped the chain holding Tollan's Heartstone. The lightning drew closer as the words of incantation filled her mind.

"Form of clay receive thy Master's heart," she said as she laid the amulet carefully on the form's chest and clasped the chain around its neck. "The Storm of Justice calls you to service. Elements of Earth and Air grant you leave to avenge thy Master's honor."

There was no other option available to her and Tollan. In exchange for their autonomy, crimes against a wizard, rare though they were, did not fall into any magistrate's jurisdiction. The Guild controlled its own by whatever means it deemed necessary. With the nearest Guild outpost a three day ride away, this clay Silhouette was their only recourse.

She stumbled back in the gusting wind. The Heartstone's glow pulsed in a dazzling synchronicity with each burst of lightning, the thunder an endless cacophony. One blinding flash struck the amulet directly and Anyi brought her arms up to shield her eyes. Deafening silence told Anyi all was finished. She lowered her arms to see the clay Silhouette standing before her, mist rising from it, the amulet glowing with the power of her husband's heart.

She stepped aside to let it pass, then followed. Anyi hadn't seen their faces, but Tollan knew who his assassins were and his spirit would guide the Silhouette. They thought themselves safe and unseen. They were wrong.

Already past midnight, Anyi had only until dawn to find her husband's killers. The sun's first rays would carry her beloved Tollan's heart to the Beyond and the Silhouette would again be formless clay.

Anyi followed as Tollan's Silhouette plodded purposefully toward the village and her stomach soured. Ten years she and Tollan had called Mabina home. Ten years! They'd believed the people of the village cared about them and valued their service, thought of them as neighbors and friends. When their farms suffered from drought, Tollan and Anyi brought the rain. When little Tanika became lost, trapped in a sinkhole in the woods, it was Tollan's magecraft which found and rescued her. People came to her and Tollan time and again for the treatment of fevers, difficult births, even simple rashes; never was even one turned away unaided, even when the only payment which could be offered were heartfelt thanks. It made Anyi sick to think someone whom they'd trusted, who perhaps had even gusted at their table, could commit this obscene betrayal.

They passed through the village square, then turned left. Anyi stayed alert for any sign their passage was observed, but all seemed peaceful in the warm summer night. The chirp of crickets, the trill of a nightbird's song, and the flap of a bat's wing all drifted – so deceptively normal - past Anyi. Only the gentle thump-shuffle the heavy, clay figure made as it walked was different from the sounds heard the previous evening when she'd strolled along these very roads for pleasure, Tollan at her side, holding her hand and laughing at the antics of two stray kittens. Tonight her companion was an eyeless clay form, shadow image of the man taken from her.

A dog came running out of an alley, prepared to bark, but instead it stopped and sat down, watching them pass in silence. Animals know when not to interfere.

They passed the last house and still the figure shuffled on. Anyi glanced around frantically. Were her husband's killers foreigners? How could they have surprised him? Yet the Silhouette continued its passage out of the village and down the road. Unless - Anyi's heart sank with the thought - perhaps they were now fleeing on horseback. If so, she would never catch them before dawn.

Trees closed in around them as the road narrowed. Anyi could hear the rush of the river as they headed for North Road Fording. Could the Silhouette cross water? She wasn't sure. What knowledge she'd gained came from Tollan's spirit so she could make the Silhouette properly. With the task completed, it trickled from her memory like water from a leaky bucket.

Then she heard laughter: someone sat camped by the river! As she grew closer the voices became clear over the rush of the water.

"Did you see the look on his face?" A female voice crowed. "He never dreamed I

could do it. Hah!"

Anyi caught herself on the trunk of a tree and barely managed to keep from being sick. What kind of monster could exult in killing her gentle Tollan?

"Will you be quiet," a younger male voice hissed. Both voices sounded familiar to Anyi, but in her grief-fogged mind she couldn't quite place them.

"Why?" Demanded the woman. "Having second thoughts?"

"You said you wanted to talk. You didn't say you were going to kill him!"

"Well now, lad, 'twas for your own good. You'd never have gone along if I'd told you. You should thank me," the voice sneered. "He would never have given you all his knowledge. None of them do! They just use you, then throw you away. But I beat them at their own game. Now the wizard's power is mine!"

"Is it?" demanded the boy. "Do you feel any different? All I feel is sick. Sick that I let you talk me into this, that I didn't see what you were going to do. He was my friend, and I betrayed him. How will I ever be able to face Mistress Anyi?" His voice broke then. "She will never forgive me. Never."

No! It was impossible. How could Gaelen be involved?

Tollan's sixteen year old apprentice, Gaelen, was supposed to be visiting his family in Bevyn. They'd treated him like a son these past four years. And who was the other familiar voice, the gloating, laughing one?

"So? What can the wife of a dead wizard do? The power will come, I know it will. I took his head, the power of Archmage Tollan is *mine*! And *you* had better keep your wits about you or you'll be the first one I use it on!"

Tollan's Silhouette emerged from the trees then, Anyi following. Her breath

caught when she saw the laughing speaker.

“Rordyn!”

She'd come to her husband five years ago, asking to be apprenticed to Tollan. At fifteen they'd thought her rather old to be a beginning apprentice, but they took her in anyway and Tollan tested her. Rordyn held some talent, but her impatience and volatile temper made her a poor apprentice. Study of the craft is arduous and requires self-discipline and a temperate nature the girl could not manage. After only a month Tollan sent Rordyn on her way. He'd been as gentle as possible, giving the lass more than a month's wage as severance and a letter of reference so she could apprentice in some other, non-magical, profession. Rordyn tore up the letter and threw it at Tollan in disgust, swearing she *would* be a wizard, and if Tollan wouldn't teach her, someone else would.

It was a year before they heard the rumors among the mage circles. The explanation for the girl's age was she had already failed with three other wizards before Tollan.

Rordyn and Gaelen stood frozen at the sight of Anyi and the clay figure, not quite comprehending what they were facing. Cold rage burned in Anyi as she confronted Rordyn. "How dare you so much as speak his name!" Anyi screamed. "You should have accepted my husband's counsel. You are not suited to magic and never will be!"

Rordyn drew herself up, brandishing a sword. "I will be a wizard this night. Do you not recognize your dear husband's blood? *I* took his head, his power is *mine*!"

The Silhouette moved to face Rordyn. She slashed at the clay figure, but the blade bounced off ineffectively. As she brought the blade down a second time, a cold,

clay hand caught and closed around Rordyn's wrist and the triumph in her eyes turned to shock and terror, a scream erupting finally as the bones were crushed in the inhuman grip, the useless sword dropping to the ground.

"Fool!" Anyi spat. "You think a wizard's power can so easily be stolen?"

The Silhouette tossed Rordyn aside like a wet kerchief. She hit the base of a tree but managed to roll away before the clay hand could catch her again. She scrambled away, plunging down the embankment to the river's edge and splashing into the knee-deep water. The Silhouette stopped at the top of the embankment.

Rordyn laughed again, but this time tinged with hysteria rather than triumph. "It can't, it's clay. No matter what holds it together, it can't follow me. I've won!"

The sound of the shallow fording changed as the Heartstone glowed brighter.

"What are you doing? I can't move my feet. Let go!" Rordyn's panic grew as the water began to rise all around her. Anyi watched, strangely dispassionate, as Rordyn struggled to move feet magically held to the river's bottom. The water swirled and rose until her shouts became gurgling, water-strangled pleas; then silence as the water swirled above her head. When the river subsided the woman was gone, her body swept downstream.

Anyi'd thought watching Rordyn die would satisfy her, somehow ease her grief. Instead, she felt even more empty and numb than before.

It hadn't brought her beloved Tollan back.

Nothing would.

"I won't run," she heard Gaelen say. The Silhouette turned to face the lad.

"I deserve to die." Gaelen spoke quietly, his eyes bleak. "I'm sorry, Mistress, I'm

so sorry."

"Why?" Anyi managed to ask as her desire for revenge drained away with the lowering waters. "Why did you do this?"

"I didn't know! She said she wanted to talk to Master Tollan. Said she'd been his apprentice before me and she wanted to show what she'd learned since leaving."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"It happened so fast," Gaelen broke then, falling to his knees. "She told me she wanted to surprise you and Master Tollan. She said she was sure you'd be happy to see her. Called herself your long-lost daughter. She seemed so sincere, and I . . . I believed her. I blocked the wards and let her in. She ran ahead of me while I replaced the wards. By the time I reached the workshop, she'd already bound Master Tollan and pulled out a sword." He paused then, his voice tight with shame. "I froze when I saw it, Mistress," he said miserably, "a moment, just a moment," a sob shook him, "too long, just a moment and . . . if I'd just done something, said *something!*" The horror of what he'd witnessed, and failed to prevent, choked him. It was a long time before he could speak again. "And then it was over. Master Tollan was dead and Rordyn was dragging me out of the house. I'm so sorry." He bowed his head, tears falling freely, the slosh of the river accompanying his sobs.

Anyi watched the wretched young man, son of her house these past four years, and her heart broke again. He, too, was a victim of Rordyn's madness. His apprenticeship, his esteemed teacher, a man he loved the same as a father, even his innocence - all lost in a single stroke.

The first gray light of pre-dawn filled the air. The Silhouette stood motionless

beside Anyi, watching in eyeless scrutiny.

Then she felt Tollan's gentle presence again. Like the molding of the Silhouette, a new knowledge bloomed unbidden in her mind. Anyi looked from the Silhouette to the slowly brightening sky, then reached up and unclasped the Heartstone from around the clay neck.

"Gaelen." She said, and he looked up to see her standing over him. "You have much to learn and precious little time." She placed the Heartstone around his neck and saw, in the shock of his widening eyes, the knowledge - and forgiveness - Tollan's ever gentle spirit was imparting.

The sun glinted over the horizon, sending shafts of light toward the three figures. One touched the clay Silhouette melting it back into a pile of lifeless clay. Another touched the Heartstone and a shaft of blue light reflected off it toward Anyi's own heart. She heard Tollan's whispered good-bye and felt the eternity of his love.

As the Heartstone dimmed and went out, Anyi thought the sun seemed to shine more brightly than usual as it climbed into the cloudless sky.

The End