

A Soul For Tsing

A Novel

By

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CHAPTER III

The brass bells on the apothecary door clattered discordant notes as Katie pushed it open with her foot and stepped back onto the dark street. The weight of the burlap sack full of groceries threatened to tug her arm away from the two dark loaves of bread she cradled, but she held them closer. Her other hand was thrust into her pocket, clutching the vial she had just purchased in a grip of steel. After paying more than the cost of a week's groceries for it, breaking the thin glass vessel on a careless misstep would be unthinkable. The pharmacist always had an excuse to jack up his price each time she came by.

More likely he's just padding his own pocket, Katie thought vehemently, hoisting her bag higher again. She turned left onto Greenbriar Street, cursing as her foot found a slick spot on the treacherous cobbles. She was more worried about the origin of the slickness than about taking a fall, but the cursing helped calm her nerves, which were still twitchy after her encounter with the sailor. The memory of his stricken face as the dagger landed so close to his clenched hands brought a thin smile to her lips, however.

"The sot had it comin' anyway," she mumbled, making the right onto Nightwatch and starting up the hill. "They've all got it comin', the filthy pigs..." So poisonous were her thoughts that she forgot to cross to the dark side of the street before passing the Swinging Swine Pub.

"Oi! Ere's a fine fig'r o' a lass, Boys!" one of the drunken patrons slurred, leaning limply out between the broken shutters of one of the pub's windows.

Katie judged she could get past before any of them had time to stumble out onto the street, but quickened her pace anyway and wished she'd taken time to lace her bodice a bit tighter. Filth like these needed no encouragement, and she could ill afford an incident so close to home. Also, she always ran the risk of some former business acquaintance recognizing her here in her own neighborhood. If rumors about her true source of income ever began to spread...

"Hau baut a lit'o tumb'l in the hay, Lassie-o," another squawked before she could hurry past. "I gotta bit o' silver fer yer time, 'ere Girlie. I ain't so drunk 'at I can't do ya goo' an proper, ye know!"

"Oi, bucko! She's go' a pair o' gams on 'er that 'ud wrap round yer ol' -- Hey, ye filthy cow!"

The drunkard's exclamation was understandable, considering the accuracy of Katie's spittle. Fortunately, by the time he'd wiped his face, she was out of sight up

the alley to the tenements where she lived. She worried a bit about the incident as she climbed the rickety stairs to the third level, but shrugged it off. They were so drunk that they would not even remember her, let alone what she looked like or that she lived nearby. Besides, if they gave her trouble, she had her dagger. *Filthy scum like that deserve no better anyway*, she thought viciously. *None of them deserve any better...*

She thumbed the latch to her flat and stepped inside. Residents of this neighborhood could not afford the luxury of locks, but also had nothing any self-respecting thief would want. She wondered briefly at the dark room, knowing that the lamp should have been turned up, but then noticed the slumbering form on the low daybed. She started to get angry, but a deep sigh cooled her temper. *It's nearly midnight- I can't blame her for falling asleep.*

She moved silently to the kitchen nook and deposited the bag in a crate, then put the loaves in the bread box. She lit the lamp and frowned at her reflection in the tiny mirror. It was hard to believe that her face had only seen nineteen summers; Tsing's brutally hot summers seemed to have aged her two years for every one. The thought brought a smile, then another frown with the knowledge that a woman of forty would simply look that much worse having led her life. She turned up the lamp and checked her purse, making sure she had enough coin before returning to the outer room. As she bent to wake the sleeping nursemaid, however, the pungent reek of lotus root touched her nostrils. She saw the chewed tuber clutched in the woman's sleeping hand, and her temper flared.

"Get up you hag!" she hissed, kicking the slumbering shape sharply in the ribs. The woman stirred with a gasp of pain and alarm, her eyes snapping open but unfocused. Then she saw Katie and levered herself up. The chewed root thumped to the floor and she reached for it, but Katie kicked it away.

"I don't pay you good money to sit here and get pickled!" she snapped, snatching the front of the woman's dress and jerking her easily to her feet, even though she weighed twice as much as Katie. "I pay you to watch over a sick woman, not be one! Now get out of here before I kick you down the stairs instead of letting you walk!"

"What about my money?!" the nursemaid snapped, stooping to pick up the half-chewed lotus from the corner. "I still got two silver comin' from you."

"All you've got comin' from me is a quicker trip down the stairs than you could manage on your own," Katie growled as she took a menacing step closer.

"It'd be a shame if your poor mother was to learn how her precious young daughter makes all that extra money, now wouldn't it, you little shrew?" The woman's eyes narrowed to slits and her hand gripped the root like a dagger.

"What are you talking about, Hag?" Katie seethed, hoping that the woman hadn't guessed the truth.

“What do you think I’m talking about, Slut?” She pointed with the root to Katie’s loosely laced bodice and the cleavage it revealed. “She’d likely roll right into her grave if she knew you was sellin’ yerself like a piece of rotten meat to any dog that’d cough up two silvers. And if you don’t cough up what you owe me, I just might be inclined to tell her the whole sordid story.”

Katie blanched. If this hag knew the truth... No, she could see by the woman’s face that it was only a guess. She stepped forward and reached for her pouch as if to pay, but came up with her dagger instead. Her free hand shot out to pin the woman against the wall by her chubby throat while positioning the dagger just an inch before the craggy old nose.

“After I cut out your lying tongue, you’ll have a little trouble telling anyone anything,” she said, flicking the dagger’s needle point across the woman’s trembling lips just hard enough to scratch. “And if you breathe a word of your filthy lies to anyone, especially my mother, that’s exactly what I’ll do. Now do we understand one another?”

The terrified nursemaid’s head bobbed hastily.

“Good. Now get your lying carcass out of my home before I think of a easy way of getting rid of your corpse.”

The woman dashed through the door and down the steps with an agility that belied her age and rotund shape. Katie put her dagger away and closed the door, shaking her head. There was really no way short of killing the fat old woman that would prevent her from telling her all-too-accurate stories, and though the thought did pluck a string of poetic justice in Katie’s heart, she hadn’t exactly sunk that low yet. She would just have to hope that fear would keep the old woman’s mouth shut.

She moved quickly to the bedroom, whispering a short prayer that her mother had not awakened. The quick, shallow breathing of uneasy slumber brought a sigh of relief from her lips. The nursemaid was not lying that it would likely kill her mother to learn the origin of their money, but that could not be helped; the medicine was just too expensive for her to afford with honest wages.

Katie returned to the kitchen to stoke the coal stove to life and put water on to boil. The barrel was low, but she decided it would have to wait until tomorrow; if she made a trip to the well now, she would be late for sure. While the water was warming, she diced two potatoes, an onion and a carrot that was soft, but not yet truly bad. She smashed three cloves of garlic with the flat of the knife and turned to the meat locker; it was more of a closet than a proper locker, but it kept the rats out. She sliced off a not-too-moldy piece of the salt pork hanging there and trimmed off the worst of it. By then the water was bubbling and she poured off enough for two cups of tea, then dumped in the vegetables and meat. She tended to the tea while the food cooked. When it was boiling again she added a chunk of lard mixed with flour to thicken the mix and a handful of crushed peppercorns. It really was not a proper stew, or even really a good soup, but it was all she could manage with so little time.

She checked her mother twice more while the pot bubbled on the stove, using the extra time to tidy up the place and brush out and braid her tempestuous hair. Her fiery locks were her one indulgence, but she often thought they were more trouble than whatever they might add to her looks.

Finally she took dinner off the heat and closed the damper on the stove to conserve the coal. The soup filled two earthenware bowls and she fetched the only two decent spoons from the drawer. Adding two slices of the dark bread, she balanced the bowls and took them back to her mother's room. Setting them on the night stand, she quickly returned to the kitchen and brought back the tea, careful to keep steady the one she had laced heavily with the priceless medicine.

"Momma," she called softly, kneeling and placing her own tea aside. "Momma," she said louder, placing her hand on the frail woman's shoulder. The eyes fluttered open. "Momma, it's me. I brought you some tea and a bite of dinner." The eyes widened then clenched shut as the older woman tried to take a deeper breath.

Katie's mother was immediately wracked by a painful bout of coughing. Such awful awakenings were common and Katie quickly helped her to sit up, which usually seemed to help. As the coughing ebbed, Katie helped her sip the tea. The medicine was a mixture of several potent narcotic plant extracts that helped her to breathe more easily, though it did nothing for the actual illness. The fragile woman sipped some tea, swallowing quickly to avoid choking while Katie held the cup patiently and tried not to notice the blood staining its rim. She smiled through gritted teeth, cursing all the silent curses she knew. Seeing her once strong and beautiful mother reduced to this weak, frail thing so young felt like a knife in her heart. She lifted the cup again, trying not to think, as she always did, that the disease ravaging her mother's lungs was a direct result of the years she had spent working in a flour mill to support a growing daughter alone.

"There you go," she smiled, helping her mother finish the last of the tea, then moving another pillow to help her sit up more easily. "Is that better?"

"Yes, dear," her mother said with a nod. Her breathing was more steady now and a lot deeper, but her eyes were already growing glassy. This was the critical time when she could breathe well without pain, but before long she would succumb fully to the drug. Now was the only time her mother could eat without triggering another bout of coughing.

"Hungry?" Katie asked hopefully, knowing that appetite was something very fleeting for her mother.

"A bit," she whispered carefully, managing a smile as Katie brought the soup over and spooned it for her. She could have managed alone, but Katie had learned that she ate more and chewed better if she was relieved the strain of handling the spoon herself. Katie filled the time by telling of "her day", a collection of half-truths and outright fancy that Katie concocted every day. She felt horrible lying to her

own mother like this, but she knew what damage the truth would cause. Besides, the stories kept her mind away from what she really did to earn a living. Katie grimaced as her mother nearly choked on a spoonful of soup, put the dish aside and dabbed the spill away.

“Enough?” At her mother’s weak nod she helped her lay back down, frowning at the mere half a bowl of soup she had managed to consume. She had hoped she could eat more, but once the drug took hold it was dangerous to try and feed her. “Maybe we’ll have the rest for breakfast.”

“Mmmm, that sounds nice, dear,” the sick woman said, smiling and closing her eyes as the drug took its final hold. “You take such good care of me... Your father would be so proud.”

“Hush, Momma,” Katie ordered firmly. “You’ll only start coughing again if you talk, and I’m too tired for any of your stories.” *Besides*, she thought, watching her mother’s breathing carefully as she ate her own dinner, *my father was probably a bartender, not some kind of knight or whatever...*

Finished, she hurried to the kitchen, rinsed the dishes and put them aside. She then retrieved a satchel from behind the meat locker and peeled quickly out of her dress. She donned dark trousers and a shirt and pulled on a pair of boots, tucking this and buckling that and checking to make sure everything was in place. Finally ready, Katie snatched up the satchel, tossed her dress over the daybed and left the flat. A quick plea and two silvers bribed Mrs. Doughton next door to look in on her mother. She knew the woman would gossip relentlessly about her leaving in the middle of the night dressed like a man, but saw little alternative.

Well, I’ll just have to live with it, she resolved, hurrying down the stairs and up the alley. *At least dressed like this, I could never be accused of whoring.*