

# Gretch Mountainborn

## *Part 1 - The Blind Wolf*

A warm afternoon sun shone over the city of Kern Avanna, the largest harbor city in all of Lenori. Few of its streets were calm this time of day, as the hustle and bustle of traders and workers filled the streets with life. But a bit outside the center laid the dark quarters, those worn-down and dilapidated areas that had served as quarantine houses in the days when the Rakkhari spread their plague. There, the city was almost always quiet, brooding rather than resting. Though the red plague had been eradicated, its memory would not disappear for a long while. These quarters were the last refuge for those who had nowhere left to go. Along one of the streets overlooking the harbor cove far below, the poor and the outcast sat and warmed themselves in the mellow spring sun. This, at least, was free to enjoy.

Suddenly, a loud crash broke the afternoon peace as a man smashed through a door and into the street. He was dressed in rags, but he had the look of someone who wore a disguise rather than someone who had spent years in poverty. He tried to get up, but could do nothing but try to crawl away. Seconds later, another big, bulky bear of a man appeared in the doorway that had just burst open. Clad in simple, but heavy armor, he had a sword at his side and an axe at his back. His hair was shaved on the side, leaving only a short stripe of reddish brown hair on top and a short, but wild, beard. Bushy eyebrows sat atop eyes that were sunken, but bright. His face, a stone-like mask of frightening decisiveness and patience, was covered in the tattoos of the Mountainborn. Though anyone who saw him in that moment would certainly agree that he was far from your typical wanderer from the mountains.

“Alright,” the man on the ground wheezed, still unable to get up. “You made your point”-

The bigger man, clearly in charge, calmly walked up to the other, grabbed him by the neck and lifted him with frighteningly little effort. “You’ll pay your debt then?” his voice was deep and gravelly, but calm.



“Yes...yes,” the other man said timidly, and nodded. “No more. Every lidas, I’ll pay. Just...just let me get it. It’s inside,” there was no doubt about the honesty in his meek voice.

“You know what’ll happen if you don’t,” the mountain man said, though he made it sound more like a comradely joke, rather than a threat. He let his captive go, and waited outside. Noticing onlookers who had gathered in the street, he simply waved at them with a polite smile. “Pay your debts, good people. Or don’t get into debt in the first place.”

Before long, the ragged man returned with a pouch in his hand, which he handed over without a word. The mountain man took the pouch, opened it, and counted the money. Satisfied with the amount, he poured it back into the pouch, and sealed it up. “I’m glad I could make you see sense, Uridrim. I’m sure my client will be too,” he said, now far more relaxed and friendly. He patted the man on the shoulder, as if the violent scuffle mere moments ago had never even happened. “And don’t hesitate to ask them for Gretch if you need any debts collected yourself,” he added with a smile before walking off as confused onlookers made way for him.

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A little while later, Gretch was making his way through the crowded market at the main square. Almost a year and a half after peace had been settled with the Rakkhari the city was nowhere near its pre-war glory. But more and more ships were returning from the colonies and little by little the markets were getting more crowded. The city was slowly getting back on its feet, despite all the hardships. But his business was not with the Lenorian merchants that peddled wares from across the ocean. Rather, he made his way towards the brightly colored tents in red and orange that signaled the presence of more foreign sellers. Outside these tents was a small squadron of sellers offering spices, foodstuffs and trinkets from far down south. Their dark skin and bright clothes certainly made them a flashy part of the market, but it also painted them as a target.

Gretch made his way inside the largest of these tents, one that was almost a small house in itself, made of exquisite cloth and leathers. Inside, amidst tables and coffer overflowing with wares sat Faramès, his employer

and dear friend. Deeply focused on a thick ledger, he barely noticed that company had arrived. It wasn't until Gretch took out the pouch and dropped it on the table that he managed to tear his eyes from the ledger. But when he did, his eyes widened and glistened with a glimmer of hope.

“Is that the debt? Dare I hope?” he said, his voice weary but controlled.

“Indeed it is,” Gretch replied. “He parted with the money quite willingly, in the end.”

“Praised be the spring sun...” Faramès sighed and took the pouch. “It may not be a big debt, but if we allow tricksters and hustlers to get away with their fraud, then what does that say about our way of doing affairs? Fairness must go both ways, after all. And we have enough trouble with people trying to run us out...”

“Have there been more troubles?” Gretch asked, though he knew that the pressure from people who wanted the Rakkhari merchants gone had gotten worse during the winter.

“I’m afraid so. It makes no difference that I try to explain to them that we are Hineans and Ulavi, and have nothing to do with those that burned this city and spread that horrid plague...” Faramès said as he took out the pieces of lidas to count and note them down. “We are southerners, and that is enough. Even among the ones who buy our wares, many simply do so to try and exploit us... As if there was not enough troubles getting our wares all the way through Norn,” he stood up and put the money into an ornate coffer, that contained several different currencies.

“The Lenorians are far less concerned with a just nation than they say they are,” Gretch muttered. “But you have my unconditional help, for whatever it’s worth.”

Faramès turned, and looked at him with an almost teary tenderness. “I’m glad for it, friend. Without you, we might have been driven away already,” he said, and embraced his comrade. Gretch simply received the embrace, saying nothing. The musky, exotic perfume of the South filled his senses

and made his heart ache just a little bit. There were feelings there, but there was no use reopening an old wound. That talk had come and gone.

“Speak nothing of it. You and your workers are like family, after all,” he said with a melancholic warmth. In a sense, they were. Among his own people he had never quite fit in, but these strangers from far away had welcomed him with open arms. He would not let any harm befall them.

As their embrace parted, Faramès brought out a small leather pouch and handed it to him. “For you, my friend. More than well earned.”

Gretch took it, and put it away without counting. There was no doubt about the sum being fair. “Is there anything else that you need done?”

“Actually,” Faramès said, and brought out a piece of parchment. “Do you know of an inn about a day and a half north of the city by the name of the Blind Wolf?”

“Vaguely,” Gretch said as he sat down in one of the lavish chairs Faramès kept around for guests.

“It has something of a history to it. It almost burned down during the early days of the war, but was rebuilt by the Rakkhari as a sort of makeshift army barrack. But after the peace was settled, it was returned to Lenori. The man who now runs it was more than happy to start buying our wares, but now...”

“He’s being a problem?” Gretch said, sensing where it was all going.

“Indeed. He refuses to pay, saying that the wares we delivered were unusable. The nerve! They were of the highest quality – never would I insult a customer so gravely, it is...” Faramès had to pause to collect himself. Gretch let him take his time. After a few deep breaths, Faramès continued. “The amount he owes is no small amount. What’s worse is that I’ve come to understand that the establishment isn’t exactly doing well either. So he’ll be all the more stubborn about paying his due...”

“I’ll make him see reason.” Gretch said calmly. “I’ve dealt with my share

of liars and con men over the years...” For a second, memories of his old travel companions resurfaced. Like fetid corpses rising from the bottom of a pond, he saw the faces of Djungan and Rodrigo. Over the years, his memories of them had not grown fonder.

“I do not doubt it, my friend,” Faramès said, handing over a folded parchment. “But perhaps I can interest you in a sampling or two of chilled liqueur imported from Gabbardan before you leave?” There was a mischievous glint in his eye.

Gretch let out a small laugh as he leaned back in his chair. The Hinean’s eternal eagerness to show off his wares was one of the man’s most charming traits. “I wouldn’t dream of declining.”

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It took a bit over a day for Gretch to make the ride to the tavern. It was nested in the forest on the edge of the Sorcerers’ forests, that infamous place which was still sealed off as it had been since the war with the Rakkhari started. The tavern itself was a strange piece of building – part Lenorian wooden house, part Rakkhari military housing made of timber and stone. Parts of it still bore the scars of an old fire, likely from the days of the war. He noticed quite quickly that there didn’t seem to be many people visiting, even though evening was quickly approaching. Perhaps Faramès’ information had been correct.

After stabling his ox, he headed inside. While he hoped that it could all be talked through, he suspected that a larger sum of money would likely mean that it would require a lot more drastic methods. As soon as he entered, his suspicions were confirmed. There was about a dozen guests inside, sitting at their tables eating, smoking and chatting. But he also spotted at least four thugs that looked more like they were waiting for trouble to arise, rather than enjoying the mood. There was something else going on here, and that something would probably make his own job harder. So he sat down at a table and thought through his approach before acting.

A waitress, young and seemingly a bit overworked, came over to ask him what he wanted. He settled on some apple brew to start with and it was

soon put in front of him, steaming and savory. Looking around, it didn't seem like the owner had taken very good care of the place. There were marks on the wall where he guessed had been decorations that had been carelessly removed. But they hadn't been replaced, and the serving hall had a very shabby atmosphere. Almost as if there had never been any earnest effort to make the place attractive. But why, he wondered, would someone take on such a business if they weren't going to make it attractive? The staff did not seem very happy either, all of them some degree of worn out or surly. Every now and then, he could hear faint yelling from inside the kitchen, and the general mood was tense. Finally, he decided he had waited enough. He waved to the waitress, and when she came over, he asked her to bring the owner and to tell him that Faramès had a message.

As he expected, he didn't have to wait very long. Soon, a tall, wiry man appeared from behind the serving counter. His eyes were dark and jittery, like some kind of rodent. He didn't look very strong, nor did he have the air of someone of great brains. Once more, Gretch was hit with the feeling that this was not the kind of person who would decide to run an inn. As their eyes met, the man's eyes narrowed for a moment, before he put on a strained smile of feigned politeness. He shot a few looks at the brawny goons that waited in the background as he walked over to Gretch's table.

"Well met, I understand that you have some kind of message from that Rakkhari merchant?" the owner began, his voice syrupy with overwrought friendliness.

"In truth, he is Hinean, but yes. I've come to ask about the money he is owed," Gretch said, his voice flat and emotionless. He wanted to see what kind of game this man was going to try.

"Ah, apologies – I can never tell what is what with the southerners. It's all a mess to me, to be honest," the man said with a laugh. "Nor do I see much use in telling the difference."

Gretch remained silent, simply looking at the man, waiting.

"Hrm, yes, well," the owner began, a bit less sure of himself. "The payment. Like I told Faramès, the shipment was in no way fit for use, neither for

making food nor selling it. So there is no way I could pay him for that kind of delivery.”

“What was wrong with it?” Gretch asked, his voice low and challenging.

“I-well, some of it was moldy and old. Other foodstuffs had been badly damaged and crushed. Blemishes, weird colorations, damages – you name it!” the man grew a bit agitated, and for a moment Gretch couldn’t tell if he was just acting or truly that incensed. “Now maybe that is partly due to a careless transporter – I cannot tell – but if so is the case, then your issue is with them, not me! I can’t be expected to pay for things I can’t sell, I tell you.”

Gretch watched him for a moment, pausing to let the man sweat a bit. He was sure that the man was lying, but he couldn’t very well prove it. And if he pushed too much, there’d be trouble. But he had an idea. “If what you say is true, then I can assure you that it is not Faramès who had wronged you.”

“Well, be that as it may, I can’t”- the man began.

“So would you then be prepared to compromise? Would you split the loss as a sign of good faith to keep a good business partner happy?” Gretch knew it was a gamble. Faramès would be very disappointed in such a deal, but if he was right this man would never accept.

For a few moments, it seemed like the owner was thinking it over. He betrayed himself, as a pained expression twisted his face. “Ah, I...appreciate such a suggestion. And I mean no insult to Faramès. But what kind of business man would I be if I accepted that offer? No, your issue is with those who carried the goods here,” he said, regaining his composure. But Gretch saw how the man eyed his weapons, hands twisting around each other. “I promise you, do so and I’ll vouch my own belief that Faramès is not at fault, that he is trustworthy, even if he is a southerner.”

Gretch let the words sink in for a few moments, keeping his silence and contemplating his options. Finally, he sighed and said “Very well. I will have a talk with the people Faramès hired. I’ll make them see reason.”

“A fine idea!” the man exclaimed, a bit too eagerly. “If I can help, you need only ask. Of course”- the man paused, against twisting his hands “-of course, I can’t accept any new shipments until this matter is resolved, I’m sure you can understand,” he said apologetically.

Though he did not like it, Gretch could simply nod. “I understand. I will talk with Faramès about the matter.”

“Send him my regards,” the man said, visibly relieved. “Now, you must excuse me, I have to attend to my work.”

Gretch looked around the room, and silently wondered exactly what there was to deal with at this time of day. But he nodded, and let the man return to whatever it was that he was doing. Whatever it was, it involved cursing and yelling at every employee he could spot on his way back. By now, Gretch knew that there was no way this man was going to give back the money. The man had wanted to take the offer of a compromise, but something had stopped him. Now, more than ever, Gretch was sure that something else was going on here. He’d get that money, if for no other reason than that he really didn’t like that man. In that man he saw Djungan, that bastard with a silver tongue who never stopped running his mouth. Djungan had been but one person in their group of eight, but together with Rodrigo, the two had gotten the whole group in no end of trouble and danger. Even now, many years later, Gretch owed the two of them the beating of a lifetime.

But he pushed those thoughts aside, and called the waitress over to order some meat soup and some drink. The young woman did her best to serve him, but it was clear that she was becoming more and more distraught as the afternoon progressed. He could see the owners goons eyeing him from time to time, but they seemed to have largely lost interest. Once his food arrived, he sank into deep thought. He didn’t want to spend more time than necessary in this place, nor was he really that interested in whatever the owner was up to. But he didn’t want to return without some kind of reimbursement for Faramès, be that money or something else. He decided that he’d simply have to wait until nighttime, and see if he could figure some way to gain more information.

The meat soup was a bleak disappointment, and the mood in the tavern

certainly didn't improve as the afternoon faded into evening. He had retreated into a corner, content with observing and listening to the other patrons as best as he could. But the only thing he could pick up was rumors that were of no use to him. Only a few more visitors came to the tavern as the evening progressed, but there was nothing that suggested that they were anything more than weary travelers. The only thing that really caught his attention was the noise that the owner managed to keep up throughout the evening. He was about to call out to the waitress for another drink, when he saw how she simply stormed out through the front door, no doubt fed up with the endless badgering by her boss. That's when he got an idea. He let a few moments pass, to make sure that any commotion would die down before he slunk out after her. Outside, he found her sitting by the stable, smoking a long pipe with a furious expression on her face. He approached her carefully.

"Your boss is certainly a piece of work, isn't he?" he began, with a sympathetic smile. She looked up at him with suspicion in her eyes, wary of any unwanted attention. He could see now that she had hidden her Seran ears the headwrap she had worn all day.

"That is putting it lightly," she spat out. "I have half a mind to torch the whole place with him in it."

"I would hardly blame you. Those thugs he has lined up don't seem like they are too happy either," he tried, fishing for some more information.

"Pschh. They're as bad as him," she said, her voice hinting that there was far more to them than he had seen. "The whole place is just rotten to the core."

He looked at her a moment, not wanting to press her too hard. "What do you mean?"

"I used to work here before the war. It was a mess then too, but at least then the owner tried to run it properly. Then, when the war ended, I figured that maybe things would be a bit better." she grew silent. It seemed that the whole thing had brought some unpleasant memories to life. "But now...it's all just rotten. Completely rotten."

He sat down with her, looking out into the darkening evening. She reminded him of someone he used to know, a long time ago. Someone dear to him. “Why are you still here then?” he finally said, genuinely curious why someone would choose such a life.

“Where else would I go?” she sighed. “When I left Kern Avanna, the city was a mess, and it seemed like there was nothing but chaos everywhere, even after the peace treaty...this, right here...this is all I have,” her voice faded, becoming soft and vulnerable.

An idea suddenly came to him. For a moment, he felt bad about it, but he realized this was his best bet. “I work for a merchant in Kern Avanna. I’m sure there would be use for someone that knows the city and its languages. But...”

She looked at him intently, unsure if she should take him seriously. “But...?”

He looked her straight in the eye, judging his gamble. “But I need something from you.”

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “...and what is that?”

Sighing, he decided that he’d just have to trust her. “You see, I’m here because your rat of a boss has tricked mine out of a rather large sum of money. I need to get that money back, but I have a feeling there’s something fishy going on here. If you could help me with that, I can see to it that you get a cut, and...” He let the words linger a bit. “I can put in a word with my boss to get you another job in Kern Avanna.”

She listened intently as he spoke, still not sure what to make of it all. Then, knocking her pipe clean against a rock, she simply looked out into the forest again. “You know, they’re not really trying to run a proper tavern here.” Her words caught Gretch by surprise – more because of her admission rather than the revelation. “They have a smuggling business going on. All kinds of things being brought in and out, some really weirds things. Weapons, potions, and lots of other things. Don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. But that’s what it’s about.”

“Damn.”

“And they’ve messed up a shipment pretty bad, so money has been short. I guess that’s why he pulled a fast one on your boss...” She sighed. “It’s all about to go ass-end up.”

“Sounds like you’d do well to get out why you can in that case,” he finally said and looked at her askance.

She caught his hint and turned to look at him. “What exactly are you asking of me?”

“I need that money. Or something of equal value. And nothing illegal,” he said without flinching. “Get me that, and I promise you that there will be another job in Kern Avanna whenever you want it.”

She thought in silence for a while. “I’m not sure that there’s much here of value besides the goods they’re smuggling. “But...how about the tavern itself?”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“What if...I could help your boss get the tavern itself for cheap? That should be worth much more worth than whatever they’ve stolen, right?”

Gretch pondered her words for a while. An illegal operation that was quickly spiraling out of control run out of a decaying tavern. If they played their cards right, Faramès could perhaps be well poised to take over the tavern. All it took was a surprise visit by the Duke’s men and some greased elbows...It could work. “You know where they keep the goods?”

“Yeah. They think they’re clever with a hidden part of the cellar, but it’s real easy to get into once you’ve spotted it,” he could hear the excitement building in her voice. She meant it, no doubt about it. “It’s just”-

Suddenly, the placid evening was disturbed, as two of the thugs from inside came out, brandishing wooden clubs. As soon as they spotted Gretch and the waitress sitting by the stables, they barrelled toward them at a pace

that suggested that they weren't interested in talking about the weather. Gretch quickly got on his feet, but refrained from drawing weapon. At least until they gave him reason not to.

"The boss wants you inside. Now!" one of the meatheads yelled at the waitress, who had gotten up, but stood steadfast. No doubt used to their wailing.

"I've been working all day. The boss can wait, or maybe one of you two could carry something for once?" she spat out, voice full of contempt.

"And you"- the thug with the gift of speech said, looking at Gretch. "It's about time you took your sorry hide and left."

Gretch simply gave the man a vacant look, well used to threats. "I can see your boss hired you for your charm and grace. Do you wield that club as well as your words?"

"Why you," the man growled, and gripped his club tighter. It had been plain to see that they had been itching for a fight, and Gretch admitted that the whole evening had put him in a pretty foul mood. Taking these two down a peg would certainly be a pleasure. In a quick, but clumsy motion the first one raised his club and took a swing at Gretch. But he swung too hard and too wide. So Gretch sidestepped the blow, and with a swift kick to the man's knee, he felled him to the ground. The other one brandished his club, waiting for Gretch to make a move. But that was not a mistake the mountainman was about to make. Instead, another well-placed kick to the downed goon's ribs kept him down for the count. That was all that was needed for the other one to make an attack. He was more careful with his blows, and nearly caught Gretch in the shoulder. But nearly was not enough, and as the man raised his club for another blow, Gretch stepped in close, caught the club high with his left bracer and landed a devastating blow straight to the thug's jaw. Staggering backwards, the man's grip on the club loosened, allowing Gretch to disarm him and throw the club into the forest. And in a few seconds, the other club joined its friend. With the two ruffians disarmed, Gretch drew his sword.

"Go back inside. Don't make this any worse." he said menacingly. He had

no intention of drawing blood, but he'd rather get out of there before any more troubleseekers arrived. Luckily, as soon as the two recovered a bit, they had enough sense to flee – or too little courage not to. The waitress chuckled as they scuttled off, tail between their legs.

“You shouldn’t have. But they certainly had it coming,” she said, not without some satisfaction.

“Probably not. But I can’t stand loudmouths,” he said with a sigh. Though he was no longer the hot-tempered youth he once was, there were still things he had a hard time tolerating.

“You probably should leave though. They’ve got thin hides, but you don’t want to take on the lot of them,” she said as she started walking towards the inn again. Then she stopped, and turned to face him. “In six days, I’ll wait by the main road by sunset. Bring the guards then, and I’ll lead them to the stash. If you’re not there...” She paused, hesitating. “Well, then I’ll be here until they run out of business or I burn the place to the ground.”

He let out a light laugh. “And what do I call you, arsonist?”

“Kaela.”

“Gretch,” he said with a smile.

“Pleased to meet you, mountainman,” she said, smiling, before heading back inside once more.

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Two days later, he arrived back in Kern Avanna, as the sun was setting. The fading light scattered on the clouds in bright hues of red and pink, beautiful and eerie. A light rain was starting to fall as he arrived at the square, where he noticed that the lights at Faramès’ tent were still burning. Deciding that he’d rather deliver the news right away, he headed for the tent. But as he approached, he heard that Faramès was not alone. Instead, there were a great many voices coming from inside. From the sound of their voices, something sounded very wrong. Had someone attacked them, or worse?

For a moment he hesitated, pondering whether he should interrupt them. But he decided that it was best to see what had happened, in case he could help. As he entered, he saw that all the Hineans and Ulavi were gathered in the tent, and the mood inside was tense as a bowstring. Everyone grew silent, and all eyes were on him. Faramès sat at his table, pale as a corpse.

“What has happened?” Gretch asked carefully. For a moment, they all simply looked at each other without anyone uttering a word.

Finally, Faramès spoke. “Something horrendous has happened in the South.”