

She kept talking as the fish struggled. ‘The lantern man wanders the fen still, looking for souls to trap so he can pay his debt to the devil.’

‘My father went missing in the fen,’ Dory said, ‘two years back.’

‘If you see his light,’ the hermit said, ‘do not go to him. Turn your back and put your face down in the mud. Taste the earth, so that your soul will stay bound to your body.’

She drew a small club from her belt and hit the fish in the head.

‘Get down!’ Dory said, catching up with Bram and pulling him back.

‘Get down and put your face in the mud, or he’ll get you!’

Dory threw himself on the ground, begging Bram to join him. But Bram seemed stunned and stuck, and he was too big now for Dory to make him do what he was told.

Opening his mouth like the hermit had said, Dory pressed his face into the mud. It tasted rich and bittersweet, like duck eggs and fish stew and juniper bark tea, and at the same time like filth, like rot, like waste.

The reeds whispered in sharp tones, and, closer and closer came the soft squelch of a creature moving through the mud.