

A Soul For Tsing

A Novel

By

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CHAPTER I

Spellfire roared and waves of searing heat blasted into the cavern as if from a dragon's maw. But it was the yawning mouth of a great forge, not a great beast, that gave the illusion of a fiery hell. Stout workers cast lurid shadows as they scurried about, working machinery and laying out long lengths of massive chain. The dwarves squinted against the forge's unnatural glare, trying to pierce the gloom where the chains trailed into darkness. As one, they heaved, and a squeal of grinding wheels louder than any king's fanfare heralded a long-awaited arrival.

Like a long-dormant beast leaving its lair, a huge shape was dragged from the shadows. Two angular obelisks of dark stone set onto a wheeled base towered fully five times the height of the dwarven laborers. The great black slabs arched toward one another, nearly touching at the apex. Runes of power, etched deeply into the burnished stone surfaces, glowed faintly in the painful glare of the forge. Beneath the arch of the ebony pillars, suspended by invisible fingers of magic, floated an oddly shaped piece of grey ceramic. Slowly, the apparatus ground forward, halting only a few paces from the forge's searing mouth.

Wedges were hammered into place to block the iron-shod wheels. More dwarves swarmed about, securing this and preparing that, but carefully avoiding contact with the looming dark structure. Their worried glances flickered toward the floating piece of ceramic, an intricate block of kiln-fired clay that had taken weeks to manufacture, and was itself no small wonder. Now their work was about to be put to use, but if something were to go awry and the intricate mold were damaged, the entire forging would be set back months. The leader of the dwarven workers inspected the apparatus carefully, then nodded toward a shadowed alcove; everything was ready.

Mystic syllables rushed from unseen lips, summoning a shimmering cylinder of magical force from the roaring inferno of the forge. The incandescent shape descended to the floor, its swirling surface the color of burnished white marble. A glowing radiance of molten metal shone through the translucent cauldron of energy with a pearly light that added a ghostly cast to the glaring forge fire.

As the cauldron descended, an aged dwarf approached bearing a pair of long tongs. He wore a slitted visor and thickly woven garments soaked in icy water. Steam rose in torrents as he came within a few steps of the cauldron to carefully pour the contents of two small crucibles into the swirling mass of molten alloy. A sprinkle of iron dust and the pearly light flared, then subsided. A measured amount of mercury caused a similar display until the spell of mixing could distribute the final component throughout the molten medium.

The dwarf's sodden garments blackened and smoked as he backed away, and the cauldron raised once again and moved to the ebony pillars. The vessel approached the sculpted ceramic mold and tilted, its searing contents plunging into the painstakingly prepared interior to take the shape of its destiny. Glowing molten metal spat and spattered, burning tiny holes in the floor, and sending dwarves scampering out of harm's way. As the level of the molten alloy reached the lip of the mold, the great cauldron tilted back and returned to the furnace. The doors to the forge swung ponderously closed, slamming shut with the resonant thrum of a tomb being sealed.

Harsh words flowed out from the shadows once again, and white fingers of chilling frost hissed from the pillars to the mold, cooling it to precisely the point where the newly formed alloy would solidify. The howl akin to that of a forlorn banshee shrieked across the chamber as the molten metal contracted into its final shape.

When the heat of the chamber had dwindled to humanly tolerable levels, the Master moved from his protective alcove. Sweat drenched his bare torso, rivulets trickling along the cords of muscle that belied his age. He was old, much older than the scant flecks of white in his ebony hair and beard implied. His dark features, broad cheekbones and subtly slanted eyes marked him as an easterner, but that was no matter; the forge, any forge, was his true home. The faint smile that tugged at the corners of his immaculate goatee lent a boyish quality to his smooth features, but the hands that wielded the magic of a bladamage showed his true age to a greater degree. He raised one such hand now, dark and scarred with burns and wrinkles, and presented the callused palm like a shield toward the mold as he approached.

The dwarven workers moved away, knowing what was to come and wanting no part of what might result if all did not proceed as planned. The Master paused a few steps in front of the arched supports, gauging the chances of his own survival should the new alloy prove dangerously unstable. But such were the risks he must endure if the latest creation of his century-long career was to be his greatest, and worthy of the hand of an Emperor. He drew a long, deep breath, and spoke a single word of power.

Immediately, a rune burst into being upon the mold's surface and flared white - but only for a heartbeat - before the entire block of ceramic shattered into a thousand glowing shards. Shrapnel clattered to the floor, chipping and gouging the chamber's architecture, but none touched the Master. Even the dwarves took little heed of the damage, as all eyes locked on the culmination of a year's efforts.

A great double-bitted axe head hung suspended by the force of the pillars, still hot enough to melt iron but already harder than the finest tempered steel. The dwarven foreman once again moved forward, climbing upon the supporting structure to peer closely at the clicking, cooling work of art. The blade was nearly two feet across from edge to knife-sharp edge, and half again as high. The thick center portion glowed dull red, the color of drying blood. The edges were cooler and pearl-grey, but still hot enough to curl and singe the dwarf's bushy eyebrows.

“‘Tis stable, Master!” the foreman judged with a gap-toothed smile.

The bladamage moved closer, once again extending his gnarled and scarred hand and muttering a few words. His palm glowed with a white, pure light. The thinnest of smiles graced his lips for a moment before he finally spoke.

“So it would seem, Glipsil... so it would seem.” Though the smile had vanished, his eyes shone with a fire of exultation to rival that of the mage-fired forges. “See that it cools uniformly. I will inform His Majesty and return when it is time to begin the sharpening.”

“Very well, Master!” the dwarf agreed, snapping orders to his workers as the bladamage turned to depart. Chains rattled and wheels squealed in protest, but the noise was now accompaniment to the deep thrumming music of dwarven song.

In a third floor room of one of the less reputable inns lining the wharves, a man slept noisily. Exhausted and intoxicated from spending more than half his seaman’s wage in his first night ashore in two cycles of the moon, he failed to notice as the slim wisp of a girl sharing his bed edged deftly from his slack embrace.

Katie moved with painful care, fear and loathing steeling her nerves as much as determination. Inch by tedious inch, she moved the burly, hairy, smelly arm of her most recent client and slipped out from between the dubiously clean sheets. As her bare feet touched the rough floor boards, the lump of sweat, hair and soiled linen beside her snorted and stirred. She froze instinctively lest her movement wake him fully, but he was more than a little drunk and quickly resumed his snoring.

Her breath eased out and she continued her snail’s pace escape, shifting her weight out of the lumpy bed and onto her feet. She had taken careful note of the four creaky floor boards, and carefully avoided them now as she moved to the dresser. In a moment she had cleaned herself with the washcloth and the lukewarm water in the basin. Her client snorted again, but the snoring returned quickly, earning only a scathing glance and a muttered curse from Katie.

“Filthy pig!” she hissed beneath her breath, quelling a bout of nausea as she unwillingly remembered the last hour of being pawed and bruised by his rough hands. She purged the memory from her mind with a sheer force of will, careful not to make a sound as she struggled into her dress and laced the bodice loosely.

The man’s bulging belt pouch lay where he had flung it onto the dresser, and drew her attention her like a magnet. Katie glanced at her snoring client and eased the knotted draw strings loose. She had already been paid of course - money up front was one of her strictest rules - but he had promised her a bonus, hadn’t he? Besides she had a much better use for his money than buying ale and the favors of women such as herself.

Her fingers dipped deftly into the pouch, lifting out a few additional coins and slipping them into a hidden pocket in her dress. She replaced the still half-full pouch and retrieved her shoes from beside the dresser, but as she turned to leave, her mind summed up the items

she needed to purchase at the apothecary and found her funds lacking. With a silent sigh, Katie decided that she had earned one more coin and turned back to the dresser.

She reached once again for the pouch, but the creak of the floor behind her sounded like a warning klaxon in her head. Katie turned in time to glimpse the fist that smashed into her cheekbone. Her vision exploded into a swimming sea of stars as the floor came up and slapped her just as hard.

“Rotten whore!” the burly man spat, glaring as he reached down for her. His thick fingers curled around the loose lacings of her dress, and he lifted her easily.

“Rob me will ye?” he growled, cocking his hand back for another blow as her vision swam in a blur.

“Gods, I’m glad you’re stupid,” Katie muttered as her head cleared just before his fist descended. She snapped a foot into his still nude and quite exposed groin with all the force she could muster, relishing the meaty “THOCK” of her hard instep against much softer and more vulnerable tissues.

The man’s eyes bulged impossibly and his grip turned to water. Katie struck the floor before he crumpled to his knees, rolled out of the way and spun to her feet. Using her momentum as she had been taught, she planted a solid roundhouse back kick squarely onto the man’s jaw. The sodden sailor sprawled like a pole-axed steer, landing with a solid thump. She stepped past his prostrate form, massaging her battered face tenderly and enjoying the gasps of pain as her former client clutched his battered manhood.

“You just earned me another bonus, pig!” she informed him, reaching for his belt and drawing his own dirk to cut the pouch free. “And let me tell you something else,” she continued as she tucked the pouch away then dumped the water from the wash basin onto his face to get his attention. “If you ever touch me again, I’ll use this instead of my foot!” She brandished the blade in front of his face for emphasis. “Understand?”

At his weak nod she smiled, “Good!” She took three steps to the window and jerked it open, turning back to grin murderously. “And don’t think I can’t!”

She flipped the dirk in her hand and threw in one fluid motion. The blade plunged an inch deep into the hardwood floor only a hand’s breadth from his clutched fingers. Katie smiled once again and levered herself out the window, vanishing into the sultry night.

