

# CHANNAKH

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**National Novel Writing Month Entry 2006**

# 1. A Bad Harvest

The work of the harvest had begun in the village of Woodfield, and was proceeding again today after the break for the midday meal. Peasant farmers with small sickles were cutting ears of wheat, one handful at a time, slowly filling the wicker baskets strapped to their backs. Others were at work in the granary, driving the oxen round and round to tread the grain from the chaff; while others still were tossing the trodden grain in broad winnowing baskets, letting the chaff blow away in the autumn breeze.

Loggat, the village warden, looked out over the scene with mingled relief and dismay. Relief that the harvest was coming in at last after a long year's work, and dismay that it was not more plentiful.

The warden was a well-built man, his fitness belying his often sedentary work of running the village. He was thirty-seven years of age, with dark hair and eyes so dark that they were hard to read. He had learned his business from his father before him, just as his sixteen-year-old son Joram was learning in his turn.

Loggat turned to the farmer standing beside him, a weather-hardened man who had spent some sixty years wresting a living from the soil of Woodfield. He had retired from heavy work last year, leaving his farm to his son, and was now the official spokesman for all the peasantry of the village. He was Loggat's right-hand man, and the nearest the warden had to a friend. "What say you, Glin?" asked Loggat. "Will the harvest be enough?"

Glin narrowed his eyes and looked out over the widespread field of wheat and barley, and the adjoining field of beans. "To speak the truth, Warden Loggat," he said slowly, "I say we should have enough to last the winter, gods willing, but not much over. It's been a bad year. We've had drought when we wanted rain, and rain when we wanted sun. It's been hot and cold at all the wrong times of year, and now we're starting the harvest late. All we can pray for now is that the autumn rains hold off until we get it all safely stored away."

Loggat nodded and turned away. "Come with me to the manor," he said. "We need to go over things more carefully." Glin nodded and followed wordlessly.

The great hall of Warden Loggat's manor house was nothing more than a larger version of the peasants' homes, though built indeed on a stone foundation, and with the wattle-and-daub walls somewhat thicker and brightly plastered inside. The striking innovation in the warden's manor was a fireplace against the wall, with a genuine chimney. It had been installed only a couple of years ago, and was the only fireplace Glin had ever seen. True, the chimney didn't always draw properly, especially when the wind was from the northeast, but it was impressive all the same. The large, charred hearthstone was still in its place in the centre of the room, but on grand occasions it was covered with a colourful rug.

This was not a grand occasion, so the floor was covered only with rushes. Loggat's wife, Senga, had drawn a comfortable chair to the window and was working an embroidered headcloth by the light of the early afternoon sun. Senga was slim and lithe, with chestnut hair arranged high on her head, as fashion dictated. A headcloth similar to the one she was embellishing was fixed to the hair and flowed elegantly down the back of her head to her shoulders. She smiled warmly as the two men entered. "Hello, dear. Good afternoon, Yeoman Glin."

Glin bowed. "Good afternoon, Wardress Senga. I trust you are well, and Joram also."

"Oh yes, we're quite well. Joram has gone out to supervise the work in the granary."

Loggat nodded his approval. Joram was growing nicely into his role as apprentice warden. "Glin and I are just going to discuss this year's harvest. It looks like there should be enough after all."

"That is good news," Senga said, and returned to her embroidery as the others settled themselves at the long table at the far end of the hall. The estate records were already on the table, and Loggat opened one of the huge books.

"I realise it's far too early to know exactly how much we'll have at harvest home, but it's never too early to begin to plan," the warden said. "We know the grain harvest will be a poor one. The beans?"

"Not quite so bad," said Glin, "but still well below what's normal. The household vegetable gardens are coming in much the same."

"What of the livestock? The herds look in reasonable number."

"Yes, we didn't lose many beasts this year, but the grazing has been thin. The herdsman has had his work to keep them moving to fresh pasture. Slaughter isn't for another month yet, so we may be able to fatten them further in the lower field, once all the beans are in."

Loggat nodded. "It may be worth putting more hands to the bean harvest, then, to free up that field sooner. But the great problem for us now is the grain harvest. We're certainly going to have to ration to see ourselves through the winter, and we'll have to work out the size of the rations."

Glin grunted. “And I take it I’ll have to convince everyone to accept the plan.”

The two men bent over the records of past years and past harvests, and their conversation became purely businesslike. Now and then Loggat turned to his abacus, a shallow tray marked into squares in which he manipulated tiny pebbles.

After a time Joram came into the hall. “The granary work went well, father,” he said. “It’s growing too dark to see in there, so I dismissed everyone until morning.”

“Good lad,” said Loggat approvingly. “There’s no need to overwork the men or their beasts. You’ll make a fine warden.” He explained to Joram what he and Glin were doing. The boy offered to help, but Loggat said, “No, that’s all right. You’ve done enough for today.”

Joram settled himself by the fire, and Loggat and Glin turned back to their records. They continued with their business until, to their surprise, they were interrupted by a servant lighting candles.

“I think we’ve done as much as we can,” said Loggat, stretching. He stacked the books to one side. “Will you stay for a bite of supper?”

A servant was dispatched to fetch bread and cheese, and a large jug of beer. But before he could return, a peremptory knock sounded at the door. Loggat signalled the pageboy to let the caller in. It was a lean, wiry man, still covered in the dust of the road, with an abrupt, nearly rude, manner.

“I come bearing a message from Baron Peredur, stating the wishes of the great Overlord Vashaman Carnifex,” the caller stated, and held out a parchment, folded and sealed with red wax.

Loggat recognised Peredur’s seal, a great shaggy bear. Taking the missive, he fixed a hospitable expression to his face and said, “Thank you, messenger. The day grows short. Would you like supper and a bed for the night?”

The messenger did not relax, but stayed as erect as a soldier on guard duty. “I am to return with your reply.”

“You can leave first thing in the morning. The roads in these parts are unsafe in the dark.” Loggat waved the messenger to the table as the servant returned with the evening meal: a platter with a newly baked loaf, a dish of butter, a large chunk of creamy yellow cheese, and dishes of dried apples and raisins. An assistant boy carried the beer jug and four mugs. He put them down in a hurry and raced off to fetch a fifth before anyone could scold him.

The messenger, whose name turned out to be Marek, relented at the sight of the food. The pageboy was sent out to see to the stabling of Marek’s horse. Senga and Joram joined the three at the table. The assistant boy came with the fifth jug and tried to slip away unnoticed, but Senga caught his eye. “The evening is growing chill,” she said softly. “Build up the fire, if you please, and close the shutters.”

In the flicker of candles and the orange glow of the fireplace, the five supped convivially. Or rather, four were convivial; the messenger sat stiffly and spoke only in response to direct questioning. He did, at least, seem to relish the food.

“These apples are good, Warden,” said Glin, spearing another with the point of his knife. “And they go well with the cheese.”

“We’ll have fresh ones again soon enough,” smiled Senga. “I do enjoy a nice fresh apple.” She took a handful of raisins to finish the meal.

Loggat drained his mug and leaned back with a sigh. His eyes turned reluctantly to where the letter from Peredur lay on the table. It could be put off no longer. He took the letter, broke the red wax seal, and read.

The message was bluntly to the point. “Overlord Vashaman requires that taxes be increased by a further half-bushel per quarter of grain, gallon per barrel of beer, and other produce in proportion, or the equivalent value of the aforementioned in coin or fine goods.”

Without a word, Loggat flicked the message across the table to Glin. The farmer read it through more slowly, moving his lips at the harder words. His eyes rose to meet the warden’s.

“It can’t be done,” Glin said simply. “Not on top of the taxes we’re already paying. People will starve before next harvest.”

“That’s what I thought.” Loggat turned to the messenger. “Devising a proper reply to this command will take some time. I’ll have it ready for you in the morning.”

Marek accepted this, then added, “I am not permitted to be sociable with you, by order of the baron. If you would show me where I am to sleep, I will withdraw.”

“I understand.” The attendant boy was waiting to clear the supper dishes. Loggat waved him over. “Show messenger Marek to the side bedroom, and bring him water for washing, and anything else he might require.” The boy led Marek up the stairs to the private chambers.

In the meantime, Senga had taken and read the letter from Peredur. “What answer will you give?” she asked as she handed it across to Joram.

“What answer can I give? It’s impossible. But I will have to word it more delicately than that.”

Glin pushed his stool back from the table. “It’s getting late. I ought to be back at home, or my son will begin to worry. Thank you for the supper, Warden. I wish you luck writing that letter.” He said his farewells and left. At a nod from Loggat, the pageboy barred the great door behind him.

Joram was re-reading the letter. “This is worrying, father,” he said, trying to seem older than his years. “The overlord does not take refusals lightly, I hear.”

Loggat forced himself to look optimistic. “Well,” he said, “this letter is from Baron Peredur. We have no real proof that the command comes from Vashaman. It might simply be Peredur trying to enrich himself.”

Senga shook her head. “Would he dare invoke the name of Vashaman without permission?”

Loggat considered for some time. “Probably not,” he sighed. “Peredur is as greedy as any of the other barons, and as flint-hearted, but he’s far from stupid. The nearer people come to Vashaman, the more they fear him – or so I’m told.”

“Perhaps,” said Joram, “the overlord has proposed some increase in taxes, but the baron has added more on top. Then he could take the excess before passing the rest on to the overlord. And yet he would have reason to use the overlord’s name in his message.”

“That’s certainly possible,” said Loggat with a wry smile. “And I wouldn’t put it beyond Peredur to try such a scheme. You are getting too clever by half, young Joram.”

The youth blushed, but said nothing.

Loggat called for parchment and ink, and pulled the baron’s letter toward him. “Now you’ll have to leave me to myself. I’ll need to consider carefully. Go on to your bedroom, Joram. We’ll have to be in the fields at dawn, you know.”

Joram said his good-nights and disappeared up the stairs. Senga fetched her embroidery and settled herself by the fire, ready either to speak to Loggat if he needed to discuss a point, or to keep quiet if he needed to be left strictly alone.

Loggat, for his part, sat and thought for a very long time before putting pen to parchment. He folded the reply carefully and sealed it, then looked across to Senga. “That’s the best I can do,” he said. “Whether Peredur will care about the welfare of our villagers is another matter. Gods willing, he might understand that starving the cow is no way to ensure a supply of milk.”

“And what if he doesn’t understand?”

Loggat shook his head slowly. “Then I don’t know what we’ll do.” He rose from the table, suddenly tired to his bones. “Let’s put it out of our minds for the night.” They went to bed.

The next morning dawned bright, with a cool breeze heralding the first touch of autumn. The family gathered for a quick bite of bread and butter before beginning the day’s work, a new and sophisticated custom not shared by most of the peasant farmers.

The messenger Marek remained stiffly civil, but confirmed that he had slept well, and made all the right compliments concerning the hospitality he had been shown. He took Loggat’s letter with a slight bow, put it in his pouch, and was gone.

The family turned to the business of the day.

Four days later, the granary was filling nicely with sacks and baskets of beans. The weather had stayed dry, and everyone was daring to predict that the entire harvest could be got in without mishap. The workers were beginning to down tools and straggle to their cottages for their midday meals.

It was the herdsman, chasing a wandering sheep, who first saw the movement in the distance, a dark blur surrounded by a light dust haze, moving towards Woodfield on the road from the east. Soon hoofbeats and the jingle of harness could be heard. A call went up for Warden Loggat to meet the approaching traveller.

Loggat’s initial curiosity quickly melted into a knot of dismay in the pit of his stomach. It was none other than Baron Peredur, with his entourage, and Loggat could guess at his business in the village.

Peredur rode into the village without looking to left or right. His horse was caparisoned in brilliant trappings of white silk, embroidered with the red bear and edged with gold borders. Behind him rode five men in light armour, swords ready at their sides, their horses caparisoned in less luxurious white linen. Red bears were painted on the linen and on the shields of the guards.

The baron rode directly up to Loggat and reined in his horse with an imperious air. The animal neighed, flared its nostrils, and pawed at the ground in a way that Loggat found intimidating. The thought passed through his mind: *He’s trained it to do that.*

Peredur did not deign to dismount. He glared down at Loggat. “You’ve had a chance to recant that ill-considered letter of yours, warden. What do you say now?”

Loggat waved a hand toward the fields. “You know yourself it has been a bad year, baron. Once the ordinary tax is paid, there will be only just enough to feed the population until next harvest.”

“And what is that to me?”

“There will be great hunger.”

Peredur sneered. “What do I care for the comfort of your peasants? Let them forage in the woods for rabbits and mushrooms, if they choose.”

“People will die.” Peredur looked uninterested, so Loggat pressed his point. “If the workers perish, that can only mean less tax for you next year.”

“Then see to it that the ones who die are the ones who produce nothing. Let the old and the sick die... soon. That should leave more food for the workers.”

Loggat compressed his lips and said nothing.

Peredur wheeled his horse round. “I am on my way to Stadda Spurrye to make report to Overlord Vashaman. You have made me travel out of my way, Loggat, and I am not pleased. Vashaman wants his taxes, and he will not be gainsaid. You will pay, and how you manage it is no concern of mine.”

“And if I refuse?” Loggat asked quietly.

“You won’t,” called Peredur, looking back over his shoulder as he rode away. “Not if you value your life.”

Another five days passed by, each day filled with harvest toil. The lower field had been emptied of beans, thanks to concerted effort by the peasants, and the cattle and sheep were let in to graze among the plants. Attention was being turned again to the grain harvest. Thanks were given each day that the weather remained ideal for harvest – not too chill, with just enough breeze to help with the winnowing, and above all dry.

Loggat was passing from house to house in the centre of the village, looking over the garden plots belonging to each household and passing the time of day with the residents not working in the fields. Most of these were the peasants’ wives, who were busy with their own work in the gardens at this time of year, and minding their chickens and pigs besides. There were also the children who were yet too young to work in the fields, and the elderly, some of whom could remember when Loggat’s own grandfather was first made warden of Woodfield.

The young wife to whom Loggat was speaking had a child just old enough to chase chickens, so their conversation was frequently interrupted. As Loggat watched her pursuing the boy yet again, he heard a voice shouting his name, and the sound of hooves. He turned round to see the messenger Marek, riding into the village and calling for him.

“Over here!” he shouted, and waved an arm.

Marek cantered up to Loggat and drew a sealed letter from his pouch. “I am to give this to you and return posthaste.” Loggat took the message, a thick bundle sealed with the imprint of a shaggy bear in red wax. Marek drew closer and leaned down from the saddle. His eyes flicked from side to side and his voice dropped low. “By the gods, warden, do as he says.” Surprised, Loggat could find nothing to say for a moment, and in that moment Marek had turned his horse and galloped away.

Loggat made his excuses to the young woman and walked slowly across the village to his manor, studying the sealed missive in his hand. For some reason he was reluctant to open it until he was safely within his own walls. He found himself alone in the great hall. Joram, he knew, was in the granary. Senga was nowhere to be seen; probably in the manor garden, supervising their own vegetable harvest.

He sat at the long table and broke the seal. At once he saw why the letter had felt so thick; a second sealed letter dropped from the packet onto the table. The outer letter bore a single sentence, in Peredur’s hand: “This is your last warning.”

The inner letter was closed with an enormous rectangular seal in black wax. The imprint was of an horrendous beast, part tiger and part bull. Loggat had seen this badge only once before, and the sight of it here and now sent a shudder through him. It was the personal seal of Vashaman himself, the self-styled Overlord of the Realm, who lately had taken the title Carnifex after a mass execution of barons who were (so he had said) traitors.

For some reason, as he looked at the monster on the seal, Loggat was reminded of the rumours he had heard. Some said that Vashaman had been born Ashman, a sturdy woodcutter’s name. But as he climbed to power over the bloodied bodies of his rivals, he soon discarded his embarrassingly lowly past and changed his name to something more exotic and barbaric. Others said he was indeed a barbarian from the south, who had mustered an army and simply taken over. A few whispered that he was half demon, dropped directly into his place by the rulers of hell, but that was surely too far-fetched to be believed. As far as Loggat was aware,

there was no official history of the rise of Vashaman. Loggat suspected that the overlord preferred to keep his subjects guessing.

He broke the black seal, snapping the monster in half, and unfolded the parchment slowly, willing his hand not to tremble. The message was to the point: “My personal troops will arrive in your village of Woodfield three days after this letter. You will have the tax ready for them, both the ordinary tax and the additional amount I have decreed. If the amount is not available in full, my men are authorised to take any action they deem suitable, both to recover the value of the tax and to punish anyone they perceive as causing difficulty. I need hardly remind you that the warden of the village will be seen as the prime instigator of any trouble that may arise.”

Leaving the letter on the table, Loggat went out in search of Glin. He found him by the mill pond, swapping stories with the miller and a few other retired farmers. Glin looked up and began to tell a joke, but when he saw Loggat’s face he fell silent. Loggat motioned for Glin to come back to the manor, and the old farmer followed without a word.

“What is it?” asked Glin when they had returned to the great hall. “I’ve never seen you look like this.”

Loggat handed him the letter from Vashaman. “Here, read this. You’re my closest advisor. Advise me.”

Glin read the letter twice through before he spoke. “We have enough on hand for the ordinary tax. We’d already counted on paying that.”

“What about the surtax? I’d rather pay than have the villagers punished. We can try to bring in extra food from somewhere later on.”

Glin shook his head. “I’m not sure we even have it. The harvest is proceeding, but we started late this year, trying to give the crops as much time as we dared. And we haven’t even begun the autumn livestock cull. Everyone will have to work like devils to get it all done in time.”

“We’ll have to tell them. I’m sure the villagers will prefer to work hard for a few days than fall foul of Vashaman’s troops. We’ve all heard tales of the barbarities they deal out as punishment.”

“I’ll go now and call everyone together.” Glin hurried out, leaving the warden trying to frame a speech.

When Loggat emerged from the manor, the villagers were gathered in the square, waiting for him. Glin had evidently told them something of the situation, for their faces were grave. At the back stood a worried-looking Joram, whispering something into Glin’s ear.

The warden held up the letter from Vashaman for all to see, then began explaining the problem. He tried to put a brave gloss on it, as far as he was able, but at the same time did not seek to play down the threat facing them all.

“...And so,” he concluded, “you can see the position Woodfield is in. The first thing we must do is set aside as much as we can, and see how much is lacking. The next thing is to work as long and hard as we can to make it up. We have three days. Every available hand must be turned to the harvest from first light to nightfall, male and female, young and old alike. It won’t be an easy time, but I promise you that – however hard the toil – it is better than the alternative.”

Murmuring agreement, the villagers dispersed. Glin and Joram returned with Loggat into the great hall of the manor. Senga was waiting by the door; she had obviously heard the speech. She shook her head sadly. “What chance do we have, realistically?” she asked.

“Not much,” admitted Loggat. “But we have to try. It’s just possible that, even if we don’t have quite enough, we might be able to make it look like enough. The overlord’s troops are soldiers, not farmers, and we may be able to give them short measure.”

Glin snorted. “We may. And then again, we may flap our arms and fly to the moon.”

“It’s a long chance, but it’s the only chance we have,” said Loggat. “We must try everything we can think of.”

On the morning of the third day, the goods were amassed in the village square. There were sacks of grain and beans, barrels of beer, baskets of vegetables, barrels of hastily butchered and salted meat. It was not enough.

The women and children had decamped at first light, heading for the town of Bridgewater, where they hoped to blend into the market crowds. Those too old or ill to accompany them had already taken refuge in the manor. All able-bodied men and youths, perhaps forty of them altogether, were busy arming themselves with pitchforks and kitchen knives, determined to sell their lives dear.

“Into the manor,” called Loggat. The manor house was far from being a stronghold, but it was the sturdiest building in the village. The great hall filled with men. Loggat stood on the table to talk to them. Senga was by his side, having refused to join the farmers’ wives in their exodus. She carried a carving knife. Joram was somewhere in the throng, armed with a hatchet from the kitchen.

The men were beginning to murmur. “Keep your heads,” Loggat shouted. “We must not make the first move. When the troops come, we wait. If they want to speak to me, then I’ll go out. Alone.” The murmur grew again, and he held up his hand for silence. “If they attack us, we have every right to defend ourselves. I repeat: we are here only for our own defence.”

“If they do attack, what is the strategy?” someone called from the back of the room.

“There is no strategy,” admitted Loggat. “If they attack, it is not war, but Vashaman’s punishment. If we resist, even in self-defence, we will call down an even harsher reprisal upon ourselves, and that swiftly. It can be only every man for himself. Fight or flee as you see fit, and may the gods protect you in either case.”

Silence fell over the group as they absorbed the harsh truth.

It was perhaps an hour later that Vashaman’s troops arrived, half a dozen of them marching in formation, followed by a seventh who drove a large ox-drawn wagon. The soldiers were almost identical, tall and strong without being muscle-bound, in chainmail with an overtunic of black leather. They wore large helmets with nose and cheek pieces, so that only a T of eyes and face showed. Each wore a black scabbard housing a longsword, and at the other side a dagger.

They rode in, watched silently from every window of the manor house. Without a word, they began loading the goods onto the wagon. Then the one who seemed to be the leader stepped away from the rest. “Warden Loggat, come forth and show yourself!” he shouted.

The door of the manor house swung open slowly, and Loggat stepped out. Behind him, the doorway was crowded with men and youths, saying nothing, but gripping their makeshift weapons. The leader of the troops laid a hand lightly on his sword hilt as he waited for the warden to approach.

Loggat took a deep breath and forced his voice to stay steady. “I am Warden Loggat,” he said. “What do you want of me?”

“What I want of you,” said the soldier, “is the rest of what is due.”

“There is no more,” said Loggat simply. “It is impossible.”

With a sudden movement, the soldier’s gauntleted hand lashed out and caught Loggat a blow across the cheek. The warden staggered but did not fall. He heard a collective gasp coming from the manor, and a rustle of arrested movement. Without looking behind, he gestured with his hand that the villagers should stay in their place.

“Bring it,” the soldier said, in a voice still devoid of emotion. The rest of his men had finished loading the goods. They stood in a formation, hands on their swords, watching their leader and waiting for command.

“I cannot,” replied Loggat. “I cannot bring what does not exist.”

The leader drew his sword. At his movement, the other soldiers drew their own swords in unison. “Bring it,” he said.

“I cannot,” Loggat said again.

The sword flashed in the morning sunlight. To the end of his life, Loggat would remember that gleam of light on the bright steel as the weapon moved through the air. It seemed to take hours, and yet he could not move, could not dodge. He could do nothing but watch as the blade swung round, plunged forward, and buried itself in the right side of his chest.

Loggat gasped in surprise. He felt the force of the blow, but no pain yet. The soldier withdrew the sword, and he felt it sliding out of his flesh. He felt the warmth of blood on his skin. His breath was not coming properly. He gasped again, and then the pain hit him. He fell to his knees.

Somewhere behind him, he heard a great shout coming from many throats, and a rush of feet. The villagers were charging the troops. “No,” he tried to shout, but the word came out as a broken panting.

Loggat sat back on his haunches, trying to catch his breath. The leader of the troops, the one who had stabbed him, was beset with angry villagers. One, a burly young farmer, had the soldier’s sword arm in a vicelike grip. Three or four other villagers were grappling the soldier’s other arm, his neck, his chest, and were slashing and battering at him with their makeshift weapons. They made little impact on his armour.

All across the village square, similar scenes were being played out. Each soldier was facing a knot of farmers and farmers’ sons. The soldiers were well armed and armoured, and obviously well trained. A village mob was no match for them. As Loggat looked across the square, he saw one of the soldiers make a powerful backhand sweep that bit deeply into a villager’s neck. The farmer staggered back in a spray of blood, and was dead by the time he hit the ground.

Two of the overlord’s men broke away from the villagers and moved to the nearest farmhouse. One kicked in the door and went inside, while the other took something from a belt pouch. The first one returned in a few moments, showing empty hands to the other. The second struck sparks from the flint and steel in his hands and set light to the thatch.

“They’re firing the houses!” a villager screamed. All the rest paused in their attack. This was all the opening the soldiers needed, and their swords flashed out. A rabble of men went for the firestarters, grabbing up and throwing stones. One farmer’s son, noted for his prowess at foot racing, closed the gap quickly. He lunged with a pitchfork, and caught the flint-bearing soldier halfway between the shoulder and the elbow. A ragged cheer rose from the other pursuers. The flint-bearer’s companion made a similar lunge. The farmer’s son stood for a moment, looking down at where his belly had been split like a pig’s at slaughter time. He collapsed in a heap, surrounded by red loops of intestine that steamed slightly in the morning air.

The sight stopped the other pursuers where they stood. They hesitated for the space of a heartbeat, then broke and fled, running for the woods. The soldiers did not bother to pursue them. The flint-bearer had by this time removed the pitchfork from his arm, and his companion examined the wound and found it minor. They resumed their business of firing houses.

Loggat coughed, and immediately wished he hadn’t. Breathing hurt; the cough racked him with fire. His eyes screwed shut. He fell onto his wounded side, trying to force it to keep still through his own body weight. He coughed again, and tasted blood. The blood was still oozing from his side, spreading in a dark patch on his shirt, and now pooling on the ground.

Someone was with him. He opened his eyes to see Senga. His own Senga, lovely Senga. She was kneeling beside him, caressing his brow. She was trying to lift up his head, hold it in her lap. Loggat focused on her face and tried to smile, tried to let her know he was all right.

“Go,” he whispered. She shook her head.

He arranged his face to look stern, and forced a stern voice from his throat. “Go!” The effort sent pain through his body in waves. “Run,” he gasped. “Save yourself. Look – look for Joram.”

The reference to Joram finally made her hesitate. “Go on,” he repeated. “Leave me.” His speech gave out, and he lay still, panting for breath and pleading with his eyes. He motioned with his head for her to leave.

At last Senga relented. She kissed his brow tenderly, gently laid his head on the ground, and rose to her feet. All around the smoke was spreading from the burning houses.

He turned his head to watch her go. She moved off, head turning from side to side, searching for their son. A soldier came running past Loggat and approached obliquely from behind her. She shouted, “Joram!” The soldier jumped, apparently startled at the shout. He slashed out with his sword. She gave a short scream and crumpled to the ground.

“Senga!” Loggat tried to scream, but his breath failed him. He struggled to rise, but could get only to his hands and knees. He crawled, but was forced to stop and gasp for breath. His vision dimmed. The fighting between the troops and the villagers was continuing, but it was becoming harder and harder to tell exactly what was happening. Loggat closed his eyes again.

A scream tore through the smoke, blasting his eyes open again. Loggat tried for a moment to rise, but he knew he could not. His body would not let him. He lay still, trying not to cough, trying not to think about Senga. And what had happened to their son? Joram was a sensible lad, he would stay away from the fighting... he would...

Loggat was beginning to feel detached from the scene. He wanted to go to Senga, to make sure she was alive, to help her, to make everything better for her. He knew his duty was to help the villagers, to stand up for them. He wanted to do all these things. But he could not. Although his eyes were open, he realised he couldn’t quite take in what was going on. He heard shouting and running, and a little further away the increasing roar and whoosh of flames. *Somebody ought to do something about that fire*, he thought. And then he thought, *I hope no-one steps on me*. And then his eyes closed once more, and stayed closed.

## 2. The Road to Stadda Spurrye

Before Loggat opened his eyes, he was aware of movement, a slow irregular rocking punctuated by occasional lurches. Each jolt sent a new shock of pain through his chest. He took a slightly deeper breath, experimentally. His chest hurt abominably, and he still felt that he couldn't catch his breath, but it was perhaps slightly eased.

"He's waking up," a gruff voice said. A booted toe nudged his leg.

Loggat opened his eyes. He was riding on the wagon, lying on a makeshift pallet of grain sacks. The six black-armoured soldiers surrounded him, lounging against the wagon's sides. They were moving through trees, following a road through a forest. He tried to move, then realised his wrists and ankles were bound with ropes. His shirt had been stripped from him, and his wounded right side was tightly strapped up.

One of the soldiers noticed that Loggat was trying to look at his wound. "Field dressing and strapping. You'll live," he said. "You're a tough one. Vashaman will be pleased."

The others grinned slyly, and there were one or two wry laughs.

"Vashaman?" Loggat managed to gasp.

"We're taking you to the Overlord Carnifex himself," said the leader. "He'll be wanting to see you."

"The – the village? My wife?" He paused to catch his breath. "My son?"

"Never you mind about them," said the leader. "You've got more than enough to worry about."

Loggat groaned. The wagon lurched over a stone, and he bit back a cry as he passed again into oblivion.

He awoke again in the early afternoon. The soldiers were eating a frugal midday meal of bread and dried meat, and taking pulls from a leather wine bottle. One noticed that Loggat's eyes were open. "Here," he said. "You must be thirsty." He held out the bottle.

Loggat squirmed to a more upright position, took the bottle, and drank. He was thirsty – that's from the loss of blood, he thought – and even this thin sour wine tasted good to him. When he returned the bottle, another soldier handed him a slab of bread, flat and hard-baked to make it keep for travelling, and a portion of meat.

Encouraged by these apparently friendly overtures, Loggat tried to start a conversation despite the pain in his chest. Why did the overlord want to see him? What would happen to him? Was Senga dead or alive, and what of Joram? What had happened to the village? But the soldiers made no reply. At last he sank back onto his grain-sack pallet and lost himself in worries and imaginings. Eventually he fell again into a fitful, feverish doze.

He regained full consciousness when the wagon halted and the soldiers jumped over its sides to the ground. The sky was growing dark. At first Loggat thought, with a pang of fear, that they must have arrived at Stadda Spurrye. Then as he looked around, he realised they had simply pulled up in a clearing near a stream. The soldiers were busying themselves fetching water and lighting a fire. Another was unyoking the oxen and leading them to the side of the water. They had stopped for the night.

One of the men saw Loggat trying to wriggle into a seated position. He came over and checked the prisoner's bonds. "Don't try anything," he warned. Loggat shook his head. He was in no condition to try anything. But something was bothering him.

"I need to go into the woods," he gasped. Seeing the look on his guard's face, he quickly added, "Unless you have a privy here."

The guard released Loggat's bonds, helped him out of the wagon, and accompanied him to a private area among the trees. As Loggat relieved himself, he scanned his surroundings as much as he dared, but it was little use. The area was completely unfamiliar to him. If they were indeed going to Stadda Spurrye, then they must have been travelling more or less to the northeast, and Loggat's experience in that direction was very limited. A distant howl rose from deeper in the forest, and was answered by others still more distant.

"Come on, don't take all day about it."

Loggat nodded, adjusted his clothing, and followed the soldier back to the campsite. Some logs and boulders had been arranged encircling the fire, and he sank gratefully onto a flat-topped stump, panting. The short walk had exhausted him.

One of the troops was roasting some chunks of fresh meat over the fire, using sharp sticks as a makeshift spit. The aroma set Loggat's mouth watering, and the sudden sensation of hunger overcame even the pain in his chest. Some rounds of camp bread were baking on flat stones near the fire, and a pot of cabbage was boiling.

The soldier who was guarding Loggat asked, “Where did you get the beef, Burrud?”

The cook, evidently named Burrud, waved a hand toward the wagon. “From one of the barrels. The shipment’s already light, so I figured a few helpings more or less wouldn’t be missed.” The rest of the camp roared with rough laughter. Burrud added, “This too,” and stirred the boiling cabbage.

Loggat’s guard seemed less amused. “If it does get missed,” he grumbled, “I only hope I’m not around.”

“Oh, shut up, Walf,” said another man. “You’re always looking on the black side of everything. I daresay you won’t pass up your chance to get some of that beef inside you.”

Loggat’s guard, evidently named Walf, took a seat near the prisoner where he could keep an eye on him. He sat silently while the others laughed and bandied words.

At last – it seemed an age to Loggat’s stomach, at least – the meat was ready and the camp bread baked. The soldiers went to their packs and drew out tin plates and spoons, and readied the knives they carried with them. Walf looked at Loggat and said, “You can eat after me.”

So Loggat had to wait and watch hungrily while the soldiers piled cabbage onto their plates and cut steaming portions of beef to eat with the fresh-baked bread. They talked and joked, and devoured large quantities, and washed it all down with the vinegary wine from their bottles.

At last Walf had had enough, and sliced off a portion of beef for Loggat. He cut the meat into reasonably sized pieces, saying, “You’re not getting a knife, you know.” Loggat didn’t care. He was ready to grab the flesh in both hands and tear at it with his teeth. The plate of food was thrust at him, and he fell upon it, ravening. He followed it with a deep draught of wine, and was accompanied by Walf when he went to the stream to rinse off his hands and mouth.

Burrud packed away the food remains so the smell would not attract animals to the camp. In ones and twos, the soldiers went to wash their utensils in the stream. They stored these away and unpacked blankets, and soon the camp was settling down for the night. Loggat was tied up again and given a blanket, and when he began to cough he was given another.

Walf had the first watch, and settled down on a log, sword ready at hand. The others spread out their blankets and lay down in a ragged circle around the campfire. The fire’s warmth was welcome in the cool air, apart from its protective glow against predators. Just as this thought crossed Loggat’s mind, it was reinforced by another howl from the trees. He couldn’t decide whether it sounded closer this time.

Though he couldn’t call it true sleep, Loggat had dozed for most of the day, and now was wide awake. He lay quietly, experimenting with his breathing to find the depth and rate that caused the least pain. He could hear the soldiers’ breathing change, one by one, as they drifted into sleep. He heard Walf shift slightly and give a quiet cough.

Loggat turned onto his back and looked up at the sky. It was clear, and the stars were bright and hard in the cool autumn air. He traced the familiar constellations – the Bull, the Wolf, the Sower. When Joram was a small boy, he had been fascinated by the stars. They had spent hours together every night they could, Joram learning to name the constellations and Loggat telling the old, old legends about how they came to be there...

*The Sower had a small farm of his own, near the edge of the forest. When he was out alone, scattering his grain, a starving mad Wolf came out of the forest and tried to devour him. Then, just as all seemed lost, his Bull burst out of its pasture, charged into the field, and killed the Wolf. As the Sower stood amazed, the Bull turned to him and spoke, saying, “Do not fear me, for I am the great god Mushef, who took the form of a bull to test your spirit. You have treated me with nothing but kindness, and so I have saved your life, and now bless you forevermore.” The Sower lived a long and happy life, and when he died Mushef put him in the sky together with the Wolf and the Bull, so that people would always remember the story and know that good must triumph over evil.*

Loggat blinked back a sudden tear. Good must triumph over evil? How could that be so? All the villagers of Woodfield were good people. They worked hard, shared what they had, helped each other through difficulties, and celebrated together in the good times. And now, what had happened to them? They were massacred, their houses set alight, their food stolen. Were any left alive? If alive now, would they survive the winter? And Senga, who had been cut down for no reason.

He tried not to think about any of it too much. The only thing he could do right here, right now, was survive. He had to regain his health and survive long enough to find out what had happened, then do whatever he could to set it right.

Another howl interrupted his thoughts. This one was surely closer. Loggat glanced sidewise at Walf. He was still seated casually, but had become somewhat more alert. He pushed another lump of wood into the fire and watched it blaze higher.

Then, off in the distance, came another sound that Loggat had never heard before. It seemed like drumming, mixed perhaps with throaty shouts, or was it a chant? It sounded in a way primitive, even brutal.

Loggat watched Walf intently from the corner of his eye. The guard had snapped to his feet, fully alert, his sword half-drawn, even though the source of the noise was clearly a mile or more away.

It had been about an hour since they had bedded down. Walf woke another of the soldiers to take his place. Loggat strained his ears as the two men spoke quietly. He caught the words “wolf” and “howling”, and then “ogres”. He was still thinking about this last when sleep came suddenly upon him.

Morning arrived suddenly with a hand shaking his shoulder. Loggat opened his eyes to the thin grey light of dawn. His bonds were removed and he was allowed to relieve himself in the woods, then to drink from the stream and splash his face with the cold fresh water. He was half-helped, half-lifted into the wagon, and his wrists and ankles were again tied as he fell back onto the sacks of grain.

“Here,” said Walf, and thrust a chunk of bread into his hands, left over from the previous night. He was not feeling particularly hungry, but ate mechanically, feeding his body. Walf offered him a slice of cold meat, but he shook his head.

Loggat’s chest still hurt him terribly, but the pain had become a background to his life, something that simply existed and need not occupy the forefront of his mind. He settled into a position that gained him a little relief and determined to stay awake this day, if at all possible.

As the wagon lurched forward, the soldiers finished their own breakfasts, made sure their packs were properly stowed, and settled more comfortably against the barrels, baskets, and sides of the wagon. Soon they were conversing desultorily, discussing the night’s camp and exchanging obscure private jokes.

Loggat watched first one, then another. One of these men was the one who had slain Senga, had cut her down from behind when she was doing no more than looking for her son. Which one was it? He had seen him only as an armoured figure from behind, through drifts of smoke and his own pain-filled, wavering vision. Eventually he had to give up. Looking at their faces, he could not identify the attacker.

As he watched them sitting there, talking and laughing, he felt a knot forming in the core of his stomach, as cold and hard as stone. *They destroyed my village*, he thought over and over. *One of them killed my wife. One of them might have killed my son.* His eyes shifted from one to another. *Look at them now, sitting and talking like normal people, like my farmers after an honest day’s work. Relaxing and telling jokes, with blood on their hands.*

For a few minutes Loggat tried to guess how many other villages they might have plundered, how many other innocent people they might have killed. Then he realised he didn’t care. He only cared about his own.

He thought back to the previous night and his vow to stay alive. Watching the soldiers, he felt his oath changing. Staying alive was only a means to an end, and the end was revenge.

Despite Loggat’s determination to stay awake, he found himself dozing off and on throughout the morning. His body insisted. During his waking periods, he had little to do but watch the soldiers and the passing scene. The forest thinned to light woodland, then to rolling open land. At regular intervals they passed farmland and pasture, and he could see buildings in the distance. A few times they passed through the centre of a village, and once through a market town.

The soldiers had taken to singing bawdy songs, of which they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply. Occasionally one or another of them would settle back for a brief nap, but never more than one at a time.

The sun climbed to its zenith, and the troops broke out something to eat. There was no fresh bread left, so it was back to the hard-baked travellers’ rations. They finished off the last of the beef from the night before, throwing the bones and scraps over the side of the wagon, and filled in the meal with the dried meat from their packs. Loggat was given travellers’ bread and dried meat, and allowed his share of wine. He ate in silence.

With his stomach full and the sun warming his body, Loggat slept again. When he woke, the sun had not moved far in the sky, but the landscape was beginning to change. The rich farmland had become thin scrub, with rocky outcrops breaking through the soil. The gently rolling landscape was becoming hilly. There were fewer ploughed fields to be seen, less cattle, and more sheep.

Loggat’s attention turned to the soldiers. They had stopped singing and, though they still conversed animatedly, they told fewer jokes. A faint indefinite air hung over them, a sense of feeling just slightly subdued.

As the afternoon wore on, the land became rockier, and Loggat felt that – although the wagon was making its way up and down hills – overall they were climbing higher. The road was, paradoxically, becoming better, smoother and wider with each mile. The soldiers’ conversation quieted, and they spent more time going over their equipment. Burrud checked the barrels he had opened, making sure they were sealed as tightly as when they had left the village.

Evening was beginning to draw in when Loggat, who was facing the rear, saw all the soldiers straighten and look at something ahead. Ignoring the pain in his chest, he squirmed round far enough to cast a glance over his shoulder. In the distance rose a high wall of grey stone, crenellated along the top and punctuated by towers. The road ran directly forward, to a massive gate.

One of the soldiers spoke. “Welcome to Stadda Spurrye, warden.”

### 3. In Stadda Spurrye

As they drew nearer, Loggat could see that Stadda Spurrye was not a stronghold or castle, as he had always believed, but was in fact an entire walled city. The great gate which they were approaching was set in a huge gatehouse, embellished along the top with Vashaman's sign of the terrible tiger-bull carved in some glossy black stone. Though the day was not yet dark, the gate was closed and guarded.

At last the wagon reached the gate. Two portal guards came forward and exchanged a few words with the soldiers in the wagon. Everything being to their satisfaction, they returned to the gatehouse and, by pulling on counterweighted chains, opened the heavy iron-bound doors. The wagon rolled through, and Loggat watched the gate close again behind. More guards were posted inside the gatehouse. The internal side of the gatehouse bore a massive iron portcullis which was, however, open.

The wagon rolled through the streets, watched by citizens who stood in silence as they passed by. None seemed surprised to see a contingent of soldiers with a bound prisoner in custody.

The streets were paved with cobbles, which jolted and pained Loggat's chest as the wagon bumped its way over them. The buildings were made partly of wood, partly of the dark grey stone Loggat had seen in the hills they had passed. Their style was plain and utilitarian, the buildings seeming little more than stout boxes with doors and windows. A few of the smaller structures were thatched, but the larger ones were roofed with wood or slate, a feature Loggat had never seen, and which seemed to him heavy and oppressive.

Near the farther end of the town the land rose into a hill, the sides of which had evidently been artificially steepened. Atop this squatted the overlord's stronghold itself, a massy structure of black stone surrounded by a curtain wall. The wagon trundled over a wooden bridge across a ditch, and began to climb the hill. At last the road flattened again, and they faced a smaller but no less imposing gatehouse, its black oak portals deeply carved with the tiger-bull rampant and roaring.

The gate guards again exchanged words with the soldiers in the wagon, then passed them through. The wagon soon pulled up outside the castle, and the soldiers climbed out. Loggat's arms and legs were unbound, and he was helped from the wagon. His arms were then pulled behind his back and bound again, more tightly, placing a painful strain on his injured chest. In the meantime, a servant had come out to take charge of the wagon, and drove it slowly around a corner of the building and out of sight.

Even before they began climbing the steps to the door, Loggat was short of breath. The position of his arms pulled on his bandages and seemed to compress his chest. Walf drew near and whispered to him, "If you value your life, you'll enter the throne room under your own power." Loggat nodded, gulped air, and hardened his determination. His guards drew their swords and fell into formation around him.

As they approached the door, the portal guards opened it respectfully. They passed through and marched along a corridor hung with paintings and tapestries, and lined with occasional seats and tables which did not look particularly useful. Loggat cast glances at the decorations. The tapestries were rich and obviously expensive, but the pictures on them were unappealing. Many were of monsters or wild beasts in the act of tearing each other apart; others were scenes of battle or gladiatorial combat. The paintings included portraits which Loggat assumed might be ancestors, or perhaps famous historical figures, but others returned to the bloody themes of fighting beasts and men, or horrendous depictions of fiendish creatures.

His determination notwithstanding, Loggat was obliged to stop and catch his breath every few yards. The soldiers tried at first to force him onwards, but soon understood that he was simply unable to progress any faster.

At last they stood before an imposing black door carved with the sign of the tiger-bull. This, Loggat instinctively knew, was the audience chamber. The soldiers paused outside to allow him to take a few breaths, then knocked and entered.

They walked upon a thick red-and-black carpet which stretched from the door to the dais upon which was Vashaman's throne. The dais was striking, of highly polished crimson stone. The throne itself was of glossy black stone, carved in severe lines which were relieved only by thin lines of gold inset along the arms and up the sides of the back. The back was high, and surmounted by the ubiquitous tiger-bull carved in deep relief and picked out in gold.

Upon this chair, seated on a thick black velvet cushion, was Vashaman, the Overlord Carnifex himself, ruler of the realm, whose merest whim was command and whose lightest word was law. Not, Loggat thought, that Vashaman would ever speak many light words. The overlord sat silently and still, watching them approach. He was a tall man, and thinner than Loggat had expected. His head was long and high-browed, with

pale white skin setting off his black hair and deep-set black eyes. He wore a uniform of black trimmed with gold embroidery, a red robe with a brilliant cloth-of-gold lining, and a gold crown cunningly worked to resemble a wreath of plaited vines.

Vashaman was flanked on either side by guards bearing polearms which served double duty as banners. These soldiers in turn were flanked by more ordinary-looking men-at-arms. All were clad in the black armour and black leather overtunics that Loggat's own troops wore, the uniform of the overlord's personal guard.

Loggat, surrounded by his guards, approached the dais. "Eyes down, prisoner!" shouted Walf. "Eyes down in the presence of the Overlord Carnifex." Loggat obediently bowed his head and studied the carpet, trying not to pant too heavily. At last they stopped.

"My Overlord Carnifex," stated Walf in ceremonious tones, "we return with taxes from the village of Woodfield. As the amount was insufficient despite all warnings, we also return with plunder, and we bring to you as prisoner one Loggat, once warden of Woodfield."

"Step forward, Loggat, once warden of Woodfield." Vashaman's voice was low and unemotional, but hummed with a sense of power.

The guards standing before Loggat stepped to the sides, and the warden moved a few paces forward, keeping his head down. It took him all his effort to control his breathing, which was coming more and more shallow and quick.

"Look at me, prisoner." Loggat looked up and met the cold, deep-set eyes which surveyed him casually. "What say you now?"

"I have – nothing to say," Loggat began, but was then racked by gasps and coughs. He struggled to retain his balance.

Vashaman looked sharply at his troops. "Is this man diseased?" he snapped.

"No, my overlord," Walf replied. "He was injured in the taking of Woodfield. I believe his lung has been punctured."

Loggat had by this time fallen to his knees. The coughing had stopped, but he continued to gulp for air. Vashaman examined him more intently, then said, "If he is so badly injured, what good is he to me?"

"He is very tough, my overlord," said Walf. "Many men would have died already from such a wound. Once healed, he should serve you well."

The overlord considered for a moment, then nodded. "Take him to the doctor, then, and let him be healed." He waved a hand in dismissal. Two of the soldiers helped Loggat to his feet, and the procession turned and retraced its steps along the carpet and out through the carved black door.

The soldiers led the way along less ceremonial corridors and down a flight of steps, which Loggat needed considerable help to negotiate. They stopped at a door outside which an ordinary soldier sat comfortably. He sprang to his feet as they approached. Walf nodded a reply to his salute, then opened the door.

The doctor was a small but muscular man, with the hard-set expression of one who had seen a great deal of the suffering of others and had become inured to it. His eyes ran up and down Loggat's frame, reminding him of a horse dealer looking over a beast at the fair.

"Lung, is it?" he said tersely. Walf nodded, and Loggat coughed as if on cue. The doctor said, "Hmm. Take him over there," and pointed to a narrow iron bed at the far side of the room.

The infirmary was fairly large and contained five such beds, each equipped with an iron shackle at the foot and furnished with a thin straw-stuffed pallet and a lumpy-looking pillow. Only two were occupied. In the bed nearest the door was a huskily built man with his right arm in a sling. He sat up, propped with a pillow behind his back, and watched them pass.

"What cheer, Garrick?" called out one of Loggat's guard as they went by.

The man raised his left arm in greeting. "Ho there, Tallin. Wrenched my shoulder in training." Tallin gave a wry chuckle and quickened his step to keep up with the group.

Loggat sank gratefully onto the bed, panting. Walf untied his hands, bringing some measure of relief, and the doctor locked the shackle around his ankle. "You can leave him with me," said the doctor. The soldiers turned to go, one or two murmuring a word of good-bye.

"Lie down," the doctor commanded, and Loggat was happy enough to obey. The bandaging around his chest, grubby by now, was unwrapped, revealing a thick blood-soaked dressing that adhered firmly to his skin. The doctor muttered and disappeared into a side room, returning shortly with a bowl of water.

The water was warm, and the doctor sponged it around and over the clotted dressing until it came free. "Might as well clean you up a bit," he grumbled, and sponged Loggat's face and the rest of his chest before taking the bowl away.

He returned to examine the wound, bending closely to sniff. “Seems healthy enough,” he commented approvingly. “It’s closing up well.” The doctor turned to Loggat. “Having trouble breathing, are you?”

Loggat nodded. “It’s better now that I’m lying down.”

“I should think so. How far did you come – on your own legs, that is?”

“From the front door to the overlord’s throne room, and then here.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed. Well, I was going to put in a chest tube, but perhaps you don’t need one. We’ll see how you get on.”

The doctor left Loggat and turned his attention to the next bed, on which a painfully thin man lay, his breath coming in faint rasps. This patient was also shackled to his bed, though Loggat was of the opinion that he would never have made it to his feet if he’d tried. His brow shone and his hair was matted with sweat, and he seemed neither awake nor asleep. The doctor laid a hand on the patient’s brow, and shook his head. He fetched a fresh bowl of water and sponged the man’s head and chest.

“What’s the matter with him?” asked Loggat.

“Swamp fever,” said the doctor. “Not a lot of hope for him, I’m afraid. But as long as it doesn’t progress to a consumption, he might pull through.”

Loggat sank back onto his pillow for a moment, then a thought crossed his mind. “Swamp fever?” he asked. “But we’re in the mountains, aren’t we?”

The doctor made a noise that might have been the shadow of a laugh. “You don’t know much about this place, do you?” was his only reply.

Loggat pondered this for a time, then fell into an exhausted sleep.

He woke early the next morning, and the doctor brought him some buttered bread. The injured soldier’s captain came soon afterwards to check his man’s progress, and ended up taking him back to the barracks. “Light duties for the next week or so, remember,” the doctor called after them.

The patient with swamp fever looked worse, even to Loggat’s untrained eye. He rolled from side to side and muttered in delirium. The doctor sponged him with cool water and spooned warm milk into his mouth. Loggat could see in the doctor’s eye that the case was grave.

The doctor had little to do after that, and seemed pleased to have Loggat for company. He pulled a wooden chair up to the warden’s bedside and chatted quietly, though he refused to reveal his name or to discuss anything to do with Vashaman or the details of life in Stadda Spurrie. He seemed interested in the quiet village life of Woodfield, and in the wagon journey Loggat had just undergone.

The morning passed thus peacefully. Around midday the doctor stepped outside for a brief word with the guard at the door, and soon after a servant boy appeared with three covered bowls on a tray. The doctor helped Loggat to sit up, propped on his pillow, and put a bowl and a wooden spoon into his hands. “This should help replenish your blood,” he said. It was a savoury soup, thick with lentils and vegetables, and Loggat ate with relish.

For the feverish man in the next bed, the doctor had ordered a thin broth. He fed it into the patient’s mouth, one slow spoonful at a time. The patient seemed less delirious, but only because he had sunk deeper into stupor. He swallowed the broth only by reflex, and often sputtered and choked.

Loggat had finished his meal long before the doctor finished feeding the fever patient. The doctor fetched warm water and sponged the man clean, then at last took a bowl for himself, the same soup that Loggat had enjoyed. He returned to Loggat’s bedside and conversed while he ate.

When lunch was finished, the doctor brought a jug of small beer and a mug to Loggat’s bedside, for him to drink as he pleased. “I must go off now and see to my records,” he said. “Call me if you need me.”

Loggat had a drink, then sat back to consider in quiet all that had happened to him in the past few days. Again and again he saw in his mind the plundering of Woodfield, the attacks by Vashaman’s troops on his villagers and the villagers’ ineffective response. And more than anything else he saw Senga being cut down from behind, when she had done nothing more than call out. He brooded over this memory, went over it again and again, almost relished the accompanying sensations of helpless anguish and impotent fury. It fed the heat of his revenge. Whatever happened, he must not forget his revenge.

Suddenly his painful reverie was broken, interrupted by coughs and choking sounds from the next bed. “Doctor! Doctor!” Loggat shouted, and the doctor came running from his side room to the feverish man’s bedside.

A brief examination of the patient made it clear that there was little that could be done. The doctor went to the infirmary door and exchanged a quiet word with the guard, who followed him back to the bedside.

The guard took the sick man’s pillow and pressed it hard over his face, then laid his arm across the man’s throat and leaned down with all his weight. After a few seconds the patient ceased to move or make noise.

After a few minutes the guard rose and left the room. The doctor replaced the pillow under the man's head and pulled the blanket over his face.

Loggat had watched the entire episode in silent astonishment, but now he found his voice. "You killed him," he whispered. "You ordered him killed."

"Yes," said the doctor.

"How could you?"

"There was no hope."

Loggat remembered speaking to a doctor who had visited Woodfield from the neighbouring market town. "But I thought – don't doctors always say, where there's life there's hope?"

The doctor shook his head. "I have my orders."

Loggat was baffled. "Orders?"

For the first time since the patient's death, the doctor looked Loggat in the eye. He seemed haggard and tired. "I'm as much a slave as anyone," he said quietly. "As much as you, or that man there." He pulled the shoulder of his tunic down to reveal a diamond-shaped mark branded into his upper arm. "Why do you think a guard is always at my door? It's not for my protection, I assure you."

"But orders?" Loggat pressed.

"Have you ever owned an old horse, or an old cow? There comes a time when it's simply not worth fighting for the beast's life." The doctor turned again to the covered form in the bed. "Overlord Vashaman is... economical when it comes to the lives of his property. If they can be healed, then let them be healed. But if death is certain, what point is there in keeping them alive for a few extra days, or weeks? It's a waste of food, he says."

Loggat could say nothing, either to cast blame or to show sympathy. The doctor returned to his side room in silence. After a time, two soldiers entered the infirmary and took the body away, also without saying anything.