

VRRGUL OF THE *GRUMBLING KING*

A Thirnavar Story

The history of Captain Jjule Barrin's troll master-at-arms,
as remembered from the decks of the Grumbling King

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Chapter One — The Troll on the Deck

Captain Jjule Barrin had learned, over the years, that there were three kinds of people who saw Vrrgul for the first time.

The first stepped backward.

The second stared.

The third tried very hard to behave as though a fourteen-foot troll standing barefoot beside the mainmast was an ordinary feature of a merchant vessel.

Barrin preferred the third kind. They were usually useful sailors.

The Grumbling King was a broad-bellied spice trader out of Gao, privately owned, heavily worked, and maintained with the kind of attention that came from a captain who knew exactly how much of his fortune was floating beneath his boots. Thirty-eight souls made up her usual complement. Mangar sailors worked beside Deccan riggers; Araq hands shared watches with Zandir and Aramite crew; Gao men argued over cards with a Thylor dwarf; and Galic Barindrom, the eastern elf who served as ship's mage, cultivated the weary expression of a scholar condemned to spend his life among people who handled rope for a living.

There were no Oiohelkans aboard. Barrin had tried. Oiohelkan sailors were respected almost everywhere around the Bay, but those he had approached had politely declined. Barrin never took offense at a refusal honestly given.

Then there was Vrrgul.

He was large even for a troll, twelve feet at the least and nearer fourteen when he bothered to stand fully upright. The old drawings of trolls made them look starved and stringy, all elbows, claws, and improbable noses. Vrrgul had the same long reach, the same deeply recessed eyes beneath a massive brow, and the same disturbing mouth, but years of good food and hard shipboard labor had filled his frame. His shoulders were broad enough to make a hatchway look insulting. His arms had the heavy, useful muscle of something that had spent decades hauling rope, cargo, spars, and occasionally sailors.

He wore trousers and a loose sailor's shirt because Barrin had eventually convinced him that ports behaved better when trolls wore clothes. He would not wear shoes.

The sailmaker, old Toman Rusk, had been responsible for the first successful pair of trousers. Rusk was a gray-bearded Deccan with hands so permanently bent by needlework and rope that they looked carved around invisible tools. He had approached the problem of dressing Vrrgul exactly as he approached a storm sail: heavy canvas, generous reinforcement, doubled seams, and no expectation that the finished article would be treated gently.

"Claws," Rusk would say whenever Vrrgul brought him another tear.

"...Caught."

"On what?"

Vrrgul would look around the ship as though the answer were obvious.

"...Ship."

"The ship does not have teeth."

"...Maybe."

Barrin had heard that exchange enough times that he no longer looked up from his ledger.

Vrrgul had improved. He learned to curl his claws when pulling on a shirt and to use the pads of his fingers instead of the tips when adjusting cloth. He still tore things. Rusk still complained. Neither seemed inclined to end the arrangement.

The crew called him Vrrgul. In the ship's papers he was Mister Vrrgul, Master-at-Arms. Barrin used the title when speaking to officials and almost never aboard ship. Years later artisans would call him Mr. Vrrgul with complete seriousness, and Vrrgul would accept it with the solemnity of a man receiving a fishing hook.

His actual work was simple enough to describe. He kept order, trained sailors in the use of shipboard weapons, and made certain that anyone trying to take the Grumbling King discovered the difference between a merchant vessel and an undefended one.

His method of stopping fights among the crew was particularly efficient.

Two sailors would begin shouting. A shoulder would strike a shoulder. A fist would come up.

Then one of them would notice Vrrgul standing beside them.

Nobody ever heard him arrive.

"...Done?"

They were generally done.

Barrin had once watched a new Mangar hand named Pel Aruq go pale enough to look ill when he turned and found Vrrgul less than an arm's length away.

"Captain," Pel said later, "how does something that large move like that?"

Barrin had considered the question.

"I have no idea."

Galic Barindrom claimed it was unnatural. The elf was narrow-faced, dark-haired, meticulously clean when conditions allowed it, and possessed of the conviction that magic should obey categories. Vrrgul did not.

"He cannot be that quiet," Galic complained.

"He is," Barrin said.

"That is not an explanation."

"No."

Galic consequently spent much of his leisure below decks or in the crow's nest. Vrrgul disliked both places for reasons he never explained. He rarely went below except to cook, and he slept on deck in all but the worst weather.

Barrin had asked why, long ago.

"...Like deck."

That was all he had ever received.

The crew eventually stopped asking.

They also stopped being frightened of him, if they stayed long enough.

New hands were always wary. Barrin expected it. A troll was a troll, and Vrrgul's smile did little to improve matters. But familiarity worked on fear. A sailor who had watched Vrrgul haul a line beside him, take the ugly end of a cargo shift without complaint, and quietly stand his watch began to see the person rather than the species.

It helped that Vrrgul cooked.

Not every day. The Grumbling King had a cook, a sharp-tongued Gao woman named Sui Ren who considered the galley a sovereign state. But after a good port call, Vrrgul sometimes took over the largest pot aboard and made his boil.

Crab. Shrimp. Sausage. Potatoes. Corn. Peppers. Onions. Whatever the port had offered that looked interesting. Octopus in one harbor, squid in another, reef roaches somewhere farther south, and always a great heaping ladle of the spice mixture he kept in a battered tin no one was permitted to reorganize.

Vrrgul ate the shells.

He ate the corncobs too.

The first time Pel Aruq saw him crunch through a crab whole, he stopped with his spoon halfway to his mouth.

Vrrgul noticed.

“...Good for ya.”

Pel stared.

“Shell and all?”

“...Try.”

“No.”

“...More for Vrrgul.”

The older hands laughed.

What delighted Vrrgul was praise.

A sailor could compliment his strength and receive a shrug. Praise his fighting and Vrrgul behaved as though you had observed that water was wet.

Praise the boil and he lit up.

When a passenger once called him a chef, Vrrgul pointed across the deck and shouted, “He say Vrrgul chef! At least one of ya gots taste!”

The crew groaned, knowing they would hear about it for a week.

Barrin watched the troll ladle another portion into the passenger’s bowl.

“Why do you bother?” the man asked. “You’re master-at-arms, not cook.”

Vrrgul looked genuinely puzzled.

“...Everyone gots ta eat.”

Barrin remembered that sentence.

He would have cause to remember it many times.

Chapter Two — Twelve Ogres by Spring

The Reach banned Vrrgul from coming ashore because of three ogres.

By the following spring there had been twelve.

Barrin had learned that this was simply how ports worked.

The original incident occurred early in Vrrgul's years aboard the ship, when the Grumbling King was taking on provisions and Vrrgul had not yet acquired the reputation that later preceded him. Barrin had given him coin and a list because Vrrgul wanted to make a boil before they cleared the harbor.

The troll returned from the markets with several hundred pounds of food.

He also returned under escort.

The story, reconstructed from six witnesses who contradicted one another on every detail except the important ones, was that three ogres had decided a dressed troll carrying groceries was funny. The largest blocked his way near the docks. There were words. Someone prodded Vrrgul. A crate of crabs was upset. One crab apparently attached itself to an ogre's foot.

Then Vrrgul had a very good afternoon.

The warehouse district did not.

One ogre suffered a broken arm. Another had broken ribs. The third had a cracked skull and a shoulder that would trouble him for years. A fish stall collapsed. Several barrels ceased to be barrels. A grot-drawn cart lost a wheel when one of the ogres landed against it, and the terrified grot had to be calmed by three handlers before it would permit anyone near the harness.

Vrrgul had a split lip.

Barrin found him seated beside the Harbor Watch, carefully gathering escaped crabs back into their crate.

"Vrrgul."

The troll looked up.

"...Bought spices."

Barrin looked at the ruined street.

"I see."

"...Fight happened."

"I see that too."

Vrrgul touched his lip.

One of the watch officers, a Deccan woman named Vara Selk, stared at him with an expression that suggested she had spent the last half hour trying to decide which municipal regulation covered this.

"Is he injured?" she asked.

Barrin looked.

Vrrgul grinned.

"...Still pretty."

Even Vara laughed.

The settlement cost Barrin a painful amount of money. The ogres were not innocent, which mattered. Neither were the broken stalls, damaged masonry, terrified merchants, and injured bystanders imaginary, which mattered more.

The Reach's solution was characteristically administrative.

The Grumbling King remained welcome.

Captain Barrin remained welcome.

His crew remained welcome.

Vrrgul did not.

The notice prohibited the troll known as Vrrgul, master-at-arms of the Grumbling King, from leaving his vessel within the Reach's jurisdiction.

Vrrgul read the order slowly.

"...Can't shop."

"No."

He frowned.

"...They never get enough peppers."

That, to Vrrgul, was the true punishment.

The story spread before the ship returned the following season.

Three ogres became five.

Five became seven.

A tavern in Korinthar Bay produced a version involving nine ogres and a fountain.

By spring there were twelve.

Barrin heard one man swear that Vrrgul had defeated twelve ogres while carrying a barrel of potatoes under one arm and had never put it down.

"That one true?" a new deckhand asked.

Vrrgul considered.

"...Had potatoes."

Barrin walked away before he laughed.

Other stories followed.

Some were true.

Vrrgul had lifted a broken spar off a trapped sailor's legs before tackles could be rigged.

He had helped raise an anchor by hand when the windlass failed, though the popular version removed the three dozen sailors tending the line and left Vrrgul hauling the entire anchor alone.

A pirate crew once laid boarding planks between ships and found Vrrgul waiting at the far end with his arms folded.

"...Who goes swimming first?"

Nobody volunteered.

The planks went back.

That story required no improvement, so naturally sailors improved it anyway.

There were tales of arm-wrestling champions, sharks caught barehanded, dock gangs defeated six at a time, and a Mangar prince who supposedly paid Vrrgul a hundred gold to wrestle a sea lion. Barrin had never met the prince or the sea lion.

Vrrgul did not care.

He cared what the crew thought.

That distinction took Barrin years to understand.

A dockside stranger could call Vrrgul a monster, fool, brute, or legend and receive essentially the same response: nothing. But let Rusk tell him he had done poor work securing a load and Vrrgul would brood until he corrected it. Let Sui Ren tell him his boil was oversalted and he would adjust the next one. Let Barrin say, “Well done,” and the troll would remember.

The crew were his people.

Everyone else was weather.

Chapter Three — When Vrrgul Was Angry

Barrin saw Vrrgul truly angry once before the wreck.

That was enough.

The Grumbling King was crossing open water when a Mangar vessel altered course. There was nothing unusual in the maneuver until the first crossbow bolt struck the foremast.

The second took a sailor through the shoulder.

The third killed the helmsman.

Barrin remembered the sound more clearly than the sight: the hard snap of the crossbows, a shout cut short, Galic screaming a warning, and then the confusion of two ships closing under incompatible intentions.

“Hard over!” Barrin shouted. “Shields! Get those hooks off us!”

The pirates came alongside anyway.

They threw grapnels. Boarding planks struck the rail. Men gathered behind them with axes and blades.

Vrrgul crossed the gap before the pirates did.

He did not roar.

Barrin would almost have preferred a roar.

The troll took three running steps and jumped.

The pirate deck shuddered beneath him.

The first attacker swung an axe. Vrrgul caught the arm and twisted until the weapon fell and the man screamed. He threw the pirate into a mast hard enough that the man folded around it and did not rise.

Another stabbed him.

Vrrgul looked down at the blade, seized the swordsman by the wrist, and bent the arm until the joint failed.

This was not the Vrrgul who fought ogres.

There was no laughter.

No delighted “good hit.”

No effort to make a contest last.

He was killing a threat to his crew.

Barrin’s people crossed after him and then hesitated at what they found. Pirates were in the water. Others lay broken across the deck. One man tried to crawl away with a leg that no longer worked correctly. A crossbowman put a bolt into Vrrgul’s shoulder from scarcely ten feet away.

Vrrgul pulled it free.

The crossbowman dropped his weapon.

The pirate captain surrendered.

Vrrgul kept moving.

Barrin shouted his name.

No response.

He shouted again.

Still nothing.

Then Barrin used words none of his crew expected to hear.

They came from deep in the throat, rough and resonant, an old Stone Giant dialect Barrin had learned in circumstances he rarely discussed. The sounds carried differently across a deck. They were less like ordinary speech than stones grinding under great weight.

Vrrgul stopped.

The pirate captain was backed against the mast.

Barrin spoke again.

Slowly.

Vrrgul turned his head.

For several seconds the entire deck seemed to wait upon whatever passed between captain and troll.

Then Vrrgul stepped away.

The pirate captain collapsed.

Later, Galic cornered Barrin beside the chart table.

“What language was that?”

“Giant.”

“Vrrgul speaks Giant?”

“Apparently.”

“You knew?”

“I knew he understood enough.”

Galic stared.

“That is not the same thing.”

“No.”

“How?”

Barrin looked at him.

“Galic.”

The elf sighed.

“You are not going to tell me.”

“No.”

The pirates remembered the encounter differently.

Those who survived told stories of the troll of the Grumbling King. The crew told stories too, but theirs were quieter.

They had seen what Vrrgul could do when he stopped enjoying a fight.

For a few days the newest sailors avoided him.

Vrrgul noticed.

Barrin knew because Vrrgul became quieter than usual.

Then Sui Ren put him to work moving a barrel in the galley and shouted at him for standing in the wrong place. Rusk complained about blood on a shirt he had recently mended. Pel Aruq asked him to help splice a line.

The ship resumed being a ship.

Fear faded.

Barrin was grateful.

He also never forgot that the pirate captain had surrendered several heartbeats before Vrrgul was willing to stop.

Chapter Four — Seventy-Three Days

The story Barrin trusted least in other sailors was the story of survival.

Men remembered hunger badly. They remembered storms worse. Given ten years, a miserable week became a month and a hard month became an epic.

Barrin did not need to exaggerate the seventy-three days.

The ship before the Grumbling King died in a storm so large that memory broke into fragments.

Rain horizontal in the dark.

A mast gone.

Someone praying.

Someone else vomiting between orders.

The deck becoming a wall beneath Barrin's feet.

Then water.

When Barrin woke, his mouth was full of sand and blood.

The islet was barely nine hundred square yards at low tide. At high tide it seemed smaller. It offered stone, a little coarse growth in cracks, tide pools, and nothing that could honestly be called shelter.

Twelve survived.

Barrin.

Vrrgul.

Toman Rusk, younger then and still black in the beard.

A Mangar rigger named Kesh Tal.

A Gao cook's mate, Wen Dao.

Four Deccan sailors: Mirra Kol, Jasen Turr, and brothers Oren and Pell Dar.

An Aramite deckhand named Nefer Sakh.

A Zandir carpenter, Yevan Korsin.

And a quiet Thylor dwarf named Dorrim Slatehand who spent the first day staring at the horizon as though he intended to intimidate a ship into appearing.

They salvaged what the sea returned.

A kettle.

Rope.

Part of a sail.

Tools.

Two damaged water casks.

Food enough, carefully measured, for perhaps seven days.

Barrin wrote it down because captains wrote things down when writing was all that separated a problem from panic.

Food remaining: seven days.

Rusk looked over his shoulder.

"That with Vrrgul eating?"

Barrin looked toward the troll.

Vrrgul was sitting at the edge of the water.

“No,” Barrin said.

Rusk gave a humorless laugh.

“Then four.”

The next morning Vrrgul went into the sea.

He did not explain.

He simply walked until the water reached his waist, then chest, then shoulders, and disappeared.

Jasen Turr watched him go.

“He’s leaving.”

“No,” Barrin said.

“How do you know?”

Barrin did not, but a captain was sometimes required to lend certainty where none existed.

“He’ll come back.”

Hours passed.

Vrrgul returned carrying food.

Crabs filled one arm. Shellfish had been tied into a bundle of torn cloth. Fish hung from loops of weed. He had found mussels, clams, sea urchins, and several ugly things Wen Dao inspected before deciding which portions might be edible.

Vrrgul dropped the catch.

“...Food.”

That became the pattern.

Rain kept them alive.

Vrrgul kept them fed.

He swam beyond the reefs when the pools were exhausted. He dove. He pried shellfish from stone with claws made for tearing. He caught fish by methods nobody fully understood and returned with creatures none of them had seen before.

Some things only Vrrgul could eat.

He ate those.

The rest he shared.

Barrin watched him grow leaner.

That frightened him more than the hunger.

Vrrgul was enormously difficult to starve, but feeding eleven other people while feeding himself was labor, and the sea did not always cooperate.

On the thirty-first day, he came back bleeding.

Three parallel wounds crossed his ribs. Another ran down his arm. He carried a creature over one shoulder that looked like an eel armored for war.

It was nearly twenty feet long, black-plated, and crowned behind the skull by hard bony ridges. Its inward-curving teeth were made to hold whatever entered its mouth.

Rusk stared.

“What in all hells is that?”

Vrrgul dropped it.

“...Dinner.”

“Did dinner do that to you?”

Vrrgul looked at the wounds.

“...Tough.”

The creature fed them for days.

Vrrgul kept one of its crown plates.

Barrin assumed at first that it was sentiment.

He was wrong.

“Why that?”

Vrrgul turned the black plate in his hands.

“...Never saw one.”

“And?”

“...Tough.”

That was enough.

By day fifty, they had routines.

Mirra and Nefer tended rainwater.

Yevan repaired tools that had no right to remain functional.

Dorrim carved fishhooks from bone.

Wen Dao could make three kinds of shellfish taste different with nothing but saltwater, patience, and spite.

Every evening someone watched for Vrrgul.

Nobody admitted to doing it.

On day seventy-three, Kesh Tal began shouting.

A sail stood on the horizon.

The rescuing vessel was an Oiohelkan patrol cutter, lean and disciplined, running a search pattern after storm debris had been reported farther west.

Barrin remembered the first boat coming ashore.

The officer in command was a square-faced Oiohelkan woman named Helka Orun, her pale braid wrapped tightly against the wind. She stepped into the shallows with four sailors behind her and stopped.

She counted.

Then counted again.

“Twelve?”

Barrin nodded.

“How long?”

“Seventy-three days.”

Helka looked at the survivors.

Not skeletal.

Thin, exhausted, weathered, but standing.

Her eyes moved to the drying racks.

Shells.

Fish bones.

The remains of the black-plated creature.

Then Vrrgul came out of the water carrying two large rays.

The Oiohelkan sailors raised weapons.

Helka did not.

Barrin said, "That's Vrrgul."

The officer looked from Barrin to the troll.

Vrrgul dropped the rays beside Wen Dao.

"...Good ones."

Helka stared for several seconds.

Then she looked back at Barrin.

"He has been feeding you."

"Yes."

"All of you."

"Yes."

"For seventy-three days."

"Most of them."

Rusk coughed.

"All of them."

Helka removed one glove and rubbed her face.

One of the rescue sailors whispered something in Oiohelkan.

Helka answered without taking her eyes from Vrrgul.

Barrin did not know the words then, but the tone needed no translation.

Disbelief.

The rescue crew had brought emergency food. Vrrgul ate enough of it in the first hour to alarm them all over again.

When Helka finally understood that the troll had been rationing himself for weeks, she ordered another crate opened.

Vrrgul looked at Barrin first.

That detail stayed with him.

Not the food.

Not the rescue.

Vrrgul looked to his captain before taking more.

Barrin nodded.

"Eat."

Vrrgul did.

Years later, when sailors asked why Barrin trusted the troll, he rarely told the whole story.

“We had Vrrgul,” he would say.

That was sufficient.

Seven of the twelve still sailed with Barrin more than a decade later. Others left the sea, retired, or died in the ordinary manner time eventually demanded.

Those seven never feared Vrrgul.

They had already seen the answer to the only question that mattered.

When everyone was hungry, what did he do?

He fed them.

Chapter Five — The Reach Breaks

The news of the Reach Incident reached the Grumbling King in Oiohelka.

Barrin was grateful for that.

Oiohelkans did not improve bad news by decorating it.

A harbor official came aboard carrying a sealed packet. He was a compact man named Orst Nial, gray-eyed and precise, wearing the dark practical coat of the port service.

“The Reach has suffered a catastrophic event.”

Barrin set down his cup.

“What event?”

“Unknown.”

“War?”

“Not established.”

“Fire?”

“Not established.”

“Plague?”

“No evidence presented.”

Barrin waited.

Orst continued.

“The harbor functions under emergency authority. Severe structural loss is confirmed. Population displacement is confirmed. Korinthar Bay is receiving vessels and displaced persons. Food, medicine, and construction material have priority.”

“How many independent reports?”

“Five judged reliable.”

That was Oiohelka. No rumors. No cousin of a cousin. No tavern certainty.

Barrin thanked him.

That evening he gathered the crew.

“I will tell you what we know,” he said. “Then I will tell you what we do not.”

Some of the sailors had family in the Reach.

Barrin watched their faces as he spoke.

“The city still stands. The harbor functions. Severe damage is confirmed. We do not know the cause. We do not have reliable casualty figures.”

A Deccan deckhand named Sella Dorn raised her hand as though she were in a schoolroom.

“My brother’s there.”

Barrin met her eyes.

“I don’t know.”

She looked down.

He hated the answer.

He gave it anyway.

When he explained that food, medicine, and lumber were being prioritized, the crew understood the rest before he said it.

"We're not buying in Korinthar," Barrin said.

Quartermaster Darek Sen frowned. Darek was a broad, careful Mangar man with a habit of touching his thumb to each finger while thinking through numbers.

"Closest market."

"And therefore everyone's market."

Darek nodded slowly.

Barrin spread a chart.

"We go north."

Several people leaned closer.

His finger traveled past the Deccan ports, beyond the strained supply web surrounding the Reach, to Aarakiel's southern port.

"That is two months there and back," Galic said.

"Near enough."

"We lose a season."

"No. We lose a season if we spend it fighting fifty other captains for grain that isn't there."

Darek studied the chart.

"Aarakiel will still have stock."

"That's my wager."

Vrrgul, sitting against the mast, spoke from behind them.

"...Lots hungry."

Barrin looked at him.

"Yes."

Vrrgul nodded.

"...Need bigger boil."

No one laughed.

Not at first.

Then Rusk did, quietly, and the tension broke just enough for people to breathe.

Barrin's wager proved correct.

The Aarakiel warehouses had supplies because distance had protected them from the first rush. Barrin bought flour, beans, salted meat, medicines, nails, rope, tools, and lumber. The Grumbling King returned burdened with things nobody would have called glamorous before the Incident and everyone suddenly understood were wealth.

The Reach unloaded them almost immediately.

The second voyage carried people north.

Craftsmen first when possible.

A cooper who had lost his shop came aboard with his wife and three children. He stood before Barrin holding a purse too light to matter.

"I can't pay your rate."

“Can you work?”

The man blinked.

“I’m a cooper.”

“Then you can work.”

His wife looked suspicious.

“For passage?”

“For passage.”

“How long?”

“Until port.”

“What about the children?”

Barrin looked at the three of them. The youngest was asleep against her mother’s shoulder.

“They eat.”

The woman’s eyes moved toward Vrrgul, who was carrying a barrel by himself.

The troll noticed the children staring.

He stared back.

The eldest hid behind his father.

Vrrgul continued walking.

By the third day, the same child was following him around the deck asking questions about gulls.

Rich passengers received a different arrangement.

Lord Harven Tel, a Deccan noble whose Reach townhouse had survived but whose patience had not, demanded a cabin for himself, his valet, and six pieces of luggage.

Barrin named the price.

Harven stared.

“That is robbery.”

“No,” Barrin said. “Robbery involves taking it without your consent.”

“You charged the cooper nothing.”

“I charged him six weeks of skilled labor.”

“You are charging me enough to buy a small house.”

“You have a small house. Several, I’m told.”

Harven’s valet looked away to hide a smile.

The noble paid.

So did others.

A wealthy factor paid three times the old passenger rate to move his family before another disruption. A jeweler paid even more for secure space and complained every day until Vrrgul asked whether he wanted to go swimming. The question was innocent. The jeweler became remarkably content with his accommodations.

Barrin did not give away his ship.

He could not.

Wages had to be paid. Sails cost money. Timber cost money. Food cost money. A captain who ruined himself helping people would soon possess nothing with which to help anyone.

So Barrin charged those who could pay what they would tolerate.

Those who could work, worked.

Those who could do neither were judged one by one.

It was not charity.

It was decency conducted by ledger.

The Houses understood. Deccan was trade. Keeping trade alive was itself part of keeping the nation alive.

Not everyone behaved as Barrin did.

Some warehouses raised prices until ordinary families could no longer buy from them. Some Houses called it preservation of stock. Sometimes they were telling the truth. Sometimes they discovered how profitable fear could be.

The distinction mattered afterward.

Coin was remembered.

So was conduct.

Chapter Six — A Dangerous Bay

The Incident turned men who had never expected to become pirates into pirates.

It also made better pirates out of men who had been waiting for an excuse.

Luxury trade collapsed. Silk sat. Fine wine waited in cellars. Jewelry merchants discovered that frightened wealthy people preferred flour, secure passage, and timber to another necklace.

Fishermen, meanwhile, sold everything they could land.

The sea lanes changed.

Ships began sailing in company.

Oiohelkan warships guarded the outer approaches to major ports with the cold efficiency of people who regarded piracy as a navigational obstruction to be removed. Convoys formed. Captains exchanged signals and schedules. Armed watches doubled.

Barrin disliked sailing alone.

Vrrgul seemed unconcerned.

At night, when the moon set, the troll sometimes fished.

His method confused everyone.

He fixed a bright hooded torch low over the water. Beside it he set a twelve-foot pole strung with multiple bare hooks. He worked the pole slowly, lifting and lowering it through the illuminated water.

If he caught a small fish, he stamped it, threaded pieces onto the hooks, and sent the rig back down.

One morning the deck held seventy-three pounds of squid.

Sui Ren was delighted.

By breakfast the galley smelled of hot oil, garlic, pepper, and calamari.

Vrrgul was glum.

Barrin found him cleaning hooks.

“Seventy-three pounds.”

“...Yes.”

“That’s enough squid to make Sui forgive you for existing in her galley.”

“...Yes.”

“So why do you look disappointed?”

Vrrgul looked over the rail.

“...Trying for tideripper.”

Barrin stopped.

“A tideripper.”

“...Yes.”

“Show me.”

The rig was fifty feet of small anchor chain, a massive harpoon, and an attachment intended to bolt directly through a reinforced mast collar.

Barrin stared.

“How large?”

Vrrgul spread his hands.

Then farther.

Then shrugged.

“...Big.”

“Have you caught one before?”

“...Once.”

“On a ship?”

“...Yes.”

“Did the ship survive?”

Vrrgul considered.

“...No.”

Barrin closed his eyes.

The cook kept frying squid.

A month later Vrrgul caught one.

It weighed close to five thousand pounds.

The fight lasted seven hours.

The Grumbling King was never in serious danger of being capsized by an animal of that size, but the strain on gear, timber, and crew was real enough. Barrin altered sail repeatedly to keep the pull manageable. The chain sang under tension. Vrrgul's shoulders and back worked until even his regeneration could not disguise exhaustion.

When the tideripper finally died, they hauled it aboard using the cargo gear.

There was far too much meat.

Barrin raised signals.

Two nearby merchant ships approached cautiously and left carrying portions of the catch.

Three crews ate.

The story reached port before the Grumbling King did.

Months later Barrin noticed that Vrrgul had not fished for another.

“Given up?”

“...No.”

“Then why?”

Vrrgul rolled one shoulder.

“...Shoulder hurt.”

That was all.

The next port with northern whalers changed him.

Vrrgul talked to working people. Always working people.

Whalers.

Divers.

Dock-repair crews.

Salvagers.

Fishermen.

Men and women missing fingers, carrying scars, or possessing the quiet certainty of people who had seen something rather than read about it.

“How deep?”

“Where gills?”

“Bleed long?”

“What comes when blood?”

“Good eating?”

He listened.

The next rig had three harpoons.

One to hold.

One to deepen the wound.

One for the gills.

“Don’t fight it for seven hours,” an old whaler named Torvek Harn told him. “You aren’t proving anything to the fish.”

Vrrgul nodded.

“...Kill fast.”

“Exactly.”

“And if it bleeds too long,” Torvek said, “leave.”

Vrrgul frowned.

“...Why?”

Torvek looked at the dark water.

“Because you are not the only thing that knows what blood smells like.”

Vrrgul remembered that too.

Chapter Seven — Rippering

It was Vrrgul who asked why tiderippers came near the ports.

Barrin had never considered it.

They were anchored outside a strained Deccan harbor when Vrrgul spoke.

“...Rippers like bays.”

Barrin looked up from his ledger.

“What?”

“...Reach. Ports. Why?”

Barrin followed the troll’s gaze toward the city.

He thought for a long time.

“Cities feed the sea.”

Vrrgul waited.

“Offal. Sewage. Spoiled food. Fish waste. Scavengers come for that. Bigger things come for the scavengers. Bigger things come for those.”

“...Rippers.”

“Aye.”

The Bay’s warm shallow waters produced large tiderippers, but not the monstrous northern animals of the cold seas. A large Bay specimen might reach six tons, enough to endanger small boats but not to capsize a vessel the size of the Grumbling King under ordinary conditions.

Vrrgul considered this.

“...Fish in port?”

Barrin almost dismissed the idea.

Then he thought of the food prices.

The crowds.

The exhausted warehouses.

“They’d use the meat.”

“...Yes.”

“And almost everything else sells.”

“...Yes.”

Barrin looked at him.

“Aye, Vrrgul. We can try.”

The first port hunt drew spectators.

The second drew fishermen.

By the fourth, people were asking questions.

Vrrgul showed them what he had learned, but he warned them against copying him.

“...Don’t hunt alone.”

Ordinary fishermen listened.

They used several boats, whaler-fashion, distributing the strain and risk. It remained dangerous. Boats were damaged. Men died. A wounded ripper could smash planking or drag a careless hunter into the water.

But successful catches brought thousands of pounds of meat into stressed ports.

Rippering became a trade.

The largest animal taken by a coordinated local fleet exceeded twelve thousand pounds.

Vrrgul heard about it while eating breakfast.

He stopped chewing.

“...Twelve?”

“Twelve thousand and change,” Darek Sen said.

Vrrgul looked at his own necklace.

He had begun keeping the largest intact tooth from every tideripper he personally killed. It was a curiously human habit, or perhaps a sailor’s habit. Trolls did not generally preserve trophies with such care.

The largest tooth belonged to a nine-thousand-pound animal he had eventually taken alone.

Darek grinned.

“Still smaller than theirs.”

Vrrgul looked offended.

“...Many boats.”

“Still bigger.”

Vrrgul said nothing.

Barrin knew that expression.

“No.”

Vrrgul looked at him.

“No what?”

“Whatever you are planning.”

“...Not planning.”

“That worries me more.”

Vrrgul never beat the twelve-thousand-pound catch.

He did not stop trying forever.

He simply became more patient about waiting for a reason.

Chapter Eight — The Things Below

Vrrgul's interest in the sea widened after the tiderippers.

He did not become a scholar.

At least not in the manner scholars expected.

He sought out people who knew the water with their bodies.

A harbor diver who had repaired pilings in darkness.

A woman who butchered whales.

A salvager who knew which wrecks attracted sharks.

An old fisherman who had seen a shape beneath his boat thirty years earlier and still refused to fish that reef.

Vrrgul listened to them all.

Museums happened by accident.

Someone would say, "There's a skeleton of one in the maritime hall."

Vrrgul would ask, "...Where?"

Then a curator would discover Mr. Vrrgul standing in the entrance.

He read slowly.

Painfully slowly, by the standards of educated observers.

But he read everything.

In one Aarakiel collection, two scholars watched him spend nearly an hour before a mounted marine reptile.

One whispered, "Does he understand the plaque?"

Vrrgul continued reading.

The other shrugged.

Eventually Vrrgul pointed at the reconstructed jaw.

"...Wrong."

The first scholar nearly laughed.

A retired salvage diver standing nearby leaned closer.

"No," the diver said. "He's right. Hinge should sit farther back."

The scholars stopped laughing.

Vrrgul did not notice.

He had already moved to the next exhibit.

He disliked nets.

When a fisherman asked why, Vrrgul answered immediately.

"...Catch things don't want."

The Bay's warm shallows supported great jellyfish. Large ones could ruin a net, fill it with stinging tentacles, or turn hauling into an emergency.

Vrrgul preferred hooks.

Poles.

Chain.

Harpoons.

He liked knowing exactly what was attached to him.

Northern Anufed became his favorite source of equipment, even though he never visited it.

Ogre smiths already made tackle at the proper scale. They hunted northern tiderippers with harbor winches, great poles, heavy chain leaders, and irons that looked like weapons for killing siege beasts.

Word spread that the troll of the Grumbling King bought good gear.

Shipments began arriving.

One contained a pole so massive that several sailors called it a crane until Vrrgul corrected them.

Another contained hooks large enough to make Sui Ren ask whether he intended to bait them with passengers.

Then came the tooth.

It was dinner-plate sized.

More than half again the size of the largest Bay ripper tooth on Vrrgul's necklace.

The ogre smith had included it as proof of what the equipment was built to withstand.

Vrrgul laid his own largest tooth beside it.

The difference silenced the jokes.

Barrin found him comparing them.

"You are not taking my ship north just to catch one."

"...No."

"Good."

Vrrgul turned the northern tooth over in his hands.

"...If go north."

Barrin sighed.

"Yes?"

"...Get one."

The troll stored the tooth with the tackle.

He would not wear it.

He had not earned it.

He cared about that.

Chapter Nine — Dasht

By the time the Reach stabilized, the Grumbling King needed money and dock time.

The crisis voyages had been hard on her. Barrin wanted a proper refit, not another season of temporary repairs.

The best contract went south.

Dasht.

Barrin approached Vrrgul carefully.

The troll was repairing a fishing pole near the foremast.

“We need to make a run to Dasht.”

Vrrgul stopped.

For several seconds he said nothing.

Then:

“...Why DASHT?”

The name came out hard.

“Contract work. Good contract work. Enough to pay for the refit.”

Vrrgul stared at him.

“You can fish for a month while the King is in yard.”

That helped.

“...Good.”

Then:

“...But Dasht.”

The crew knew Vrrgul disliked the Yuan-ti.

Barrin knew why.

Thirnavar’s Yuan-ti carried humanlike torsos above long serpentine bodies, and the people of Dasht had a reputation for contracts that were precise, layered, and dangerous to misunderstand.

“Cheats,” Vrrgul said.

“Predictable.”

“...Cheats.”

“Predictable cheats.”

Vrrgul remained unconvinced.

Barrin explained the difficulty.

“They don’t know me. They know you.”

“...Fear Vrrgul.”

“Yes.”

“I need you ashore.”

Vrrgul frowned.

“...Need someone count.”

“That,” Barrin said, “is what I wanted to discuss.”

The actual exchange did not require Vrrgul to negotiate value.

Barrin would do that.

Vrrgul needed to verify weight.

So Barrin taught him a scale.

A heavy counterweight balance was built for him, portable only in the sense that Vrrgul could carry it.

The weights were calibrated and marked.

Every night for two months they practiced.

Twenty pounds.

Forty.

One hundred.

Four hundred.

Barrin lied deliberately.

“Four hundred.”

Vrrgul watched the beam.

“...No.”

“Four hundred.”

“...Scale say no.”

“I’m captain.”

“...Captain wrong.”

The crew laughed.

Vrrgul did not.

He added weights until the discrepancy was proven.

“...Three eighty.”

Barrin smiled.

“Good.”

“...Captain cheat.”

“That was the lesson.”

Vrrgul grinned.

“...Vrrgul caught.”

He practiced alone too, weighing tools, cookware, rope, and anything else he could carry to the scale.

Sui Ren once found half her galley arranged by weight.

She shouted for ten minutes.

Vrrgul listened.

Then he finished weighing the pans.

By Dasht, Barrin trusted him.

The instructions were simple.

“They say four hundred?”

“...Scale.”

“They say their scale is better?”

“...Use ours.”

“They become offended?”

Vrrgul thought.

“...Scale anyway.”

“Exactly.”

Chapter Ten — Scale Says Light

Vrrgul insisted on carrying a harpoon ashore.

Barrin objected.

“Business does not require a harpoon.”

“...Harpoon stop fight.”

“It is more likely to start one.”

Vrrgul shook his head.

“...Trust me.”

Barrin should have known better than to argue with the one person aboard who actually knew Dasht from experience.

Vrrgul went ashore barefoot, dressed in heavy canvas, tideripper teeth at his chest, the portable balance beneath one arm, calibrated weights in the other hand, and an Anufed harpoon across his shoulder.

The younger Yuan-ti assigned to the exchange did not know him personally.

That was their mistake.

They spoke slowly to him in Trade.

They spoke freely to one another in Yuan-ti.

They commented on the scale.

They commented on Barrin sending a troll.

They wondered whether the creature could count.

They discussed which stock might be easiest to substitute.

Vrrgul assembled the scale.

He said nothing.

Then War-Fang Sszareth entered.

Sszareth was an elite warrior of Dasht, broad through the humanlike torso, scarred, bronze-scaled along the shoulders and temples, his long serpentine lower body moving with controlled strength across the stone. A curved sword rested in a worn harness.

He stopped when he saw Vrrgul.

Vrrgul stopped when he saw him.

Sszareth's eyes moved to the harpoon.

Then back to the troll.

“You got bigger,” he said in Yuan-ti.

Vrrgul answered in the same language.

“...You got old.”

The younger traders went silent.

Sszareth and Vrrgul had fought years before.

Neither called the other friend.

Neither called the other enemy.

They understood one another more usefully than that.

When Sszareth learned how freely the younger Yuan-ti had spoken, his anger was cold.

“You knew his name,” he told them, “but not the person. Yet you spoke as though ignorance were guaranteed because of what stood before you.”

No one answered.

“Fools. Never decide what another creature understands until you have discovered what it understands.”

Then he looked at Vrrgul.

“What did they tell you?”

Vrrgul considered.

“...Enough.”

Sszareth closed his eyes.

The trade proceeded.

Four hundred pounds had been agreed for a lot.

Vrrgul loaded the metal.

The beam rose.

“...More.”

A trader began explaining tolerances.

“...More.”

Another ingot.

Still light.

Vrrgul pointed.

“...Scale say light.”

They could not negotiate around him because he was not negotiating.

They could not tempt him with supposedly superior stock because Barrin had specified particular stock.

They could not combine lots because Barrin had specified lots.

“You are attempting to bargain with a wall,” Sszareth finally told them.

Vrrgul considered.

“...Wall don’t have scale.”

Sszareth laughed.

At the end, they attempted to make another contract through him.

“Write deal,” Vrrgul said. “I take captain.”

“We can establish terms now.”

“...No.”

“You represent him.”

“...Weight.”

“We could negotiate through you.”

“...No.”

The future offer went onto vellum.

Chapter Eleven — No Blood, No Fight

Vrrgul returned to the Grumbling King at sunset.

Barrin was waiting.

The troll's first act was to pull the enormous harpoon free and hold it out.

"...No blood."

He turned the iron head.

"...No fight."

Barrin inspected it.

"Excellent."

Vrrgul grinned.

"...Told you."

Then he said, "War-Fang Sszareth was there."

That got Barrin's attention.

"Sszareth?"

"...Old now."

"Still dangerous?"

"...Yes."

Then Vrrgul produced a large folded sheet of excellent vellum.

"...Deal."

"You made a deal?"

"...No."

"No?"

"...They try. Told write deal. Take captain."

Barrin smiled.

"Very good."

"...Captain does words."

"Aye."

"...Vrrgul does weight."

The vellum described a second exchange, twice the quantity.

The metal was worth returning for.

It came from the edges of the Naga Underrealms nearest the ancient volcanic tubes: a natural composite of adamant-bearing ore and bronzium, altered by old heat and pressure. The Yuan-ti could mine it. They could smelt it into useful ingots.

What they could not reliably do was forge and temper it to its full potential.

Others could.

That made the ingots extraordinarily valuable.

Dasht, in turn, wanted practical things. Timber. Worked iron. Preserved foods. Lamp oil. Rope. Tools. Materials that mattered more to them than another stack of difficult metal they could not fully exploit.

Barrin read the proposed quantity twice.

Vrrgul waited.

“They want us back.”

“...Good.”

“They want twice the metal.”

“...Good.”

“They also want preserved fish. Tideripper products.”

Vrrgul leaned closer.

“Meat, oil, hide, teeth.”

Vrrgul immediately touched his necklace.

“...No teeth.”

Barrin looked at him.

“They are valuable.”

“...Mine.”

“Your largest tooth from your own catches remains yours.”

“...Rest sell.”

“That seems fair.”

The crew gathered.

They wanted the story.

Vrrgul gave them almost nothing.

“Any trouble?” Darek asked.

“...Tried.”

“What happened?”

“...Scale.”

“That’s all?”

“...Scale say light.”

“What did they say?”

“...Lots.”

“And?”

“...Still light.”

The deck laughed.

Later Barrin asked whether the younger Yuan-ti had known Vrrgul understood them.

The troll grinned.

“...No.”

“What did they say?”

“...Lots.”

“Anything I need to know?”

“...Yes.”

That conversation occurred privately.

Rusk asked about Sszareth.

“Friend?”

“...No.”

“Enemy?”

“...No.”

“What then?”

Vrrgul thought.

“...Fought.”

“Who won?”

“...Stopped.”

“Who stopped it?”

Another pause.

“...Lots people.”

The crew howled.

Barrin remembered more of that old encounter than he chose to say.

That night he read the contract again.

It was good.

Not generous.

Good.

He would change three clauses.

Then the Grumbling King would return.

The ship needed a refit first.

Vrrgul, Barrin suspected, had plans for the refit of his own.

Chapter Twelve — Mr. Vrrgul Goes to the Yard

The shipyard learned to call him Mr. Vrrgul.

The crew almost never did.

The artisans did because artisans liked titles when a customer was spending thousands of gold.

The Grumbling King entered dock battered, profitable, and carrying a contract that promised another profitable southern voyage. Barrin intended to replace standing rigging, repair planking, rebuild the galley stove, reinforce strained fittings, inspect the mast, and address every small problem he had been postponing since the Reach crisis.

Vrrgul arrived at the first meeting carrying drawings.

Not good drawings.

But drawings.

Master shipwright Edran Vos was a Deccan man in his fifties, thin as a spar, with silver hair cropped short and a measuring cord permanently hanging from his belt. Beside him stood Kora Dhem, an Aarakiel metalworker with topaz Zandir skin and a habit of examining every problem as though it had personally offended her.

Edran looked at the drawing.

Then at Vrrgul.

Then at Barrin.

“Captain.”

“Yes?”

“Is this a fishing arrangement?”

Vrrgul answered.

“...Yes.”

Edran pointed at a sketched line that ran through three structural members.

“This would distribute load through half the forward frame.”

“...Yes.”

“What are you catching?”

Vrrgul thought.

“...Don’t know yet.”

Edran looked at Barrin.

Barrin rubbed his forehead.

“Build it stronger.”

That began a month of spending.

Poles.

Hooks.

Lines.

Chain leaders.

Swivels.

Harpoon heads.

Replacement barbs.

A winch heavy enough that ordinary fishermen called it harbor equipment.

Reinforced attachment rings backed by plates and structural timber so that Vrrgul's tackle no longer depended upon one unfortunate mast collar.

Ogre-made components from Anufed were incorporated wherever appropriate. Some had been built for northern tideripper fisheries and were absurdly overqualified for ordinary Bay work.

Vrrgul was delighted.

"Mr. Vrrgul," Kora said one morning, "your new gill iron is ready."

Vrrgul immediately abandoned breakfast.

Rusk watched him go.

"Mr. Vrrgul."

Barrin smiled.

"Don't."

"I'm going to."

"You'll regret it."

That evening Rusk bowed theatrically.

"Mr. Vrrgul, your trousers require mending."

Vrrgul stared at him.

"...Rusk."

The old sailmaker laughed until he coughed.

The money came from Vrrgul's own accumulated shares.

Barrin warned him once.

"You know how much you are spending?"

"...Yes."

"Most of your share."

"...Yes."

"You could buy property."

Vrrgul looked horrified.

"...Why?"

Barrin surrendered.

The artisans loved him because he paid for quality and listened to explanations. He did not haggle for sport. If someone showed him why a better swivel cost more, he considered it. If he believed the explanation, he paid.

He also tested everything.

Kora once presented a hook whose shank was as thick as a man's wrist.

Vrrgul examined the weld.

"...Strong?"

"Yes."

He pulled.

Kora's eyes widened.

"Not like that."

Vrrgul stopped.

She took a breath.

"Mr. Vrrgul, I can demonstrate the rated load."

"...Good."

From then on she demonstrated first.

By the time the Grumbling King was ready to sail, Vrrgul had spent thousands.

He had never looked happier.

Chapter Thirteen — What the Sea Knows

The refit gave Vrrgul time to learn.

Barrin began noticing that the troll's questions had changed.

Once they had been simple.

"How big?"

"Good eating?"

"Hooks work?"

Now they were specific.

"Feeds surface or deep?"

"Runs when hurt?"

"Needs move water over gills?"

"Comes to light?"

"Follows warm current?"

"Blood bring others?"

He spoke with whalers and divers.

Dock repair crews taught him what large creatures did around pilings and submerged foundations. Butchers showed him where tendons thickened and where armor thinned. Fishermen taught him seasonal movements. Salvagers taught him what lived around wrecks.

He listened to people who had lost friends.

He never mocked fear.

A diver named Aram Nesh, gray-skinned and Aramite, told him about a giant mantis-shrimp creature harvested for the magically accelerated structures in its striking limbs. The material was valuable to artificers. The meat was excellent.

The hunt was murderous.

"They strike faster than your eye follows," Aram said. His left hand ended at the wrist. "One cracked a piling beside me. Same blow took this."

Vrrgul looked at the missing hand.

"...How big?"

"Biggest I saw? Twenty feet, perhaps."

"...Good eating?"

Aram stared.

Then laughed so hard he had to sit down.

"Yes, troll. Very good eating."

Vrrgul leaned closer.

"...Tell more."

Barrin heard about that conversation afterward and immediately regretted the existence of mantis shrimp.

Yet the knowledge Vrrgul accumulated became useful.

Galic eventually admitted it.

The elf did so reluctantly.

“There is a difference,” he told Barrin, “between knowing facts and knowing a subject.”

“And?”

“He knows the subject.”

Vrrgul could identify signs of large marine predators, judge feeding behavior, recognize likely habitats, and understand how anatomy affected a hunt. His knowledge was narrow.

Ask him about alpine flowers and he would be useless.

Ask him why a large wake was moving against the current outside a harbor and he might save the ship a great deal of trouble.

Barrin began recording it in the crew assessments simply as:

Nature — Large Oceanic Creatures: specialist.

Vrrgul never saw the entry.

He would not have cared.

He cared that Torvek Harn, the old whaler, once inspected his three-harpoon rig and said:

“That’ll work.”

Vrrgul talked about that compliment for days.

Chapter Fourteen — The Troll of the Grumbling King

Barrin eventually understood that strangers always expected Vrrgul to be something other than what he was.

A monster.

A curiosity.

A weapon.

A fool.

A legend.

The expectations changed. The mistake did not.

Rich passengers fleeing the Reach expected him to carry their trunks because he was strong. Sometimes he did. Then he charged them for the labor through Darek and gave the coin to the ship's common fund.

Refugee children expected him to eat them because someone had told them trolls ate people. Instead they watched him eat a gull that landed too close.

That did not reassure them.

The gull landed on the rail.

Vrrgul's hand moved.

One startled squawk.

A crunch.

A little girl named Tessa stared at him in horror.

"Why did you do that?"

Vrrgul chewed.

"...Tasty snack."

"Birds have feathers."

"...Not now."

Tessa's mother covered her face.

By the end of the voyage the child was bringing Vrrgul interesting shells.

Scholars expected him to be unable to read.

Merchants expected him to be unable to count.

Pirates expected him to be slow.

Dock fighters expected him to be stupid enough to provoke.

All of them learned different lessons.

Vrrgul ignored most of it.

He wanted Barrin to trust his work.

He wanted Rusk to stop complaining about torn shirts, though he never quite managed that.

He wanted Sui Ren to approve of his boil.

He wanted Galic to admit, once, that the troll had approached without the elf noticing. Galic refused to give him the satisfaction.

He wanted the crew fed.

He wanted his fishing gear strong.

He wanted, someday, to go north and find the animal that had carried the dinner-plate tooth.

Barrin sometimes wondered whether that was enough for a life.

Then he remembered the islet.

Seventy-three days.

Twelve people.

Vrrgul walking out of the sea every evening carrying food.

He remembered the Reach and the craftsmen working for passage.

He remembered rich men paying outrageous fares because they could.

He remembered the pirate captain collapsing when Vrrgul finally stepped away.

He remembered a Yuan-ti contract folded in high-quality vellum and the troll proudly presenting a clean harpoon.

No blood.

No fight.

Barrin had spent much of his life surrounded by people who explained themselves beautifully.

Vrrgul rarely explained anything.

Perhaps that was why the few things he did say mattered.

One evening, after the refit, the Grumbling King lay ready to sail again.

Her hull was sound. Her rigging was new where it needed to be. Reinforced fishing mounts sat forward like fittings for some obscure siege weapon. Dasht waited far to the south with twice the adamant-bronzium alloy promised in exchange for practical cargo.

Vrrgul sat beside the mast sorting hooks.

Each was enormous.

Barrin came to stand beside him.

“Happy?”

Vrrgul looked at the new pole.

The winch.

The harpoons.

The heavy iron rings built into the ship.

Then at Barrin.

“...Yes.”

“Good.”

Vrrgul returned to his hooks.

After a moment he said:

“...Captain.”

“Hm?”

“Dasht then north someday?”

Barrin stared out over the harbor.

“No.”

Vrrgul waited.

Barrin sighed.

“Not specifically to catch a tideripper.”

Vrrgul grinned.

“...If go north.”

“Yes, Vrrgul.”

“...Get one.”

Barrin laughed.

Around them the Grumbling King settled against her lines, thirty-eight lives preparing once more to trust timber, canvas, skill, weather, and one another.

That was what a ship was.

Not the hull.

Not the cargo.

Not even the captain.

It was the agreement that when the sea became difficult, everyone aboard would do what they could.

Barrin looked at Vrrgul and thought again of a barren islet and an empty ration ledger.

Everyone gots ta eat.

There were worse principles upon which to build a life.

There were worse men to have beside you when the world went wrong.

And there were certainly worse trolls.