

A Soul For Tsing

A Novel

By

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CHAPTER V

The Imperial Archives occupied an entire wing of the royal palace. Towering shelves of moldering tomes, scrolls and loosely stacked parchment vied for space with row upon row of portraits, sculptures and depictions of various persons and events throughout the entire reign of Tsing. This was not the bladamage's favorite place. The close shelves felt like they were about to topple over on him and the dust wreaked havoc with his sinuses. Unfortunately, a principal component of any soul blade's construction was the spirit of a once-living person. Without it, the culmination of his skill would be just another enchanted weapon. Oh, it would be keen and well balanced to be sure, but it would not be a masterwork worthy of his genius. But locating candidates suitable for union with the most powerful weapon in the Realm of Tsing was quickly becoming an even more formidable task than forging the blade itself.

He had poured over rosters and lists and death notices until his eyes burned, with little more to show for his hours of effort than a pounding headache. At this point he was beginning to wonder if the three traits he sought - skill with the battle-axe, loyalty to the Emperor and, most importantly, a strong and stable psyche - were mutually exclusive. The most renowned axe-wielding heroes of recent legend were notoriously short tempered and uncannily belligerent with regard to any figure of authority. Several had been expelled from the knighthood or even banished for acts bordering on treason.

So far, he had found reference to only two persons who seemed skilled, devoted and stable enough for the union, and one of those was a dwarf. He doubted that any dwarf would submit to such a binding union, but he could not know the fellow's answer if he did not ask. And to ask, he had to not only locate them in the archives, but also locate their burial sites.

"If only I could find one such as you, Kaoin-ka," he mumbled, letting his hand rest on her braided hilt as he strode through the isles searching for a reference. The hilt grew warm in his hand as her decidedly lusty thoughts caressed his mind. He smiled despite himself as his body reacted in a manner inconsistent with his years. He knew he could break the mental contact simply by removing his hand from her hilt, but he let it rest there for a while, simply enjoying her company. The union of Kaoin-ka with the blade had been the answer to a desperate dilemma a century earlier when he had been young, brash and completely in love.

Then, as now, he had been employed by a powerful noble, but in another empire, on another continent, and what seemed several lifetimes ago. Kaoin-ka had been a Teikoku no Bannin, an elite guardian of the Emperor's royal daughter. They met when the bladamage was contracted to design and manufacture a personal weapon for the young Princess. The assignment proved quite challenging in that the Princess had no weapon-skill whatsoever and abhorred violence. The young bladamage embraced this test of his skill, spending much time with the Princess, and so with her bodyguard Kaoin-ka.

As he came to know the Princess, and to fall in love with her sworn protector, he discovered that they were the closest of friends. Strangely, while Kaoin-ka was a master of the katana, the Princess' only true love was her dance. She was renowned for the art form of Himo-odori, the ribbondance, and often entertained her father and visiting royalty with her grace, agility and rhythmic skill. It was this love that the bladamage focused on.

In the months that followed, he forged Silverwand, a two-foot rod of purest mithril that, upon the Princess' command, trailed a ribbon of thin, razor sharp metal. Both the Emperor and the Princess were pleased with his innovation, the former because his daughter seemed safe, the later because, with Silverwand, she could be so precise that its keen edge would never harm anyone more than was absolutely necessary for her protection.

Tragedy struck when the Princess was beguiled by a skilled sorcerer-assassin who killed and assumed the form of a servant boy that she had been seeing in secret. At their meeting, the vile creature took her as would her lover, and in doing so weaved a subtle self-destructive spell into the Princess' mind. She stumbled back to her chambers, drawing the attention of a number of royal guards, since everyone thought her asleep in her bed. Kaoin-ka was stunned at the deception and angrily questioned the Princess, but the Princess didn't answer. Something was amiss; even a dejected lover exhibits some kind of emotion, but the Princess' face was a blank slate. Then the girl took up Silverwand. Kaoin-ka drew her blade and leapt as the long ribbon of razor-edged mithril snaked forth, but her desperate parry came too late. Silverwand plunged straight through the enspelled Princess' chest. As Kaoin-ka's sword struck in an effort to ward away the blade, the ribbon of silvery metal flexed, cutting her friend in half. Kaoin-ka screamed out a cry so horrible that everyone thought it was she who had been struck dead.

Silverwand, bound by spells of devotion and protection and forced into betraying its mistress, self-destructed in a thrashing tornado of deadly metal. Kaoin-ka was mortally wounded, but survived just long enough to tell her lover what had happened.

Never had the bladamage been so enraged. His creation, his work of art, had been used to murder the very one he had sworn to protect! Immediately, he took up his dead lover's sword, a katana of finest adamantine, and scrolled upon it the spells

that would bind his love and the weapon forever. His creation may have killed his love, but at least he could resurrect her soul.

They made a perfect team: the bladamage, with his skill of magic and ability to speak with the dead, and the blade, with her skill of a warrior and his strong hand to wield her. Together, they hunted down the sorcerer-assassin and forced him to reveal the identity of his employer before they took his head. When the Emperor learned what they had discovered, war broke out almost immediately. As thanks for delivering his daughter's murderer, the Emperor insured the bladamage safe passage from the warring nation.

"And you've been seducing me with your lecherous thoughts ever since," he chuckled, flipping through a dozen dusty portraits.

Ah, but you forget, Benoshi-san, her sultry contralto sounded in his head, *I am but a sword. That is all I *can* do to you.*

"Thank the gods for that, or I would have been dead fifty years ago." He finally let go of her hilt as the portrait he had been searching for caught his eye. *Yes, this is the one*, he thought, letting his eyes take in the man's thick features, stark green eyes contrasting his fiery hair and beard. "Lord Kershann von Keenan," he read beneath the bust, "Paladin of Emperor Tynean Tsing II. Hmm, died T-II 64, about twenty years ago..."

Katie carefully brought her weight to bear on the climbing spur, fitting the one on her right toe into the hole left by the one on her right hand only moments before, then glanced back at Torghen and the sixty foot drop behind. She placed another spur and tested its hold, bringing her other hand to the ledge that was their goal. She resisted the temptation to quickly chin up and over, knowing Torghen would scold her for her haste. Sacrificing safety for speed was one thing if you were being chased, it was merely foolish if you were not. There was no hurry, not yet.

She reached the top and levered herself over, careful to keep her profile low. The spurs were off and stowed in her satchel by the time Torghen's black-hooded cloak poked over the ledge. She gave him a hand up, more for camaraderie than any need of help. He was only slightly over three feet when he stood his tallest, but his muscles were denser than a human's and he weighed as much as Katie. He could chin himself one handed more times than she could with both, but he smiled thinly just the same and accepted her help.

"Yer gettin' fast, Girl," he complemented her in a whisper. "Just watch that yer secure on no less than three points. We're in no hurry, ye know."

"I know," she smiled back, "and I was secure on three points all the way up. How did you have time to watch me, anyway? You had more holds to get than I did." She never passed up a chance to kid him about his height.

“I wasn’t watchin’ ye, Girl, I was listenin’ to ye. Ye make more noise than a virgin prince in his daddy’s harem! All that gruntin’ and groanin’...”

“I don’t grunt!” she hissed, following him across the flat rooftop while trying to silence her breathing.

They reached the other side and leapt the narrow gap of an alley over to the next roof. It was no more than ten feet, but the drop to the street was several times that. Fortunately, Torghen had long ago cured Katie of any aversion to heights.

This section of the city was named the Heights District in deference to the hills it was perched upon. During the city’s centuries-long expansion, the wealthy had made this district their home, lining every street with their towering town houses and gaudy, pillar-studded edifices. Rich merchants, shipping magnates and courtiers had transformed the Heights District into their own private playground, living in homes worth a king’s ransom and spending more gold in a day’s shopping than honest folk earned in a year.

And there, in the glittering light of the balcony across the way, some rich merchant entertained a crowd of overdressed friends in a room of polished marble and sparkling crystal. Katie enjoyed stealing from these rich snobs. They made fortunes on the blood and sweat of people like her and her mother, then had nothing better to do with it than buy jewels and fine silks. She had lived too long with the lack of even the simplest luxuries; watching others flaunt useless wealth while poor wretches starved and died just across the river made her sick to her stomach. *Just once*, she thought murderously, *I’d like to see some rich countess keep her composure while a fat, drunken sailor grunted and huffed on top of her for half an hour...*

“Ssst!” Torghen hissed, snapping her attention away from the spectacle and to the next alley. This gap was wider, more than twenty feet with a ten-foot drop to the next roof. Torghen drew a coil of light rope from his pack and handed it to her with a terse grin.

“See if ye can keep yer attention on what yer doin’ long enough to noose that chimney o’er there, Girl.” His smile was intact, but Katie could tell by his tone that he was displeased with her lapse.

She clenched her jaw and took the thin line, carefully checking below before attempting the throw. She had almost given them away once when she botched a toss like this and the falling rope nearly noosed a passing constable’s neck. Such bungles were lessons never forgotten, but only if the bungler was lucky enough to live through the mistake.

This time there were no passers-by, so she lengthened the loop, took a careful swing and let it fly. The deceptively strong line flew through the heavy night air like a serpent’s flickering tongue, cinching securely over the chimney on the first throw. She handed the slack end to Torghen, smiling his own thin smile back at him.

“Eh, maybe ye was payin’ attention after all.”

Katie knew that was the only compliment she would get, so she concentrated on watching in all directions as he secured the line. After cinching it tight, he applied a small lever sporting three hooks, bent the already taut line double, then secured the handle to the line itself. A careful pluck told him the tension was adequate, then he simply nodded to her and traversed the dark expanse of night air like a spider on its web. Once safely across he crouched and waited, then nodded once again. Katie knew better than to hesitate. She gripped the thin line, hooked a heel over it as she moved feet first out over the fifty foot drop and shimmied across. She breathed easier when her backside bumped the opposite ledge and she dismounted, crouching immediately to listen. After a moment's silence they turned to their work, leaving the line in place for the return trip.

They moved to an ornate stained glass skylight of a type commonly used for ventilation in the warmer summer months. Torghen smiled through the colored panes; his vision was far more sensitive than any human's and he could easily see the room's glittering interior, though it was pitch black to Katie.

"Just like he told me," the gnome rasped. "Remember Lass, a good caser is worth every copper of his percentage. Without one, you're just askin' to get nipped by the caps."

Torghen rummaged in his pack for another line and a tightly rolled tool pouch, handing the former to Katie, which she looped over her shoulder. He unrolled the pouch on the rooftop and pointed to a thin drill bit and a tiny handle, then the ornate iron hinges at the crest of the skylight. Katie knew already what he wanted, since he had drummed the procedure into her for hours the previous day. She fit the bit into the chuck at the tip of the handle and tightened it carefully, then held it out while Torghen wrapped a braided wire around the grooved steel section near the tip.

Katie placed the bit's point upon the pin of the hinge. The pin was steel rather than iron like the hinge, and could be drilled. She held it steady as Torghen pulled the wire back and forth, spinning the rotating portion of the tool. There was virtually no noise, and when the end of the pin was drilled out, he simply pulled it free with a plier. The other two hinges went likewise, then the entire window was lifted out, flipped, and laid on the roof, the heavy latch inside still securely locked. Torghen grinned at his accomplice and hopped through the gaping window, vanishing into the darkness within.

Katie cringed at his theatrics, knowing he was standing on the thick bars just inside. She edged over more carefully, feeling for the bars with her feet, then crouched in the dark to let her eyes adjust. She could see him working on the bars, fitting another device between them. Her vision was still too poor to show her exactly what it was, but she knew already. A slight groan of bending metal was the only sound as he worked the bar spreader. In moments the gap was wide enough for them to slip through.

Suddenly Torghen jerked back from the aperture, bounding like a coiled spring out of the skylight housing and back onto the roof. Katie gasped at what had startled the gnome, and scrambled out of the confining space. A grey, translucent hand, thick claws tipping craggy fingers with too many joints, groped after her retreating ankle.

After a moment gathering their wits and stilling their pounding hearts, and nothing pursuing them onto the rooftop, they risked a glance over the lintel into the darkness. There, hanging beneath the bars, two dead-looking motes glimmered faintly from within a misty and monstrous head. Hairs stiffened at the nape of Katie's neck until the wispy form swirled away and vanished. Katie, suddenly realizing that she could breathe again, sucked greedy gulps of air into her aching chest.

Torghen looked at her and drew one gloved finger across his throat. His thin smile had turned grim and serious. This was the security system they had been warned about. Torghen's informant had stressed how proud the jeweler was of his infallible sentinel. "It not only keeps out the riff-raff," the merchant had bragged, "I haven't been bothered by so much as a mosquito since I contracted its services." But the caser had also said that the spells binding the ghostly beast into service kept it inside the shop. Torghen had assumed "inside the shop" meant on the other side of the bars. Such assumptions killed thieves.

Torghen had to admit that using an ethereal devourer as a burglary deterrent was an ingenious idea. The spirit would feast upon any living thing unfortunate or stupid enough to venture into the shop, be it animal, vegetable or even another spirit form. At night, it would keep the merchant's precious jewels safe, then in the morning the light of day would banish the fiend back to the netherworld, and business could proceed as usual.

There were few ways to thwart creatures of the netherworld. They could be exorcised, but the spells were long and usually required more than one visit by a high-ranking priest. They were affected by powerful magical weapons to a certain extent, but were also lightning fast and very difficult to see. Only the light of day would drive them back to their ethereal origins, but a bright spell light could keep them at least partially at bay. The problem in this instance was the stained-glass windows that stretched from floor to ceiling across the entire store front. Any light they used would be easily seen from the street. An alarm would be raised immediately, and the constabulary would arrive in moments.

Torghen had pondered this problem for days, when a childhood memory of watching a frog catch a large glowbug provided him with a solution. For a brief instant the glowbug had flickered inside the frog, illuminating it from the inside. What he needed here was something similar, but larger and brighter. A sorcerous business acquaintance had supplied him with the necessary elements, for a price, of course.

The wily old gnome retrieved his secret weapon - a head-sized bundle of blackened sack cloth - from his pack. He secured the draw strings to the end of Katie's line, then simply let the bundle hang over the edge of the skylight until it was suspended several feet below the grating.

"Just like fishin'," he whispered hopefully, paying out a bit more line and peeking over the edge.

"Yea," Katie agreed, peering over as well, "but this is one fish I hope you don't reel in."

Torghen opened his mouth to comment when there was a sudden jerk on the line and a bright but brief flash. The silhouetted image of the devourer was burned briefly onto their retinas before the shop was plunged back into darkness. Katie snapped her eyes shut, but it was too late, her night vision was momentarily ruined while the shape of the creature swam about on the inside of her eyelids. The ploy had worked perfectly. When the spirit consumed the giant dayglow beetle in the sack, the magical insect's light had instantly diffused throughout the devourer's wispy essence to banish the creature, for the time being anyway.

"Got 'im!" Torghen hissed in triumph, snapping the line back up and hopping into the window well, his eyes apparently less effected than Katie's by the flash. "Come on, Girl! We don't know how long he'll be banished!"

"My eyes are still swimming with spots!" she cursed, edging over the sill mostly by feel. She paused while Torghen secured the line, listening for an alarm. The flash could have been spotted by someone, but they probably would not have believed their eyes. "I don't hear anything. Are you sure the thing's gone?"

"Eh, I sure hope so, Girl," he said with one bushy eyebrow raised as he dropped the rope inside, "or this is gonna be the shortest burglary in history!"

He fastened a clip to his belt and then to the rope, bent the line double to retard his descent, and dropped between the bars. Katie heard the near-silent thump of her mentor encountering the floor some distance below and decided everything must be okay. She fastened her own clip and followed him down the line.

The skylight was in the center of the vast shop, forty feet above the polished marble floor. Katie landed with a quiet thump and quickly got her bearings. Her eyes were returning to normal and she had studied a map of the shop's layout for hours; it all fell quickly into place. Glass cases displaying glittering wares were arrayed like a wheel. The second floor was simply a balcony ringing the large chamber.

Torghen was already lifting three pieces of exquisitely wrought emerald jewelry from a display case. Her assignment lay on the other side of the room: a diamond brooch and two sapphire bracelets. The lock on the case opened almost too easily, and she slipped the items into her bag, then moved to the next rack. There lay a ruby-studded torque and a garnet ring that were also on her list. Torghen always insisted they only stole items for which he already had a buyer. He had been caught

once with stolen goods, but the merchant had been persuaded by a very close (and very well paid) friend to drop the charges. Now one of his rules was to never hold merchandise more than a day.

“Ssst!”

Katie whirled at the gnome’s insistent noise, her eyes flashing to where he pointed. A soft glimmer shone in the air above them, started to brighten and take shape, then faded away again.

“He’s comin’ back!” Torghen snapped. “Up the rope wi’ ye, Girl!”

“You go,” she said, dashing for the stair to the balcony. “I’ll get the statue and be up in a second.”

She heard him grumble, but saw that he was already scrabbling up the thin line like a spider. He knew what she was going after, and knew it was the most valuable item on their list. The glowing form of the devourer coalesced once again only feet away from the gnome, but vanished again a second later.

Katie was up the stairs and halfway around the curving walk when Torghen reached the skylight grating. As he levered himself through, she knelt to work on the lock that secured an exquisite jade statuette of an elephant with emerald eyes and gold armor. In mere seconds she had the lock and the cover came off. A soft cloth wrapped the statue carefully and she thrust it into her bag. But just as she sprinted back the way she’d come, something shimmered in front of her.

“Oh, Gods!” she cursed, sliding to a halt on the smooth marble as the devourer coalesced on the steps. Her only way to reach the rope was now blocked. The figure was still mostly transparent, but she did not know if it was insubstantial enough to actually pass through.

“Ssst!” came a hasty call from above, drawing her attention as she whirled and dashed away from the advancing ethereal form. Torghen was leaning through the bars, grasping the line and swinging it in a long arc so that it almost reached the balcony. Katie marked the spot where it would come closest and ran for it. A quick glance told her the glow of the devourer was not far behind as she vaulted to perch on the ornate railing. The beast seemed to be moving slowly, lethargic from its exposure to the light. Unfortunately the rope was at the opposite end of its swing. In an instant she knew that the ravenous spirit beast would reach her before the rope would return.

She snatched her climbers, grooved pieces of pitch-soaked leather for gripping the thin rope, and cinched their straps onto her hands. Her mind clicked with the notion that the line was already on its way back to her, and if she were to meet it partway, she just might evade the glowing clutches of that... thing. The trouble was, she could not watch both the line and her advancing foe. The latter seemed the more imminent danger, forcing her to time her jump accordingly. But if something changed the line’s trajectory, she would fall twenty feet to the marble floor. She

mumbled a quick but ambiguous prayer and leapt into the air where she hoped the line would be.

Katie's hasty calculations were perfect. As her foot left the balcony railing, the claws of a wispy hand missed her ankle by inches. The line materialized from the gloom at the apex of her leap, slapping into the secure hold of the climbers. Then she was clamoring up, thoughts of those cold, lifeless eyes driving her on. Something wisped past her face once, but she was swinging and thrashing so wildly that the devourer missed its grab. Then something snatched her wrist like a vice, and the breath left her lungs with the chill of fear.

Torghen cursed as she thrashed, hauling her up through the grating even as she realized that the grip on her wrist was the familiarly substantial hand of her friend. She gulped the night air as they scabbled out of the window well, Torghen pausing to retrieve his bar bender and the line. The clawed hands of the ethereal devourer snatched at his retreating ankles as he finally climbed clear.

"That was a good leap ye made there, Girl!" Torghen smiled at her warmly, patting her shaking shoulder as she gulped air greedily. "Ye ready ta go back across the span now, or would ye like a bit o' rest?"

"No," she managed between breaths, willing her shaking body to relax. "Let's get out of here. That thing was glowing pretty brightly when it was after me. If it attracted attention we'd best be gone quickly."

"Jist what I was thinkin', Girl." He grinned even more broadly as he helped her to rise.

Katie followed her mentor to the edge of the roof and quickly traversed the length of the taut line, the comforting weight of pilfered gold and jewels pulling at her pack straps all the way across.