

Vrutglob Ufonian

Skjalm Arrøe

A smelly runt in a smelly bag

Vrutglob grew up in the Grwor Camp in the Eastern part of Darguun. When he was a runt he lived with one of the local shamen, Bororg, who basically treated Vrutglob and the other assistants like slaves. Daily beatings and lashings either made the runts very tough or very quick. Several of them died when they were quite young and Vrutglob only managed to survive through a mix of quick reflexes and being cunning enough to divert Bororg's attention to the other runts.

For endless years Vrutglob slaved and toiled and cleaned pots and dodged heavy items thrown by use of ancient gobbo magic. Life was both an adrenaline rush of survival and boring as hell.

Boring, that is, until one day a strange thing happened.

As always Bororg had sent some of his runts, including Vrutglob, out on an impossible errand. This time they were to come back with the essence of the sky. Off the runts went spending more time and energy figuring out how to blame the

others for their eventual failure than they spend on figuring out what the essence of the sky could actually be.

Though they all dreaded their return and following beating the group were somewhat light heartened. After all, they did get to spend the entire day away from the camp. Playfully they ran across the fields surrounding the Camp doing their best to beat each other up with sticks they picked up as they went. None of them were badly hurt except, of course, for the one they always called Squeaky. He was constantly whining and complaining over every little thing that happened to him. So naturally it was even more fun to poke and prod him. It also helped that he was the youngest and smallest and if you can't figure out how to grow bigger than the others, well, tough luck. You're just in for a hard ride.

On the other side of the fields they headed into the forest to try and find some mushrooms. It was not really fall yet so there probably were not a lot around. But maybe, just maybe, some of the Green Spotted Bulbheads were too stupid to realise they should not come out yet. Big, huge, juicy, tasty mushrooms that made your head spin and your eyes water. Oh, what joy it would be to sink your teeth into some of those. Giddy with anticipation the runts bounced and ran and screamed and chased each other in their search for old tree trunks where the mushrooms grew.

Before the runts could find any mushrooms they encountered something far more interesting. A dead humie. Naturally they immediately started tearing all her clothes apart and rumaged through her back pack and pouches. There were lots of shiny trinkets that the runts fought for. Even Squeaky were so mesmerised by the twinkling lights that he actually put in enough effort that he got hold of a little something for himself. Not a

twinkling trinket, of course. Not even a piece of knick knack. Even a little soft cloth would have been nice, but no such luck. Oh, well, at least he looked happy to have managed to tear off a piece of the woman's skin that had some strange symbol on it. He jubilantly bounced around pressing the still bloody skin to his forehead pretending to be a tall, fancy humie lady.

The others laughed wildly at this and since there was nothing else to loot from the corpse they started chasing after Squeaky. Vrutglob was among one of the first in the litter as they chased little Squeaky through the forest. So caught up in their chase were they that they did not really notice that a clearing they ran into was not deserted. It was hard to see who were most surprised: the runts or the humie warriors they had come across. It was not hard to see who reacted first. For while the runts might not have been the smartest in the world they were most certainly among the ones whose survival instincts kicked in the fastest.

It did not take many seconds before they scattered in all directions. Except for poor wee Squeaky who just did not grasp anything at all, perhaps apart from the fact that the others were obviously so afraid of him that they had given up the chase and ran off. And, of course, then there was Vrutglob who had become dead set on snatching the skin symbol from Squeaky.

Right in front of the humies' eyes two things happened after most of the runts ran screaming from the clearing. Firstly, a particularly small gobbo jumped up on a small tree trunk and began dancing wildly while pressing one hand to its forehead. Secondly, a slightly less small gobbo jumped head, and nails and teeth, first at the first gobbo. After that something happened that took everyone by surprise, most of all the two

runts: Squeaky literally exploded in a cloud of blood, goo and an eerie lingering squeaky sound.

Vrutglob had been just about to hit Squeaky when the world exploded in a red haze right in front of his eyes. He fell heavily to the ground spitting Squeaky bits out of his mouth and trying to clear his eyes of things he did not particularly want to know what was.

Squinting against the liquid that kept running into his eyes he saw the piece of skin lying on the ground. The strange mark looked somewhat like the tattoos Bororg's body was covered in. Except that this one glowed fiercely.

He spat some more and squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed them hard with his claw like hands. Then he remembered the humies and bounced up with a loud squeel and began to run as fast as he could towards the forest even before his feet hit the ground. Sadly for him, before his feet hit the ground one of the humie's hands hit the back of his neck and grabbed him in an iron grip.

The humies were obviously not pleased with seeing the runts or the tattoo and they were shouting both among themselves and at Vrutglob. Having never seen humies before he had no idea what they were going on about. He just knew that they did not seem to care about his loudly voiced protests or his repeated attempts at scratching out the eyes of the humie who had picked him up. The last bit might have had something to do with the fact that he was so tiny compared to them that he could barely even reach the humie's elbows. And the thick leather covered with metal rings seemed very effective at reflecting his claws.

Without ever knowing why Vrutglob was dragged away from

where Squeaky's remains had made a very colourful redecoration of the grass. In spite of his struggles the humies just kept on dragging him towards some strange kind of hut on the other side of the clearing while one of them picked up the glowing tattoo. That was the last thing Vrutglob saw before they stuffed him in a bag and tied it shut.

Vrutglob was not a happy little runt. He was, in fact, a very angry little runt. No bag has ever, neither before nor after, gotten such a fierce and viscious trashing as he gave it. When he finally began to feel that he was making a little progress he was completely spent and had no choice but to collapse in a heap at the bottom of the bag. The humies must have noticed this because they tossed the bag down on something hard provoking a thin grunt and a little wailing from Vrutglob.

Around him he could hear how the humies were walking around in their heavy, clumsy boots and how they were shuffling a lot of very heavy objects around. At some point something banged against the side of the bag and he felt himself being pushed up against some kind of barrel or crate. Another jolt and he could feel another barrel on his other side. It began to slowly creep into his gobbo mind that he might be getting into a somewhat unpleasant situation.

All of a sudden his mind went completely blank. This happened roughly half a second after the bottom went out of his stomach and it felt like the entire world was tumbling end over end with him in the middle. The foulness inside the bag got a whole new odour to it when he puked his guts out. Somewhere between the stench of his own vomit and the remains of Squeaky it became too much for him and he drifted away in the darkness of unconsciousness. Oh, the sweet, soft, comfortable darkness... that lasted far too short.

When he woke up he was still in the bag and even a gobbo has some limits to how much foulness he will tolerate to sleep in. So he began to scratch at the bag again, this time a little more concentrated and before long he had made a small hole. There was not much light in the room he was and there was still a strange rolling sensation in his entire body so he could not make out a lot of details. It did seem like there were no humies around so he continued making the hole bigger until he could finally climb out.

Taking a good look around he saw that he must be in some kind of storage room or something. That was strange, he thought, because why would a bunch of humies build something like that in the middle of the gobbos' forest. And why hadn't anyone gotten around to burning it down yet? Everyone knew that humies could not be trusted so they should simply be killed, stabbed and screamed at and anything they owned should just be burned. Unless it was bright and shiny and made your eyes all round and big.

In vain he searched the room for something to start a fire with. What was it with these humies? Had they never heard of fire stones? Or lamps? Or anything?

Mumbling to himself in his squeaky voice he did not notice that a door in the far end began to open. Fortunately for him the humies who came through the door were stupid beasts who were no match for his lightning quick gobbo reflexes. He snickered quietly to himself as he dodged behind a crate and began to sneak around the humies towards the door. When they were at the other end and he was within dashing distance of the opening he jumped forward with a squeel of delight and ran out and closed the door from the other side. Grunting with effort he managed to slide the latch into place and grinned

visciously when he heard the humies shake and rattle the door from the other side.

Before turning around and heading up the stairs behind him, and what were those stairs doing there, he stuck his tongue out at the door and made the rudest sign he could think of. That should show them. Silly humies.

Going up the stairs proved to be more of a challenge than he had first thought. Not so much because they were incredibly narrow and had very tall steps. It was more because with every step he climbed the more the world began to roll back and forth and from one side to the other. Once he reached the top he felt like it would not matter whether he fell back down again or continued. His eyes rolled and rolled in their sockets and it was all he could do to get even the slightest idea of where he was.

The first thing he really noticed was the huge cloud that was passing by almost within arm's reach. If he had had very long arms, that is. The second thing he noticed was the confused roar from several humies as they saw him emerge. The last thing he noticed, before generations of finely honed adrenaline glands kicked in in an attempt to save his life, was that he was stumbling over some kind of edge that led to a big, vast emptiness. Acting purely on reflexes his arms grabbed hold of the nearest thing as he tumbled over the side of the flying ship the humies had carried him up in.

Later, much later, Vrutglob and the ship's captain would sometimes joke at how fortunate they had both been that the captain had been standing next to the stairs leading to the hold when the confused little goblin first ventured out onto the deck. What Vrutglob had managed to do in those confused seconds

was to sink his claws into the captain's thigh just as he went over the side. There had been a few painful moments where the captain had tried to pry open the claw only to find that there is nothing more secure than the grip of a goblin whose feet are dangling a thousand feet over the ground. Eventually the captain had managed to pull the goblin back onto the deck and calm him down enough that he let go.

The captain had not known that some of his crew members had snatched Vrutglob and while he was not as such a big fan of goblins he was quite adamantly against the concept of slavery. So he had decided to not throw Vrutglob over the side and keeping him to sell him later was completely out of the question.

And that was how the little, sneaky goblin known as Vrutglob had found his way onto one of Cyre's elemental courier ships near the end of the Last War.

A sneaky runt in a smelly town

For several years Vrutglob sailed the skies on the Cyre courier ship and eventually the crew began to see him as their mascot. Sometimes new crew members would begin to make fun of him or play cruel jokes on him. This usually stopped very quickly. Either because Vrutglob himself gave them a demonstration of just how dangerous a very small and lithe climber can be in the rigging of a ship. Or because the other crew members simply beat up who ever was harrassing their darling little gobbo.

All good things must come to an end, though, and for Vrutglob's lofty adventures that day came when the crew were dou-

ble crossed by one of the greedier merchants in Lhazaar. It was never really clear to him what had happened, all he knew was that one night, when the ship had been moored outside the town Lassal a bunch of soldiers had come aboard. They had killed most of the crew and hauled the captain off shouting something about him being a traitor and other strange things.

It had sunk into Vrutglob's head that there was some kind of war going on, but that was all humie stuff and despite him now being almost thirteen years old the finer details of politics were still lost on him.

The finer details of survival were not, though. Despite him getting the better of two soldiers who had tried to kill him he had been able to figure out that trying to save the captain was perhaps not the most clever and cunning plan. Instead he hid on the ship until after the surviving crew members had been dragged away. Only a few sentries were left behind and it was not a big problem for him to sneak away during the night.

He made his way into Lassal and actually surprised himself by trying to figure out what had happened to the captain. Back in the Camp he would never have thought twice about what had happened to any of the other runts. And if anything had happened to Bororg he would just have danced around screaming happily at the top of his lungs.

While doing his best to avoid attention and dodging out of the way of anyone who looked like soldiers or watchmen he made his way through the city trying to find out where the crew had been taken. It did not take him long as justice was swiftly served in those days, especially amongst the viscious merchant princes of Lhazaar who were little more than petty bullies who had managed to carve out their own little kingdom.

On the wall outside the local keep Vrutglob found the crew members who had not been killed in the fight. They had been strung up in chains and most were either already dead or unconscious. Only one of them was conscious enough to give any kind of response to Vrutglob and that was only a few words. He managed to mumble that the local prince, who had taken the name Lassaltioch after the city he had conquered, had made a deal with Aundair to capture one of Cyre's elemental ships. The crew had been taken before the prince and had all swiftly been sentenced to be hung up by their hands as a warning to any other who might consider, well, consider doing something the prince did not like. There had been no sign of the captain.

For several minutes Vrutglob had tried to pull and claw at the bolts that held the chains to the wall, but they were too firmly burried in the stone. Chattering quietly and nervously to himself he scrambled up and down the wall, using the chains and rocks for footing, looking for some way of freeing the men he had grown to like over the past years.

Eventually he tripped and fell heavily to the ground and had to hide in the shadows as the watchmen came to investigate the noise. Blinking heavily against a strange moistness that was leaking into his eyes he saw one the men rattle his chains to make the watchmen think that had been the source of the noise. The reward for that was a quick jab in the arm pit with a spear and with a horrible rasping sound the man died.

After the watchmen had left Vrutglob ran from the shadows and grabbed at the feet of some of the men only to find that they were now all limp.

Never before in his life had Vrutglob felt alone. Even when

the humies had first captured him he had felt that there were someone else near. True, Squeaky had in some way been with him, but being bunched up in a sack and caught by huge, lumbering humies still had not made him feel alone. Being all by himself in the middle of a strange town with only dead friends to keep him company did very much make him feel alone. And also very, very small. Somewhere nearby he heard a sound. With a whimpering squeak he jumped into the air and ran off into the quiet, foggy night.

The first couple of days after this he lived hidden in a pig sty near the wall where the crew had been executed. He was hoping to at least get a glimpse of the captain, maybe even get a chance to heroically rescue him. As the days went by he eventually began to stray from his hiding hole in search of food and something to do. Being restless and curious are traits that are more a part of goblin nature than even their notoriously bad breath. So before long all thoughts of finding the captain had been pushed to the back of Vrutglob's mind and he began to look for ways to survive in Lassal.

To tell the truth there was not much fun or excitement about his first weeks in Lassal. It quickly became evident that leaving the town was anything but easy. Not so much because of the watchmen but simply due to the fact that there quite literally was nowhere to go. Lassal lay on a small island some way off the coast. And a more correct term for the island was probably a barren rock. There was hardly any vegetation and the few lizard like creatures Vrutglob managed to catch tasted really strange and gave him nausea and stomach aches.

Once or twice he did manage to sneak aboard one of the ships that anchored outside the harbour. One time he even managed to stay unnoticed before the crew caught him and threw him

overboard. As he nearly drowned on his way back to Lassal he reflected that it would have been far better if he had been thrown off a flying ship. That way he would not have had insult added to injury as he tried to keep his head over the foul, salty water. Somehow he managed to get back and collapsed on the beach waking up late in the night with a viscious head ache and a hole in his stomach.

He made his way back to the town and there and then decided that it was a lost cause to sneak onto the ships. For some reason the humies here were much fiercer about unwanted pas-sengers than the captain had been.

Over the next couple of years he made his living by doing odd jobs for the people in Lassal. Though he did not have the strength and size to be of any use on the docks a few of the merchants soon found out that having a nimble messenger boy who was entirely unable to read came in handy quite often. Vrutglob's small stature and quick feet gave him an edge over the humie kids who lived on the street. It was not good money, sometimes not even money at all but simply scraps of food, but it kept him going.

It was during his days as a runner that he began to develop a finer understanding of how humies worked and how they were not unlike gobbos. Oh, they might think they were different, what with their fancy clothes and all, but when he really sat down and strained his brain thinking about it he found out that humies really were gobbos. It was also during this time that he realised that the humies with pointed ears were actually called other things. Often they were called differently when they were not around. This struck him as odd. When he tried using one of those names openly he found out precisely why it was so and he cursed himself for not thinking it through

as he raced for his life through the twisty streets and alleys.

He got away safely, of course, because it turned out that despite the pointy ears also just being gobbos they were as stupid as the gobbos who thought they were humies.

For quite some time he had had to take great care to avoid a street gang that lived near his current hiding place. They had never been able to find out where he hid and that only made them even more angry when they saw him. Once they had even caught him and the result of that had been a cruel beating. Just as he was about to pass out from the abuse one of the other kids had drawn a small hand axe and swung it at him. It had been a clumsy attack and Vrutglob had managed to twist his head around so he did not take the full force of the hit. One of the kids who had been holding him down had been surprised when the axe came out and had briefly let go of Vrutglob. This had allowed him to twist enough to get free and break away. Even so it had still cost him a broken and very messed up nose and blood was dripping down his chin as he raced away, scrambling over walls and roofs to get to safety.

Once back in his little nest he had vowed to get revenge, the face of the kid with the axe etched into his mind. Slowly thoughts began to creep into his mind. Thoughts of how it would be far too easy to trick these stupid gits into doing what he wanted them to. Without them realising it. As time passed his insight into the daily life of Lassal became better and better until one day he finally decided to step up and make his life easier and more comfortable.

His first goal had been to get even with Axy as he called the boy with the axe. This had proved to be surprisingly easy as Axy was even more stupid than the other kids and relied

on brute strength to get by. One night Vrutglob had simply waited on a roof until Axy came stumbling by. He had jumped down on Axy's back and quickly dug his nails deep inside his eyes. Oh, how delightfully Axy had screamed at this. Vrutglob had wiggled his fingers as best he could before drawing them back leaving long scratch marks from Axy's eyes to his ears. Then he had jumped down and ran away giggling madly in the night. None of the other kids had even managed to react before he was safely away.

After this the gang had almost left him alone. Some of them had made half hearted attempts at catching him, but he had found that if he sneered at them and wiggled his fingers they would remember Axy's mangled face and give up the chase. A sort of daily routine settled on Vrutglob's life and he began to think up more plans for how he could take even more advantage of the humies and elfies' stupidity. Yet something kept eluding him. He had oh so many grand plans but they all relied on something he could not quite pin down.

Not until one day when he came across two of the kids from the gang. One of them was a very scared looking boy, the other an elfie girly with curly curly hair and an admirable cunning in her eyes. At first Vrutglob had almost panicked because they had caught him in a dead end alley. Then he had tried his sneering trick and when that failed he had simply slumped a little, preparing himself for another beating.

He could not have been more surprised if the sky had fallen down. The girly girl had actually asked him if he could help them out. Him, the fearsome Vruglob, help out those two gits? He had at first laughed at the thought. Then something clicked inside him. This was what he had been missing. This was the answer. Trying to conceal his excitement he had

spluttered, between mad cackles, something about them having to do favours for him in return. Not a lot of what they had talked about had taken hold in his brain. He was far too occupied with thoughts of his own gang, of his own kingdom. Somehow he had managed to be coherent enough that the kids got his meaning and they nodded promising to return to the same spot the next day with food for him.

All through the night Vrutglob could not sleep. The kids were working for him. Doing his bidding. He envisioned himself sitting on a large throne in a heated inn with food and minions all around him. Joy, joy, joy, he sang to himself and practised looking mean and vicious so they would have no choice but to follow his every command.

The next evening he had quieted down a little and was crouching on the top of a wall leading into the alley. Earlier that day the icy thought had hit him that it could be a cruel and petty plan made by Axy to get back at him. So he had gotten himself under control and set out early to scout out the place where he was to meet the kids. As it turned out it was a good idea. Some time after he got there he saw two other kids take up position among the rubble of the alley. In the light of the setting sun he saw something glinting in one of the kids' hand. An icy shiver ran down his spine as he recognised a long slim blade similar to the ones the elfie sailors carried. Knives were not uncommon among the kids but they were very rarely used in their street fights. This was actually closer to a sword showing just how seriously scared they were.

In the growing darkness Vrutglob thought and thought about how to best get through this unharmed. Finally he decided that there he could either walk away and risk another ambush another day, or he could ambush the ambushed. His giggle

almost gave him away as he revelled in the irony of the situation.

Silently he climbed down into the alley and slowly and carefully made his way up behind the boy with the short sword. These humies were stupid, he thought as he sat within arm's reach of the kid. Why could it not see him? Had it forgotten that darkness is a gobbo's friend?

There was hardly any sound when the boy's body dropped to the ground. Vrutglob had driven a long, rusty nail into his brain through one eye while wrapping his other hand around the boy's mouth. He waited for a few moments to make sure the other kid had not heard him and then he slipped across the alley hiding the blade from sight behind his body.

When the elfie girly girl came down the alley carrying a loaf of bread Vrutglob was patiently waiting in the middle of the alley. He could still feel the warm blood dripping down the blade he held behind his back and he felt his heart racing in his chest. It was not the killing that made him excited. Some strange new part of his mind told him that that had more been a waste. No, it was the thoughts of the time to come and how he would play a role in turning these stupid, confused humies into proper, cunning and sneaky gits!

And that was how Vrutglob came to spend several months as the leader of the most organised street gang in Lassal.

A cunning runt in a smelly sky

In the darkness of night Vrutglob sat on a roof top overlooking Lassal's docks. He often did so these days, reflecting on how

good life was. It had taken a few months to really get his gang up and running and then a few more months to make sure the kids he had chosen to lead it would not stab him in the back. A couple had tried, one even succeeded. Fortunately, Sally's attack had been clumsy so it had only done a little damage. It had still left a wicked looking scar down across his left shoulder blade. And it had stung like hell since Sally had used poison on her blade. Vrutglob snickered proudly to himself whenever he thought about that. None of the other kids who had tried to take his place had used poison. Sally had been different. She had been his favourite, or at least the one he wanted to kill less often. It had, in some bizarre way, warmed his heart that she had shown so much initiative though it had not been enough to prevent a very painful death for her.

Behind him he heard soft foot steps on the roof. Rather than turn around he listened a little bit trying to guess who it was. Ah, that was easy. One foot was dragging just a little giving away that it must be Gideon. He had been one of the first kids in the gang to support Vrutglob's ideas about how to do things. At first it had made Vrutglob wary since he had an instinctive fear of anyone who so easily agreed with him. It made him suspicious that they were simply doing it to get on his good side and lull him to sleep. Gideon had proved differently, though, and was now a kind of unofficial second in command. A lot of the daily things, such as keeping tabs on the gang's thievery and making sure there was not too much infighting, was actually handled by him. Actually stopping the small fights between the gangs members were done by Reet and not Gideon since Reet's size and strength made him far better at this. But detecting who was fighting who was Gideon's area of expertise. He had a keen eye for reading the other kids

and had on more than one occasion predicted, and allowed Vrutglob to prevent, major schisms in the gang. There should always be room for non-lethal competition, but within limits that made sure that no matter the differences the kids would always let them slide when it was time to work together as a gang.

When the foot steps were a few meters from Vrutglob they stopped. It was the way it should be. He had gone to great lengths to make sure his leaders did their best to be discreet and quiet when they approached him when they were out in the city. One reason for this was that he might be in the middle of something that required his attention. Another, and far more important, was that it lowered the risk of anyone noticing how well structured the gang was. Most of the competing gangs were really just a small group of kids hanging out together with no real leadership or direction. Vrutglob wanted to keep his gang looking like that from the outside. Have the others think that his gang was as disorganised and random as all the others. It gave him so many advantages when they finally took action.

“Ello, Gid,” he said. “Wot news?”

“Just the usual. The new kids are a bit behind on the food they steal for us, but nothing serious. The rest are keeping their heads down as you wanted. Reet had to bust a nose or two, but it’s good.”

“Dat’z good. An’ da scouts?”

“In position and keeping their eyes on new people coming in.”

“Very nice. Very nice. We’ll get sumfink good soon. I can feel sumfink good ’appenin’. Yes, yes. I must fink. Go!”

Gideon retreated back across the roof and Vrutglob returned his attention to the docks. Making the gang work as a group had been one of the most important things for him to do and also one of the hardest. At first it had been hard for the kids to accept how they should work as a group with some people stealing food for the others. Before he took over it had mainly been a matter of everyone stealing for themselves and some of the larger kids stealing from the smaller. It had taken him a few weeks to make them understand that it was a lot more efficient if they worked together in small groups and helped each other distracting shop owners or people walking in the street while others stole their goods or money. Fortunately for Vrutglob it had actually been the otherwise slow witted Reet who had finally caused the gang to come to their senses. He had a huge appetite but was too slow to be really good at stealing from the shops and stalls in the city so he had mainly relied on bullying the younger kids. Convincing him, Vrutglob thought, had been so easy. Instead of Reet having to bully the kids to give him food they now simply supplied it. And they felt happy about it because Vrutglob had managed to orchestrate a few situations where the younger kids found themselves in need of Reet's help.

It had probably not been a nice thing that Vrutglob had hired a rival gang to interfere with one of his own thefts. It might even have been very risky if not for the fact that he had, of course, chosen a gang with a stupid bully for a leader. But it had been a very good lesson for the kids. After successfully stealing almost a week's worth of food from a baker's shop the rival gang had "accidentally" managed to stumble across the kids as they were carrying the bread and butter back. In the past it would have been easy for the rival gang to simply beat

up the small kids, but with Reet waiting around and backing them up they had managed to fight off the others and made it home with almost all the food. From there on it had been a lot easier to make them understand the concept of taking advantage of their individual strengths and working together.

And yet sometimes it still went horribly wrong for the gang. The kids seemed to understand his plans and ideas, but every so often they would simply forget it in the middle of everything. He often wondered if it was because these human kids were simply just not as cunning as goblins. Or perhaps it had something to do with their age. He had lost count of how old he was, but it was a long time since he had grown in height so he considered himself to no longer be a runt. Judging by how much he remembered about the winters back in the Camp his best guess was that he was about a dozen years old. Some of the others were probably around the same age as him but just seemed unable to think. Either they would be stupid runts or they would be stupid in some other way that Vrutglob could not figure out. It mainly happened with the older kids and, he had noticed, it seemed to have mainly happened when there were both boys and girls involved in something. This puzzled him completely because to his mind humans were just humans and that was the end of it. He did not know about things like hormones. And as he had never been around other goblins since he was taken away by the air sailors he had had no exposure to the lure of the opposite sex.

“Silly, stinkin’ ‘umies,” he mumbled.

It did not please him that he had to split the boys from the girls to get them to function properly. There had seemed little choice, though, so he had simply done his best to find out how they could be used best. So far it seemed to work to mainly use

the girls as scouts. They had a lot more patience for hanging around looking bored without actually being bored. The boys seemed to either wander off, get into fights or simply forget to keep an eye on which boats arrived at the docks, what passengers they carried and so on. When it came to breaking into buildings or fighting the boys seemed to do somewhat better.

All these small things Vrutglob kept track of in his head and over the months he had gotten a completely new look on not just the kids in Lassal, but also the adults. It had quickly become evident that a lot of the same things applied to the adults. Especially the bit about them losing focus when they were in mixed company.

He had also learned a lot about how the different races worked together. Or rather, did not work together. Sure, to some degree they could get along and do things together. At the end of the day, though, humans were humans, elves were elves and so on. That was how things were and that pleased Vrutglob. There were no other goblins in Lassal and the few he had seen coming in on the ships had all left again. As far as he could tell they were kept as slaves or, at most, badly treated workers. Vrutglob did not have sympathy for them. They were goblins. They were sneaky. They were so superior to everyone else. If they could not get away from their masters they were just stupid and deserved whatever they got.

Out over the ocean the sky slowly began to turn grey. Dawn approached and it was time for Vrutglob and the gang to go into hiding until the city was completely awake and they could disappear in the masses on the streets.

“ere. Wot’z dis?”

Outlined against the slightly lighter sky he could see a small dot moving. It was moving very quickly toward the city and as it came closer he could see that it was a flying ship. He had not seen one since the captain had been captured and the prince had stolen the ship Vrutglob had been on. Sometimes he had wondered what had happened to the captain. It annoyed him a lot that thinking about the captain and the crew still made him angry at the prince. It did not make any sense. There was no purpose or profit in being angry. And yet he could not shake the feeling that he had been wronged by the prince when the people Vrutglob had sailed with had been killed. A part of him that was buried beneath a lot of harsh lesson from both his days at the Camp and in Lassal still felt part of the old crew and sometimes that part would surface and demand that he did something to avenge their deaths. Whenever it did Vrutglob kicked himself hard for even thinking like that. He should not waste his time on such foolishness when there was so many other things ahead of him.

Seeing the flying ship made him remember the captain and the crew again far more vividly than he ever had. He almost felt pain in his chest when the thought struck him that perhaps the captain had escaped and was coming back to kill the prince. Maybe he even remembered Vrutglob and would make him part of his new crew.

His head began to feel very light and he dazedly climbed down from the roof to find some of his scouts and make sure they kept an eye out for the flying ship and, if it did indeed land here in Lassal, who was on it and what they were doing here.

He was so giddy with excitement that he completely forgot to kick himself for thinking about the captain. When he finally managed to settle down in his hiding place to get a few hours

sleep he did so with fond thoughts of his days in the air and how wonderful it would be to once more soar among the clouds.

It was after noon when he woke up with dreams of climbing the rigging of a flying ship still lingering in his mind. As quickly as he could he snuck out of his hiding place, the loft over a smith's stables, and headed toward the docks. Along the way he kept his eyes on the sky looking for the flying ship but there was no sign of it. That did not mean it was not in the city, though. When Vrutglob had first arrived the captain had, after all, landed the ship outside the city.

When he arrived in the alley where his gang usually hung out he noticed that almost the entire gang was there. This made him very angry. The scouts should have been out scouting. And the younger kids seemed more interested in gossiping excitedly than finding food for the rest of them.

"Oi! Gits!" he said, "Why's ain't you out stealin' grub?"

His face was twisted in what he had found out was a very scary grimace that normally made the kids jump. Partly because they knew he was a ruthless person, partly because the clamps down his nose made him look frightening indeed. After Axy had bashed his nose he had only been able to keep it from falling out of his face by clamping it in place with some crude steel wires. Even though the wires were no longer strictly necessary he had decided to leave them in. They had such a wonderful effect on the kids. Except that today it did not.

"Oi! Oi! Gid, get dem to shuddup!"

It took him several minutes to actually get their full attention. That was a bad sign. Even Reet and Gid were lost in whatever they were jabbering on about. Vrutglob actually had to kick

Gid over the shin before the kid got himself sorted out and started quieting the others.

Eventually they did shut up and from Gid he managed to find out that the flying ship had indeed landed outside the city. He almost shed a tear of pride when he learned that his scouts had followed the people who had left the ship. There had been two of them, one who went to the prince's palace and another who went to one of the merchant houses. The kids had been unable to follow them into the places they visited, of course, but they had rotated scouts and managed to find that the man who had visited the prince had returned with a great, big bruise on his face. He had quickly returned to the ship.

The other man had went to the merchant house carrying a courier bag. After a few minutes he had returned and started on a long tour of the city visiting various people. Shop owners, other merchant houses, the dock master.

Vrutglob pressed the scouts for as much information as possible and eventually deduced that the ship was most likely one of House Lyrandar's courier ships. When he had flown with the captain he had heard a lot about how the Lyrandar ships were the fastest and best in the world and he had longed for a chance to fly on one of them. His eyes shone with a mad fury as plans began to unfold in his mind.

"Where's da cooreer?" he said.

"After his round he went back to the ship," Gid said. "We's got two scouts down there."

"Good, good. Get the gits back on der street. We's still need grub."

He watched as Reet began, literally, to kick the others out of

the alley. This opportunity was too good to be wasted. He had to see the ship for himself. Not later, now.

With a quick word to Gid to keep things running as normal he raced off through the city's streets. There were several things he could do. One was to sneak aboard the ship and wait until it sailed. That was risky, he knew, since he might well be thrown over the side rather than taking in as he had been the last time. Another thing he could do was to try and talk to them. That would probably not work. The few times he had tried to talk to the big humans or elves had not been very succesful. They had, at best, ignored him. Once or twice they had simply just kicked out after him so he had to run off.

The ship was moored on the field west of Lassal. While there were no city walls as such, the water around the small island was wall enough, there were still guards at the edge of the city and Vrutglob had to be careful. The guards were not friendly to the street kids. A bit from the field he spotted one of his scouts lurking in a side street and he went over to her.

"Oi, whaddup?" he said.

"Sshhh, hide!"

The girl pulled him down behind the barrel she was hiding behind.

"There's guards over there are looking," she said. "Don't think they've spotted me."

"And the ship? The ship?"

Vrutglob could feel himself getting more and more excited. He wanted answers now. He wanted to see the ship, to fly once more.

“It’s just outside the city. Can’t get to it, tho. They’s got big soldier guards.”

This was not good news. If the ship had posted its own guards it would be even more difficult to get close to it.

“Shit, look,” the girl said.

Out on the field they could see a kid racing toward them with several soldiers running after him. They were clearly upset and with their swords drawn it looked like they would kill the boy if they caught him.

“Kor’! That’s Peg, that is. Stupid git, what she do now?” he said.

The kid running for her life was one of his best thieves. There was no wall in Lassal she could not climb, no window she could not pry open. If she did not get herself killed doing something foolish, like trying to sneak aboard a guarded flying ship, she could very well become one of the best cat burglars in the world. If she did not get herself killed.

Silently he cheered her on hoping she would make it. She seemed to be able to keep her distance to the soldiers and none of them had bows or crossbows so they would have to catch her to kill her. Vrutglob looked up and down the street trying to see if any of the city guards were around. With a sinking feeling he realised that not only were there guards nearby, they had also spotted Peg and were moving into position to intercept her.

“Quick,” he said, “I’ll distract da guards o’a dere an’ draw dem away. Den you distract dem o’a dere so Peg can get into da city.”

Without waiting for a reply he ran out into the middle of the

street picking up a few small rocks from the ground. Moving as quickly as possible he began to throw rocks at some of the guards. It did not matter if he really hit them or not. The idea was to make them angry enough to run after him and not catch Peg.

Behind him the girl moved quietly up towards another group of guards and pulled out a small knife. Out of the corner of his eye Vrutglob saw her cut one of the guards' purse without him noticing it. She sprang back a few paces and let out a taunting laugh and shaking the purse so the ringing sound of coins jingling together could be heard. This caught the guards' attention and with a wink to Vrutglob the girl raced off down the side street with a handful of guards after her.

For his own part Vrutglob had managed to severely piss off the guards. Perhaps, he thought as he too raced through Lassel with guards on his tail, they had not appreciated that some of the rocks had actually been turds. He snickered to himself. Stupid humans and their fancy clothes.

At first he made sure he did not give the guards the slip. It would have been so easy, but he needed them to follow him for long enough to let Peg get back to safety. Once he was a little further inside the city, though, he decided that enough was enough and nimbly dodged into an alley and scrambled up a drain pipe to he could escape over the roof tops. The guards did not follow him and he soon began to make his way back to the gang's alley.

When he got there he saw that both Peg and the other girl had made it back. Peg was triumphantly holding something in her hand. It was a small bundle. Some kind of cloth wrapped around an object the size of a fist. She gave a small squeel of

delight when she saw him and bounced over.

“Look, look. See what I got,” she said.

She held out the bundle to Vrutglob who carefully unwrapped it. When he saw the small statue within he nearly dropped it. The other kids oohed and aahed when they saw what Peg had stolen. It was a small idol of one of the gods, he could not remember which one, made from gold with small jewels for eyes. That alone made it so valuable that if they sold it at even the tiniest fraction of its worth the gang would not have to worry about stealing food ever again.

However, it was not its value that made Vrutglob’s eyes go wide. He knew this statue, had seen it several times before. And he could remember precisely when he had first seen it: in the captain’s cabin just after he had nearly fallen off the ship. Unable to contain his excitement he began chattering to himself in the goblin tongue. The kids withdrew at this. They had learned that it was not a good sign when he started doing that.

“Captain’s statue,” he said. “He’s here. Or someone who know him. Must find them, must find them.”

He quickly wrapped the statue in the cloth again and stuffed it inside his tunic. Then he grabbed the nearest kid and ordered him to double the scouts near the ship and report to him immediately if anyone left the ship. Despite being scared the kids sprang into action. The sight of the gold won over their fear of their leader and his strange ways.

Once the kids had ran off he quieted down a little. His head was still spinning, but he could now think clearly again. Beside him Gideon was sitting on a crate. He had a calculating look in his eye.

“You’ve seen that statue before, haven’t you?”

“Ya. Is captain’s.”

Gid was the only one he had ever really told about his life on the flying ship. It had been a part of his plan to make sure Gideon understood not only how important the flying ships were but also that they were just ships that normal people could fly in. Some of the other kids still told stories of how only specially chosen people could survive being on the ships. Vrutglob did not mind that as it made his background seem even more impressive and intimidating. But he needed Gideon to know that they were just stories.

“What’s you gonna do?” Gideon said.

“I’s gotta see if captain’s on da ship.”

“And if he is?”

“Talk to ‘im. Join ‘im.”

“What about the gang?”

Vrutglob looked around in the alley for a while before staring intently at Gideon for a few moments. He was pleased to see the kid held his gaze.

“Lookz like it’ll be your gang, eh?”

A cunning smile spread on Gideon’s face. Apparently he had been hoping to take over some day. It pleased Vrutglob. While he did not really care much what happened if he left Lassal it was still good to know that there would still be mischief around after he left.

Together he and Gideon ran to the field to see what went on near the flying ship. On their way they checked with the scouts who could tell them that the theft had caused quite a

stir. Both the city guard and the ship's soldiers were trying to find the thief. Vrutglob asked them to spread the word that Peg should go into hiding if she had not already done so. No point in risking her getting caught.

Shortly before reaching the edge of Lassal Vrutglob sent Gideon off to take care of their scouts on the north side while he himself would check with the ones close to the ship. As he looked at the kid running away he had a feeling they would not meet again for a very long time.

He turned around and moved toward the edge of the city to get a better look. Settling down behind a crate he looked at the guards patrolling the street. There were a lot of them and he was very careful to hide properly far from their searching eyes.

A group of both guards and soldiers passed by just beside him and he sat completely still until he was sure they had passed. Then he slowly inched his head around the crate to check the street.

He froze.

Against the skin of his throat he could feel the cold sharpness of steel. Someone had managed to sneak up on him. Fear of dying warred with anger at being caught by surprise. Who was the git who had the nerve to sneak up on him?

Very quietly a voice hissed next to his ear.

"Now what have we here. A little thief, perhaps?"

As slowly as he could Vrutglob shook his head and denied being a thief in a squeaking voice. He could feel a strong hand grab one of his arms and yank it behind his back. With a knife

to his throat he could do nothing to resist. Again the voice spoke.

“Not a thief? Well, then what are you? An air pirate, perhaps?”

The last bit had not been whispered and now Vrutglob recognised the voice. Only one person knew his most secret dream of one day becoming a flyig pirate. The knife lifted from his neck and when his arm was released he quickly spun around with wide eyes and his tongue hanging out one side of his mouth. He gave a squeel of delight.

“Captin!”

Vrutglob bounced up and down and started ranting about everything that had happened from he saw the captain being captured to he had seen the statue Peg has stolen. The captain let him talk for a while before he stopped him.

From his tunic Vrutglob quickly pulled out the statue and gave it to the captain.

“One of da gits stole dis. I knew it was yours so I brought it 'ere for you.”

“Thanks. When the guards told me they had lost the thief because she got help from a goblin I thought it might be you.”

The captain stood up and lifted Vrutglob up on the crate he had been hiding behind. Something was changed about the captain. Not only the clothes which were now much fancier and better than anything Vrutglob had ever seen him in. There was something about his face.

“Wot 'appened?”

With a sigh the captain shook his head.

“Bad things. How much have you heard of the war?”

“Not much.”

“Well, you remember Cyre. The country I come from?”

Vrutglob nodded. He had never known much about, not cared much for, the human lands. But he did know that there were a handful of them and that they had been fighting each other for a very long time.

“It is no more. Not long ago something horrible happened that killed almost everyone in Cyre. The entire country is gone. Wiped out.”

This did not make a lot of sense to Vrutglob. The captain was obviously upset, though, so it must have been something very bad. The statue was still in the captain’s hand and he looked at it intently for a while longer before putting it away in his shirt pocket.

For a while none of them spoke. Then Vrutglob could not contain himself no more.

“Captin,” he said, “can I fly wiv you again?”

The captain looked down on the little goblin with a bemused smile and a short laugh. Vrutglob’s face looked even uglier than when he had first run out on the deck of the ship, but his eyes still held that incredibly childish delight that had made him the old crew’s mascot.

“Whenever you want, Vrut. And gods know, we could use someone like you these days.”

And that was how Vrutglob returned to the skies to fly with the captain on one of House Lyrandar’s courier ships carrying

messages all over Khorvair, spending the rest of the Last War with, quite literally, his head in a cloud.