

## "Night of Two Moons"

By David B. Coe, © 2002

Healers moved among the wounded like wraiths, their pale faces and white hair illuminated by the fires and torches. Low moans and gentle sobs drifted across the battle plain, as if riding the evening wind with smoke and the stench of gangrene. Off to the west, where Hanan's company guarded the army's left flank, a man was screaming in short, sharp bursts, like a hungry babe. Again and again he screamed, as he had since dusk, until his voice sounded raw and ragged. Carthach found himself wishing that the poor fool would just die.

Panya, the Qirsi moon, was almost directly overhead, white as bone and only two nights shy of full. Everything in sight seemed alive with her glow: the low grasses that bowed and danced in the wind, the hulking grey boulders strewn across the landscape, the shields and spears of the Qirsi warriors who slept beneath her on the soft earth. Yet Carthach could not tear his gaze away from Ilias, the Eandi moon, hanging just above the eastern horizon, huge and full, and red as a wound.

"Tomorrow will be the Night of Two Moons," someone said from behind him. "Perhaps it will bring good fortune to our soldiers."

Carthach turned, recognizing the voice.

"You're up late, Jerel. Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

The man shrugged, his yellow eyes drawn to the red moon as well. He had dark lines on his face, and his white hair hung loose to his shoulders, making his features appear even more gaunt than usual.

"My battle group has injured. The healers aren't done with them yet, and I don't like to sleep until I know how many warriors I'll have in the morning."

After a moment, he faced Carthach. "And you? What keeps you from sleep tonight?"

Listen to the screams, Carthach wanted to say. Can't you hear them? Can't you smell the blood and the rot? Instead, he forced a smile and opened his hands. "Who can sleep?"

Jerel nodded. "Of course," he said. "Your battle group leads the advance tomorrow. I had forgotten."

A gust of wind made the torches sputter, and Carthach shivered, though the air was warm. "Yes, we lead the advance."

"I'll be with you, Car. So will, Treb and Eben. And Hanan will be weaving us. You've nothing to fear."

Carthach said nothing. If Jerel wanted to think that he was afraid of the morrow's battle, let him. Perhaps he was. To the south, so close that he could hear them singing, the army of the Forelands waited for dawn. If this day's slaughter was any indication, the losses his people had suffered may have begun to weaken their magic. Another few days like today,

and all the Weavers in the Southlands wouldn't be able to help them. Carthach only hoped that Braedor hadn't figured this out yet.

"Has Hanan found an answer for their archers?" Carthach asked.

Jerel's mouth twitched. "Not yet, but he will. Give him time."

Carthach almost laughed. Give him time? They were dying. There was no more time.

The early battles had gone well, almost too well it seemed, looking back on them now. Everything had worked to perfection. As one Weaver and his battle groups raised mists to conceal their numbers, the other Weavers led their warriors into battle, destroying the Forelanders' swords and shields, decimating their ranks with fire, and whispering dark words to their mounts that made the beasts throw their riders and bolt. For more than a fortnight, the Qirsi army advanced up the center of the Forelands, carving their way through the armies of the north and driving the Eandi before them like a herd of drel. Their victories were coming with such ease that Hanan and some of the others managed to convince themselves that the Qirsi would control all of the Forelands before the harvest.

But somehow, through luck or cunning or the intervention of the gods, the northmen rallied, finding a way to defeat the magic of the Qirsi. Rather than engaging the Southlanders in close battle, the Eandi used their archers to keep them at a distance, where their mists were less effective, their fire could not reach the enemy, and their whisperings could not be heard by the northmen's horses. The Weavers tried to direct their power at the arrows, hoping to splinter them as they had the enemies' blades and shields, or perhaps to burn them out of the sky.

But the darts moved too swiftly. Qirsi magic had little effect on the shafts as they rained down upon the army. A few broke or caught fire, falling to the ground harmlessly. But most found their mark. Carthach still remembered his rage at seeing the arrows descend from the bright blue sky and hearing the shrieks of his warriors as they died. He was a shaper, as were Jerel, Treb, and the other commanders in Hanan's company. He had known the joy of seeing his magic shatter the Forelanders' swords as if the steel had turned suddenly to glass. To be rendered powerless now seemed to him a cruel joke. He could almost hear the laughter of the gods mingling with the wind and the death cries.

Hoping to withdraw to safer ground and plot a new strategy, the Weavers tried to retreat, but by then reinforcements from the west had moved into position behind them. The Forelanders had the Qirsi trapped, leaving them no choice but to fight here. If it could even be called fighting.

They wove their mists, concealing themselves from the archers. They raised winds to weaken the arrows' flight. They even sent out small parties of raiders, who cut bloody swaths through the armies of the north before being wiped out themselves. Hanan and the other Weavers still spoke of conquering the Forelands, as did most of the group commanders. But Carthach knew better. He was no gleaner, but the fate of their invasion seemed as clear to him as the night sky. It was remarkable that the others didn't see it as well. If they kept fighting, they were going to die here on this desolate plain. And though he believed in the mercy of the gods, he feared death.

Which was why he had found a way to end the fighting. Let Hanan and the rest of the Weavers battle to the last breath. Their blind devotion to this war had determined their fates long ago. Any peace that was likely to be forged now would bring their executions. But

Carthach and the others didn't have to die. They wouldn't, if he had anything to say about it.

He glanced at Jerel, who was staring once more at the red moon. The injured man's screams still cut through the night. Nearby, the horses whinnied and stomped.

"Do you ever wonder if our people were meant to be warriors?" Carthach asked.

Jerel narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Look at us. We're not built like warriors. We're not nearly as large or as strong as the men we fight. By necessity, our swords are smaller, our armor lighter, our bows less effective. Doesn't it strike you that perhaps Qirsar never intended for us to fight?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Jerel said with a frown. "Qirsar gave us powers that the men we fight can only dream of possessing. That's our strength."

Carthach knew that he should have let the matter drop, but for some reason he couldn't.

"You're right. Our powers are what set us apart. But are they the powers of a vanquishing race? Mists and winds? Fire and shaping? They're more than enough to protect us from invaders, but are they enough to make us conquerors ourselves?"

"What is this foolishness, Car?" Jerel asked, sounding angry. "I didn't hear any of these questions coming from you a fortnight ago. Is this how you respond to a little adversity?"

He heard the goad in Jerel's words, but he was well past losing his temper over such a trifle.

"You're right, Jerel," he said. "Forgive me. I'm not myself tonight."

For a moment, the man said nothing. Then he gave a thin smile and nodded. "Of course you're not. Who can blame you, given what you have to do tomorrow?"

Carthach's blood turned cold, as if Bian himself had reached up from the Underrealm and taken hold of his heart. He's talking about leading the advance, he thought, forcing himself to breathe again. Calm down before you get yourself killed.

"Thank you for your understanding," he said, inwardly cursing the flutter in his voice. He hesitated. "I would prefer--"

Jerel shook his head. "Don't give it another thought, Car. The Weavers will hear nothing of this. You have my word."

"Again, thank you," Carthach said. "I'm in your debt."

"Strike a blow for us tomorrow. That will be thanks enough."

This time, at least, he kept his composure. "I'll do my best."

The two men stood together in silence for another few moments.

"Well," Jerel finally said, clearing his throat awkwardly. "It's late. I should check on my injured and then get some sleep."

Carthach nodded. "I should as well. Shyssir grant you rest, Jerel."

"And you."

Glancing once more at red Ilias, Carthach walked back to where his battle group slept. He had no intention of sleeping this night, but he lay down on the soft grasses anyway, and stared up at Panya and the stars, trying to empty his mind until Ilias reached his zenith. After a time, he realized that the screaming had stopped, and he shuddered.

"Maybe the healers saved him," he whispered to the night.

Another gust of wind swept across the plain, carrying smoke and the faint smell of death.

A single cloud drifted across Panya's face, giving the night over to Ilias's red, if only momentarily. Legend told that Panya and Ilias had been lovers, in defiance of the gods who had decreed that Qirsi and Eandi should never lie together. To punish them, Qirsar, God of Magic, had placed them in the sky for all to see, and had ordained that they should spend eternity apart. Whenever one rose, the God said, the other would set. But such had been the power of their love, that they defied him. The first time she rose into the night, Panya paused high above the land and waited for Ilias, so that ever after they could travel the sky together.

How foolish that under the gaze of the Lovers, Qirsi and Eandi warriors should be preparing to slaughter each other.

When Ilias was directly overhead, his red glow mingling with Panya's white to give a rose cast to the grasses and stones, Carthach climbed to his feet and started toward the southern edge of the camp.

Apart from the sentries, few were awake. Yet the camp was alive with sound. Horses snorted and nickered. Some of the soldiers cried out in their sleep. Others murmured, as if engaged in conversation. The breathing of the sleeping warriors made the entire plain hum, until it seemed the earth itself was whispering to him.

Carthach had to keep himself from looking around to see if he was followed. The sentries would have noticed him, but he was a battle group commander. None would question him unless he acted as though he expected to be questioned. So he just walked, his eyes trained on the small cluster of trees before him.

"Do you need something, Commander?"

He stopped, his heart abruptly racing like a war horse. After a moment he made himself turn slowly and smile. It was a young woman, her battle armor seeming to glow with Ilias's red and the golden light from her torch. Her white hair was pulled back from her long, thin face, and the yellow of her eyes was so pale it was hard to tell where the whites ended and the irises began. She couldn't have been more than a year or two past her Fating.

Are we really meant to be warriors?

"Thank you, no," Carthach said, trying to keep his tone light. "I can't sleep. I thought I'd take a walk."

"To the south, sir?"

She hadn't drawn her sword, but her stance and the expression on her face made him feel as though the point of her blade was pressed against his chest.

"Yes," he said, allowing a note of impatience to creep into his voice. "Is that a problem?"

She shook her head, her retreat apparent in the widening of her eyes. "No, Commander. Of course not. I just--"

"Good. Carry on."

Before she could say anything more, Carthach turned away and continued toward the trees. He could feel her watching him, but he didn't turn again. Slowly, his pulse began to slow.

He found Braedor waiting for him on the far side of the coppice. He could hear the river gurgling in the distance, and beyond it, the singing of Braedor's army. The Forelander looked annoyed, as though he had been waiting for some time. He wore no helm or armor, and, as the northmen went, he was not particularly large. Still, he was taller than Carthach and far more powerfully built. His dark face appeared ruddy in the moonlight. His short black beard seemed to bristle like quills on a hedgehog.

This is a warrior, Carthach thought, measuring Braedor against the young guard he had just left. A man like this had no need of magic. Two swordsmen stood on either side of the northman, and three archers stood a few paces behind, eyeing the trees warily, arrows nocked.

Abruptly, the Qirsi felt small and vulnerable, like an innocent caught between two advancing armies. The traitor walks a lonely path. Carthach had heard the saying before, but until that moment he had never truly understood it.

"One last day before the Night of Two Moons," Braedor said, his voice cutting through the dark like torchlight. "Everything is ready for tomorrow?"

"Yes. It's just as we discussed. I'll be leading the advance. Hanan, my Weaver, will be to the west. He rides under a yellow and black banner, and like all our Weavers, he wears his colors over his armor. Amara and Wazir are Weavers as well. They ride to the east, Amara under a banner of red and white, Wazir under silver and blue. The others--"

Braedor cut him off with a gesture. "The others can wait. With these three dead, we should control the south by nightfall, correct?"

Carthach swallowed, then nodded. "By nightfall."

"Your people are powerless without the Weavers?"

He stared at the Eandi. Hadn't the man been listening at all the past few nights? "No, not powerless. Not in the least. The Weavers allow us to combine our powers, to draw on each other's strength. Even without the Weavers, we still have magic. But fighting on our own, we'll tire more quickly, and our magic will be far less effective."

Braedor nodded. "Good." He hesitated, nodded again. "That's good." He rubbed his large hands together, though even here, closer to the river, the night wasn't particularly cold. "Is there anything else?"

Yes, you fool. A good deal. My gold, your promise of asylum, your guarantee of safety for my men. Carthach took a long breath. "Your men know not to hack us to pieces when we ride forward?"

"You won't be harmed."

"And my battle group?"

"We'll do everything we can, Commander. But please remember, war is not a precise endeavor. Your warriors know nothing of your . . . choice?"

Carthach regarded the man closely, looking for some sign that he was being mocked. Seeing none, he shook his head. "No. I've told them nothing."

"I thought as much," Braedor said with a nod. "Then they'll be fighting us. We must protect ourselves. You understand that. But we'll try to kill as few of your men as possible."

Carthach's eyes strayed to one of Braedor's swordsmen, a hulking man with a thick moustache and deep-set dark eyes. The warrior was glowering at him, one hand resting on the hilt of his blade and the other flexing repeatedly, as if it was all he could do to keep himself from killing Carthach right there.

I'm leading them to a slaughter, he thought. Yet, what could he do? Braedor was right. The Forelanders could offer no guarantees. And even if they could, he was in no position to demand them.

"You'll have my gold?" he asked after several moments.

Braedor grinned, although Carthach could see the contempt in his eyes. "All of it."

"What will happen to the other--?"

The northman raised a hand abruptly, silencing him. His gaze was fixed on the trees behind Carthach. "You're certain you weren't followed?" he asked in a whisper.

Carthach spun and scanned the coppice. "I don't think I was."

"You don't think you were?" Braedor repeated, his voice rising.

Before Carthach could answer, he heard a light footfall.

"Is that you, Commander?" a woman's voice called.

The guard, he had time to think. Then a bow thrummed and Carthach heard her topple to the ground. He and Braedor rushed forward and found the woman lying face up, an arrow through her throat, her blood glistening in Ilias's glow.

"You, idiot!" Braedor said in a harsh whisper.

Carthach could say nothing. He just stared at the woman. He wanted to bend down and close her eyes, but he couldn't even bring himself to do that.

Braedor spat a curse. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Nothing," Carthach heard himself say, his eyes still on the woman. "Nothing at all."

"What?"

"If someone finds her, they'll just assume she strayed too close to one of your patrols." He looked up, meeting the northman's gaze. "This changes nothing."

Braedor eyed him for several moments. "Very well. Until tomorrow then." He turned away and started back toward his camp, gesturing for his archers and swordsmen to follow.

Carthach watched them go before turning himself and making his way back to where his warriors slept. He didn't look at the woman again, but he felt as though her eyes were on him once more, watching him walk away.

He returned to where he had been lying before his meeting with the Forelander, taking care not to be seen by the few Qirsi who were still awake. Sitting among his warriors, he watched the morning dawn, warm and clear. The sentry had been on the night's final shift. No one came to relieve her, and no one noted her absence.

As the Qirsi warriors began to stir around him, Carthach stood, stretching the night from his legs. Jerel caught his eye from where he sat, a short distance away.

"Did you sleep at all?" he called.

"Some," Carthach said. "Not much."

Jerel nodded, as if satisfied. A moment later he barked a command at the men and women sleeping around him, and they began to rouse themselves as well. Carthach's warriors checked their weapons and readied their horses.

To the south, the armies of the Forelands resumed their singing, their voices sounding far closer than they had the night before. Carthach heard a horse approaching, and turning to the west, he saw Hanan riding toward him, white hair flying behind him, his yellow eyes glimmering like gold in the early morning light. A man rode beside him bearing a yellow and black banner that snapped loudly in the wind.

"You lead us today, Carthach jal Terad," the Weaver said, reining his white mount to a halt just in front of him. "Orlagh smile upon you and guide your blade."

The ritual words. Carthach heard one of his men vomit behind him. The Weaver frowned.

"We fight for the glory of Qirsar," Carthach replied, the words coming to him as an oft-repeated lesson might come to a child. "Our magic is yours, Weaver. Use us well."

A smile stretched across Hanan's face and then was gone. "Your warriors are ready?"

"Yes, Weaver."

He nodded. "Good. We'll await your signal, Carthach. Don't keep us waiting."

"I won't."

Hanan wheeled his horse away almost before Carthach got the words out. He'll be dead by sunset, Carthach told himself, watching the Weaver go. The thought gave him some comfort.

Looking away from Hanan, Carthach found them all staring at him. His warriors and Jerel's, as well those of the other battle group commanders. They expected him to say something, to ease their fears and give them something for which to fight other than their own survival. As if that wasn't enough.

But nothing came to him. Nothing at all. They just stood there, waiting. And all he could do was gape back at them like a king's fool.

"We fight for the glory of Qirsar," he said at last, the words sounding hollow and forced.

Still they looked at him, expecting more, until a few, realizing that he had no more, turned away from him, muttering and shaking their heads.

Carthach glanced at Jerel, but the commander wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Your horse, Commander," a woman said from behind him.

Carthach took the reins from her and smiled, but she wouldn't look at him either. "Thank you," he said.

She nodded and moved away.

The traitor walks a lonely path. It was almost as if they knew.

He swung himself onto his bay and looked over his battle group. They were watching him again, grim yellow eyes beneath long white hair. It occurred to him that the Forelanders must have thought them strange looking, perhaps even frightening. Qirsi and Eandi lived together in the Southlands. They had grown accustomed to each other. But here . . . Even with asylum and gold, he faced a difficult future in the Forelands, as did those he managed to save.

Facing west, he saw Hanan, resplendent in yellow and black, perched on his mount and gazing back at him. Taking a breath, Carthach drew his sword, lifted it over his head, and spurred his horse forward.

"Gods be with us!" he called.

It wasn't the traditional war cry, but still his warriors responded with a ringing cheer, so desperate were they for any words from him.

They rode swiftly, hooves drumming past the cluster of trees where the dead guard lay. Someone cried out on Carthach's left, and several riders from Treb's battle group slowed. She had been found. Carthach and his warriors didn't stop or even slow their advance, nor did Hanan or any of the battle group commanders.

Beyond the trees was a small rise, and as they crested, Carthach saw the Forelanders. They were waiting on the far side of the Rassor, their spears and swords sparkling in the sunshine like the slow waters of the river. Braedor sat on a great black stallion in the



middle of them, his polished armor shining, his head still uncovered. Before him, in a half dozen rows that seemed to stretch the entire length of the river, stood the archers, their bows jutting sharply into the air like stakes in a vineyard.

Carthach heard several of his warriors invoking the gods.

"It'll be butchery, plain and simple," one man said.

Carthach turned toward the voice. "Stay close to me, no matter what happens."

The man stared at him. After a moment, he nodded.

Carthach started to say something else, but in that moment he sensed a wind rising. Facing east, he saw Amara, her arms raised, riding forth into the gap between the two armies. It was his signal to lead the charge, but all he could do was watch her, silently begging her not to raise a mist as well. He should have known better.

It began as wisps of grey, rising from the earth on the Qirsi side of the river, like hands of the dead reaching out from the Underrealm. The strands of mist quickly gathered into a white cloud that rose above the river and rode the wind toward the Forelanders.

Braedor's archers would never be able to see him now. Perhaps the man had been right after all. It was to be butchery.

"Ride!" Jerel called to him. "Now, Car!"

Beyond Jerel, Hanan was watching him as well, his arms raised like Amara's. Already he could feel the Weaver reaching for his magic and that of the others, gathering their power within his own so that he could wield it as a single weapon.

"Ride!" Jerel shouted again.

Carthach dug his heels into his mount and the creature bounded forward. With a deafening roar the rest of the Qirsi army followed. Mist continued to pour out of the ground like smoke, as if Amara had set the earth itself on fire. He could feel the Weaver's wind at his back, like a hand pushing him forward. The air rang with the sound of swords being unsheathed, but Carthach did not reach for his. Instead he just clung to his mount, crouching as low as he could, waiting for the first arrow to pierce his armor or the flesh of his horse.

He was the first to reach the river, the water splashing up into his face and hair. He heard the others hit the water as well, and it almost seemed that the Forelanders had been waiting for the sound to begin their assault. For in the next instant, arrows were everywhere, pelting the river and the warriors like rain. The archers were firing blindly -- they had to be. Amara's mist was thick as a coastal fog. But all around him, warriors were dying.

He felt Hanan drawing power out of his body, fusing it with that of the others, trying in vain to destroy the arrows.

Still, Carthach drove his mount forward. He couldn't see Braedor anymore, but he could hear him shouting commands, and he rode toward the sound of the northman's voice as if it were home.

Reaching the far shore of the river, he glanced back. Most of his battle group was with him,

as were Jerel and his warriors. Hanan still had his sword raised and now he brought it down, signaling to Carthach and the other battle group leaders in the Weaver's legion that they were to turn west and join him as he cut into the northmen's flank. Jerel turned immediately, just as he was supposed to, just as they had discussed the previous day. But Carthach kept riding toward Braedor's voice.

"Car!" Jerel shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Commander!" several of his men cried.

Still, Carthach rode. "Stay with me if you want to live!" he called.

"Carthach!" Jerel sounded enraged, and Carthach half expected the man to ride him down and kill him.

Once more he was aware of Hanan reaching for his power, as if the Weaver could turn his mount with a thought. But Carthach resisted him, and looking back for just an instant, he saw that most of his battle group was with him.

"What are we doing, Commander?" one of the men yelled. "Why aren't we going with the others?"

"Stay close to me!" he said again, as though there was some magic in the words that would keep them all alive. "Ride to their leader!"

Another cheer went up from his warriors. "To their leader!"

Carthach almost laughed aloud. They think I'm a hero.

An instant later he and his group plunged into Amara's mist, and suddenly there was fighting all around him, the ring of steel on steel, the screams of horses and dying warriors. Fighting from atop their mounts, the Qirsi had the advantage, and they cut through the Forelanders' lines like scythes through a field of grain. Carthach had yet to draw his sword, but when the northmen came for him he drew upon his power to break their blades and shields. He still heard Braedor's voice over the roar of the battle, and he knew that he was close. For just an instant, he considered fighting on. Perhaps there was a chance that he could kill the northmen's leader before he fell himself.

But in that instant, Carthach felt the wind slacken. A few moments later, the mist began to lift, and a hint of sunshine seeped through the white cloud, coaxing a dull shine from the armor of the warriors around him. Amara was dead. It was the only explanation.

Braedor appeared before him, emerging from the thinning mist like some servant of Bian, closer even than Carthach had thought. Seeing Carthach, the northman's eyes widened. "Archers!" he called sharply.

In as much time as it took Carthach to rein his mount to a halt, he and what remained of his group were surrounded by bowmen. Behind them stood Eandi swordsmen. Hundreds of them, their eyes filled with loathing. Carthach looked west, hoping to catch some glimpse of Jerel, but all he saw was the dust and confusion of battle. He could hear screams and war cries, but it was impossible to determine who had the upper hand. Hanan's banner was nowhere to be seen.

Around him, the fighting had ebbed and an unworldly silence had descended upon the two armies, as if all the warriors there were waiting for Carthach and Braedor to speak. Many northmen lay dead behind them, their blood making the grass shimmer. He still had upwards of sixty warriors in his battle group; he had lost barely half that number. It seemed Orlagh had been smiling upon them after all.

Still, Braedor said nothing, and after several tense moments, Carthach heard a bow snap like a dry twig. Whirling in his saddle, he saw one of his men raise his sword. At the same time, he heard the wood crack on several more bows. His warriors were using their magic.

“No!” he screamed. Without even thinking, he threw his power at the sword of his nearest warrior, splitting it in half as it descended toward the archer. “No!” he shouted again. “They’ll kill us all!”

Too late. Bows sang to the left and right. Qirsi swords whistled through the warm air. Braedor’s swordsmen rushed forward, and warriors fell, Qirsi and Eandi.

“Stop! We can’t win!”

“We can try!” one of his men shouted back. “Better dead than a slave!”

“It won’t be like that! Braedor gave his word!”

That stopped some of them.

“Hold!” Braedor commanded.

Slowly, the fighting subsided again, although suddenly Carthach was only dimly aware of what was going on around him.

He and the Qirsi warrior were staring at each other.

“What did you say?” the man asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. His skin appeared unnaturally flushed, and he held his sword loosely at his side, as if he had forgotten about it.

Carthach opened his mouth. Closed it again. How could he possibly explain? At least we’ll be alive! The words echoed in his mind as if he had shouted them, but he couldn’t give them voice. This invasion was a mistake. We’ll never conquer this land. Don’t you understand that? But perhaps our people can still have a future here. If we just end this war now, there may be hope for us. He knew he was right. The truth of it was as plain to him as the smell of blood that clung to his clothes and hair.

But warriors didn’t think this way. He knew that as well. And regardless of whether Qirsar had intended it, that’s what his people had become. Warriors.

Tearing his eyes from the man’s face, he looked at the rest of his battle group. They were all watching him, some, those who had figured it out, with expressions of disgust. After a moment, he turned his gaze back to the warrior, who hadn’t moved.

“I’m sorry,” Carthach said at last.

The man sat there like a statue, glaring at him until Carthach began to tremble.

Then, so abruptly that Carthach's mount started, the warrior rose in his saddle, and screaming, "Traitor!" raised his sword to cleave the commander in two.

Carthach had time to shatter the man's steel -- he needed only to form the thought -- but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had earned this death. Had it not been for the six arrows that buried themselves in the warrior's chest just as he began to bring down his blade, the commander would have died then. Instead, it was the warrior who fell, sliding almost gently from his saddle, as blood swelled from the wounds.

The others glared at him, no doubt wishing they could muster the courage to raise their swords against him as well. But Carthach continued to stare at the empty saddle of the warrior. The man had called him a traitor. True, he had thought of himself that way for several days, but it was another thing entirely to have other Qirsi think it of him, to realize that he would be known this way for the rest of time. Carthach jal Terad, traitor.

"Take the soldiers away," Braedor said. "Leave the commander with me."

Carthach faced the Eandi again. "You promised that no harm would come to them."

"And I intend to keep that promise. It's you I'm worried about, Commander."

His face grew hot, and a moment later he dropped his gaze. He didn't raise his eyes as the northmen began to lead his warriors away, or when one Qirsi woman stopped beside him and spit on his cheek. He didn't even look up when the cheer went up from the Forelanders battling to the west, although he had an idea of what it meant.

"Ride with me," Braedor said, once the others were gone.

The northman kicked his horse into motion, and Carthach had little choice but to follow. They rode west, toward a great cluster of Eandi soldiers. Carthach wiped the spittle from his cheek, and though Braedor glanced at him as he did, the Forelander had the good grace not to say anything.

As they reached the knot of soldiers, Braedor's men parted to let them through, eyeing Carthach with unconcealed curiosity and whispering among themselves. At the center of the cluster, they found a small party of Qirsi men and women. Jerel was among them, as were Treb and Eben, and several other commanders. Hanan was there as well, but he was lying on the blood-soaked grass, an arrow in his shoulder and another in his chest. He was still alive, but only barely, his breath coming in shallow, wet gasps. Blood trickled from his mouth, and his eyelids fluttered open and closed like butterfly wings.

"The Weaver needs healing, Car," Jerel said, staring up at him. "Tell your friends to let us save him."

"Why would we do that?" Braedor asked mildly, "when our intention is to kill all the Weavers?"

Jerel's jaw tightened. There was a wild look in his yellow eyes, but he held his tongue. At least for a moment.

"Why did you do it, Car? Is it that nonsense from last night? The Qirsi aren't meant to be warriors, you said. Is that it? Is that what this is all about?"

He shouldn't have said anything. He should have just ignored Jerel and what he read on the faces of Treb, Eben, and the others. But he couldn't.

"This was going to end in a slaughter," he said. "Sooner or later, they were going to destroy us. Believe it or not, I was trying to save lives."

Jerel laughed, although that look in his eyes remained. "Well, you certainly saved your own. I bet you made yourself rich, too."

Carthach felt the blood rush to his face again, but he didn't allow himself to look away.

"How much did they give you, Car?"

There was no use in fighting it anymore. None of them would ever understand. He forced a thin smile. "A lot."

"Put these soldiers with the others," Braedor said. "The commanders stay here."

It took some time for all the Qirsi warriors to be led away. None of the commanders spoke, and Braedor sat motionless on his mount, gazing toward the river. Finally, when the warriors were gone, the northman swung himself off his mount and drew his sword.

"Are you going to kill us now?" Jerel asked, his voice steady.

Braedor nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Carthach's mouth went dry. "That wasn't part of our agreement!"

"That's right," Braedor said. "Because it wasn't open to negotiation."

"But you--"

The northman raised a hand, silencing him. "You asked me to spare your warriors, Commander, and I agreed. But I can't risk keeping your officers alive as well. When prisoners have leaders, they become dangerous."

Jerel started to laugh again. "You're an idiot, Car. You really thought--?"

He stopped, gaping at Braedor as the Forelander walked to where Hanan lay and placed the tip of his sword over the Weaver's heart. "What are you doing?" Jerel demanded.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

An instant later there was a sound like a smith's hammer on hot steel, and Braedor's sword snapped in two, the end of the blade falling harmlessly onto Hanan's chest.

Braedor dropped the hilt as if he feared it might bite him. He whirled toward Jerel. "How--?" He faltered. His hands trembled and his dark eyes were wide. "Why would you do that? One way or another he's going to die. Would you rather he suffered?"

Jerel didn't answer, though he held the man's gaze.

Braedor made a small gesture with his hand. Carthach barely noticed it. But within the span of a single heartbeat, Jerel lay dying on the ground with several arrows jutting out of his chest and neck.

The northman picked up the broken blade that lay on Hanan and tossed it away.

“Fool,” he muttered.

Not quite understanding why he did it, Carthach drew his own sword. He saw several of Braedor’s archers ready their arrows.

Braedor held out a hand and shook his head to stop them. “Don’t!” he commanded.

The men lowered their bows.

Holding the blade lightly in his hand, Carthach extended the hilt to Braedor.

The Forelander took it, his eyes fixed on Carthach’s. After a moment he nodded.

“Return it to me later,” Carthach said, turning his mount away. “I don’t care to watch the rest.”

He didn’t know where he was going. He only knew, as he rode away from Braedor, that there was little comfort for him here. The Qirsi prisoners stared at him with such venom that he had to turn away. Some shouted obscenities. The Forelanders wouldn’t even look him in the eye.

The traitor walks a lonely path.

In the end, he rode downstream some distance, until he could no longer hear the two armies. No one tried to stop him. Yes, Braedor still needed him; there were four more legions of Qirsi warriors to the north, all led by Weavers. But the Forelanders knew he wouldn’t go far. They still had his gold.

He rode back just after dusk, making his way slowly through the army of the Forelands as Panya climbed into the night sky. Apparently, Braedor had captured the Qirsi camp, for the white-haired healers were here now, ministering to Qirsi and Eandi alike. A tent had been erected in the middle of the northmen’s camp, and Carthach rode toward it, knowing that he’d find Braedor inside. Reaching it, he dismounted and entered.

The Forelander sat before his supper, sipping dark wine from a metal cup. He glanced up when Carthach entered, but he didn’t stand.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “There’s plenty for two.”

“No, thank you.” Carthach wondered if he’d ever be hungry again.

Braedor pulled out Carthach’s sword and offered it to him, hilt first. If he had used it on Hanan or anyone else, he had cleaned it. The steel shimmered in the candlelight.

“My thanks,” Braedor said, as Carthach took it from him.

“Never mention it again.”

The northman regarded him briefly, then gave a small shrug and raised the wine to his lips.

Carthach turned and started to leave.

“We ride north at dawn,” Braedor said, just as the Qirsi reached the tent flap.

He stopped momentarily, nodded without turning around, and then stepped out into the moonlight.

Panya’s glow illuminated the Eandi army and reflected off the waters of the Rassor. Below her, Ilias hung just above the plain, like the great red eye of some demon from the Underrealm.

Qirsi moon and Eandi moon. The Lovers, traveling the night sky together on this, the Night of Two Moons in the turn of Adriel, Goddess of Love. It was said that a romance consummated on this night would last forever.

“And what of a betrayal consummated on this day?” Carthach whispered.

Glancing down, he saw that he still carried his sword in his hand. Light danced along the steel, white from Panya, red from Ilias, yellow from the torches. He saw his face reflected on the metal. White hair, yellow eyes, his cheeks flushed red with the night air.

Carthach jal Terad, traitor.

He formed the thought so suddenly, with such violence, that when the sword shattered he flinched, dropping the hilt. Silver shards fell to the grass like flakes of snow, tiny and perfect. But still they glittered with torch fire and the light of the two moons.