

Big Sister, Little Sister

By John McCabe

Little sister leaned on the side of the ship, her fingers trailing in the beads of water on the wooden railing. She turned and looked at her big sister whose arm had been badly hurt by a falling piece of wood from a broken mast, a trickle of blood stained her tunic and ran down her leg. The ship they were on had been damaged by the storm and they had been left standing on the deck as people shouted and scrambled to get the only dinghy into the water. The man they had been sold to had given them only the briefest of glances before he stepped into the boat as it was lowered to the turbulent sea below. He was one of four people on a boat that was designed to seat eight. Unfortunately for the sisters, the seats that could have held them were packed with boxes crammed with treasures deemed more valuable than the two who clung to each other in fear.

They ran alongside the rail as the boat reached the water, almost being swamped when a large wave hit and smashed it against the port side of the ship. They watched as some people jumped from the ship into the water and tried to swim to the escaping boat. Only one managed to make it, the others were driven under by the raging storm never to surface again. The man who made it, was beaten with something metallic held in the hand of one of the lucky four on board the boat and he too disappeared under the waves.

The elder of the two turned to her sister and took her hand as the ship lurched and water rushed into the breach below deck. The large vessel groaned and shook, the deck tilting dangerously to one side forcing them against the rail overlooking the lifeboat. The younger one screamed as boxes and crates that had come loose slid towards them. Her sister shielded her with her own body as they crashed against their small, huddled forms. The youngster was more shocked by the cry of pain from her big sister. She never showed fear or admitted pain, bearing all things with such stoicism that it had caused their father much anger. Her unflinching bravery looked like defiance to their father, and he did not tolerate this. They were lucky in some ways; in that they were only two amongst at least twenty to have been sired by him, making it easier to keep out of his way.

They had pushed the crates to one side as the ship tilted even more until the distance from the rail to the ocean had been halved. They could look into the faces and see the concern of the four who had taken what they could and were leaving everyone else behind. One of the men, their owner, a man who had bought them from the slave blocks of some city, was shouting an instruction to them and although they could not hear what he was saying over the roaring of the storm, they could see where he was pointing to. A large plank of wood had become snarled in the rigging of the doomed ship, the other end was pressing down on the boat preventing it from leaving the side of its nautical mother. The man, Thobault, was asking them to free the plank so that it could be slid to one side. The ship sagged again, and water began to pour over

the side of the small boat and several unsecured boxes began to float away. There is room for us now, they were both thinking.

Big sister, her arm badly hurt, made her way to the plank, ropes and sail that they were being asked to untangle. The little one contained her fear, mimicking her older sibling and they set to work. It was a mess of tangled wood, rope and fabric and there was no way they could free it with their small hands in time. Grabbing an axe that was secured to the side with some rope, the elder of the two wielded it with her unhurt right hand and began chopping at the rope while the youngster pulled the loosened debris away, clearing a path for her sister to continue chopping. They looked down again to see that only two people were on the lifeboat, which was half filled with water and listing badly.

With the wind howling in their ears and the salty spray from the ocean washing over them, the last piece of rope holding the tangled mess together was severed and almost immediately it slid to one side. Thobault raised a hand to the two stranded children left on board. Was he beckoning to them or waving goodbye? The elder grabbed the hand of her sister and pulled her up on to the rail. They were not going to be left behind. The screams of little sister could not be heard over the crashing waves and splintering wood of the ship as it disintegrated around them.

Feet hit the water first and almost immediately they felt themselves being pulled under. Kicking as hard as they could they tried to break the surface. As they did, however, a large wave hit them just as they were trying to fill their lungs with air. Panic. Stay calm, that's what big sister would do. It's amazing how much longer you can hold your breath when you have no choice. Even so when they broke the surface again, they were almost helpless. The youngster could see the grimace of pain and determination as her sister, unable to use both her arms, reached out and grabbed the side of the boat. She immediately turned, searching the ocean for her. Little sister kicked hard and grabbed onto her sister's tunic and belt as tightly as she could. They were rocked and battered as the ocean tried to tear them free but big sister was strong, and she would not let go. Her hand cramped badly but she bore the pain and allowed it to cramp and spasm closed onto the side of the boat.

One of the two remaining men stood at the side, they could see him looking back. Whatever was said it caused him to draw his sword and brace himself against the rail as he raised his hand to strike. Big sister was silent but her look of defiance, the one she had always given her father, was on full display. She could not let go, even if she had wanted to and she did not want to. Neither of them could swim well enough in still waters, let alone in the middle of a storm. A huge wave struck the lifeboat again and when her eyes cleared, she looked once more for the man, but he was gone. Her arm was numb now and she could just about detect that her sister was still clinging tightly to her side. A shadow rose above them. Thobault was on his knees, perhaps afraid that he too would be washed overboard. Big sister could manage the barest of grimaces to show she was not afraid. She waited for her hand to be chopped free, managing to find some comfort in the fact that she would not feel it. Instead, she was lifted clear of the

water along with her little sister. Her arm was wrenched badly as her hand would not release, but eventually Thobault forced it loose, and they lay in an almost lifeless bundle on the bottom of the boat.

When they awoke, there was light in the sky and a comforting stillness. They looked at each other and managed to smile. Were they dead? Was this the afterlife?

They knew shortly that they were still very much alive and listened as Thobault cursed and complained bitterly about the loss of his ship as he bailed out the last of the water. He seemed less concerned about the loss of all his crew.

"All that loot, all that treasure lost. Damn it all" he cried, wiping his face. He noticed that the two youngsters were watching him. "Awake, are we?" he snarled. "Good, get to work tidying this mess up and fix some food". When he saw that they did not immediately hop to it he leaned forward. "Or would you prefer to go over the side?"

Little sister opened one of the boxes that contained some food and began to lump it onto the upturned lid of a barrel. Thobault looked at her critically. "Not the fine dining I'm used to, but beggars can't be choosers".

Big sister had managed to bandage her wounded arm, after setting the bone herself. Thobault pointed to her with a long bony finger addressing the younger sister. "She's tough, she is. Worth a bit more than you even with a broken arm." He began muttering to himself and looked around trying to get his bearings. "Tide should take us to land in about a week if we're lucky. Make some more money, buy a new ship. It'll take a while but hell, what else will I do", he grinned, turning once more to face them. "All those crates lost overboard contained everything I have. You should know the only reason you two are on board is because you're worth something. Not much but ..." he spat over the side of the boat, "...beggars can't be choosers".

Four days passed and the sun kept beating down. Thobault had tied a piece of shredded sail to a long pole little sister had salvaged from the ocean. He sat under it most of the time leaving them outside in the midday heat. Only the fact that he intended to sell them for whatever he could get for them at market, allowed them to have even the barest piece of food or cup of water. Thobault was unsure about reaching land before the rations ran out, so he was making sure he had enough for himself. If the youngsters died it would make getting back on his feet more difficult, but he had been here before.

He stood now at the single sail he had cobbled together and pulled on ropes to adjust it to catch the wind when he determined that it was changing. "Two more days", he muttered before he looked at the two huddled youngsters, appraisingly. Satisfied they would survive he moved to the side of the boat, loosened his belt and watched as the dark yellow stream hit the still ocean. "Dehydrated. Need to drink more water".

A terrible pain pierced his back and with a strangled cry he turned around and faced his attacker. The older one had his knife, and it was dripping with his blood. "What have you done?", he asked in shock, his eyes blinking.

She moved forward quickly but was impaired by her broken arm, and he easily caught the hand that held the blade.

Thobault had a firm grip on her arm and struck her hard across the face. She wilted and fell to her knees. He struck her again, hard and she was forced closer still to the bottom of the boat.

"You ungrateful sod. I saved your life, and this is how you repay me? I own you; I can do what I want with you. I was going to make sure you went to a good home, but you can forget that now. I'll sell you to whoever wants ye, for whatever reason you orc swine". He raised his hand again and smashed her with a clenched fist. "You're not the pretty one, so it doesn't matter what you're face looks like". He struck her again, "But your sister, now that's a different story. Not my taste, but there are some that have a thing for orc females", he raised his hand again, and big sister could do nothing but brace for the impact.

Little sister grabbed the boat hook and thrust it hard against the body of the human who was hurting her sister. It caught him in the armpit, and he stumbled to the side of the boat, blood already streaming down the side of his stained white shirt. He dropped the knife and grabbed the side of the boat as the youngster staggered forward with the long pole, the metal tip, pointed straight at him. He had no room to dodge so he tried to grab it, grunting in pain as it hit him in the ribs and forcing him back. Big sister got to her feet, the knife once more in her hand and moved to finish the job and push Thobault overboard. He was much bigger than them and even though they were fighting for their lives, so too was the captain of the sunken ship. He pushed the pole aside and grabbed little sister. He lifted her into the air and was turning so that he could fling her over the side of the boat when big sister crashed into him. She was young but solid and it was enough to send him and little sister overboard with a splash. She grabbed the rail with her free hand, the damaged arm pressed painfully against the side as she looked for her sibling.

The two of them came spluttering to the surface almost straight away and she shouted at her to swim to the side. Thobault had lost his bearings and was looking the wrong way as little sister swam to the outstretched hand of her sister. When he turned around though he quickly closed the distance and grabbed little sister pushing her under the water in fury. He looked at the older sibling as she stood in the boat, "I'll drown this little rat and then I'm coming for you".

Little sister struggled in vain against the strong human, her breath was fading fast, and her lungs were spasming trying to suck in air. She knew if she allowed them to, all they would inhale would be water, so she fought. Suddenly the strong hands around her shoulders were gone and she pushed for the surface, blinded and gasping for air. She coughed and sputtered, barely able to keep her head above the water. A strong hand grabbed the collar of her tunic, and she was dragged to the side of the boat and held in place. Her sister did not yet have the

strength to haul her on board and little sister was too exhausted to do anything but breathe. The ocean rocked her against the side of the boat as she watched Thobault splash weakly, a crimson tint spreading out around him. The long boat hook was sticking out of his body, and he was trying to pull it free with one hand while he used the other to keep himself afloat. He gasped and spat blood as the relatively small waves hit his stricken form.

Big sister finally managed to pull little sister onto the boat and while she regained her strength, began pulling on the ropes that secured the mast. There was a crack from the fabric as it snapped and filled with wind moving the boat towards Thobault. He reached out in desperation trying to grab on, his fingers scraping along the side of the boat as it passed. Little sister watched as he became smaller, his bobbing form was soon lost amongst the waves.

They saw land early the next day, but it had taken them hours to finally get the craft to the white sand of the beach. They had not slept much over the previous night, afraid that Thobault or his spirit would somehow return seeking revenge.

When they judged the water was shallow enough, they jumped in and began wading towards the beach, dragging the boat behind them. Upon reaching dry land, they collapsed in relief and fell quickly asleep.



Little sister was the first to awake, her stomach grumbling before her brain had processed that she could smell cooking fish. She nudged big sister awake and they went to investigate the source which was further up a small estuary that led further inland. A small human male with dark hair and almond shaped eyes, was cooking the fish and they noticed his boat, several long bamboo tubes lashed together with rope, was pulled up on the riverbank. There were also two large birds, with black feathers sitting on poles close by. Little sister's stomach growled so

loudly that the man turned to regard them where they crouched half hidden behind a clump of scrub and sand dunes. He said something in a language they did not understand but he seemed unafraid of the two orc girls. Big sister took the lead, and they walked carefully towards the man, scanning the area for more men. He ignored them as he prepared the first of the fish, picking it off the wooden slats he was using to grill them and dropping it onto a makeshift plate made of green leaves. He licked his fingers and handed it to big sister who shared it with her sibling. After their meal he began packing up his belongings and motioned for them to follow him. They were not sure about following the human having just escaped from one, but they did not know where they were, only that they were a very long way from home.

They ended up going back to a small village of about a hundred people and staying with the little man who had a place barely big enough for himself and the two cormorant's that he used to catch fish. It was a small, roughly circular building made of wood and stone with a thatched roof. There was not much to the village but one building stood out and although modest in size, great care had been taken in its construction. Over the doorway was the image of a hand, palm facing forward, the symbol of Koryis. An immortal known for peace, prosperity and diplomacy.

They were on their guard initially but found out over time, that there were very few 'monsters' on the island and that the orc sisters were perhaps the only representatives of their race there. The people were also incredibly polite and treated them like all the others. If their presence was unwanted, it was not something they were aware of. They also discovered that their natural habits and behaviour were coarse and rude by human standards, and these gradually gave way as they tried their best to mimic their hosts. This involved learning proper Ochalean etiquette and using utensils, two wooden sticks, to eat their food.

Big sister loved to go fishing with the old man, Kai Linn, and was amazed and delighted at how the birds would dive into the water searching for fish. When they caught one, she would swing the bamboo pole out towards them and they would climb onto it, and then she would lift it back onto the bamboo raft. There was some string tied around the bird's throat to prevent it from swallowing the fish and Kai Linn would remove it from the bird's mouth and hand it to big sister who placed it in a wicker basket. Then the bird was set back into the water to catch more fish.

As they picked up the language the two girls began to refer to each other as Da Yi and Siao Yi, big sister and little sister, in the Ochalean language. They had never been given proper names when they were whelps. Kai Linn said that this was improper and that they needed real names. He called Siao Yi, Viola as she had shown great interest in a stringed wooden instrument that he owned but was unable to play that he had found washed up on the beach. All but one of its four strings had snapped. Da Yi was officially named Lynn, after many months of being called 'Linn's shadow' by the other villagers, as they spent so much time together fishing.

One day Xian Zhi Peng, a man from a more prosperous village nearby, arrived seeking a training partner for his son, Xian Li. There were no volunteers and Kai Linn sought to overrule Lynn's

decision to accept. He tried to explain that the man's son was a violent, spoilt child and had hurt others before, which was why no one else had stepped forward. She ignored the look of unhappiness on his face and told Xian Zhi Peng that she was up to the task.

She managed to keep the look of surprise and wonder hidden when she saw Xian Zhi Peng's home. He was the head of the village and as such had an impressive home that was surrounded by a high stone wall made from neatly cut grey bricks. The doorway to the place had a piece of wood along the bottom about six inches in height that you had to step over to enter called a ménkǎn. She was told that it kept evil from entering and luck from leaving. Passing through a small front courtyard they passed through another doorway, once again stepping over the ménkǎn, into the main courtyard. It was paved with stone, had a peach blossom tree in one corner and was surrounded on four sides with buildings and covered walkways. Xian Li came out to meet them here and bowed to his father, acknowledging Lynn with a salute that involved putting a closed hand against the palm of his other hand. She returned the gesture. What she did not realise, was that she would be gone most of the week, spending each day as a practice partner for Xian Li in the main courtyard.

It started off alright, although he went quite hard when they practiced with wooden swords. Her fingers were skinned and bruised but she did not complain and took to it with great gusto looking forward to each day. On the island of Ochalea it was uncommon to see a woman with a sword. Any women that had an inclination to take up weapons usually ended up leaving the island and its restrictive protocols on how women should conduct themselves. Perhaps because she was not a human female this restriction was not as heavily enforced with Lynn. She was allowed to go home for a couple of days to see her sister Viola and Kai Linn but returned again to continue with Xian Li's training.

Things took a turn for the worse when the boy, jealous at how quickly she was picking up the new skills, sliced her with the metal sword he was using. She gripped her stout wooden blade with her left hand, raising the other to her ear, which was now streaming blood. She looked to Xian Li's father and saw that he was undisturbed by what his son had done and by his bearing expected her to continue. Her eyes were drawn to the ground where drops of her blood had fallen, and she knelt to have a closer look at the tip of her ear which was lying there oozing blood. She felt her horror rising and looked at Xian Li expecting him to apologise but he did not. At an order from his father, they resumed their training, blades clashing together, his metal sword cutting lumps from her wooden one. She held her own despite the unfair assignment of weapons and was breathing heavily when an end was finally called to their sparring session.

She lowered her sword and turned to face Xian Li's father when his blade flashed out again. This time her other ear was the target, she shouted in pain and turned on him, her anger flaring. The goading glare of the young man infuriated her, and she was about to engage once more, envisioning herself biting down on his face as he struggled beneath her when Xian Li's father called out again, but this time he was angry and not with her. The smug look left Xian Li's

face and he looked at Lynn in anger, blaming her for the harsh words his father now directed at him.

When she returned to the village, Viola was upset by what had happened and Kai Linn checked the wounded ears that had been attended to by a woman in Xian Li's village.

Viola who was not known for speaking much, left the village later that night to pay Xian Li a visit without telling anyone. There was a commotion the next day when men from the other village arrived armed and angry, demanding that the two orc girls come with them. With little choice they went back with them alone, as Kai Linn was not permitted to accompany them.

Viola had been locked inside an old garden shed awaiting the ruling of the village head, Xian Li's father, while Lynn was aggressively interviewed to determine if she was responsible for what had happened to Xian Li. Someone had beaten him around the face and then while he lay unconscious, his head had been shaved. Lynn's innocence had been decided by those gathered and Xian Li's father was satisfied that she was not responsible. But if not her then who? Xian Li was not short of enemies, but none would dare attack him. The crime would go unpunished for now.

Viola had been detained in the garden shed for most of the day while the trial took place. When she was released, it was discovered that she had repaired and mended some of the damaged work implements being stored there. The village they were in now was much bigger than the one they lived in and had its own blacksmith. Viola was offered and accepted the chance to become an apprentice. Neither girl was permitted to return to Kai Linn and they were given a small hut of their own to live. They had the freedom of the village and when Lynn came of age, she was given a silver hairpin to signify this. In Ochalean culture it meant that she was of an age to marry but as an orc she was unlikely to find any suitors.

There was a small place on a rocky hilltop near the coast that they had been warned to stay away from. To get there you had to pass through a small wood and cross several streams. They were told that a hermit, an ugly woman, who could wield magic and bend the rocks around her, lived there. In the past men had gone there to drive her away, as magic-users were tolerated but not trusted in Ochalea, but they had been defeated easily when she had turned their metal weapons into a molten liquid. The others who had been armed more simply with wooden staves and slings had forced her to retreat but she had a huge guardian made of rock that blocked the way. It ended in a stalemate and the elders had decided that so long as she stayed away from them, then they would do the same. It had been this way for many years and the men who had fought the old hermit were all dead and the young who had listened to the tales were now showing more grey hairs than they would like.

Lynn and Viola had talked it over and had decided to investigate the rumour, finding out that it was in fact true. However, it was not a human woman they found but an ogre. She recognised them for what they were and surprised to see orcs in Ochalea, had brought them in, leading them down to her home. As they followed her, they could see the rock guardian that stood

motionless at the entrance to her cave. With a wave of her gloved hand, it sunk into the ground disappearing from sight. They walked along a short corridor to a large rough-hewn chamber where they could hear the rush of water as the tide came in through an opening in the rock. The ogre brought them to one side and offered them food before she made them sit. As they bit into the first of the fish she had provided, she began asking them questions about who they were and how they had come to the island.

Viola watched the ogre mage who called herself, Shamelle. She was a large shambling mound, with clothing draped in layers over her large body that made her look even bigger. She entertained them with her magic and Viola in particular, took an interest in the magical gauntlets the ogre mage wore. They were beautifully intricate items that seemed to be made of cloth but were actually some kind of black metal. Shamelle was able to bend metal and make it liquid, creating random objects much to the girl's delight. She pulled back the sleeves of the robes she wore, exposing the black gloves inlaid with strips of black metal, the fingers ending in sharp points. They covered her arms to just below her elbows. Shamelle rubbed her palms together, which made a smooth scraping noise as the metal on each glove rubbed together. The rough stone floor rumbled gently, some of the smaller pebbles and dust began to swirl in a circular fashion as a round piece of rock emerged from the floor. The round rock revealed itself to be a head, followed by the shoulders and torso of a large earth elemental. The massive creature dwarfed everyone in the room even Shamelle, standing almost twice as tall as the female ogre. She set it to work, excavating an extra room in her home, after which she sent it back to guard the entrance.

When the conversation dropped off the girls informed her that they needed to go and were surprised when she would not let them. They had been trapped there and forced to become slaves for the ogre who told them it was their role as orcs and that they were lucky they were not human as then they would be her food. With the earth elemental guarding the only exit, they had toiled each day with minimal food and tidied up when the ogre left her lair.

On good days Shamelle entertained them with magic and the black gauntlets, but these moments of enjoyment were short lived as Shamelle was gruff, impatient and prone to violence. Viola was interested in the gloves, while Lynn was interested in escape. She watched all of these things with curiosity and attention, but only so far as it was needed for them to find a way out of here.

They worked for Shamelle keeping the chamber clean, something that the ogre had not previously found too important judging by the state it was in when they had first arrived and preparing meals while Shamelle carried out experiments and pored over charts of the night sky. The basic meal was very often fish and rice, not human as they had been led to believe. The fish were raised in large, relatively shallow pools that ran along the side of the chamber. Large fish with deep orange, almost red scales and yellow fins, they were easy to catch.

They began to recognise the cycle of the tide. When the tide was in, one side of the large chamber which was lower, filled with water, but when the tide went out the water level would fall about six to eight feet. It was when the tide was low, and the water level dropped that it was possible to see a dark opening close to the bottom of what was really a large rock pool. Lynn had wondered if it led anywhere, if it was a way for them to escape.

One day when Shamelle left her cave home, locking them inside, Lynn decided it was time to check the underwater hole. She sat at the edge of the pool; the water was no longer at its lowest point when Shamelle had been in the room. She was not deterred as she was a good swimmer. The sisters were of very different builds. While Lynn was streamlined and athletic, Viola was quite curvy. The joke was that she took after their father who was a large bulky orc, strong in the chest and shoulders. She slipped into the water as Viola watched, hands resting on her wide hips. The water was cold and salty and after taking a few deep breaths she submerged and began swimming to the bottom and the opening that she hoped was a way out. Viola crossed her arms and crouched down waiting for her sister to return. She glanced towards the tunnel that led to the entrance to the ogre's home. She could not see the earth elemental from her position, but she knew it was there.

Five minutes later she saw movement from the pool of water as Lynn emerged from the hole and swam back to the surface slowly, allowing the natural buoyancy of her body to carry her to the surface. Viola looked at her expectantly. Lynn, the water running down her face, smiled and nodded her head. She pulled herself out and sat on the side of the pool.

"There's a way out. The tunnel is not too long and there are plenty of handholds. There's one part you might get stuck with that big fat ass of yours, but I think it'll be ok".

Viola smiled and handed her a towel to dry herself off.

Over the next few days, they watched Shamelle and discreetly prepared for their escape. They had no belongings to bring, and the cave was not too far from their village so they would not need food. Lynn had Viola practice holding her breath. The exercises involved taking five to six deep breaths and letting it out before taking a final breath that she would hold. The next time Shamelle left the cave they were ready and fortunately it was while the tide was on its way out. Lynn let Viola go first and told her what to expect. The reason being that if Viola did get stuck it might be easier to push her from behind. As it turned out Viola managed the tunnel without any assistance from her sister. They emerged from the tunnel into the ocean. Behind them the jagged rocks rose high into cliffs that shielded them from view if anyone had been watching. Lynn took the lead this time and they moved away from the sharp rocks, swimming parallel to the cliff until the rocks fell away to a sandy beach. When the water was up to their waists they stood up and walked the rest of the way, looking all around, afraid that Shamelle would catch them. They ran down the beach away from the cave before walking into the forest. It took them two days to find their way back to the village, hungry but happy to be home.

They spoke with the villagers and told them what they had been through. It was decided to finally deal with this 'beast woman', as the Ochalean's called her, not having a word for ogre in their language. It was a word the sisters sometimes heard being used to describe them. When it was spoken for Shamelle, it was harsher and transmitted the idea that she was a beast and evil. When used in relation to Lynn and Viola it was much softened and translated more closely with 'other'. It was not used much by the villagers who generally used their names, but it still marked them as different, not of the people here.

Xian Zhi Peng and his son Xian Li had gathered the men, ignoring pleas from others who tried to remind them of the teachings of Koryis, that there had always been peace and to try and face the ogre was doomed to failure and might even result in retribution. Xian Zhi Peng was not persuaded but recognised that a frontal assault would be foolish when Lynn told them that Shamelle had a large earth elemental, a rock man, that guarded her home. So, the plan evolved to include the information they now had regarding the sea tunnel entrance. If the ogre stayed in her lair, it was decided that most of the men would approach the front and draw her and the rock guardian out. They would not use metal weapons and would attempt to keep her occupied by creating a diversion, while a small party led by Xian Li and Lynn would go in through the sea tunnel and try to overpower or slay Shamelle. In the event she was not home Xian Li had been given some powerful poison, which he would lace the ogre's food with if they could gain entry while she was away. They would then return in a few days when she was sure to be dead.

They kept watch and waited to see if Shamelle would leave her lair, but she had become cautious when she had discovered that the sisters had escaped. The decision was made to start the attack and hope they could hold her attention while the others gained entry.

Emerging from the pool, Xian Li, Lynn and three others climbed silently out onto the rock floor, which due to the tide being out was about three feet higher now. They could hear the muffled noise of clanging pots and shouting warriors. They spread out around the room and hid awaiting the best moment to attack. Shamelle shuffled into the chamber from her newly finished sleeping area to see what all the commotion was. She looked unconcerned because she knew the earth elemental would not be defeated by anything the humans had at their disposal. She stopped in surprise as a splashing noise caught her attention. She walked to the lower end of the room, towards the pool, a light on her staff lit up and glowed more brightly.

Viola surfaced and began coughing uncontrollably. She reached blindly for the edge of the pool, wiping the water from her eyes and face with one hand while she clasped the edge, holding herself in place until the coughing subsided. Shamelle tapped her on the head with the staff, the light from it illuminating Viola's face, her eyes red from the salt water. Before either could speak, Xian Li and the others attacked. The large ogre turned to them, raising her staff before her and muttering a spell.

Xian Li struck her with his sword drawing blood, but Shamelle knocked him aside as her staff warped and transformed. The wooden staff was now a coiled snake, which she held by the tail

like a whip. The snake head struck one of the Ochalean men, sinking its venomous fangs into his flesh. Then Lynn arrived, sliding low across the loose pebbled floor, hitting Shamelle in the shin with her sword. The ogre pulled her leg back and Viola, using one hand to pull herself up partially from the rock pool and the other to grab the loose layers of clothing that Shamelle wore, dragged her off balance. The ogre fell backwards into the pool and Viola immediately started to pull herself out.

The heavy layers of soaked clothing made it difficult for Shamelle to swim. She struggled slowly to the side where she was jabbed brutally with spears in the neck and face. The water turned red, and her screams of pain and desperation filled the chamber. The earth elemental came to her rescue, the sound of rock and shifting soil alerting them. This made them cease their attack and turn to face the threat giving Shamelle time to grasp the side and try to pull herself out. She was badly encumbered by her soaked clothing and iron shod boots but managed to get herself partially onto the side when Xian Li moved to stop her, having left the others to hold off the earth elemental. Viola who stood close by grabbed Shamelle's hand and started pulling on it, shifting her grip to the ogre's forearm and elbow. Shamelle mistook this as an attempt to help her out of the water and was confused by this. When the glove slipped down her arm to bunch up at her wrist, she realised that the young orc was trying to pull the glove off. If they could get the glove off, they hoped that this would dispel her control over the earth elemental, and it would leave. Shamelle was in an awkward position, her left hand grabbed the edge, the lower half of her body was still submerged, and Viola was dragging on her right hand, exposing the blotchy, earth toned skin of her forearm.

Shamelle roared at her. "Pest, you can't take the gloves while I live". She fought against Viola who was leaning back, twisting her body and trying to pry the glove free from the struggling ogre.

Xian Li lunged in; the family heirloom that was his sword sang as it swept from his shoulder in an arc that cut through Shamelle's exposed forearm, severing it cleanly. Viola fell backwards still holding the glove and part of the severed limb. Shamelle fell back into the water with a wail and a splash. Whatever magic held the earth elemental was disrupted and it collapsed in a pile of rocks and soil that slowly merged once more with the floor of the cave leaving no mark or trace that it had ever been. As Shamelle tried weakly to again grab the side of the rock pool, she was jabbed mercilessly with spears. Unable to protect herself she finally slipped under the water and drifted to the bottom, where her waterlogged boots and clothing held her.

Viola pulled the severed hand from the glove and dropped it on the ground. She held it against her body, pulling the sleeve like cloth out and examined it closely. The rectangular and square cut pieces of black metal were secured somehow to the black cloth reinforcing it. Upon closer examination she could see that the cloth was actually very fine links of metal, like chainmail but much smaller. The fingertips were capped in metal, each one ending in what looked like long manicured fingernails. As the others made sure Shamelle was dead, she pulled the large glove on, rolling the sleeve up to her elbow. At first it was much too big, but she watched as it shrank

to the size and contours of her limb until it fit perfectly. Lynn joined her to check that she was not hurt.

“You were supposed to stay behind, Siao Yi”.

“I did”.

“I meant behind on the beach, you know I did”.

“Where you go, I go, remember?”

Lynn sighed remembering the words often spoken between them when they were children, but not for many years. Not since they had arrived on the island. She touched the black glove on her sister’s hand, admiring the texture and artistry. “Nice”.

“Let me get the other one too”, said Viola, walking to the edge of the pool. Shamelle’s body was just visible as the water level began to rise.

Xian Li was elated with the outcome of the fight and sent one of the men to open the door to the ogre’s lair to let his father and the others in. He watched as Viola dropped back into the water to retrieve the other glove. His eyes shone with success and victory. They searched the ogre’s lair, retrieving quite a lot of valuable and interesting items.

Lynn was gifted with a new sword from the ogre’s lair but for Viola the only item of interest were the gloves. She had watched Shamelle whenever she used them and spent several weeks trying to reproduce what the ogre could do with them without success. All she could manage, and it was quite a lot, was to enhance her ability as a blacksmith. When she touched a piece of metal it rippled like water allowing her to more easily mold it into whatever shape she desired. Metal was like soft clay in her hands when she concentrated and she could craft beautiful objects, including jewellery and razor-sharp weapons in a fraction of the time it had taken and of a much higher quality. The long nails on each glove allowed her to engrave any design as easily as a knife on a piece of wax.

It was a fine mid-summer morning when a carriage from the capital city Beitung arrived accompanied by heavily armed guards dressed in lamellar armour and carrying jian swords. The woman in the carriage, Yang Mi, was the niece of the Archduke himself and it was known that Xian Li had his eye on her. After the success of the attack on the ogre and all the treasures they had found, his stock had risen considerably. The girl was said to be somewhat spoilt and was here to sample Feng Hui’s noodle speciality. The story was that although similar quality noodles were available in Beitung, she insisted on going to the source of what she considered to be the best. It was a very extravagant thing to do and somewhat out of keeping with the normally reserved and polite people of Ochalea. It was whispered that she had taken on the more extravagant habits of the Thyatians who had taken control of Ochalea many years ago.

Yang Mi, wearing a flowing dress of yellow and white, her hair gathered in a bun and held in place with gold pins, walked past the sisters as Lynn was helping Viola to put her long black hair

up into a bun. Lynn preferred to let her hair hang loose but Viola due to her work around a hot forge usually had her hair tied up. Yang Mi spent some time with the sisters fascinated by their story and interested in learning more. She had invited them to her home back in the capital and they had been polite enough to say they would go but had no desire to do so. Xian Li used his familiarity with Lynn, his training partner, to insert himself into the conversation.

Perhaps a week later, while Xian Li and his father had gone to the capital to make an official approach for marriage, a ship was spotted not too far offshore. A large boat was lowered into the water beside the ship, which had dropped anchor. Several fishermen regarded the approaching vessel calmly and continued to bring in their nets. Some of the men muttered the word "pirates" under their breath but did not seem too concerned. When Lynn and Viola returned to their village, they saw that everyone was armed.

The leader of the pirates was a strong, proud looking woman with brown skin and black hair. A red bandana was tied around the black hat she wore. There were several men with her, including a middle-aged man with wispy brown hair, easily identifiable as a mage, along with an orc. The orc, who was dressed in leather armour and also had a red bandana on his head, was called K'tag. They had come ashore for supplies but when they learned of Viola's skills, they hired her to make tools and weapons. The mage, Zertoan, was particularly interested to know if she could make armour. She told him she could but that she usually only made the type seen around Ochalea, be they native or that used by the Thyatian soldiers garrisoned there, such as banded mail, shields, bracers and such like. The mage conjured some sheets of paper from his robes which showed a design for heavy plate armour with an undercoat of chainmail. The proportions were enormous, as would be the weight. The mage confided in her that the armour, when complete, would be for his ogre bodyguard, Knox. Viola was interested in the challenge and told him she would undertake the job but that it would take a few weeks. Zertoan did not want to hang around the island that long and insisted, offering a huge sum of gold, on Viola assembling the armour on the ship when it set sail.

This offer came as a shock to her and Lynn as they had never given serious thought to leaving Ochalea. It was their home, but now that the offer had been made a door had opened and they were curious to see what was on the other side. Another factor that tempted them was K'tag. They could not remember the last time they had been in the company of another orc, and they were interested to see what he was like. It was obvious to Viola that her sister was very interested in K'tag, the burly, charismatic orc.

Viola looked to her sister, "Well, Da Yi, what do you think?"

"Where you go, I go".

Nervous though they were, they agreed to join the motley crew when they departed the island. They would be arriving at a string of ports and cities with the ultimate destination being a faraway place called Darokin. What interested them more was a place called the Broken Lands

that K'tag had told them contained a huge number of humanoids including orcs and that the leader of these was an orc called Thar.

A new chapter in their life had begun when they had first arrived by boat all those years ago. They decided it was time to start a new chapter and so they became part of the crew on 'The Crimson Tide', when she set sail the following day.

