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Opening extract from

Monster Blood Tattoo: Lamplighter

Written by

D M Cornish

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MONSTER BLOOD TATTOO



THE HALF-CONTINENT IS BECOMING EVEN MORE UNSAFE — MONSTER ATTACKS ARE ON THE RISE, AND EVERY FAR-FLUNG VILLAGE OR TOWN IS CALLING FOR HELP TO FIGHT THEM. INTO THIS DANGEROUS LANDSCAPE THE LAMPLIGHTERS MUST VENTURE DAILY, KEEPING THE ROADS SAFELY LIT FOR TRAVELLERS. IT IS NOT A JOB FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED, AND EVERY WEEK THERE ARE REPORTS OF NEW THEROSCADES.

Foundling Rossamünd Bookchild, sworn into the Emperor's Service as a prentice lamplighter, is finding his training at Winstermill Fortress difficult and lonely. His life is further complicated by the arrival of a young wit, determined to spite her famous mother by becoming a lowly lantern-stick. As Rossamünd begins to make new friends in this sinister world, he also seems to make more enemies, finding himself pushed towards a terrible destiny, a fate beyond anything he could ever have imagined.

Book Two of the epic series Monster Blood Tattoo, *Lamplighter*, promises twice the action and adventure, twice the fascinating characters and incredible creatures, twice the excitement and entertainment! Enter the world of the Half-Continent, and don't forget your hat!

Cornish's world-building ... the unique and fascinating Half-Continent, where ships with organic engines sail caustic vinegar oceans and monster-hunters gain supernatural powers through dangerous surgeries, is a delightful, refreshing standout in a sea of cookie-cutter fantasy worlds.

Library Journal, starred review

MONSTER BLOOD TATTOO: LAMPLIGHTER

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A HORNED NICKER



MASTER COME-LATELY

calendar(s) sometimes called strigaturpis or just strig – a general term for any combative woman; the Gotts call them mynchen – after the do-gooding heldin-women of old. Calendars gather themselves into secretive societies called claves (its members known as claviards) – constituted almost entirely of women – organised about ideals of social justice and philanthropy, particularly providing teratological protection for the needy and the poor. They usually live in somewhat isolated strongholds – manorburghs and basterseighs – known as calanseries. Some claves hide people – typically women – in trouble, protecting them in secluded fortlets known as sequesturies. Other claves offer to teach young girls their graces and fitness of limb in places known as mulierbriums. Calendars, however, are probably best known for the odd and eccentric clothing they don to advertise themselves.

THE short run of road that went east from Winstermill to Wellnigh House had a reputation as the easiest watch on the Wormway – and for the most part it was. Known as the Pettiwiggin or the Harrowmath Pike, it was so close to Winstermill, the mighty fortress of the lamplighters, that those who used it were rarely troubled by nickers or bogles. Close and safe, the Pettiwiggin was ideal for teaching young prentice-lighters the repetitious tasks of a lamplighter.

For nigh on two months the "lantern-sticks", as they were called by the scarred veterans who taught and chastised

them, had been at their training. In another two, if each boy made it through, he would be promoted to lampsman. On that great day it would be his privilege to be billeted to one of the many cothouses – the small fortresses punctuating the long leagues of the Wormway – to begin his life as a lampsman proper.

At this middle point in their training the prentices were taken out on the road to begin the lighting and the dousing of the great-lamps that lit the Wormway. Until now they had marched and drilled, learned their letters and practised at lighting on yard-lanterns safe within Winstermill. Rossamünd had found it all as boring as he once feared a lamplighter's life might be. Indeed, his first excursion out to light lamps had been uniformly laborious and uneventful, the overnight stay in Wellnigh House uncomfortable, and the return to the manse dousing the lamps the next morning as dull as the night before. He keenly regretted that he might never become a vinegaroon as he had once hoped, and often thought to himself, *Oh, that's not how* they'd *do it in the navy; that's not what* they'd *do on a ram.*

For Rossamünd the first half of prenticing had been long, yet not quite as lonely as his old life at Madam Opera's Estimable Marine Society for Foundling Boys and Girls. Here at Winstermill he shared the trials of training with the other prentices, all boys of a similar age from poor and obscure origins like his. Together they fumbled through each movement of their fodicar drill; together they winced at each reluctant, shoulder-wrenching shot of pistol

or fusil; together they balmed their feet after day-long marching. Yet the other lads were not nearly as keen on pamphlets or the matter they contained – tales of the heroic progenitors of the Empire and the monsters they slew. Most could barely read, despite the attempted remedies of "letters", the reading and writing class under Seltzerman 1st Class Humbert. None of them showed any interest in the vinegar seas or the Senior Service, nor desired the life of a vinegaroon. "Grass-combers", Master Fransitart, his old dormitory master, would have called them – true lubberly, ground-hugging landsmen.

Rossamünd's failure to get to the manse in time for the start of prenticing meant he had missed that first crucial period when fragile bonds of friendship begin. He had been late only one week, but Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod had dubbed him "Master Come-lately", and the name had stuck.

One skill he had learned at Madam Opera's proved exceptionally useful. The hours spent keenly watching his old master and dispensurist Craumpalin had shown their fruit, for he was known for his facility with potives and restoratives. He had been made the custodian of the prentice-watch's chemistry, doling out repellents or healing draughts where necessary. This earned him a little respect, but it meant that out on the road, while the others carried a short-barrelled musket known as a fusil, he was to content himself with his fodicar and a satchel of potives. However, he had seen the effect of both musket ball and repellent. As reassuring as it was to have a firelock in your hands that

could cough and boom startlingly at an enemy, a well-aimed potive could deal with many more monsters at once and often more effectively.

The evening of this second prentice-watch, Rossamünd was called forward, joining the six others he had been listed with when he first began as a prentice-lighter. These were the boys of the 3rd Prentice-Watch, Q Hesiod Gæta. Though, by letter-fall order, Rossamünd's name should have appeared second-from-top in the appropriate triple-marked ledgers ("B" for Bookchild), he was nevertheless gathered with the six whose names were at the end of it, lads like Giddian Pillow and Crofton Wheede. For a second afternoon these six and Rossamünd stood in single file on the Forming Square as the other prentices looked on. The platoon of prentices was sectioned into three quartos, one of which would go out on the road each evening to light the lamps, staying in Wellnigh House over the night and returning to Winstermill the next dawning, putting out the lights and getting back by mid-morning. Each quarto was named after a doughty lamplighter-marshal of old: Q Protogenës, Q Io Harpsicarus and Q Hesiod Gæta, Rossamünd's own.

With a cry of "A light to your path!" Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod led the watch through the great bronze gates of Winstermill down the steep eastern drive known as the Approach and on to the Pettiwiggin. After them came the crusty Lampsmen 1st Class Assimus, Bellicos and Puttinger, veteran lighters glaring and complaining under

their breath, barely tolerating the green incompetence of the prentices.

Much of the six-mile stretch of the highroad was raised on a dyke of earth, lifting it almost a yard above the Harrowmath – the great flat plain on which Winstermill was built – giving a clear view over the high wild grasses. Ever the wayward lawn of the Harrowmath was mown by fatigue parties of peoneers and local farm labourers with their glinting scythes, ever it would grow back, thick and obscuring. At its eastern end, after five miles and eighteen lamps, the Pettiwiggin descended flush with the land and passed through a small woodland, the Briarywood. Tall sycamores and lithe wandlimbs grew on either side of the way, with shrubby evergreen myrtles and knotted briars flourishing thickly about their roots. Yesternight, when the prentice-watch had worked through it, Rossamünd had keenly felt the workings of mild threwd – that ghastly sensation of hidden watchfulness and threat that thrilled all around. This evening it had grown a little stronger as he went along, tiny prickles of terror upon his neck, and its subtleties felt like a warning.

There was a great-lamp to light at the beginning of the Briary, one at its end and another right in its midst. This middle light was found in a small clearing on the shoulder of the highroad.

After this only five lamps to go, Rossamünd consoled himself. Puffing at the stinging cold, he stared suspiciously at the darkling woods about him. The thorny twine of

branch and limb crowded the broad verge, newly pruned by the day-watch fatigue party out gathering firewood. Anything might be creeping behind those withy-walls, lurking in the dark beneath the briar and winter-nude hawthorn, sneaking between thin pale trunks, hungry, waiting. Behind him the glow of the cold evening gloaming could be seen through a grandly arched gap in the tall trees where the Pettiwiggin entered the woods. The sky showed all about as pallid slits between the black of the lithesome trees. In the thin light Rossamünd adjusted the strap of his salumanticum – the satchel holding the potives – and checked once more that all within were in their place. He had been as eager as the other boys to start at lighting proper, but now here, out in this wild unwalled place, he was not so sure. He arched his back and looked up past the steep brim of his almost new, lustrous black thrice-high through the overhanging branches at the measureless wan blue of evening. Without realising it, he gave a nervous sound, almost a sigh.

"Are we keeping ye up, Master Come-lately?"

This was Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod. Even when he hissed angrily, the Lamplighter-Sergeant seemed to be shouting. He was always shouting, even when he was supposed to be talking with the habitual hush of the night-watch.

Rossamünd snapped back his attention. "No, Lamplighter-Sergeant, I just ...!"

"Silence!"

Ducking his head to hide a frown, Rossamünd swallowed

at an indignant lump and held his tongue. *Can't he feel the horrors growing?*

From the first lamp of the afternoon until now, the prentice-watch had stopped at every lamp-post to wind out the light using the crank-hooks at the end of their blackened fodicars to ratchet the winch within each lamp. Bundled as best they could be against the bitter, biting night, they halted once again, stamping and huffing as Grindrod called Punthill Plod forward. The boy pumped the winch a little awkwardly and wound out the phosphorescent bloom on its chain, drawing it out into the glass bell of the seltzer-filled lamps, where it came alive with steadily increasing effulgence. The prentices not working the lamp looked on while Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod spelled out each rote-learned step.

The little thrills of threwd prickled all the more, and Rossamünd could no longer watch so dutifully. Something was coming, something foul and intending harm – he could feel it in his innards.

There it was: the clatter of horses' hooves, wild and loud. A carriage was approaching, and fast.

"Off the road, boys! Off the road!" the lampsmen called in unison, herding the prentice-lighters on to the verge with a push and a shove of their fodicars. Buffeted by the back or shoulders of several larger boys, Rossamünd was shoved with them, almost falling in the scramble.

"The wretched baskets! Who is fool enough to trot horses at this gloamin' hour?" Lamplighter-Sergeant

Grindrod snarled, mustachios bristling. "See if ye can eye the driver, lads – we might have a writ to write back at Winstermill!"

From out of the dark ahead six screaming horses bolted towards them, carrying a park-drag – a private coach – with such bucking, rattling violence it was sure to break to bits even as it shattered past the stunned lighters.

The prickle of threwd at Rossamünd's back became urgent.

"There's no coachman, Sergeant!" someone cried.

Rossamünd's internals gripped and a yelp of terror was strangled as it formed. A dark, monstrous thing was rising from the rear of the park-drag. Massive horns curled back from its crown; the slits of its eyes glowed wicked orange. Threwd exploded like pain up the back of Rossamünd's head as the carriage shot by, the stench of the horned thing upon it rushing up his nostrils with the gust of their passing.

Some boys wailed.

"Frogs and toads!" Grindrod cursed. "The carriage is attacked!"

More horned monsters could be seen, horrifyingly large, as the coach-and-six smashed on. They clung to the sides of the carriage, worrying and wrestling with the passengers within. The weight and fury of the beasts were so great the whole carriage tipped on to two wheels as it sped. A yellow-green flare of potive burst from a window, flinging one vile nicker from the vehicle in a high, hissing

arc, and leaving a fizzing trail of reeking fume that rained fur and flesh on the prentices. Head aflame with false-fire, the monster crashed into the briars, a charred ruin. Even as this one flew, another beast leaped from the park-drag to the back of the lead mare. As large as the horse itself, the blighted creature bit into the mane and neck of the hapless, panicked nag. The horse shrieked its dying whinny and fell beneath the grinding hooves of its fellows. The whole vehicle careered and lurched as the team was brought down, sheer momentum tumbling the carriage from the Wormway. With a sickening clash of shattering wood and grinding bones, it skidded and smashed into a dense thicket of tall trunks on the farther side of the road.

For an agony of seconds there was a terrible stillness, the only sounds the mewling of a single mortally injured horse and Grindrod's muttered encouragements to the prentices.

Rossamünd struggled to accept what he had just seen, he and his fellow lantern-sticks agog at the barely lit suggestion of wreckage and mutilation barely fifty yards away among the trees.

"Ground crooks and present arms!" Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod gruffed, rousing the prentice-lighters from their stunned dumbness. "Form two ranks for firing by quarto, prentices in front, lampsmen at back! Master Come-lately, stand to our right with yer potives. Show yer flints bravely, lads!"

Driving their fodicars into the roadside to make a hedge

of steel, the prentice-watch formed up in two lines behind these, facing the carriage wreck. With the coldly lambent light of the lamp at their backs, the six other boys crouched at the front, the four men stood behind.

Putting himself to the side of this formation, Rossamünd gripped two scripts in a trembling hand, a double dose ready for throwing. One was a cloth salpert of Frazzard's powder to stagger and blind; the other a fragile porcelain caste of loomblaze, a fiery doom. He desperately wished they had a leer with them to peer into the gathering dark and tell better where the monsters were.

Indistinctly lit at the edge of the great-lamp's nimbus glow, great horned shadows stirred and began to stalk about the partly smashed cabin of the coach.

"At least five of the baskets, and as big and cruel as ye never should hope to meet," Lampsman Bellicos hissed in awe.

"Aye," Grindrod growled, his voice all a-hush now. "I bain't seen naught like 'em before. Have ye, Assimus?"

Lampsman Assimus grunted. "Where did they come from, I wonder?"

The Lamplighter-Sergeant's pale eyes glittered. "We'll have to work some pretty steps tonight if we're going to preserve the lads."

A murmur of dismay shuddered through the prentices.

Two or three of the huge, hunched shadows ripped and gnawed at the stricken horses. Others clawed at the broken carriage, trying to get to the tasty morsels within who,

obviously still alive, could be heard crying out. Women's voices.

"That changes things! Other lives are in the balance now, and protecting 'em is our duty," Grindrod said firmly. "Ply yer firelocks briskly, hit yer mark; a coward's mother never weeps his end. Master Lately! Time for ye to produce the worst yer salt-bag has to offer. Ye must defend us as we reload, boy! Prentices! Present and level on that blighted slip jack stumbling there!"

One of the horned nickers had appeared on the road. Its silhouette was clear against the pallid glimpse of sky showing where the Pettiwiggin entered the wood.

"Ranks to fire together in volley!" With a rattle of unison action, prentice and lighter levelled their fusils on this creature even as it became aware of them. At the muted metallic clicker of many cocking flints, it fixed them with a gleaming, cunning gaze that seemed to say *You're next* ...

Potives already in hand, Rossamünd adjusted his salumanticum so that it would not tangle a good throw.

"Stay to the line!" Grindrod continued, low and grim. "Reload handsomely if ye want to live – it may come to hand strokes soon enough, but I *will* see ye to yer billets safe tonight!"

Rossamünd's throat gripped at his swallowing: to come to hand strokes – to fight hand-to-hand with a bogle – was to grapple with terror itself. Smaller, weaker-seeming bogles than these could make pie-mince of a large man. He knew what hand strokes would mean: gashing and iron-tasting

terror. It was only barely learnt duty that kept him to his place.

Grindrod raised his arm, the prelude to the order to fire, yet before he could complete the command a great churning disorientation tumbled over the prentice-watch.

Rossamünd reeled as the world was turned right ways wrong and outside in.

The prentice-watch fumbled their weapons and some cursed in fright.

"They've got a wit in there ..." managed Lampsman Bellicos through spasming, grinding teeth.

"And a bad one too ..." Puttinger wheezed.

Rossamünd had spent some time with a fulgar on the way to Winstermill all those weeks ago, and now here he was feeling the working of a wit. *So this is what it is to suffer their frission* ... The sensation quickly passed, leaving a sick headachy funk.

The nicker on the road was gone.

There was a smarting flash from the ruined coach – some kind of illuminating potive that quickly became a glaring rose-coloured flare lifted high by a small, slight figure. A woman was struggling from the wreck, dazzling the scene with a brilliant ruby light that stung the eyes. The monsters shied from that strange red glare, retreating into the darkness between tangled trunks.

"Ah! Bitterbright!" growled Lampsman Assimus, shielding his sight with an outstretched arm. "That's a smart bit of skoldin'."