



The Cities

THE JEWEL OF  
TURMISH

Mel Odom



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## CHAPTER ONE

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**B**lood stink fouled the air.

Haarn Brightoak followed the scent through the thickly forested land near Evenstar Lake with a sense of trepidation, knowing that ultimately he would find yet another body only a short distance ahead. He'd been finding them for the last three hours.

Despite the heavy foliage covering the land, Haarn moved gracefully, not leaving a quivering bush in his wake. Twilight laid a soft hand on the harsh terrain, etching shadows where the land dipped and opened.

The men Haarn pursued would stop soon for the night and he'd catch up with them. Nothing would stay his hand from the justice he would exact.

Only a few yards farther on, he spotted the gray goose fletching of the ash arrow jutting from an elm tree. He went to it, knelt, and grabbed the shaft. His arm knotted with muscle as he pulled the arrowhead from the tree trunk.

The fletcher had used ash to make the shaft, and Haarn could feel the slightest tingle of spellcraft that clung to it. Ash arrows marked a serious hunter. It was one of the hardest woods to work—unless someone used magic to shape the wood. The shaft was fully three feet long from fletching to heavy iron arrowhead. The iron had been hammered into a shape designed to

create a wound that would remain open, allowing the target's life's blood to trickle out until the heart pumped dry.

The arrowhead carried the identifying mark of the fletcher, signed so that others who encountered the arrow would know whom to ask for when they reached market.

Haarn memorized the mark, snapped the shaft in half, and put the iron arrowhead into the pack he carried high across his shoulders.

Though he would never allow the arrowhead to be used again as a hunting weapon, there was a dwarf who traveled through Morningstar Hollows to whom Haarn could trade it. The dwarf would use the metal for trinkets that he smithed to trade at small towns throughout the realm of Turmish.

Haarn stood again, his ears cocked for the sounds coming from the forest ahead of him. He sniffed the air, smelling the stronger scent of blood nearby. Small carnivores gathered in the forest, drifting in from the shadows.

Another fifty paces farther on, he crossed a stream where the victim had tried to elude her pursuers. Haarn knew the victim was a female now; he could scent her pheromones in the air.

He also scented the female among the hunters.

The waning twilight giving over to full night turned the blood on the grass ahead almost ebony. Still it was fresh enough to gleam.

Haarn ran his fingers across the blades of grass. The victim had run hard and well, but she hadn't been able to elude her pursuers. He crouched in the tall grass beneath the swaying bows of an old oak tree. His practiced eye read the story with ease.

The victim had hidden in the tall grass off the well-worn game path that wound through the trees to the north. Forest creatures used the game path to trek down to the artesian well that created a spring only a quarter mile away.

She had waited, Haarn knew, and hoped that her pursuers

would follow the game path and miss her. She was canny, and Haarn regretted that she was too soon taken from the world before she could contribute to the balance. He had no doubt she was dead.

Despite her craftiness, she'd been found. The hunters had followed her blood spoor from the earlier wound and stayed on track. Judging from the amount of blood that had littered the forest, Haarn doubted she would have lived anyway. The blood had misted across the grass blades in places, almost too fine for even Haarn's keen eyesight to detect, but it had indicated that at least one of the hunters' arrows had taken her through a lung.

It had only been a matter of time till she'd drowned in her own blood.

Haarn stayed on course, following the thin trail, racing through the forest as starlight filtered down through the thick canopy. He ran fast enough that his breath rasped against the back of his throat, but still he made no sound the hunters would hear.

If the hunters had found their victim so easily, it only meant that they were armed with a magical talisman of some sort. It was the only way they could have found her in the forest. After all, she was at home there, and the hunters were interlopers. They should have been her prey—or at least been toyed with and abandoned in the forest.

Haarn touched the scimitar hanging upside down behind his back and under the pack. Silvanus willing, his blade would drink the blood of the hunters before morning. Only a little farther on, he found her.

Her body lay in a tangle of flattened grasses and brush where she'd fought her tormentors with her last breath. Blood stained the ground and foliage around her.

Creeping and flying insects from the forest drank of her blood from the grass and brush. A clutch of green-glowing fireflies, drawn by all the activity around the corpse, swirled in the air over the victim's head like a ghastly ghost-light.

She was young. Haarn saw that at once, and she'd left

a litter somewhere behind her. Her body, even torn and savaged as it was, showed heavy with milk. She hadn't been part of the pack the hunters had trailed through the forest; she'd just been another target that had crossed their sights. Wherever it was, the litter was too young to take care of itself. Without help, they would become casualties, too.

Haarn studied the wolf sprawled out in the forest. The signs showed her struggles against her foes, and he hoped she had given a good accounting of herself before being executed.

Quietly, Haarn mourned the wolf, though he had not known her. She was small in stature, barely more than five feet in length and just over a hundred pounds, covered in yellow-red fur flecked with black. Evidently she'd been on her own with her cubs because they had sucked her down over the last few tendays. Game was hard to come by for a solitary wolf, and much of what she had caught had probably been regurgitated for her cubs. Her eyes held round pupils that stared sightlessly into the darkening sky as the insects and small carnivores tore her to pieces.

Haarn didn't try to stop any of the savage feasting. It was nature's way, an unexpected bounty for those that had found her. He slipped his hunting knife free of his moccasin and stepped forward.

A trio of raccoons and a lynx gave ground reluctantly, hissing and spitting. Even the insects retreated somewhat before him.

The hunters had scalped the wolf before they'd left her. Her skull shone brightly white at the top of her head, and the blood had already started to coagulate.

Haarn rolled the wolf over and cut quickly, praying as he did so. "Silvanus, Keeper of the Balance, thank you for the table you have set before me. Watch over me now as I seek to right the imbalance her death has wrought."

The knife sliced the wolf's flesh cleanly. Haarn cut four steaks from the body, cutting out the best meat. Even that, he knew, would be tough and stringy, but it would save a

brace of rabbits that he would have taken for his dinner later.

Finishing his prayer, his voice soft and low in the forest, Haarn wrapped the steaks in leaves from the broad-leafed box elder trees where the wolf had made her last stand. When he had the steaks protected and masked somewhat by the scent of the crushed leaves, he stored them in his pack.

Then he took up the trail again, knowing the slight delay wouldn't keep him from catching up to the executioners. He kept his stride long and measured, crossing through the forest with the silence of a shadow. Where a more civilized man would have seen only dense brush and near-impenetrable walls, his trained eyes discerned a dozen different trails through the forest, all with different benefits and costs.

The executioners had primarily stayed with the game trail. Bent grasses and twigs on either side offered mute testimony of the passage of the men.

And the woman, Haarn reminded himself.

He loped through the forest, occasionally hearing his traveling companion pass through the brush behind and to the left. Broadfoot was nearly five times as big as Haarn, and his greater bulk wasn't built for stealth. That was why Haarn had gone alone. Still, Broadfoot remained nearby, ready to come to Haarn's aid at a moment's notice.

As he intersected then crossed the game trail the hunters followed, Haarn catalogued the different strides and mannerisms he could identify by the marks they left in the soft earth as well as their passage through the brush.

There were nine different members of the party. Two of the eight men were heavy and tall. Haarn judged that by the length of their strides. They were also confident, and he knew that because they were consistently in the lead. They also had similar mannerisms, which marked them as brothers or perhaps students of the same teacher.

The woman was interesting. She moved confidently,

but she seemed to stay in a position that sometimes placed her apart from the eight men in the party. Her stride was long, and when Haarn measured it, he guessed that she was about his height and weight. She was also the one who left the least in the way of marks to point to her passage. Haarn knew she would be dangerous.

One of the men carried pipeweed, meaning that he seldom traveled in the woodland areas far off the beaten path. Anyone who spent time in the woods knew better than to carry pipeweed, perfumes, or soap because it stood out against the forest scents.

The other five hunters showed varying degrees of familiarity with the forest. They were accomplished hunters—for city dwellers. One of them had a habit of stopping occasionally to check their back trail, always starting off the next step with his right foot. Another had a slight limp. Still another continually marked the trail by twisting small branches together so he could find it easily. Haarn untwisted the branches as he passed so the trees would grow as Silvanus and their nature had intended.

In only a few more strides he was close enough to hear them.

With the deepening night falling full bloom across the forest, the light of the lanterns carried by the hunting party stood out sharply. The golden glow didn't travel far and was partially masked by the trees and brush.

Haarn slid his scimitar silently free of its sheath. The blade was blackened so that it wouldn't reflect the light that lanced through the trees in places. He crouched lower to the ground, his eyes moving restlessly, but he kept moving forward.

"It's getting too dark," one man said. "You keep hunting in these woods this late at night, you're only asking for trouble."

"These damned wolf scalps are worth gold, Ennalt," another man said, "but not so much that we can be lolly-gagging about this piece of business."

"Aye," another man agreed. "Forris has the right of it,

I'm thinking. Better to be into this bloody work quickly and out of it just as quickly."

"It's only a little farther to Evenstar Lake," the woman reasoned. Her voice was soft and low, holding a throaty rasp that made it sound deep. "We can camp there for the night and take up the hunt again in the morning."

Less than fifty feet from his quarry, knowing Broadfoot would slow as well and await his signal, Haarn turned to the right and went up the slope of the wooded hill. He stayed low so the hunters gathered in the brush below couldn't skyline him against the star-filled night. As he moved, he caught brief glimpses of the eight men and the woman as they clustered within the small glen below.

Scimitar still in hand, Haarn sat on his haunches beside a thick-boled maple tree and watched the group.

"Me," another man said, "I'm all for bed. The sun will come up early enough tomorrow and we can set to hunting them damned wolves again."

"They're nocturnal feeders," still another said. "I'm telling you, with or without that enchanted charm the shepherd gave us, this is our best time of hunting wolves."

"It's also the most dangerous," Ennalt argued. "While we're hunting them, they can be hunting us." He was a small-built man who had a habit of lifting the lantern he carried and peering into the forest. "Especially that scar-faced bastard the shepherd's promising to pay the bonus for."

"We've killed nine of those wolves," one of the earlier speakers said. "I say we've done enough for the day—and the night—to warrant a rest."

Another man laughed. "You're just wanting to get next to that jug of elven wine, Tethys."

"And what of it?" Tethys snapped. "I'll drink the wine to replace the blood I've been donating to feed all these damned thirsty mosquitoes." He slapped at the back of his neck. "At least the bottle will numb some of the itch-



ing and put back some fluid into my body.”

“That’s what you’ve got water for,” the woman replied evenly, but her voice held steel. “I won’t abide any drunken fools on this mission.”

“‘Mission,’ she says,” Furras said. He was the one with the limp. Even now as he stood in the glen, the man favored his weaker leg. “Spoken like she was a sellsword guarding the Assembly of Stars or Lord Herengar himself.”

The woman met the man’s gaze and he turned away.

“We were hired to kill wolves, Druz,” Tethys said, “not to give our lives to some noble cause you might imagine up.”

Haarn stared at the woman with interest. As solitary as his work and commitment was, he seldom saw others, and he saw women even less. He sometimes found them interesting, as his father had laughingly told him he would, but there was always the heartbroken side of his father that kept Haarn in check. Feelings between men and women, the elder Brightoak had pointed out during the time Haarn’s education had touched upon the subject, were not as simple as the mating seasons that drew on animals. Liaisons between men and women were lasting things that Haarn had seen emulated between wolves, who tended to mate for life.

The woman was a few inches short of six feet, and her form was filled with womanly curves the leather armor she wore couldn’t hide. Her red-gold hair was bound up behind her in an intricate knot, and the lantern light turned her beautiful features ruddy, though dirt and grime stained them. She carried a long bow slung over one shoulder, a long sword at her hip, knives in her knee-high, cracked leather boots, and a traveler’s pack secured high on her back.

“Trust me,” Tethys said, “this is a lot quicker work and will pay more handsomely than guarding some fat merchant’s caravan from Alaghôn bound for Baldur’s Gate, Calimport, or even Waterdeep.”

Haarn turned the names over in his mind as he listened.

Baldur's Gate, Calimport, and Waterdeep were all famous cities of the Sword Coast known to him through stories he'd heard as a boy growing up under his father's tutelage. Ettrian Brightoak had been more socially driven than Haarn had turned out to be. Though he had no desire to go see those cities, thinking of them still fired his imagination.

He had yet to see even Alaghôn, the so-called Jewel of Turmish, and it lay within three days' travel of Morningstar Hollows where he spent much of his time. The idea of being in a place that housed so many people was at once exciting and terrifying.

Still, his father's descriptions of the Throne of Turmish, as the city was also known, held fascination, especially when Ettrian Brightoak waxed eloquently—an art Haarn had never acquired—about the history of the city that included stories of Anaglathos, the blue dragon that had ruled the city for a time, or of the Time of Troubles when Malar himself—also called the Stalker and the Beastlord—entered the Gulthmere Forest to destroy the Emerald Enclave.

"Gakhos, the shepherd," Tethys continued, "is a rich man, and he's drawn to vengeance. In my experience, a man drawn to avenge—even by proxy, which is what he hired us for—will pay until there is nothing left of his gold or his anger. We can kill a lot of wolves for the gold he's paying and not have to worry about taking one of those damned overland trips to the Sword Coast."

"Or maybe you're wanting to begin a new career as a sellsword aboard one of those new ships that are being outfitted for the Sea of Fallen Stars," another of the young hunters said. "Since the Serôsian War and the destruction of the Whamite Isles—not to mention the unleashing of the sahuagin throughout the Inner Sea—there's plenty of call for sailors that don't mind getting bloody."

"Mayhap you can even sign up to join the forces guarding the trade negotiations of Myth Nantar," another of the young hunters said. He was one of the two largest men in

the group. If they weren't twins, they were at least brothers. "I hear that after pulling a tour of duty down in Myth Nantar, you can breathe the ocean waters just like the air itself."

"Standing here talking," Ennalt grumbled, "isn't going to put us any closer to our beds for the evening, or to hunting wolves, if that's what we're going to do."

The reminder pulled Haarn from his inclination to watch the hunting party rather than deal with it. Broadfoot shifted restlessly in the forest to Haarn's left, but the noise he made wasn't something the hunters in the group below would have noticed.

Haarn laid his scimitar across his knees, the flat of the blade resting easily, then cupped his hands before his mouth. He blew gently, making the sound of a bloodybeak, one of the small birds in the forest that fed on the mosquitoes that lived around Evenstar Lake. He hit all four notes perfectly, and a chorus of responses came from the darkness as nearby birds answered him, but Haarn knew Broadfoot would recognize his call and be alerted.

Whisper-quiet, Haarn stood and walked down the hillside toward the hunting party. His arrival startled them, stepping as he did from the trees into the circumference of light from the lanterns.

"Tymora watch over me," one of the men snarled as he turned to face Haarn. "What the hell is that?"

All of the men and the woman reached for their weapons, baring blades in a heartbeat. Two of the men lifted heavy crossbows and turned them toward Haarn.

"Leave these lands," Haarn ordered. He stood unafraid before them, certain that he could move even more quickly than the crossbowmen could pull the triggers on their weapons. The trick was to recognize when they were going to fire. "There will be no more wolf hunting."

"Says who?" one of the two big men demanded.

"If you continue hunting," Haarn promised emotionlessly, not thinking of the mother wolf he'd seen killed

earlier, “I will hunt you, and I will slay you all before the sun rises again.”

“Like hell you will,” Tethys said. He pointed the long sword he wielded. “Shoot him!”