



A HORN-ED 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.

**T**HE 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 balméd 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 throwd – 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 lithe-some 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 unwallled 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 horn-ed 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 horn-ed 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 fodcars 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 horn-ed 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 horn-ed 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 learned 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’.”

“Aye,” Grindrod growled, “but wantonly witting and blinding us won’t help us help them. “Make ready and keep a squint so ye can see into that blasted light.”

Amazed, struggling to see what was happening, Rossamünd squinted, his eyes watering in the quick, painful brilliance. Bitterbright was powerful chemistry that took great skill to keep burning, and amid the confusion he was desperate to see its maker.

Bold again, the monsters paced a careful circle about the woman, some of them showing as black shadows against the flare as they stalked between the calendars and the lamplighters, their feral stink wafting over the prentice-watch. The smallest nicker was at least seven foot, as far as Rossamünd could tell, the biggest maybe over nine. A-bristle with stiff fur, sharp and slender horns curving back wickedly over their long skulls, they swayed menacingly as they bobbed and lurched in complete and unnerving silence. Slowly the nickers arranged themselves with grim deliberation.

Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod kept his eye fixed on the monsters. “Level on that nearest brute. We’ll see if we can’t even odds a little.”

No sooner had he said this than a slight figure sprang out from the carriage, a girl in strange costume, long hair flailing as she leaped. An angry, frightened call followed her, something like “Threnody, *no!*” The girl came on, dancing towards a monster, clutching at her temple. Once more Rossamünd felt that weird and deeply unpleasant

giddiness of frission contract in the middle of his head then quickly flex in the pit of his stomach. His vision failed briefly this time and he reeled, as did all those of the prentice-watch. Bellicos retched; Rossamünd's fellow prentice Wrangle vomited and, finally overcome, three other boys collapsed.

Grindrod swore as he staggered. "Lackbrained wit! What's she playing at?"

"They're stinkin' calendars!" Rossamünd heard Assimus' angry whisper.

Rossamünd had read of such as these. They were a society of women – lahzars, skolds, pistoleers and the rest – set to doing good, protecting the weak and pursuing other noble causes.

The agony rapidly passed, as it had before, leaving its aching in Rossamünd's skull. Yet he kept enough of his senses to see that though his fellow lighters were reeling, the monsters were not suffering much at all. The striving of the long-haired calendar had done little to deter the nickers. She was not practised enough at her witting – it was random, inept. And now the monsters pounced, the largest blocking Rossamünd's view of her in its ravenous intent.

Again they felt the wit's wild frission, driving every one of the prentice-watch still standing to his knees. One of the nickers fell too. With a weird shriek, two more oddly dressed figures pounced from the shattered wood and frame while a third, bearing the bitterbright, struggled after. By

the swaying rose light the two dashed to the young wit's defence, prancing and whirling, dancing about her as they began a mortal struggle with the horn-ed nickers, their hands trailing long lacerating wires. The monsters shied and cast about wildly, raging with disturbing strangled yips as the figures harried and slit first at one then another, keeping them at bay, pirouetting clear of every swipe.

One of the dancers misstepped, and that was her end as the horn-ed nicker gripped and ripped and clawed her – an end more terrible yet than Licurius' at the carving nails of the grinnings. Bile bubbled up from his gullet as Rossamünd tried to conceive how a living person could so quickly be bent and rent to a meaningless mash. Not even the stoutest proofing could stop such elemental strength. Even as this woman was slain the other dancer became frantic and, with a grieving wail, danced madly about the killer of her sister, cutting at it over and over, slicing off one of its horns, severing a mangled arm, removing an ear. Another beast sprung from a thicket, snatched the flailing woman about her stomach and chewed its great fangs into her face. With a flash-and-bang that echoed through the spindly, spiny wood, someone still inside the cabin fired a pistola – a salinumbus by the flat, heavy slap of the discharge. Hit low with the shot, this ambuscading nicker tottered, dropping its maimed prey. Another thick pistol-crack and a glare of orange flickered about the head of the beast, followed quickly by boisterous crackling. Its head afire, the creature collapsed back with a strange, husky

howling, tripping over its victims and falling to the earth. The glare of its burning added light to the furor.

As these things were happening, several nickers had closed with the long-haired wit, who cowered and sent out ineffectual flutterings of her witting powers. Even from where he stood, Rossamünd could feel threwd emanating from these monsters as the beasts sought to best their prey through anguish and mad terror alone.

His fellow prentices whimpered.

“Pernicious threwd!” cursed Assimus.

“Take your aim on that leftmost basket!” Grindrod cried.

The prentice-watch brought up their firelocks.

“Fire!”

With a sharp, rattling clatter the quarto fired, startling the horn-ed nickers, gun smoke obscuring their view.

One of the monsters collapsed under many hits of musket ball and crumpled, gasping, to the verge. Sets of glimmering monster eyes – maybe four, maybe five – regarded the lighters malignantly.

“Reload! Reload!” Grindrod demanded, and the prentices hurried to comply.

The long-haired calendar sank to her knees.

The monsters looked to her again and closed for the slaying.

Yet the smallest calendar staggered in between. It was she who had set the bitterbright to burning and kept it bright for her sisters to see. She flung the glare at an encroaching nicker, the red glimmer dimming rapidly now

that she no longer fed its chemistry. The beast recoiled as the potive struck and a smoulder set in its fur, quickly turning to ruby flames that engulfed head and shoulders. Regardless, two others approached slavering noiselessly, tongues lolling and licking at the smell of blood and smoke.

By the light of the failing bitterbright Rossamünd could see that this brave woman wore the conical hat of a skold and white spoor lines down both sides of her face. A thick hackle of cream-coloured fur wrapped about her neck and shoulders, and strange little wings protruded from her back. She looked fragile, vulnerable, doomed.

One set of glowing eyes, however, had stayed fixed on the prentices hurrying new rounds into their fusils. This nicker chose them as its next victims and pounced, taking five yards with each springing lope.

“By quarto!” Grindrod hollered.

The lantern-sticks struggled to get their weapons up in time as in five strides the beast was halfway towards them, foul breath steaming from its gnashing teeth.

Rossamünd lifted his arm ready to throw his chemistry.

“Level!”

The horn-ed terror arched itself as it ran at them, ready to pounce. Almost in unison the other nickers lashed at the calendars ... and froze as if each was stricken. The monster rushing them toppled and skidded along the road in mid-stride.

“What the ...!” Grindrod exclaimed.

“Saved,” whimpered Crofton Wheede.

“She’s a bane!” marvelled Assimus. Both skold and wit, banes were rare and extraordinary.

Indeed, the calendar, though clearly struggling, was now touching her left temple, a gesture characteristic of a wit. The prentice-watch looked on in awe as, with a precise show of frightening potency, the woman caused the largest beast before her to writhe in paroxysms of agony while holding the other two frozen. So skilled was she that, unlike her long-haired compatriot, she sent no wild washings of frission to trouble the lampsmen and their charges. All Rossamünd could feel was a vague fluttering in his innards.

With a hoarse sound almost like a whinny, the monster bent on the lamplighters struggled to break free of the calendar’s invisible grip. It stumbled sideways, tried to turn and lunge at the quarto of the prentice-watch, their weapons still levelled and ready.

“Fire!” Grindrod hollered, and the prentice-watch let go a clattering volley at the beast. It gave voice to a disturbing, sheeplike bleat and ceased its struggling.

Still the calendar bane held the other two beasts in a prison unseen while a pistoleer pulled herself from the ruin of the transport. She drew forth two long-barrelled pistols and fired both point-blank into the glimmering, helpless eyes of one of the pinioned creatures. With a violent jerk and gouts of black pouring from its head, the beast expired.

All that remained was the largest monster. A tortured

thing it was now, twisting and thrashing upon the ground, a captive of its own agony. The woman never moved, never touched it, a hand always at her temple. Slowly the creature's movements slackened; slowly its writhings turned to twitchings and finally to nothing. Its terrifying orange eyes faded and at last were extinguished.

With an audible and weary exhalation, the calendar bane sagged to the ground.

Rossamünd let out a quiet relieved sigh of his own.

"Ye've done it, lads!" Grindrod exclaimed, proud and a little amazed. "Ye've just won through yer first thero-scade."

*It's not my first,* Rossamünd thought but kept to himself.

"There'll be punctings for ye all after this," the Lamplighter-Sergeant continued.

"It's been a prodigious long time since a prentice was marked," Bellicos chipped in.

The prentices grinned at each other weakly, happy simply to be alive.

*I don't want to be puncted!* Rossamünd fretted.

Grindrod turned to him. "Ye're carrying the salt-bag, Master Lately. Ye can come with me," he declared.

Leaving the lampsmen to organise the prentices into piquets, the Lamplighter-Sergeant stalked over to the wreck of the park-drag. The calendar bane and pistoleer were bent over one of their fallen while the long-haired wit sat slumped in the twigs and dirt by the bristled corpse of a dead nicker.

“The snivelling snot – almost ruined us all with her wanton wit’s pranks,” Grindrod cursed under his breath, then called as they approached, “Hoi, calendars! Bravely fought and well won, m’ladies! Lamplighter-Sergeant Grindrod and a prentice come to offer what aid we might.”

Crouched by the body of her comrade whose face was a gory mess, the bane looked up at him. Her cheeks and brow glistened with a lustrous patina of sweat; her eyes were sunken and her skin flushed. Rossamünd thought she looked more ill than injured. “We may have triumphed in the fight, but the loss of two sisters is never well,” she returned in a soft voice, with a hint of a musical, southern accent. “Lady Dolours you may call me, Lamplighter-Sergeant; bane and laude to the Lady Vey, esteemed august of the Right of the Pacific Dove. Your assistance is welcome. My sister languishes with these terrible bites to her face but will survive if attended to quickly. I would tend her myself, but I lack the right scripts. Do you carry staunches? Vigorants?” All this time she had not stood, and the effort of speaking left her breathless.

Keen to please, Rossamünd nodded eagerly. “Lamplighter-Sergeant, I have what she requires,” he said emphatically as he fossicked about in the potive satchel. “Thrombis and a jar of bellpomash.” The first would stop a wound’s flowing and the second revive spirits when taken in food or drink.

“As it should be, prentice.” Grindrod nodded curt approval. “Ye may give them what they need.”

Rossamünd held the jars of potives as the pistoleer

ministered to the gruesome injuries on her sister's face. He forced himself to keep watching, to not flinch and wince and look away from the gore: he was no use to anyone if he let others' wounds trouble him. With a fright he saw a flash on the edge of sight, and was startled by a *Crack!* as Bellicos put his fusil to the head of a prostrate nicker and brought its twitching throes to an end.

"I must ask ye, Lady maiden-fraught, what possessed ye to be travelling in the eve of a day with a six-horse team?" Grindrod folded his arms. "Ye ought to know it only encourages the bogles!"

The diminutive calendar called Dolours looked the Lamplighter-Sergeant up and down as if he were a block-headed simpleton. "That I do," she returned wearily, "as does even the least schooled. The horses were proofed in shabraques, sir, and doused with the best nullodours we possess; and had we been allowed a night's succour by your less-than-cheerful brothers at Wellnigh, we would not have needed to venture forth so foolishly in the unkind hours." She held the sergeant-lighter's stare. "But we were refused lodging at that cot, directly and to our faces. No room for a six-horse team, or so they said."

"That can't be right." Grindrod scowled. "Of course six horses can stable in Wellnigh – wouldn't be much use if they couldn't! What other reason did they give?"

"No other reason at all, Lamplighter-Sergeant," the bane said coolly. "After this first exchange the charming major-of-house himself simply refused entry and sent us on our

way. Little less than storming the twin keeps would have got us within.”

“Bah!” Grindrod almost spat. “Another of the Master-of-Clerks’ spat-licking toadies,” he muttered. Aloud he said, “He’s one of the new lot shifted up from the Considine. If what ye say be true, I’ll be having words with the Lamplighter-Marshal – refusing folks bain’t the way we conduct ourselves out here on the Emperor’s Highroad. Succour to all and a light to their path,” he concluded, with one of the many maxims with which the prentices were indoctrinated from the very first day of prenticing.

“A light to your path,” intoned the prentices automatically, as they had been taught.

“Indeed, Lamplighter-Sergeant,” Dolours returned, “the Emperor’s lampsmen seem not to be what they once were.”

Grindrod bridled.

Rossamünd too felt a twinge of loyal offence. The lampsmen he had come to know worked hard to keep the roads lit and well tended.

“Attacks rise and numbers dwindle, madam,” the Lamplighter-Sergeant countered, chin lifted in defensive pride, “yet the road has the same figure of lamps and still we have to compass it all. So I ask again: what be yer business on the road?”

The calendar stayed her ground. “As I understand it,” she said slowly, “time is running short for your prentices to be sufficiently learned in their trade, true?”

“Aye, precious short. What of that?”

“It’s a simple thing, you see,” Dolours said, ever so quietly. She looked to the long-haired calendar – Threnody, they had called her – who glared at both the Lamplighter-Sergeant and Rossamünd. “This young lady desires to become a lamplighter.”