

A Soul For Tsing

A Novel

By

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CHAPTER II

Ancient pages rustled beneath Emperor Tynean Tsing III's fingers. The familiar and comforting scents of leather, parchment and well-aged brandy filled his senses as the phrases of a long-dead poet filled his mind. The lines of tension that creased his brow smoothed with the soothing surroundings of his sitting room, one of the few places where he felt at ease and at home. Crowded bookshelves lined the walls. There were books of wars long past and of wars that might be fought in the future, books of etiquette and the customs of a hundred cultures, books of the history of the Empire of Tsing, and books that were mere stories of fancy. Emperor Tynean liked his books. Sometimes he would read or browse the titles, or simply sit by the fire and enjoy being surrounded by a collection of literature that none other in his empire could rival. If the truth be told, Emperor Tynean enjoyed the company of his books far more than that of most people. And since ascending the throne seven years before, politics and bureaucracy had largely kept him from his books, the only true friends he had ever known.

Oh, he had advisers aplenty, and servants to bend to his every whim. There were so many courtiers that he often lost track of who was having an illicit affair with whom. He had consorts and trainers and footmen and even the occasional concubine, but all those were just the trappings of royalty. In his whole life, Tynean had never had someone with whom he could simply talk.

His father, Tynean Tsing II, had by all accounts been a less-than-compassionate ruler. By Tynean III's account, the man had been even less of a father: cold, distant and unmindful of the lonely life of his sheltered son. Tynean had found it hard to mourn the man's untimely passing - murdered by the hand of an assassin, some said. The incident had also propelled him into the position of Emperor at what he considered the much-too-tender age of thirty-six, an injustice for which he had never forgiven his father. Ill-prepared for the morass of duties and obligations, fully a year passed before he realized that he could change the rules that he had come to loathe.

Heads rolled quite literally when several powerful government officials opposed his radical changes with an uprising among the noble classes. The ridiculous rebellion was quashed without mercy, and with little sweat since the entire knighthood, constabulary, army, navy and palace guard had remained faithful. Consequently, the power of the remaining nobility was sharply curtailed and the royal magistrates, formerly the sole judiciary body for the commoners, were reduced to mere tax collectors. He assigned the duties of judging civil cases to his retired

paladins, thereby instituting a new, fairer, and less brutal form of justice. Everyone answered directly to Tynean Tsing III; those who did not like it quickly found themselves unemployed, exiled or far, far worse.

Several adjoining kingdoms took this brief internal power struggle as a sign of weakness. One particularly ruthless neighbor learned that it most certainly was not. The war was exceedingly short and very bloody, ending with the neighboring kingdom ravaged and Tynean III annexing the lands for his own. In less than two years of war, Tynean III had put the aggressor to death and found himself the deliverer of an entire nation of oppressed people.

Word spread like wildfire of his merciful hand and swift but fair justice. His rousing speeches won the hearts of not only his new peasantry, but the military and merchant guild of the annexed kingdom as well. His law was simple: the strong would no longer prey upon the weak. Those who did would have a very short conversation with a guillotine. This irritated a good number of very rich and influential people, but Tynean III would not bend to their veiled threats and, within a year, peace reined throughout the empire.

Fortunately, Tynean III was not stupid; he knew full well that if his predecessor could be assassinated by a disgruntled and angry peasantry, he could also be eliminated by a vengeful aristocracy. Not a few attempts had been made on his life, and several had even come close to succeeding. He needed protection, and since he could trust absolutely no one to be incorruptible, he would have to trust himself. Of course, as the heir to the throne, he had received training with the best martial artists and weapons masters the empire could produce. Strangely, or perhaps as part of his own youthful rebellion, Tynean had always favored the battle axe over the more common and courtly rapier, saber or longsword. True, the axe could be unwieldy if handled poorly, but with a finely balanced and keenly wrought weapon in his experienced hands, he could disarm and dismember most moderately good swordsmen. As Emperor, Tynean needed a truly exquisite weapon, not only with which to defend himself, but as a symbol of his swift and indisputable justice.

But all this was far from Tynean's thoughts as he mentally strolled through the literary landscape, until a discrete tap at the door interrupted his enjoyment. Sighing aloud and cursing silently, he nodded to the guard standing by the door.

"Begging your forgiveness, Your Excellency," the chief chamberlain muttered as he entered with a formal bow, "but His Majesty's High Bladamage is asking an audience with the Emperor. I informed him of the late hour, but he assured me that it could not wait until morning."

"No, no! By all means, send him in. We are most looking forward to his counsel." Emperor Tynean put down his book and took a quick sip of the spiced brandy that sat warming on the side table. He stood as the swarthy mage entered, not out of propriety – he was emperor, after all – but rather from eagerness. The bladamage was a foreigner by birth, but renowned across two continents for his

expertise. He had been commissioned to design and produce a blade that none could oppose, made specifically and solely for Tynean III's hand. The work had begun more than a year ago, but it seemed that Tynean's wait might soon be over.

"Your Majesty," the bladamage bowed low, his ebony cloaks swirling about him and brushing the carpets.

"Please join us, good Bladamage." Tynean sat again as he gestured toward a chair, then waved for the chambermaid to fetch another snifter. "Tell us, what news from the forging chambers?"

The mage settled into the plush leather chair and accepted the snifter of brandy, appreciating the delicately spiced aroma and the chambermaid's delicate curves equally before looking back to his liege. "I am pleased to report that the initial forging of our endeavor is complete."

"Really!? Oh, this is most excellent indeed!" Tynean could hardly contain his excitement, bolting upright and perching on the edge of his chair in a most un-emperor-like fashion. "And the alloy is stable?"

"Yes, Majesty," the bladamage assured him, savoring a sip of the amber liquid before placing it on the warmer. "The initial cast is complete, but we must wait at least a day until the matrix is completely set. If we try to manipulate the blade before it is uniformly cooled, the opposing grains could diverge."

"Manipulate? What do you mean? It can't be moved?" Tynean was exasperated; why could he not simply take the blade now?

"Not 'moved', Majesty." The bladamage smiled, enjoying the Emperor's naiveté. "By manipulated, I mean worked with stone and spell to enchant and refine the blade for Your Majesty's hand."

"We thought it was already magical," the Emperor said tersely, his brow wrinkling almost comically. "You said the alloy itself would make it a weapon beyond any other in the realm. That is why We agreed to such a long wait. Now you tell Us it is not yet enspelled, and not fit for Our use?"

"Please, Majesty, let me explain." The bladamage sipped his brandy and smiled disarmingly. "The blade is indeed magicked already. The alloy would not be stable without the binding magic of the matrix which holds the diametrically opposed grains of mithril and adamantine together. The enspelling I refer to is to enchant the blade for your personal use."

The Emperor tried to relax, leaning back and sipping from his snifter. He enjoyed listening to the mage's narrative and wanted to set his guest at ease.

"First of all, a proper edge must be placed upon it. That may require days in itself depending upon exactly how hard the alloy proves to be. Second, there are several specific spells which virtually any blade of enchantment receives to ensure retained sharpness and optimal durability, balance and quickness. There are also the spells which will make the blade truly yours; spells of devotion and protection. But

most importantly, the matrix for a soul must be inscribed upon the blade, which will allow me to place the psyche of a devoted warrior into the weapon.”

“Ah yes, you spoke of this earlier,” Tynean nodded, hanging on every word of the process. “But what exactly are the advantages of a... what did you call it?”

“A Soul Blade, Majesty.” The bladamage smiled lustily. “There are but a few upon the entire continent, Sire. I possess one, and a few distant sovereigns of minor kingdoms have been lucky enough to have recovered long-lost blades which possess the souls of dead heroes. The advantages are many: the blade becomes utterly devoted to a single master, it may act on its own initiative to give warning or protect, and it may never be used against the true master.”

“But surely if it were stolen, an assassin could...”

“Perhaps if I were allowed to demonstrate, Majesty?”

Emperor Tynean cocked an eyebrow inquisitively. He had not known that the bladamage possessed such a weapon, and for a brief instant wondered if it had been wise to allow him such close access to his royal person. In the end, his curiosity overcame his suspicion. He had only seen one such blade, and that never unsheathed.

“Please proceed, Bladamage.”

“Very well, Sire.”

The Mage smiled as he rose and stepped away from the chair and divan. From the folds of his robes he produced a single-edged, slightly curved sword with a two-handed hilt covered in braided silk cord and bearing a small, round guard. Such swords were common in the realms across the sea and were known to be very keen. The blade itself was of a mottled dark metal, unmistakably adamantine, with a wavy line along the edge that shone like polished obsidian.

“This is Kaoin-ka. She has been with me for longer than I care to admit.” The bladamage smiled as if at some private joke, and continued. “Right now she is telling me that your guards are exceedingly nervous, and that two are fingering their swords. Let me assure you Majesty, their concern is quite unfounded, and quite impotent.”

“Surely you jest, Bladamage,” the Emperor scoffed, although his brow furrowed with sudden worry. “There are four of them, and by your own admission you are only a mediocre swordsman.”

“Let me assure you Majesty, I mean you no ill whatsoever,” the mage smiled again. “But if I did...”

In a move too fast to follow, the bladamage whirled and slashed at something near the crackling hearth behind him. Before the Emperor could even blink the mage stood exactly as he had, but the three fire irons standing in a rack next to the hearth clattered to the stones in halves. The finger thick rods of dark iron had been neatly sliced, the ends silvery and sizzling hot.

“Very, uh... impressive,” the Emperor muttered, more nervous than ever, “but how...?”

“I did very little, Sire,” he explained. “Kaoin-ka is a weapon master in her own right and skilled beyond most of your own knights. But what is more impressive, and vital to any weapon an Emperor should possess, is this.” He bared a forearm and drew the keen edge of his sword across it. The hair was shaved clean, but the flesh was undamaged. “Even if a would-be assassin were to somehow gain possession of Kaoin-ka, she would not harm me.”

“Yes, We see...,” Tynean smiled as the mage made the sword vanish among the folds of his robes. “And this blade you are forging for Us will possess the same qualities?”

“Yes, Majesty. But there is one more item we need to make it complete.” He resumed his seat and consulted the amber depths of his brandy. “We must find the proper soul to occupy your blade, a loyal warrior who once used a similar weapon, and was reasonably good in nature. Your Majesty would not want a weapon possessed by the psyche of a maniacal, axe-wielding murderer, for instance.”

“Yes, Bladamage, We agree...” Tynean sat back and tugged at his immaculate beard in thought. “A great deal of thought must go into the choosing of the proper soul for the ultimate weapon...”

The bladamage could only nod his agreement.