

## **The Price of Salt**

**By Adrian Tchaikovsky**

Trailing little dust, four riders were making the best time they could over the scrubby ground, alternating between pushing their mounts to greater speed and reining them in when the terrain broke up. Here in the northern Commonweal the rolling hills of the wealthier principalities gave ground to the southernmost extremities of the great steppes, which ever granted the Commonweal a northern border defined not by barriers but by sheer atrophying distance. The Monarch's claim to the land grew less and less relevant as the traveller progressed, until not a soul would profess to know of the Commonweal's master, or even the Commonweal itself.

The riders had, until relatively recently, gone as far north as they cared to in the business of tracking down a fugitive, which hunt had ended successfully for all but their target. The seedy trading town in which they had cornered their quarry was still comfortably within the Monarch's domain, contained within the concentric circles of province and principality. Whilst the riders themselves were not exactly handfast friends with the Commonweal's laws, still they preferred to stay where they knew which rules they were breaking.

Fiol had been the town's name, and Fiol's headman was a man of flexible attitudes. All were welcome in the caravanserai that dominated the town, and that the Headman's family had owned since before time, and there the emissaries of princes rubbed shoulders with bandits and fugitives and tribesmen from the steppe. The native Dragonfly-kinde of Fiol were at times outnumbered by the surly, belligerent, rowdy or secretive who came there to barter.

The Headman had a similarly enlightened attitude to justice and law. He himself maintained in some style a small clan of Mantis-kinde who served as his sharp right arm when heads needed to be broken, and he frowned on large-scale conflict within his town. Personal vengeance, trackers chasing a bounty or the incursions of the Monarch's Mercers went unopposed, however. Hence the four hunters had located their target in the caravanserei and confronted him at his supper, leading to a swift and fatal case of arrow poisoning.

The quarry had in life been Corde Liantes, who had capped a long career as a robber by murdering a farmhand who challenged him. The farmhand, as Liantes had subsequently discovered, had been the nephew of a prince-minor sent to live with the farmer's family under the bonds of kin-obligation. Corde had fled, and the prince had promised a fine reward for proof of his demise.

Looking at Corde's body, lying amongst the detritus of his supper, his sword half clear of its sheath and a long-shafted arrow through his chest, the hunters had been faced with a problem. Corde Liantes had been a good runner. The hunt had been on for over three tendays, the distance back to the promised reward was long, and the only proof they had of their deed rested in the fixedly-startled face attached to the front of Corde's head.

If any enterprising Fly-kinde had flitted low over the riders, as they rushed north of Fiol now, they would have caught the tail-ends of a bitter conversation amongst the riders.

"It's not Corde I mind, it's the salt," The voice of the hindmost was a cultured drawl utterly belied by the man's squat, muscled frame and jutting lower jaw. A Scorpion-kinde, he was the worst rider of all of them and seemed hunchbacked at first, until closer inspection revealed the powerful segmented shape that clung to his back, sting-tipped tail coiled tenderly about his waist. "That's just unnecessary expense, and no wonder. We must be five hundred

miles from the sea, out here." This was Barad Ygor, who hailed from very distant points south indeed. His clinging companion went by the name of Scutts.

"What's the sea got to do with it?" This from a solidly-built Wasp-kind, name of Mordrec. His presence here, in that part of the Commonweal that the imperial invasion had not reached, showed him as a renegade.

"Salt comes from the sea," Barad Ygor maintained.

"It does not."

"I assure you it does," the Scorpion shouted over to Mordrec.

"I know thousands of slaves in imperial salt mines who'd disagree," the Wasp shot back.

"Will you two give it a rest?" a third man spoke up, his voice suggesting that he was the sort of leader whose granted authority came and went like the weather. He, at least, was a Dragonfly-kind, whose hard face spoke of hardships and desperate deeds. He was Dal Arche: veteran, occasional tracker of fugitives and, more and more these days, outright brigand. His authority over his fellows had kept the four of them together for many months now, and common interest and a lack of options were slowly being reinforced by the first shackles of mutual loyalty. However, this was not his finest hour, and his captaincy over the others was at something of a low ebb.

"Speaks the man who got us into this," Mordrec accused him.

"Quite," Ygor agreed. "Who was it that was supposed to be looking after all that salt, eh?"

"And Corde's cursed *head*," the Wasp added heatedly.

"Forget the head. The salt was worth more." Ygor had paid for the salt out of his own pocket and was feeling particularly stung.

It was a poor business, Dal Arche had to admit, albeit only to himself. The four of them had killed Corde. They had decapitated the body to secure a more portable proof of the act. Ygor had, it was to be admitted, laid out a fair amount in barter and imperial coin to secure sufficient salt to preserve the grisly thing, which he had then attended to, claiming that only the Scorpion-kind ever understood how to preserve dead flesh properly. As their nominal leader, Dal Arche had taken custody of the head, now safely within a waxed oilcloth bag.

And he had lost it. Or rather, it had been taken from him. The full details of that were not something he had shared with his fellows. All they needed to know was that a Dragonfly-kind thief, a girl of barely twenty years, had wormed her way into their room at the caravansera, taken the head and ridden off north with it, thus making herself the latest target of the hunting party.

Why the girl had wanted a salted head in a bag had Dal Arche baffled. There had been a smaller pouch beside it which had contained a handful of imperial silver and a single lozenge of ancient Commonweal gold, but that she had left. Only Corde's head had been worth the theft. The only possible explanation he could think of was that she was some relative of Corde, and that she was aiming to repatriate the man's head with the rest of his clan, but Corde had run a long way from his usual haunts to get to Fiol. Nothing that Dal had heard along the way suggested the man was running *to* anything, as opposed to just *from*.

"Enough," he snapped at his comrades. "We're gaining on the bitch. Let that be enough. After all, you used enough damn salt. Corde will keep."

The fourth member of their party was a lean, careful Grasshopper-kind man, another Commonwealer by birth like Dal, another imperial deserter like Mordrec. His name was Soul Je and he said nothing, but his watchful eyes were always at the horizon.

At the back of each of their minds was the uneasy thought that, in going north from Fiol, they were falling down that gradient of uncertainty, from clear Commonweal territory into the vast wild unknown of the steppe.

They had already left all the decent farming land behind, but they passed herders' huts, and saw flocks of goats dotting the dun of the higher ground like grey clouds, and the shiny brown backs of oil-beetles herding at their erratic stop-start pace across the lower. When they found a local who was willing to stand by while four armed men rode up, Dal Arche asked about their quarry. The people who made that place their home were Grasshopper-kindens mostly, gaunt, brown specimens of the breed, leathered by sun and wind and weather. Their manner was strange and unsettling. It was clear they had seen the woman pass, but they would barely admit to it. They obviously did not want to talk to four such dangerous rogues, and yet something compelled them.

"You should turn back," one said, "the hunt is not worth it." There was a shifty, guilty look to him. He would say little more, and he did not even seem to recognise the silver coin that Dal offered. Only when Ygor cocked his crossbow and threatened to put a bolt through the carapace of one of the man's beasts did the local admit that yes, yes a young Dragonfly maid had ridden that way. Yes, there was a Dragonfly village (he had heard) north of here, after Stae and then De Estre. But no. No and no again: they should not follow. Nothing good would come of it.

Dal glanced at his fellows, seeing disdain for the superstitious on Mordrec's face and disdain for the rustic on Ygor's. Only Soul Je looked thoughtful. He was a close-mouthed man, Soul Je, a consummate master of the longbow beyond even Dal's own exacting standards, whose conversation was only for the hunter's or the archer's art, but now he looked unhappy.

"There is something..." he murmured, so quiet that only Dal caught it, and Soul would neither repeat the words nor elaborate on them.

The hard, cold earth of the nascent steppe was not a tracker's friend, but their quarry was pressing her mount hard and making no attempt to hide her trail. When they were sure of their road they pushed their horses hoping to make up time. When the ground was rockier and their path uncertain they would slow again, losing what they had fought for. Then, on the second day, the uneven ground gave up a village that was set into a deep cut dug into the side of a hill. There was a pallisade and pens for livestock, and Dal estimated that there might be as many as seventy living there, adults and children. More Grasshopper-kindens, the hunters saw as they approached.

"Feed for the horses if they have any," Mordrec suggested. "Provisions for us."

A dozen of the villagers, men and women, had come to the broad gap in the pallisade that served as a gate. Some held spears, others cudgels, but the general sense of them was frightened more than hostile.

Soul dismounted first, his strung longbow dangling in one body hand. He had the other hand held up, open and empty, a gesture of peace recognised everywhere except the Empire. Still, Dal knew he could get an arrow moving from that bow with unearthly speed if necessary. The other two stayed mounted, Ygor with a bolt at the ready, and Mordrec with the blocky weight of his nailbow resting on his shoulder, although it was likely the locals would not even recognise the weapon for what it was. Dal took a deep breath and slung himself off the saddle, approaching the welcoming party. *Definitely scared*, he saw. He felt as though a harsh word would spook and scatter them. *And yet not scared of me*. He wondered if there was some greater brigand stalking these barren lands.

"We wish to trade for food, for ourselves and the horses," he announced.

"We have nothing," one of the Grasshopper-kindeen stated flatly. Dal frowned. There was a bustle of activity in the village's enclosure behind the welcoming party. He had a glimpse of children being hurried away, some of them crying out. Some of the huts were secured, as though to keep something dangerous in, or out. Fully half the villagers seemed to be lost in a frenzy of preparation for the worst of worsts, and yet the rest were just standing about, their faces slack as though they were simple-minded.

*Is it a plague of some kind?* he wondered, but what he was seeing did match any preparations for pestilence that he had ever seen.

The pens were empty, he saw. Had their animals died of plague? They none of them seemed as starved as that would suggest, nor so well fed that they had slaughtered them. He tried to remember if he and his fellows had passed a lot of unattended animals, and guessed that perhaps they had. *Let them go? Why would they just let them go?*

"We're looking for a Dragonfly-kindeen woman," he announced to them. "She would have ridden through here perhaps a day ahead of us, perhaps less."

"Go back," said the village's spokesman, as though he had not heard. "Please, leave here. This place is not for you."

"They're protecting her," Mordrec accused and, although it was not what Dal himself believed, it seemed a useful line to take.

"My friends are angry men, tell us or I'll not be answerable for them," he barked out. Soul had an arrow to the string now, waiting for the word.

There was a strange, bright look in the spokesman's eye that put Dal Arche in mind of a fever victim. Some of the men and women with him were shaking every so slightly.

"Take what you wish, if you are desperate men," the spokesman told him bleakly. "We have little: we have only our thought and our peace. Take, and we shall not stop you."

Something was going on here that Dal decided he wanted nothing to do with. He was just on the point of letting his wings flick him up to the saddle when one of the other villagers pointed: north.

"A Dragonfly woman passed. She is not far ahead of you," the woman intoned. "She goes to her doom. You also, if you follow her."

"Thank you," said Dal without much courtesy, and the four of them set off without delay.

"Folks around here are mad," was Ygor's pragmatic assessment.

"We should turn back."

They reined their mounts in: the words were Soul Je's.

"Don't tell me all that mumbo-jumbo got to you," Mordrec demanded.

Dal Arche wisely remained silent. It had got to *him*, certainly, but he was their leader and to turn back would be to shake their faith in him. Still, he found himself hoping that Soul would make a good case.

"You don't feel it," Soul stated. "I feel it. This is a bad time to be out on the Steppe. Madness..."

They stared at him.

"Soul," said Ygor at last. "You're not Steppe Grasshopper. You're from Sa, which is miles away from here and under the black and gold. What do you know about it? The amount I spent on that salt, we're catching the little bitch and stringing her up by her toes, right?"

Soul said nothing, pointedly.

"If you want to turn back, turn back," Dal told him, seeing that Mordrec and the Scorpion were both for pressing on. The lean Grasshopper-kinde just shook his head and kicked his horse onwards.

Dal pulled away from the other two until he was riding close by. "What 'madness'?" he demanded.

"There will be a grand moon soon," Soul Je stated flatly.

"What...? So there's a full moon, so what?"

"Not full, *grand*," the Grasshopper corrected him. "A once-in-a-century moon. A lunatic moon."

"So, what? You were here a hundred years ago, were you? You're looking well for it."

"I've never been to the steppes before, Dala," Soul said quietly, sounding as though all this unaccustomed talking was wearing him out. "There are stories, though. You know my kinde. We're a peaceful people, left to our own devices."

"You're the most bloody-minded Grasshopper I knew," Dal confirmed.

Soul winced. "I can feel it, Dal. There's something in the air, in the earth. The mystics amongst my people have always held that the moon is the enemy of peace of mind. When there is a grand moon then perhaps one or two of a town may go mad with it, and have to be held for their own good, but it is easy to escape the moon in a town, in a city. Out here... they live in tents here, under the sky... the tribes of my kinde - but they're not my kinde, no, though you'd not tell us apart by looking. Only when the grand moon is above us would you know, and then it's too late. We must be swift, Dal, double our pace and hope the horses can take it. Before the grand moon comes we must be heading back south."

Dal glanced back at their companions, knowing that they both hailed from homes where this kind of talk would be laughed out of doors.

They passed an old man next, digging a hole with remarkable energy, long Grasshopper limbs plying his spade to lever the earth aside. He had a satchel on the ground beside him that looked crammed with books and scrolls.

"Why bury your learning, old father?" Dal asked him.

"What good will it do me now?" the ancient replied wearily. His hands trembled as they rested on his spade, but not with his years. Dal guided his horse away a little, possessed by the strangest idea that the aged scholar was suppressing the urge to attack him.

Before dusk there was another village, and this clearly built for defence. The outer walls were sloped inwards, with slits cut in them for the defenders to shoot out and up at attackers. At the top the wall-builders, in a sudden change of heart, had thrown out a jagged profusion of spikes and sharpened canes so that anyone scaling the steep incline of the wall would find themselves facing a bristling fence of spines. Individual huts would be tucked under the slanted walls, and in the centre of the compound stood a squat tower, broad-based and rising to a narrow crown that was likewise ringed with wooden teeth. Dal had heard that the steppe was dotted with little fortified communities like this, but that the great majority of the steppelander were nomads, moving with their herds, meeting, warring, raiding, but mostly simply following patterns as ancient as memory about the appallingly unbounded expanse of the steppe itself.

"Maybe she's gone to ground there," Mordrec suggested.

"Let's get closer and see if they shoot arrows at us," was Ygor's plan. However they did not need to approach far before they saw the place was abandoned. The gates were thrown open, the solid metal-shod bar lying in the dust between them. The four riders rode in cautiously, awaiting an ambush, but there was no sign of a single living soul.

"She's hiding here," Ygor decided, slouching off his mount. Scutts uncoiled from about him, dropping to the ground and flexing her claws and sting, stretching just as a human might after a long and uncomfortable journey. Then the great bronze-hued scorpion was rattling off, scenting for any trace of the living.

Dal glanced about him, looking for damage, signs of violence. The individual huts were just goathide over cane frames backed onto the shadowing wall, and he kicked off from his saddle to touch down before one. With a dagger drawn, he pulled aside the flap. Inside there was a rug laid out, and on the rug a few bowls. One was still half-full of some kind of mash, which enterprising weevils had discovered and were working their way through. There had been a rack hanging from the sloping back wall, but the clay pots that had been kept there were all smashed on the ground, their burdens of herbs and dried plants ground underfoot.

In another hut he found the ashes of a fire still warm, and shreds of what had been a Dragonfly-made silk robe that someone had razored into ribbons.

Outside, Ygor had found some bodies.

There were probably five of them but it was hard to tell, both because they had been hacked into scattered pieces, and because every one of the victims had been no more than a babe in arms. There was no sign of any mother or father who had fallen defending them, only the meagre scraps of former humanity that scavenging ants were already attending to. The savagery of the act was such that the four hunters, none of them with a clean conscience, were silenced for quite some time.

They left the village. Nobody there would be answering any questions. They headed north, though, and soon they were certain of the trail again, though profoundly less certain of the land around them. That they were beyond the Monarch's civilising influence seemed undeniable.

It was cold out on the steppe, and the wind had picked up, forcing them to raise hoods and scarves against dust that cut like ice. Still, Soul Je was shivering more than the chill could account for.

The wretched girl's trail led on, and now there was a third village ahead, to the same defensible plan as the last.

"Ride!" shouted Mordrec suddenly, spurring his mount on. Dal tugged his hood aside to look about, and saw that the pale ground half a mile east was darkened with a host of people: an army, for sure. He saw no formations, no engines of war or clumsy flying machines, but his mind was briefly thrown back through the years, to when he stood within a mob of unhappy, hungry and frightened Commonwealer spearmen watching the imperial lines break into a thunderous and unstoppable advance. He knew well just how quickly a body of men like that could cover ground, if they were trained and ready for it, and soon he was outpacing Mordrec, praying that all four of them would make the walls, and that the village was as abandoned as the last.

The gate was shut, he saw. He was about to wheel his horse and try for a straight run west when, to his surprise, the gate opened smoothly as though there were allies within who had been waiting all this time for him.

He had a moment to think, then, knowing that the others would follow his lead. It could be a trap, but he had his shortbow strung and to hand, and he could loose from horseback or from the air without difficulty. The others would all be ready for a fight, and he had no idea whether the force out on the plains had cavalry or airborne forces.

Putting an arrow to the string he rode straight through the gates, standing in the saddle ready to fly or shoot. Mordrec followed with his nailbow over his shoulder, and Ygor had

eschewed his crossbow for a short-hafted lance yanked from its saddle-holster. At the rear Soul Je simply rode, and did not look back.

An expectant ring of villagers met them, Dragonfly-kinde all. Most were armed: slings, shortbows and spears were all in evidence. There was no threat, though. Instead the actually seemed *pleased* to see the hunting party, which was a novel experience indeed.

They were a determined looking lot: herders and farmers, with their beasts penned up between their huts and vocal in their complaints about it. The villagers wore clothes of a steppe cut: heavy cloaks lined with felt, moth-fur and trimmings to their clothes, broad-brimmed hats secured at the chin and tall boots of goatskin reinforced by plates of beetle-shell. Still, Dal knew them. He had stood with people like these in the war: he had seen them ordered from their land by headmen and princes, given spears and slung together and stood in the way of the Empire, while the nobles and their retainers stood behind them, with bows and swords and armour. Not that he could fault the nobles' courage, in the end, but if they had been so driven to get themselves killed it seemed poor grace to drag so many poor frightened farmers and herders and artisans with them into the bloodshed.

The gate was closed behind them, but still there was no sense of a trap, or at least not a simple trap.

"We're looking for a..." Mordrec's voice died out. "Just what is going on?"

The villagers had been staring mostly at Dal, clearly the leader, and at Ygor, patently the ugliest. Now they marked the other two newcomers. Soul they regarded with wide eyes, edging away from him, though never giving him the excuse of directing a spear his way. Mordrec, though... Mordrec they seemed to view with awe, whispering and staring, pointing him out to their children.

And at last Dal saw her, standing in the second rank with a shortbow slung over one shoulder: the headhunter girl who had robbed them in Fiol. She was a slender thing, hair cut short, wearing a banded chitin and leather cuirass beneath her long coat. Her gaze was clear and challenging, just as it had been in Fiol, which was, indirectly, what had led to all of this mess.

"Right," said Dal Arche, and swung off his mount. "You, give back what you've taken, and we'll be on our way."

The bulk of the villagers were uncertain about this and it was clear that, while the thief had apparently told them to expect visitors, she had not told them exactly why.

"You'll never find it," the girl declared. "In three days you can have it."

"Now, if you please," Dal pressed. This was going to get awkward, he knew, mostly because he hadn't exactly been wholly honest with his fellows either.

"It's buried. Only I know where," she stated. "Three days."

"Oh, what is going on?" Ygor demanded.

Dal looked from the wildly hopeful stares of the villagers to the increasingly suspicious ones of his friends. "You, into one of these huts," he told the girl. "We talk."

"Now wait-" Mordrec started.

"Give me two minutes," Dal asked.

The Wasp scowled, an expression that softened slightly when one of the locals came forth with a goatskin of something to wash the dust from his throat.

Dal pushed into the nearest slant-walled dwelling, and the girl followed him. He glared murder at her. "All right you, Alle or Elle or whatever your damned name is-"

"Lirien Aell," she said sweetly.

"What's going on?"

"I brought you here to help my people, Dal Arche. I've never been a thief, but it was the only way I knew you'd come with me."

"I have no interest in helping your poxy people," he growled. "You'll hand over the cursed head and we're off."

"I won't." She folded her arms again. She was filled to the top of her head with righteous defiance, like a child wearing her mother's overlarge clothes. "It's well hidden. You'll never find it unless I lead you to it."

"You're assuming that we won't just get that information from you one finger at a time," Dal told her darkly.

"I know you're not the torturing type. You talked a lot about yourself in Fiol, before you bedded me."

It was not that she was beautiful, certainly. At best, properly cleaned up, she might qualify as pleasing. It had been that impudent, insolent look, though, that had caught his eye and led inexorably to the two of them finding his bunk at the Caravanserai. He had never quite been able to resist a woman like that. And it was true, perhaps he did talk too much. A part of him that still suffered some dregs of guilt over the life he had taken up still wanted to give her the chance to turn him down. Which she had not done. He had guessed that she might ask for money. That she would abscond with a severed and salted head had not occurred to him.

"Maybe not," he allowed. "I wouldn't go so far for any of my companions, though, and I wouldn't bet that I could stop them, even if I chose to."

She went pale at that. "It's too late for them now. They'll have to protect the village. I never heard of a Scorpion-kindén that could fly, and probably your Grasshopper can't either."

"Protect the village from who?"

"Dala!" It was Mordrec's voice. "Get out here now!"

He swore and bundled out of the hut. Mordrec was up atop the inward-leaning wall, scanning the horizon, and now he dropped down. "That mob's on the move," he reported. "Hundreds of them, looks like. They were fighting each other a moment ago. Now they look like they're forming up."

"Who's out there?" Dal demanded, of the village in general.

"My people are out there." The voice was cracked with age. The crowd parted for a rake-thin Grasshopper-kindén woman to totter forwards. She had most of her weight on a cane, which barely bent beneath it, and her long face was a nest of wrinkles. She was perhaps the oldest living human being Dal Arche had ever seen.

"And they're after you?" Ygor pressed, trying to wrestle the situation into something they could all understand.

"He knows." The ancient jabbed a finger at Soul Je. "The grand moon is upon us. The time of the Locust is here."

"What's she talking about, Soul?" Dal prompted, but Soul Je said nothing. He had his long arms wrapped about himself, his head bowed.

"*Someone* tell me what's going on," Mordrec asked almost plaintively.

"You have come to save us," Lirien Aell told him, putting a hand on his chest.

"I've bloody not."

"Our seers knew the Time of the Locust was near, and they divined that, if I rode to Fiol, I would find the help we needed. You are that help. You, especially."

Mordrec was actually backing away from the girl, as though she was infected with a contagious disease. "What, now?"



"Why, you are a Wasp-kinden, and though your Empire never came this far, everyone here has heard of the Wasp-kinden. Everyone knows the Wasps *never* lose a battle."

Mordrec's expression was a mix of incredulity, despair and pride perhaps never before seen by mortal man.

"They're coming!" someone shouted, and one of the villagers pointed at Soul Je and demanded "What about him? Take his bow from him!"

"You can try," drawled Ygor, hefting his crossbow.

"He'll be fine," Dal snapped. "You're fine, right, Soul?"

The Grasshopper nodded. His gaunt face looked strained.

Then the enemy was upon them. The first Dal heard of it was a weird ululating howl that seemed to spring up all around them, a maniac shrieking and hollering that made his skin crawl. The villagers were instantly taking to the air, flitting to the walls. On the inside edge of the canted palisades there were ledges joined into place, ready for spearmen or archers to crouch in partial concealment. There were arrowslits cut into the wood as well, and Ygor was already at one, peering through with his crossbow at the ready. Dal kicked off from the ground and took wing to the crenulations, drawing back his bowstring.

They were not soldiers or warriors of any kind. He stared at the onrushing enemy, his arrow forgotten. The majority of the host beyond the walls had not even moved, in fact, but a few dozen of them had broken away to storm the walls. They were Grasshopper-kinden, all of them: men and women, some only children, others well past middle years. About one in four had a real weapon: a spear, a Dragonfly-made sword or a whipping chain of linked-together wooden sections that the Grasshoppers called a 'broken rod'. The rest had clubs, staves, animal goads. Some were unarmed, although their Art had given them vicious spurs on their heels that Dal knew to be wary of. There were almost no bows, he noted, but a small number of slings. They were not soldiers. They were not even a levy such as he had known in the war. They were a rabble.

But they were mad, virtually frothing at the mouth. There were perhaps twenty-five in that initial rush, far too few to take the village, but they cared nothing for the odds. A few fell to sporadic arrow-shot from those villagers who owned bows, but the hunters themselves just stared, waiting for the charge to lose momentum, waiting for the attackers to realise that they must turn back or die.

The front-runners leapt, their Art taking them in great arcing bounds to crash against the walls, clinging and scrabbling upwards. One, jumping later, landed right before Dal Arche, raising aloft a stick set with jagged flints. She was a grey-haired woman, someone's mother, someone's grandmother, but her face was twisted into something other than human, teeth bared and eyes great circles of white about tiny pupils. Dal shot her through the chest, releasing the string by sheer instinct, and she fell howling away. All around him the attacking maniacs were throwing themselves onto spears, hurtling in impossible dives through the air, snarling and smashing at anything within reach. One of the defenders had his arm broken, the stave coming down so hard that it splintered in two. Another attacker cleared the wall entire and landed within the compound. At Ygor's unspoken prompting, Scutts rushed forwards and lanced the intruder's leg with her sting, retreating hastily from the Grasshopper's thrashing stick. The attacker ran on, though, charging the nearest Dragonfly defenders, shrieking like no living thing Dal had ever heard. After a few wild blows the poison had begun to work and the wretched creature fell to its knees, but even then its screaming continued until someone put a spear through it.

*It*, thought Dal numbly. *It* had been a man, but after that display of insanity he found *it* easier to work with.

He sent a shaft into the ribs of another man as the starved-looking creature slammed into the palisade. Even as he did so the attack was over. Some wounded were still keening and kicking at the wall's base, the rest were dead. There were no runners, none whose nerve had at last broken.

Dal looked out at the greater host. To his surprise they were eddying away, beginning to swirl and flow across the plains, perhaps in search of easier game.

"Well that's that," he announced with false bravado.

"Can we have our head back please?" Ygor added hopefully.

"Look again, southerners," came Lirien Aell's implacable reply. "Look to the west."

With a sinking heart, Dal skipped over to the narrow top of the central tower. There was a second host, at least as large as the first. It darkened the land, hundreds of running bodies, surely the same breed of gibbering lunatics in the guise of Grasshopper-kind. If they kept their pace they would strike the village before nightfall, whilst the existing madmen were not going far. Feeling disproportionately tired, Dal slid down to the ground.

"You." He singled out the ancient Grasshopper woman. "Who are they? What is this?"

"They will stop at nothing," the old woman replied in a sing-song voice. "They will consume everything in their path and destroy what they cannot consume. They will eat raw flesh. Now they are weak and divided, but tonight and for some nights to come there will be the grand moon. They will find new Art within themselves. They will become strong. They will become swift. Their skin will be tough like armour. Worst of all, their minds will grow together, each sharing the thoughts of all the others, but as each one has the Locust Madness, then madness is all that they can share. They will know only the need to destroy all who are not like them, everything of beauty, every living thing save those who can run with the Madness."

"Even their own infants," Dal Arche finished for her sickly.

"Yes," she said simply, and in that one word there was a shadow casting back many years.

They could hear the weird howling and jabbering now, as the fresh horde neared them. There were plenty of the locals aloft and keeping watch, and none had warned of an attack yet. Dal glanced at the sky, seeing that they had perhaps a few hours before dusk.

"What are our options?" he asked of his fellows in a low voice.

"Run for it and risk it?" Mordrec suggested, not sounding overly convinced.

"Fight," put forth Ygor. The old woman's words had him rattled.

"Soul?" Dal prompted.

Their Grasshopper-kind was crouched on his haunches, one hand tracing symbols in the dust. "I can feel it, Dala," he said softly.

His friends regarded him doubtfully.

"Just whispers, like dead leaves, brushing against the inside of my head," Soul Je continued shakily. "The Locust mind is forming."

"Are you... going to be all right?" asked Dal gently, because he did not have it in him to ask, *'Are you going to turn into a madman and force us to kill you?'*

"Well I suppose I'll have to be," the Grasshopper replied, with an empty and despairing smile.

Dal Arche clapped him on the shoulder, not knowing what more to say. He nodded at Mordrec. "I didn't hear that thing going off in the fight."

Mordrec cradled his nailbow protectively. "Jammed, didn't it. I'll have it ready for tonight. Ask the locals for more arrows, Dal. It won't help me or Ygor, but there are thousands of the bastards out there."

There was another shout of warning just then but, when Dal's wings had taken him up he saw that there were only three attackers, a doomed trio hurling themselves at the walls. The situation did not seem to merit his intervention. Instead, he went in search of Lirien Aell.

"You," he told her, "are madder than they are."

She had been going through a stack of short, rough-made arrows, checking the chitin-shard fletchings of each one. Now she looked up, wordless.

"*This* is the salvation of your people? Two imperial deserters, a Scorpion animal-trainer and me?"

"And what are you, Arche?" was her solemn question.

"I'm someone who'd be briganding right now if Corde's head didn't have such a fine price on it," he told her roughly, "and however fine that price is, I don't appreciate your efforts to make it more than it's worth."

"If I'd found Mercers, I'd have found a way to bring them. If some noble lord had been breaking his fast in Fiol I'd have gulled him into coming here somehow. Soldiers, Weaponsmasters, heroes, I'd have reeled each of them in one way or another. But I found you, you and your fellows. Should I regret it so much?" The look she gave him was abruptly twinkling with mockery, despite everything.

"Don't give me that," but he said it gently. After all, the situation was bad enough, and there was no way out of the trap. No need to make matters worse.

The moon was up even as the sun set. Dal couldn't have said whether it was a *grand* moon but it was certainly a big old full one. He knew that seers and mystics endowed the moon with all manner of significance that the layman could not understand. He had even heard of a man cursed by a Moth-kindén Skryre, who had to be locked in the cellar each time the moon was full to keep his family safe from him. *Perhaps that was just a touch of the Locust Madness*, he wondered, because the moon was certainly doing its work on the seething host beyond the walls. They were calling and dancing, swirling in weird, chaotic patterns, leaping and springing high into the air, working themselves into a frenzy. Within the greater mob, currents and whirlpools of movement surged, never one acting alone but entire groups suddenly going through the same meaningless flurry of motion. The effect was one of superficial chaos guided by an invisible order.

"So." Mordrec was abruptly beside him at the wall's top, landing heavily in a flurry of wings and then wavering for a moment before he caught his balance. "You slept with her."

Dal started. "What? Just *now*? With all this going on?"

"Back in Fiol. You know what I mean. And you told her about Corde's cursed head, and she nicked it and lammed off while you were snoring."

After a pause Dal Arche shrugged. "Maybe."

"Remind me again why we do what you say?" Mordrec pressed.

The Dragonfly-kindén turned and looked at him, eyebrows raised. "I don't know, Mord. I've never known. Maybe you should tell me."

The yammering and yelling from the mob outside was getting louder, and the two hunters watched the great host surge and swirl and gather itself.

"They're coming in!" Dal shouted, a moment before some of the village's own lookouts gave the same warning. A moment later everyone was scrambling to find a vantage point, to shoot from or to set a spear against the charge.

If the attackers had truly possessed the linked minds of Ant-kindens then it would have been over very quickly indeed. Whatever communal spirit had burrowed into the the fanatic Grasshopper-kindens, though, it had neither any grasp of tactics nor even an ability to respond to the defence. The crazed nomads swarmed forth as though a single order had been called, several hundred of them on the attack at the same instant without a moment's hesitation, but there was no plan to it. They simply hurled themselves at the walls in blind, raging fury, tearing at wood and flesh with equal fervour, heedless of any danger. The rest of the mob swirled and danced but seemed not to know that an attack was even underway.

Still, the old woman had been right: the innocent normality of the steppe-folk had been burned away by some new fire. They were swift and savage, their limbs bursting with Art-fuelled strength that leaked out in a berserk frenzy. Dal Arche had learned in the war just how little 'swift and savage' was worth without an organising mind behind it, though. The attacking horde made no attempt to hide from arrow-shot, leapt onto spears, pounded at the walls or the huts inside when armed enemies were all about them. They died screaming but their screams were not of pain or fear. Even their faces seemed to have changed, their eyes bulbous and wide, their lips peeled back from huge, square teeth.

They got over the wall several times, for all the defenders could do to stop them. Not only were their leaps greater and greater, until several cleared the wall cleanly in one bound, but, as they neared, almost one in three was suddenly airborne, clumsy and reeling on unaccustomed Art wings. Dal knew that a very few Grasshopper-kindens could fly, although he had never met one who could. Suddenly the gift had been sprinkled liberally over the mass of his enemies and, within moments, the sky was full of them, blundering into one another, wheeling wildly, crashing down on the wall or the ground, clinging dazedly to the central wooden tower until they had almost covered it. They seemed to have almost no control of their flight but spun and gyred in random arcs above, or dropped spontaneously from the sky. At least a score must have killed themselves coming down, falling from a height or impaled on the spiked posts of the palisade. For the rest, and for those hopping and crawling up the wall, it was a bloody business to keep them off. If those who got within the compound had turned their attention to the defenders then all would have been lost, but instead they ran mad, slashing at the goatskin sides of the huts or rushing for civilians. There was a fire lit, before the squat tower's gate, and several of the intruders blundered into it, seeming not to realise they were burning. Nothing had halted the attack, not the death toll, not even the explosive roar of Mordrec's firepowder-charged nailbow as it ripped into their close-packed ranks. Only when the very last attacker was dead was there quiet. Not one of the others out on the plain had lifted a finger to aid their comrades. The killing frenzy had yet to touch them and, until it did, they milled and danced and howled but did not attack.

Seven of the defenders were killed, plus an old man and two children found by one of the rampaging Grasshoppers. Dal had no intention of counting the bodies of the enemy fallen. He could barely bring himself to dub them 'enemy'. He knew Grasshopper-kindens: they were a quiet, introspective people by nature, fond of music and philosophy. They had made poor and reluctant soldiers when the Wasps had invaded the Commonweal but, all the same, they had carried spears for their overlords alongside Dragonfly-kindens yeomen such as Dal Arche had been, and they

had died doggedly enough, fighting without joy. Some hideous spirit of chaos and death had come to possess the wretched creatures outside. They had been robbed of their minds and their peace and driven to kill themselves on the spears of their neighbours.

"They will come again, later this night. More of them, most likely," Lirien Aell told him. She handed him a fistful of arrows, most still dark with blood. The nimblest of the villagers were over the wall even now, within plain sight of the enemy swarm, retrieving as many shafts as they could.

"How long is this going on for? Tomorrow? Tomorrow night? Longer?"

She shrugged. "How long's a grand moon, Arche?"

He frowned. "Did that old Grasshopper witch survive all that? She'll know."

The old woman was still with them, just. She was shivering and shuddering, hugging her knees to her chin.

"How long will this grand moon last?" Dal demanded.

"The moon..." the old woman wheezed, "the moon is just a moon, just a full moon. The madness starts with the moon, the moon does not end the madness."

Dal felt his stomach sink. "Then... how do we stop this? There are thousands of them out there. We can't stop them for ever, even for very long. There have to just... burn themselves out eventually, go back to normal, please?" He had not intended that pleading tone in his voice, but he had suddenly seen his future as nothing but acts of killing and dying interlocked so closely that there was no space between them.

"You do not understand," the old woman whispered. "Listen, listen." She beckoned the two of them closer, and somewhat warily they crouched near.

"There are many kinden on the steppes," the old woman told them, forcing the words out. "Cicada, Dragonfly, Roach-kindens, but most of all there are my people. We have many tribes. We roam the steppe in our thousands, in our tens of thousands, increasing and increasing, many and many, until there are *too* many. Then the full moon will be a grand moon. Then the Locust Madness comes, and we run mad and destroy all we have, and we *kill* and *kill*," her withered hands made jabbing motions at each other, "and we die and die. We dash ourselves against stones. We drive ourselves onto our neighbours' blades. We fight and dance and run until we starve or drop from weariness. Until at the last there are no longer too many of us, and the Locust time is passed, until it comes again. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the night after, perhaps in a tenday, who can say?"

"Not in a tenday," said Dal. "We won't last a tenday."

"They say that a thousand years ago there was a warlord who could somehow control the madness, and who led a thousand thousand steppe warriors south to the Commonweal," Lirien murmured.

"Oh yes? And how did that end?"

"The Monarch stood before them and dispersed them with the light of purity," she recalled, "or that's how the story goes."

"Oh, right. Well if we see anyone in an enormous glowing crown we'll know we're saved, then."

The midnight assault was worse. There seemed to be no end to the howling throng, until the spikes that lined the walls were clogged with bodies or simply snapped away by the unrelenting weight, until the defenders' spears were wrenched from their hands by the flesh of their enemies. At one point it seemed that the swarming Grasshopper-kindens would overwhelm one point of the wall entirely and simply bury the defenders alive with the weight of their

numbers. Then Mordrec opened up with the nailbow, emptying his magazines ten bolts at a time, ripping the tide apart even as it rose above the wall. The moment was saved, and Mordrec resorted to sword and sting, having used every bolt he owned.

Another eighteen of the villagers did not survive, a further handful were wounded beyond being able to hold the walls. That the number of wounded was so low was mostly to do with the savagery of the enemy: any who fell into their hands were torn apart, disjointed and partitioned and then the pieces set upon in a cannibalistic frenzy. The ravening feeders were easy prey, not even stopping to defend themselves from swords and knives.

The attack seemed to go on forever, until all sense of reality had fled and the grand moon shone ogreishly down onto a nightmare, the palisaded village surrounded by a twitching carpet of the dead and drying whilst the insane host leapt and flew and crawled on every side.

And then there were no more, and the dawn light revealed an expectant host still milling on the plain, seeming not in the least diminished, as though all those bodies had simply arisen from the earth like a fungus.

Dal Arche's chitin tab, that saved his fingers from the bite of the bowstring, was worn through and ready to crack, and so he was improvising another out of a scrap of goatskin. He had snapped two strings in the fight and loosed every arrow he had got his hands on, and here came Aell with another fistful. She had been beside him for much of the fight, a keen shot herself, and now she looked grey and worn down, stumbling with fatigue.

"Get some sleep," he advised her.

"You get some sleep," she rejoined.

"When I've done this, I will. How many can fit into the tower?"

The village's central tower had so far hosted only the old, the children, the badly wounded, and even they had made use of the arrowslits, or simply stabbed at the invaders when they had come to rest against the tower's raked sides. Dal doubted that the whole village would have been able to get inside it before the grand moon came, but as of now the 'whole village' had a notably smaller headcount.

"Will it come to that?" she asked, seeing immediately where he was going with the thought.

"If this kicks off again today or tonight then yes, it will. I don't know how we held this place last night. I'm not sure we really did, it's just that we managed to kill every one of them who got over the walls."

"There isn't room in the tower for us all," she told him.

He looked at her bleakly. "There will be. Or there will come a point where those that *can* get inside will have to, and those that *can't*..."

"I don't accept that," she stated flatly.

"Well, girl, you are very plainly too used to getting your own way," he told her. "You dragged us here from Fiol, and it's good odds you've got us all killed, but if they keep coming like they have been doing then nothing's going to save your pisspot of a village." He said the words without acrimony or any intent to hurt. He was too tired to be anything other than philosophical about his impending demise.

"You, they will kill. Your Scorpion, and the Wasp, if even the imperial army cannot triumph here. Your other friend I'm not so sure about."

"What are you talking about?"

"His quiver's full. He's not shot a shaft all night."

Dal didn't like the sound of that at all, but he kept his face neutral. "You go sleep, girl," he growled at her, but when she had gone he sought out Soul Je.

The Grasshopper-kinde was crouched atop the tower, staring out at his maddened kin. Dal let his wings carry him up until he could alight beside the man.

"Still with us, then," he observed, aware that the words could be read in two very different ways.

Soul looked up at him, his long face taut with strain. "Don't press me, Dala," he said, his voice little more than a rasp.

"Is it because they're your people, that you won't fight?" As a man who wouldn't hesitate to shoot down another Dragonfly, the concept was a novel one to Dal.

"They're not my people," Soul said, and his voice was still low and controlled, so pointedly devoid of emotion that it unnerved Dal more than shouting. "They were. Perhaps they will be. I haven't fought because I don't want to become one of *their* people. I can hear them, Dala. They're singing in my head. There's a chorus of maniacs ten thousand strong who want me to be one of them. It would be easy. All I'd have to do is let go. If I'd have been born here, lived here, I'd be one of them already. I'm clinging to all I've seen of the world, to stave them off."

"You hold on tight then," Dal told him, trying to keep his voice comforting though his skin crawled with the other man's words.

"No guilt, Dala," Soul said. "No blame. No cares. Can princes and empires promise so much?"

"Soul..."

"I'm fighting it. I'm fighting to master it. I'm not one of them. I'm not a steppeman. I'm not Locust-kinde. I'm a Grasshopper from Sa. I'm civilised. But there are so many voices... The old woman died."

"She did?"

"The madness took her at last, and she died. She was too old for it. Her heart, perhaps." Soul shrugged. "Sleep, Dala. You look like you need it."

"And you?"

"I'm not tired. Not even slightly."

Outside beyond the wall the host continued their ceaseless dancing and chanting.

Nightfall found everyone tensely waiting for the attack, the air cleared by the imminence of the next wave of Locusts. Dal Arche had already locked horns with some of the villagers earlier when he had told them to release their livestock. Aell had supported him and the entire village had nearly come to blows. In the end it had not been about whether the livestock would be taken by hunting spiders or centipedes, nor about whether the howling host outside would kill the beasts, but about the implication: *we cannot hold the outer wall*. It was a fact that stared them all in the face but many of them would not see it, for all that it was pointed out to them again and again. In the end the village's goats and beetles were shooed out of the main gate to take their chances, as were the hunters' horses. That way some of them might escape and be recoverable later. Trapped in their pens they would be slaughtered when the attackers finally came over the wall in force.

And when that happened... everyone knew what they would have to do, and that there would be many who would not make it into the tower.

Now they waited, whilst the horde beyond the wall danced its spiral dances and lifted its voice in wordless song. Dal had given the enemy as close an inspection as he dared and seen that

there were plenty who had fallen from thirst or exhaustion, and been trampled beneath the pounding feet of the others. *But how many? How many is too many?*

Mordrec had spent the day laboriously casting new nailbow bolts from whatever metal was to hand, enough to burn through all the firepowder he had left. Ygor had been cutting at arrow-flights so they would fit his crossbow.

Soul had sat atop the tower and stared at his kin, his mad and savage kin.

There had been an unlooked-for respite. Cloud had eaten the moon and the crowd gathered all about had become quieter, and for two dark hours it had seemed as though a bloodless dawn was a realistic proposition. Then the moon had fought its way clear and from every side a weird high shriek had arisen, and then the host was upon them.

Dal Arche was unsure how many of them there were. It may have been all of them. The front-runners died almost instantly, men and women, children and all, and those on their heels, the first few flights of arrows unable to miss the close-packed tide. Then the sky was full of them, leaping and flying, and the defenders tracked their own individual targets across the face of the moon.

Dal could see almost immediately that the defence would not hold this time. The defenders' losses, their fatigue and their dwindling hope had taken too much of a toll. A score of the attackers were within the wall almost immediately and every fighter who left the walls to bring them down was leaving a door open for more. The villagers began dying - falling, it seemed, not to the weapons of the foe so much as to their sheer fury.

Aell had been given a snail-shell horn and a place atop the tower. She was to blow it when a retreat to the tower was inevitable, or when attrition made it possible, whichever happened first. When the call came, shockingly soon into the attack, Dal Arche had no idea which it was.

The plan was that certain picked villagers would throw open the doors and hold them whilst everyone else did their best to funnel in. Most of those so chosen were either unable to reach the doors themselves or already slain, and the doors were pushed open from within. The oldest of the village children stood shoulder to shoulder with their grandfathers and great-grandmothers, armed with spears and sticks and knives, to hold the way for their families.

Dal swore and kicked off from the wall-top. Immediately he was amidst the floundering, confused mass of the enemy fliers, and he left a bloody trail through them with his knife, cutting several out of the sky as they were swung about by their own unfamiliar wings. Then he reached the tower door, finding Ygor already there with Scutts at his feet. The Scorpion-kin had his lance held in both clawed fists and was wielding it like a battleaxe, slashing with its broad-bladed head. The villagers were fighting their way inside in twos and threes, but as each abandoned the defence, the press of enemy on the remainder grew greater, and then unstoppable, and in an instant the wall was blotted by swarming bodies and the enemy were at the tower.

Mordrec appeared, dropping from the sky at Dal Arche's feet with a bloody scalp, but still fumbling to bring his nailbow up. Dal himself was searching for Aell, who had been atop the tower. Ygor was shouting something, but all words were being swallowed and chewed beyond recognition by the yammering of the horde.

There was Aell, in a moment's glimpse between bodies, falling from the sky, her wings dancing her out of the way of a swung staff, only ten feet away from the tower door, but there were so many attackers in her way...

Dal made no definite decision but he was gone from Ygor's side, wings throwing him in a somersaulting through the cluttered air. Halfway down he rammed one of the Grasshoppers



bodily, falling to the ground in a tangle of limbs with all the breath knocked from him. Still he had the presence of mind to jam his knife home into his enemy. A moment later something heavy was brought down hard onto his leg and he yelled in pain. His wings flared, clawing for the sky, but a hand dragged at his ankle. He killed the woman who was clutching at him, then lost his knife in another. In a second he was on his feet, surrounded, then his battered leg gave way.

Lirien Aell stooped on him, lashing about herself with a short-bladed sword. She was shouting for him to get up - he could see her lips moving but barely hear a word. In a moment she had an arm about him and was half-dragging, half-throwing him at the tower. It was no good: they were surrounded. They were only still alive because most of the frenzied attackers about them had not realised that there were victims within arm's reach.

Dal was never sure whether he caught a glimpse of the tower gateway then, or whether the shout somehow cut through the chaos to reach his ears. He did not so much hear the cry as reconstruct it in his imagination, but he was collapsing down, dragging Aell down with him. The shout was "drop-drop!" and it was a cry the hunters used amongst themselves, and Mordrec most of all.

The nailbow hammered, the bolts zipping through the crowd, meant to puncture armour and barely slowing as they lashed through flesh. It was as though an invisible scythe cleared the way to the gate as Mordrec emptied one magazine of ten, and then got five shots into the next before one of his home-cast bolts jammed in the breach. With a supreme effort Dal flew for the gate. If Aell had not been on her feet then he could not have dragged her but, as it was, she outstripped him there.

They closed the gates practically on Dal Arche's heels. They were the last, and only Mordrec and Ygor's intervention had kept the tower open that long.

Dal looked from face to face until he found the absence.

"Where's Soul?" he demanded.

"Still up top last anyone saw," Ygor reported grimly. "He didn't come down when the horn went."

Dal found an arrowslit and stared out at the frenzied host that was busy destroying everything that they could find. There was a thunderous drumming all around them as the swarming Locust-kindens clawed and kicked at the tower itself, smacked down against it with blundering wings, clung to it, and to each other, in mindless bewilderment, and launched away for more pointless circling in the crowded sky.

"Count up arrows," he shouted over the roar.

They had twenty-seven shafts left between them all. Mordrec had a few shots left but his nailbow was being uncooperative about the jammed bolt, and there was no space for him to dismantle it.

"What about you?" Dal asked Ygor.

"Precisely one bolt left," the Scorpion told him, "but it's my lucky one."

Dal took a glance through the arrowslit. "How lucky?" he asked.

Barad Ygor crouched to let Scutts clamber up him, letting his pet take her accustomed place coiled about him, with her claws clasped above his collarbones. They were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder within the tower, the old, the children and the surviving defenders all crammed in together, and getting a large venomous animal out from underfoot could only help.

"We can kill a few more of them," Dal mused. "More will die of other causes, the longer this goes on. We have some food in here." Nobody could hear him over the noise. *How many do we have to kill? How many are dying elsewhere? When will the Locust Madness release its hold?*

Aell was beside him and he put an arm about her, letting her lean into him. His eyes never left the narrow slice of chaos that was his window on the world.

She must have felt him twitch, as though he had been shot.

He saw Soul Je.

The Grasshopper-kinde was standing in the midst of the frenzy, the one still point. Dal had heard stories of the damned: that people who died badly and in bad places could be cursed to stay there in spirit, tormented and tormenting and unable to escape. Soul Je could have modelled for such lost spirits. There was a look in his face that Dal had seen once or twice in the war, on the faces of men who had, by their great courage and conviction, led thousands of their own people to futile deaths.

Soul's hollow eyes sought out the tower. He could not have spotted Dal Arche within the darkness behind the arrowslit but there was a shock of contact even so. For a moment the flurrying savagery of the attackers came between them, and when Dal could see his friend again, Soul had his bow up, arrow nocked and the string drawn back. Another interruption: Dal did not see the arrow fly, instead there was a second shaft to the string. The clambering whirling mass of the Locusts crossed back and forth, giving only brief still images of Soul Je: draw, nock, nock, loose, draw, until his quiver was empty. Then Soul had taken up a spear and, blank-faced, got to work. He passed through the whooping hordes and was not marked by them. They took him in as one of their own, danced with him, whirled about him. He stalked and stabbed and they took no steps to fend him off as he left a trail of the dying in his wake. Without emotion, falling into a dreadful rhythm, Soul Je set about killing his kinsfolk.

When his spear broke he found another one, and then another after that. He was a man possessed, as all of the Grasshoppers were out there, but he sat in the saddle of the thing that possessed him. He bound it with iron and held to it. Not a moment's anger crossed his face: not rage, not fear, nor pity nor joy. The emotions that would have cracked his mind open to the Locust were banished to the furthest reaches of his mind. He was calm, killing calm. After a while Dal could no longer watch.

The siege of the Locusts lasted almost until dawn. They kept flocking to the village, over and over. Grey-faced and haggard, Soul Je was waiting for them with his spear. When at last the chanting and whooping grew faint, when the first light touched the eastern sky, it took eight men to force the doors open against the weight of bodies.

Out beyond the walls the host was already half-gone, the remainder dispersing. Huddled groups of Grasshopper-kinde were departing, seeking across the vast steppe for some sign of the places they had known. They had slain their neighbours, they had uprooted and destroyed their own lives, they had slain their own children. A generation of the steppe-kinde had been purged in blood and would live under the shadow of horror and guilt, victims of their own atrocities, resuming their nomadic lives and running from the memory of the Locust Madness. Those that remained did so for one reason only: to search over the faces of the slain.

And in a hundred years, or two hundred, when their numbers had recovered, it would happen again.

Not one of the villagers suggested retaliation or revenge: as well call for revenge against a storm, against starvation or a harsh winter. Only victims were left, on all sides.

Soul did not want to talk about it. Soul would never talk about it. He took what happened to him and locked it away behind his taciturn manner and, for their part, none of his companions felt particularly keen to press him on the subject.

The survivors of the village were gathering what little had been spared: foodstocks, possessions, anything portable. Others were flying out and seeking to reclaim any surviving livestock. Nobody had openly made the decision but they all knew that the village was finished. There was too much destroyed, too little food left. The sheer weight of the dead would defy disposal, and the numbers within were dwarfed by the corpses beyond the walls, all of those who had fallen simply to fatigue and thirst. The villagers would seek a life to the south, hope to find some land to farm or a community to take them in.

Later, Dal would hear that the steppe would suffer a year of pestilence, and then the year after the barren, dry land would be ablaze with verdant life, a once-in-a-century explosion of green, flowers and plants never seen in living memory, rooted in the decay of dead flesh, watered in blood. For years to come the grazing land would be lush and rich, and people would begin to migrate north to take advantage of it. When he was told that he would stop listening and walk away.

For now, Mordrec and Ygor prodded him into pulling Aell from the salvage work.

"You have something that belongs to us," Dal reminded her.

She stared blankly at the three of them for a moment until incredulous understanding dawned. "The *head*?"

"*Someone* might as well clear some profit from this bloody business," Mordrec grumbled. "Come on girl, give it up."

After a moment's further staring she shrugged and located a broken piece of wood that would serve as a shovel. While her people scavenged through the wreckage of their lives she took the hunters outside the sagging walls, spent a moment getting her bearings, and began to dig.

She had not buried Corde very deeply and, under other circumstances, Dal reckoned they could have found the wretched trophy themselves in time, had there not been an army of marauding madmen on the loose.

"Here," Aell declared, and hoisted the sack from the shallow hole, trailing ribbons of sandy earth.

Trailing more than earth. They stared, seeing the scissored hole in the oilcloth, hearing the patter of hard bodies. Beetles spilled from the gap, the furry-bodied black kind they called escarabins: burying beetles.

"No way!" Ygor objected and snatched the sack from Aell. Furiously he emptied out its contents, scattering beetles in all directions. Even in that moment Dal found himself thinking how much happy work those same beetles had ahead of them, how they would prosper from the misery and madness of others.

Corde's face, that was worth so much, was mostly gone now. The escarrabins had done their diligent work in the name of preserving their own next generation.

"It's impossible," Mordrec spat, aghast. "Salt meat? Beetles that eat *salt* meat? Who ever heard of that?"

Aell backed off as the three of them contemplated a suddenly impoverished future, standing like mourners about a miniature open grave. Their fourth, Soul Je, watched them from just outside the village wall, bow slung and desperate to be gone from this cursed place.

"Salt," Mordrec complained again, and Dal knew that it was not the loss of the bounty he was trying to rationalise, but all that they had been through in the last few days. "Beetles that eat *salt*."

At the very last, Ygor gave a huge sigh, watching the busy insects scurry in all directions, some even venturing into the shadow of Scutts' claws.

"Well, I don't suppose I can blame them," the Scorpion declared, reaching down to touch his pet's arched stinger affectionately. "It *was* the best salt, after all."