

A Soul For Tsing

A Novel

By

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CHAPTER IV

Deep beneath the Imperial Palace of Tsing, beneath the hustle and bustle of thousands of human feet, dwarfsong thrummed through the forging chamber like the heartbeat of an immense beast. The rattle of chain and the ring of hammer were the accompaniments to their song, but those were the ones best suited to this music, for this was the song of their work. This was the song of their life and the sound of the blood flowing through their veins.

The obelisks suspending their latest masterpiece had been moved away from the furnace to allow quicker cooling. There was little else to do but wait, really, but dwarves believe that idle hands make only evil, so the entire crew was busy readying everything for the next step in the blade's creation. Glipsil was the center of this seemingly chaotic activity, working his orders and instructions and even his criticisms into the humming rhythm of the song. But never did he stray far from the newly forged blade. The radiant heat of its birth warmed his back, basking him in the greatness of its making.

That Glipsil could not take credit for the creation of their achievement in no way detracted from his pride. He had helped to forge and enchant more than a dozen blades with the Master. This was the culmination of that tenure. Since spell was first laid upon metal, none had ever achieved a stable alloy of mithril and adamantine. The two metals were so diametrically opposed that if you simply scattered filings of the two onto the floor together, they would realign themselves into striations of silver and black. But the Master was a most persistent human, possessing more of his art than any other Glipsil had met. He had intertwined spells into the very grains of the two metals, binding them together like the threads of a fine tapestry, interwoven and inviolate. Once the lattice was set, it would remain stable forever.

Glipsil glanced over his broad shoulder once again, squinting at the suspended battle axe. It had cooled to a lustrous grey, the hue of fine granite. He briefly wondered what properties the alloy would exhibit. The Master had assured them that the new alloy would exhibit properties better than either base metal, but since no experience with it had ever been recorded, who could truly know? Suddenly a discordant note rang out, cutting through both Glipsil's reverie and the communal dwarfsong.

“SHINDRAKK!” someone cried from the scaffolding, the word meaning “widow-maker”. It was a warning of disaster, and all eyes darted to see what mayhem threatened.

A load of honing wheels being moved into position by an intricate block and tackle system had broken loose. The load weighed tons, but it swung slowly into a wall only feet away, splintering the pallet and crashing harmlessly down onto a pile of scrap. The broken block had been the transverse, or guide block. The free block swung in the opposite direction toward the center of the chamber where Glipsil stood; where the newly forged blade hung.

Something in the dwarf’s mind innately calculated the trajectory of the swinging block and he reacted instantly. Glipsil vaulted up onto the great wheeled structure and dashed around the nearest pillar. He threw himself at the head-sized pendulum of hardwood and cast iron as it swung directly at the suspended blade. The fingers of the dwarf’s hand merely brushed the projectile, however, not enough to prevent it from impacting upon the lustrous grey metal that they had so painstakingly wrought.

The sound of the impact was like a goblet of the finest crystal being struck with a fork, the note pristine and unwavering. As Glipsil rolled to his feet, the pure, clear note ringing in his ears, and with it hope rose in him that the blade had not been damaged. The block lay cloven at the base of the structure, the hardwood housing and cast iron wheels sheered in half, the wood blackened and smoking, the iron silvery where it had been parted.

He clamored up onto the structure, reached to touch the cleanly cut block, then peered at the edge of the newly wrought axe. He could feel the vibrations of the impact shivering the air, but the knife-sharp edge looked untouched by the blow. What a blade this was if it could cleave cast iron while still cooling and as yet bearing only the sharpness of its casting! What a blade it would be once honed to a proper edge and enchanted with the spells of a true weapon of power. Glipsil shook his head in wonder as he ran a thick thumbnail along the blade’s edge. It was perfect; no blemish, notch or even a dull spot had resulted from the blow.

“Not a scratch!” he announced to his worried comrades, his shoulders squaring proudly. “Not even dulled!” he added, picking up the split block for the others to see, enjoying their gaping mouths and stares of wonder. “And it ain’t even sharpened yet!”

The roar of laughter and cheers drowned out the resonant note that yet reverberated through the blade.

Deep within the lattice of the cooling alloy, in the exact center of the blade where the metal was still partly molten and the resonance of the impact was greatest, a single grain of metal shivered erratically with the vibration. One grain, alone in the matrix of millions of its perfectly aligned brethren, was disrupted just enough to twist free of the magic that maintained its alloyed form. The resonance finally

dissipated, but the damage had been done. Where only one grain had been, there now were two separate grains of metal - one of purest silver and one of jet black - each opposing the other with an intensity that set their still-alloyed neighbors shivering in opposition to the tenuous spells that held them intact.

Katie entered the tavern squinting against the comparatively bright interior. She headed toward the back even before her eyes adjusted, ignoring the few stares from both patrons and barmaids. Her attire, black woolen trousers tucked into soft leather boots and a blousy shirt of dark rose, were the cause of most the stares. The dagger on her belt and the pommel of another at the top of one boot drew a few more eyes. There were more sharp items tucked away here and there on her person, and several other things of interest in the satchel over her shoulder, but the former were well hidden, and the latter were none of anyone's damned business. The stares faded as she ignored them, and she proceeded to the corner booth unmolested.

She slid into the high-backed seat and shrugged the bag into the corner. "Sorry I'm late," she said to the diminutive figure seated stiffly across from her. The stein of beer in front of the gnome was nearly as large as the person, and it was almost empty.

"It's past midnight," he scolded, his gravelly tenor matching his scrunched face and prodigious nose only too well.

"I had some business," Katie explained halfheartedly, signaling a barmaid for a smaller version of her associate's beverage. She would sip it just for show, knowing she would need her reflexes sharp for later. She was unworried about her friend's condition, however, since gnomes weren't much affected by alcohol.

"Ye been at it again, 'aven't ye?" he grumbled, pushing his beer aside to squint disapprovingly at Katie.

"At what?"

"Ye know perfectly well 'what'," he spat angrily, clenching his jaw in silence as the barmaid delivered Katie's drink and left. "Ye should know better'n try ta fool this nose, Girl. Ye smell like a big hairy unwashed oaf, and since ye ain't one, the rest is obvious."

"And of absolutely no concern to you," she snapped back, taking too large a swallow and struggling not to cough. "I follow your teaching to the letter, Torghen. You can tell me how to walk and run and climb and dress and fight and anything else having to do with... our profession, but what I do with my own time is my business."

"Not if it leaves ye tired and beat up, it ain't," he growled, indicating her battered cheek, which was darkening nicely. "Yer taggin' around is ruinin' ye, Lass.

It's makin' an old woman of ye before yer time, and dullin' yer edge fer the work we got ahead of us."

"I need the money!" she hissed, hating more that she was always so unsuccessful at hiding anything from Torghen than his correct assessment. She was tired, and she did smell like an unwashed oaf. And whoring was indeed taking its toll on her, but more from her soul than her body.

"Then earn it, Lass!" Torghen snapped, pulling the tankard away from her trembling hands. "Ye think I been teachin' ye for me own enjoyment, Girl? Use what ye've learned, dammit! I told ye a thousand times, ye've got what it takes ta be a first rate lifter. I realize a thief's life might not be as glamorous as a prostitute's, but it's got a lot more dignity, at least."

Katie stiffened at his rebuke, putting her hands in her lap to hide the trembling. She knew he was right, but she simply did not have his optimism. She had been under Torghen's tutelage for more than a year and had learned most of his tricks and a good bit about his business, but she lacked the confidence to go about it on her own. She could see opportunities, even plan the jobs, but she felt that her own judgment was flawed; she would be caught if she followed her own instincts. Consequently, she only "worked" when Torghen planned the job and asked her along. That was rarely more often than twice a month and yielded relatively little after his understandably larger cut. So she always reverted to what she knew would earn her enough to live on without the risk of arrest by the constables.

Whoring might not have dignity, she thought, but they don't cut your hands off for it either.

"Let's go," Torghen said, finishing his ale. He knew by the set of her jaw that his words had scored, but also that he had little chance of changing her ways. He hoped one day he could teach her enough to let her rely on herself. Their infrequent jobs should have put enough coin in her pockets to keep her off the streets. The reasons why she always returned to such a loathsome profession, and why she needed every copper she could earn were mysteries to him, but he had made a rule never to meddle in the private lives of his apprentices. "We've got work ta do."

He flipped a silver onto the table and slid out of the booth. Katie followed him out of the tavern through a back room, ignoring the indignant glance from the bartender.