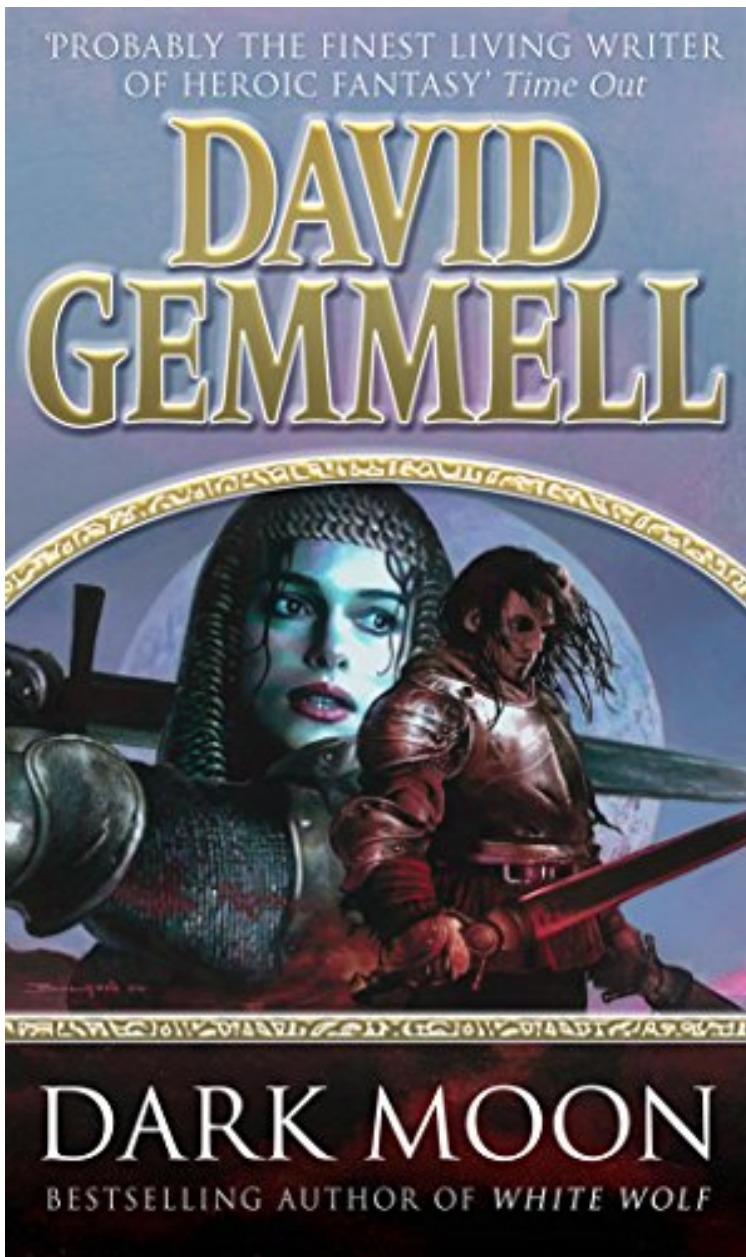


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Dark Moon



Par David Gemmell
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe peaceful Eldarin were the last of three ancient races. The mystical Oltor, healers and poets, had fallen before the dread power of the cruel and sadistic Daroth. Yet in one awesome night the invincible Daroth had vanished from the face of the earth. Gone were their cities, their armies, their terror. The Great Northern Desert was their only legacy. Not a trace remained for a thousand years...The War of the Pearl had raged for seven years and the armies of the four Duchies were exhausted and weary of bloodshed.

But the foremost of the Dukes, Sirano of Romark, possessed the Eldarin Pearl and was determined to unravel its secrets. Then on one unforgettable day a dark moon rose above the Great Northern Desert, and a black tidal wave swept across the land. In moments the desert had vanished beneath lush fields and forests and a great city could be seen glittering in the morning sunlight. From this city re-emerged the blood-hungry Daroth, powerful and immortal, immune to spear and sword. They had only one desire: to rid the world of humankind for ever. Now the fate of the human race rests on the talents of three heroes: Karis, warrior-woman and strategist; Tarantio, the deadliest swordsman of the age; and Duvodas the Healer, who will learn a terrible truth.

Chapter One Tarantio was a warrior. Before that he had been a sailor, a miner, a breaker of horses, and an apprentice cleric to an elderly writer. Before that a child: quiet and solitary, living with a widowed father who drank in the mornings and wept in the afternoons. His mother was an acrobat in a travelling group of gypsies, who entertained at banquets and public gatherings. It was from her he inherited his nimbleness of foot, his speed of hand and his dark, swarthy good looks. She had died of the plague when Tarantio was six years old. He could hardly remember her now, save for one memory of a laughing girl-woman who threw him high in the air. From his father he had--he believed--inherited nothing. Save, perhaps, for the demon within that was Dace. Now Tarantio was a young man and had lived with Dace for most of his life. A cold wind whispered into the cave. Tarantio's dark, curly hair had been shaved close to the scalp to prevent lice, and the draught chilled his neck. He lifted the collar of his heavy grey coat and, drawing one of his short swords, he laid it close to hand. Outside the rain was heavy, and he could hear water cascading down the cliff walls. The pursuers would surely have taken shelter somewhere. "They may be just outside," whispered the voice of Dace in his mind. "Creeping up on us. Ready to cut our throats." "You'd like that, Dace. More men to kill." "Each to his own," said Dace amiably. Tarantio was too tired to argue further, but Dace's intrusion made him sombre. Seven years ago war had descended upon the Duchies like a sentient hurricane, sucking men into his angry heart. And in the whirling maelstrom of his fury he fed them hatred and filled them with a love of destruction. The War Demon had many faces, none of them kind. Eyes of death, cloak of plague, mouth of famine and hands of dark despair. War and Dace were made for each other. Within the beast's hungry heart Dace was in ecstasy. Men admired him for his lethal skills, for his deadly talents. They sought him out as if he were a talisman. Dace was a killer of men. There was a time when Tarantio had known how many had died under his blades. Before that, there was a time when he had remembered every face. Now only two remained firmly in his mind: the first, his eyes bulging, his jaw hanging slack, blood seeping over the satin sheets. And the second, a slim bearded thief and killer whose swords Tarantio now wore. Tarantio added two logs to the fire, watching the flame shadows dancing on the walls of the cave. His two companions were stretched out on the floor, one sleeping, the other dying.

"Why do you still think of the slaughter on the beach?" asked Dace. Tarantio shivered as the memories flared again. Seven years ago the old ship had been beached against a storm, the mast dismantled, the sail wrapped and laid against the cliff wall. The crew were sitting around fires talking and laughing, playing dice. Against all odds they had survived the storm. They were alive, and their relieved laughter echoed around the cliffs, the sound drifting into the shadow-haunted woods beyond. The killers had attacked silently from those woods--appearing like demons, the firelight gleaming from raised swords and axes. The unarmed sailors had no chance and were hacked down without mercy, their blood staining the sand. Tarantio, as always, had been sitting away from the others, lying on his back in the rocks, staring up at the distant stars. At the first screams he had rolled to his knees, and watched the slaughter in the moonlight. Unarmed and unskilled, the young sailor had been powerless to help his comrades. Crouching down he hid, trembling, on the cold stones, the incoming tide lapping at his legs. He could hear the thieves plundering the ship, tearing open the hatches and unloading the booty. Spices and liquor from the islands, silks from the southern continent, and a shipment of silver ingots bound for the mint at Loretheli. Towards dawn one of the attackers had walked into the rocks to relieve himself. Terror filled Tarantio with panic and Dace rose within him, flaring like a light within the skull. Dace reared up before the astonished reaver, crashing a fist-size rock against the man's head. The thief pitched forward without a sound. Dragging him out of sight of his comrades, Dace drew a knife from the man's belt and stabbed him to death. The dead man wore two short swords, their black hilts tightly bound with leather. Dace had unbuckled the sword-belt and swung it around his own waist. Relieving the man of his bulging purse, Dace had stolen away through the rocks, leaving the scene of the massacre far behind. Once clear, the panic gone, Tarantio dragged Dace back and resumed control. Dace had not objected; without the prospect of violence, and the need to kill, he was easily bored. Alone and friendless, Tarantio had walked the thirty miles west to the Corsair city of Loretheli,

looking for a berth on a new ship. Instead he had met Sigellus the Swordsman. Tarantio thought of him often, and of the perils they had faced together. But the thoughts were always tinged with sadness and the velvet claw of regret at his death. Sigellus had understood about Dace. During one of their training sessions Dace had broken loose, and had tried to kill Sigellus. The swordsman had been too skilled for him then, but Dace managed to cut him before Sigellus blocked a thrust and hammered his iron fist into Dace's chin, spinning him from his feet. "What the Hell is wrong with you, boy?" he had asked, when Tarantio regained consciousness. For the second time in his young life, he talked about Dace. Sigellus had listened, his grey eyes expressionless, blood dripping from a shallow cut to his right cheek just below the eye. When at last he had told it all, including the murders, Sigellus sat back and let out a deep sigh. "All men carry demons, Chio," he said. "At least you have made an effort to control yours. May I speak with Dace?" "You don't think I am insane?" "I do not know what you are, my boy. But let me speak with Dace." "He can hear you, sir," said Tarantio. "I do not wish to let him free." "Very well. Hear me, Dace, you fight with great passion, and you are uncannily fast. But it will take you time to learn to be half as good as I am. So understand this. If you try to kill me again, I will spear your belly and gut you like a fish." He looked into Chio's dark blue eyes. "Did he understand that?" "Yes, sir. He understood." "That is good." Sigellus had smiled then, and, with a silk handkerchief he had mopped the trickle of blood from his face. "Now I think that is enough practice for today. I can hear a jug of wine calling my name." "I hate him," said Dace. "One day I will kill him." "That is a lie," Tarantio told him. "You don't hate him at all." For a time Dace was silent. When at last his voice whispered into Tarantio's mind it was softer than at any time before. "He is the first person, apart from you, to ever speak to me. To speak to Dace." In that instant Tarantio felt a surge of jealousy. "He threatened to kill you," he pointed out. "He said I was good. Uncannily fast." "He is my friend." "You want me to kill him?" "No!" "Then you must let him be my friend too." Tarantio shivered and pushed the painful memories from his mind. The War of the Pearl had begun, and the Four Duchies were recruiting fighting men. Few had even seen the artefact they were willing to kill--or die--for. Fewer still understood the importance of the Pearl. Rumours were rife: it was a weapon of enormous power; it was a healing stone which could grant immortality; it was a prophetic jewel which could read the future. No-one really knew. After his time with Sigellus, he and Dace had wandered through the warring Duchies, taking employment with various mercenary units and twice holding commissions in regular forces, taking part in sieges, cavalry attacks, minor skirmishes and several pitched battles. Mostly they had the good fortune to be with the victorious side, but four times they had--as now--been among the refugees of a ruined army. The camp-fire burned low in the shallow cave and Tarantio sat before it, the heat barely reaching his cold hands. By the far wall lay Kiriell, his life fading. Belly wounds were always the worst, and this one was particularly bad, having severed the intestines. The boy moaned and cried out. Tarantio moved to him, laying his fingers over the boy's mouth. "Be strong, Kiriell. Be silent. The enemy are close." Kiriell's fever-bright eyes opened. They were cornflower blue, the eyes of a child, frightened and longing for reassurance. "I am hurting, Tarantio," he whispered. "Am I dying?" "Dying? From a little scratch like that? You just rest. By dawn you'll feel like wrestling a bear." "Truly?" "Truly," lied Tarantio, knowing that by dawn the boy would be dead. Kiriell closed his eyes. Tarantio stroked his blond hair until he slept, then returned to the fire. A huge figure stirred by the far wall, then rose and sat opposite the warrior. "To lie is a kindness sometimes," said the big man softly, firelight reflecting in his twin-forked red beard, his green eyes shining like cold jewels. "I think the thrust must have burst his spleen. The wound stinks." Tarantio nodded, then added the last of the fuel to the fire as the other man chuckled. "Thought we were finished back there--until you attacked them. I have to be honest, Tarantio, I had heard of your skills but never believed the stories. Shem's tits, but I do now! Never seen the like. I'm just glad I was close enough to make the break with you. You think any of the others survived?" Tarantio considered the question. "Maybe one or two. Like us. But it is unlikely. That was a killing party; they weren't seeking prisoners." "You think they're still following us?" Tarantio shrugged. "They are or they aren't. We'll know tomorrow." "Which way should we head?" "Any way you choose, Forin. But we'll not be travelling together. I'm heading over the mountains. Alone." "Something about my company you don't like?" asked the big man, anger flaring. Tarantio looked up into the man's glittering eyes. Forin was a killer--a man on the edge. During the summer he had killed two mercenaries with his bare hands after a fight over an unpaid wager. To anger him would not be wise. Tarantio was seeking some conciliatory comment when he felt Dace flare up inside him. Normally he would have fought back, held the demon in check by force of will. But he was bone-weary, and Dace flashed through his defences. Dace grinned at Forin. "What is there to like? You're a brute. You have no conscience. You'd cut your mother's throat for a

silver penny."Forin tensed, his hand closing around his sword-hilt. Dace laughed at him. "But bear in mind, you ugly son of a bitch, that I could cut you in half without breaking sweat. I could swallow you whole if someone buttered your head and pinned your ears back."For a heartbeat the giant sat stock-still, then his laughter boomed out. "By Heaven, you think a lot of yourself, little man! I think I would prove a mouthful even for the legendary Tarantio. However, such talk is foolishness. We are being hunted and it makes no sense to fight amongst ourselves. Now tell me why we should not move on together."Within the halls of his own subconscious, Tarantio felt Dace's disappointment. In that moment Tarantio surged back into control; he blinked, and took a deep breath. "They will have seen our tracks," he told Forin, "and know that one of us is wounded. They are unlikely therefore to follow us in strength. I would think eight to ten men may be on our trail. When we part company, and they find the tracks, they will be forced to either split their numbers or choose just one of us to follow. Either way the odds will be better for all of us."All of us? The boy will be dead by morning."I meant both you and I," said Tarantio swiftly.Forin nodded. "Why did you not give that reason in the first place? Why the insults?"Tarantio shrugged. "Gypsy blood. Don't be too offended, Forin. I don't like anybody much."Forin relaxed. "I'm not offended. There was a time when I would have paid considerably more than a silver penny for the privilege of cutting my mother's throat. I was a child then. All I knew was that she had broken my father's heart. And she'd abandoned me. So you were not too far wrong." He gave an embarrassed grin, and idly tugged at the braids of his beard. "He was a good man, my father. A great storyteller. All the village children would gather at our home to listen to him. He knew history too. All the stories of the ancient kingdoms, the Eldarin, the Daroth and the old Empire. He used to mix them with myth. Wonderful nights! We would sit with our eyes wide open in terror, our jaws hanging. He had a great voice, deep and sepulchral."I frightened him," said Dace. "Now he wants to be our friend."Perhaps," agreed Tarantio. "But then you frighten everyone--including me."What happened to your father?" asked Tarantio aloud."He caught the lung sickness and faded away." Forin lapsed into silence and began to brush the mud from his brown leather leggings. Tarantio saw that the big man was struggling with his emotions. Forin cleared his throat, then drew his hunting-knife. From a deep pocket he produced a whetstone and began to sharpen the blade with long, smooth strokes. At last satisfied with the edge, he took a small, oval, silver-edged mirror from the same pocket and began to shave the stubble above the line of his red beard. When he had finished he sheathed the blade and returned the mirror to his pocket. He glanced at the silent Tarantio. "My father was a good man. He deserved better. He weighed no more than a child when he died."A bad way to go," agreed Tarantio."No-one's yet told me of a good way," Forin pointed out. "You know, I saw an Eldarin once. He came to see my father. I was about seven years old then. Frightened the life out of me. But he sat quietly by the hearth and I peeked at him from behind my father's chair. It wasn't the fur on his face and arms that was so disturbing; it was the eyes. They were so large. But he spoke softly and my father insisted I step forward and shake hands. He was right. Once I was close, I lost my fear."Revue de presse"As a weaver of genuinely stirring heroic tales, it's hard to see anyone in the field to touch him"