

the LongLight Legacy



the
DIRT
eaters
—
DENNIS FOON

“... outstanding first
title in a trilogy ...”

School Library Journal

the
DIRT
eaters
—
DENNIS FOON



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*This book is dedicated to
Shirley Louise Wiss.*

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LONGLIGHT

IN THE SHROUDED VALLEY, THE PEOPLE OF LONGLIGHT EVADED DESTRUCTION. FOR SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS THEY QUIETLY THRIVED, ISOLATED FROM THE WORLD, NURTURING A SMALL FLAME OF HOPE. IT TOOK LESS THAN ONE HOUR FOR THEM TO BE ANNIHILATED.

—THE BOOK OF LONGLIGHT

A SNOW CRICKET LEAPS between two smoldering buildings onto a collapsed stone wall. It sits for a moment, antennae probing, then jumps to a footprint in the snow. It vaults again and again from footprint to footprint, moving past snow-covered boulders, until it stops at a thick patch of blue bramble and settles beneath the thorns, on a mound of snow speckled red.

The white cricket sings one sweet, resonant note. The mound shudders and, within it, a pair of eyes snaps open. The eyes belong to Roan.

Roan listens, afraid to move. In the distance, the sullen cawing of crows. Stiff, cold, he considers sitting up. But then—crash! He stops breathing, terrified of being seen.

His father's anguished face.

—Quick, quick, Roan, move, move, move!

Hands pulling him up, throwing clothes on him. His sister, Stowe, clutching her straw doll, shaking. His mother, kissing him, hugging him, then pushing Roan and Stowe through the open window.

—Go! Hide in the blue brush! Run! Run!

There's another crash, this one landing at Roan's feet. It's only melting snow falling from the blue bramble. Hearing no human sounds, he rises. Slowly. Staying invisible inside the mass of thorns. Roan's head pounds. He feels his temple. There's a crust on his hair. He scratches off a piece and groans as he examines it. Scab-matted blood.

Smoke rises from the other side of the hill. The village they called Longlight is silent. No voices, no screams. Desperate to see, terrified of what he'll find, Roan breathes deeply to slow his pounding heart. Then, painstakingly untangling himself from the bramble, he crawls over the snow-spotted hill. His eyes catch something. He moves quietly through the brown whip-grass, staying low. A bit of purple cloth—Stowe's doll, wrapped in its vivid shawl, the one she dyed herself. It's been ground by a horse's hoof into the half-frozen mud. Hands trembling, he lifts the precious object.

Shouts. Explosions. Crazy, skull-masked invaders on horseback, waving torches, slashing, burning. An eerie, rumbling sound pulsates from the village, like hundreds of voices humming in unison.

Scrambling, sliding on the icy whip-grass, Roan and Stowe race, closer every step to the blue bramble, to safety. A piercing scream. Stowe's fingernails rip Roan's palm as a hideous red skull leans down, lifts her. The masked rider kicks off Roan's bleeding hand. Stowe is reaching, reaching for

Roan, but high in the air above her the rider's bone club swoops down.

Shivering, head throbbing, Roan gently places the ruined doll in his pocket. He inches close enough to see the smashed walls of Longlight. Beyond them, smoke rises from the shells of crumbled wood and clay houses. No sign of riders. No human sounds at all. Trembling, he edges closer, then rushes toward the broken gate and dives for cover. He is lifting his head for another look when a black shape whirls past him. He ducks, terror-struck, waiting for the death blow. It doesn't come. He waits, then peeks again. The ground past the gate is a mass of foraging crows, shattered pots, burned woven baskets.

How did they find us?

An acrid smell flares in Roan's nostrils. From the Community House. Burning plastic: the solar energy panels. Years spent scavenging the parts to make one unit. Gone.

House after house, all smoldering, all empty. Drag marks scar the gravel walkways. Past the Worship Place, across the Forum, to the Fire Hole. Roan hesitates, dreading his next few steps. Every year his father spoke where Roan stood now.

We stand for the Remembering. Fire Holes like this one opened when the Madness began. Earth sickened by the Abominations inflicted on its surface, spewed its insides in an attempt to purify what was fouled in the world. Many died. When the scorched lands cooled, the First Ones arrived. Many holes had been filled, but this one was left untouched, its fiery waters unquenched. The First Ones constructed their village around it, the shrine at our center. So we would not forget what we were. Once a year, during the Remembering, this stone gate is opened and a day is spent fasting and praying to remind us of why we set ourselves apart. This is the most sacred place in Longlight.

The most sacred place in Longlight. It didn't matter what we remembered. They still came to find us.

There's a foul smell. Pieces of scattered clothing in the wind. A woman's blouse, a man's torn shirt. A worn leather shoe, covered in patches. Roan, collapsing, clutches it, this shoe his father constantly mended. His father must be here. He must be close. Roan's eyes dart around the stones. Crows hover over the Fire Hole. Roan scrambles past the stone wall that surrounds the sacred site.

First he sees a mass of brown hair caught on the edge. A bit of flesh connects it to a white skull. Bobbing on the steaming surface, bones. Human bones. Rolling one over the other, hundreds of human bones. Roan's legs go weak. His vision blurs. Everyone he knew, everyone he loved. Roan staggers away from the pit, throat thick, eyes burning.

His legs buckle. He kneels, his face in the hard clay, trying to say the words his father taught him: the prayer of passing, the utterance of safe journey. His lips move but he can't speak, there are too many, he can't find air to make sound. There are too many, so many souls.

He cannot lift his face from the dirt, and the smoke hangs over him.

A sound draws Roan out, bringing him back to the world. He lifts his head and breathes. There, on his shoulder, a white cricket.

Time to go home.

Dazed, still gripping his father's shoe, Roan makes his way past the broken walls, down the gravel path, past the ruined houses of his friends and relatives. He knew every single dwelling, had eaten, played or visited inside them all. Now they were empty husks.

Unlike the others, his own house still stands, its walls intact. But the front door, so carefully crafted by his mother, has been smashed into jagged splinters. He'd taken so much pride in her artistry. It's difficult not to let grief overtake him as he cautiously steps through the defiled threshold. His grandmother's table and chairs, his great-uncle's fire-glazed bowls, all shattered. His father's bookcases upended, books strewn everywhere.

Roan slips into his bedroom. His bed's been thrown over, his belongings shredded, ripped, ruined. He reaches down and grips the bed frame. It's solid. His mother made it strong. He rights the bed, tucks the woolen mattress back onto it, picks up the crumpled blankets. He lowers himself onto the only bed he's ever slept on, pulls his knees to his chest, and stares at the wall.

His people had planted gardens to heal the earth, nurtured and loved one another, shared all that they had. There was nothing to take, but the raiders had come anyway, and now everything was lost. Everything. Everything.

A SPECKLED BROWN RAT WITH A LONG PINK TAIL SITS ACROSS FROM ROAN. THEY ARE ON A PLAIN OF DRY YELLOW CLAY, THE SUN BELOW THE RED HORIZON. THE RAT RAISES ITS HEAD.

"IT'S TIME. GO. NOW."

Roan jolts up, startled awake by the strange vision. It was unlike any dream he'd ever had. Still, his mother taught him to always pay them heed. This dream said to go. He can still feel its urgency. He has to move, now.

He pulls up a floorboard. His stash box is still there. Inside are his great-grandfather's five silver coins, each more than two hundred years old. And in its sheath is the gleaming knife his father gave him last month for his fifteenth birthday. Roan straps it around his shin with a leather thong. With his pant leg slipped over it, the knife is invisible.

Moving purposefully, he spots his mother's rucksack and shoves in a blanket roll. He rushes to gather supplies—fills his water bag, finds some scraps of dry food, carefully places his father's shield and his sister's doll in the rucksack's side pocket—until he's stopped by a peculiar sound.

It's faint, but quickly growing louder. Roan rushes to the window. On the gravel path, three hundred yards away, a man is riding something Roan's seen only in pictures: a motorbike. The driver, flowing in a black cloak and long braided hair whipping behind him, is heading straight for Roan's house. Roan dives under a bookcase that's collapsed against the wall. As he hides himself, he feels something in his pocket. The white cricket. Just then the driver walks in the door. Roan holds his breath and silently pulls the knife from its sheath.

"What a waste," the man mutters, and Roan hears him shuffling through the books heaped on the floor. The stranger's hands reach under the bookcase, feeling around. Roan clutches his knife as the man's fingers grasp a torn-in-half volume and pull it out.

"My name is Saint. What is yours?"

Roan freezes.

“Terrible thing that happened here. Are you alright, boy?”

Roan lurches out of his hiding place and bolts for the door.

“Hey, hey, you don’t need to—” Saint calls out, reaching for Roan. He’s the biggest man Roan ever seen. Roan wildly swings his blade before charging out the door. Not to the bramble, no time to conceal himself there. Instead, Roan runs the way he always ran with his friends, straight to the eastern wall. He’s headed for the Hollow Forest.

The forest goes on for miles, the tall trees still standing despite the fact the only green they sport is moss and lichen. According to his grandfather, the trees were drained of life when a chemical plant for upriver was bombed. Planting new growth, specially chosen to aid and detoxify the earth, was one of Roan’s favorite chores. He devoted many long hours to it. But nothing seemed able to resurrect the Hollow Forest.

The engine! Not much time. Roan’s fingers dig into the trunk of Big Empty, a massive, hundred-foot tree more than three centuries old. Like the other trees in this forest, it is completely hollow. Roan pulls at a perfectly matched piece of bark and squeezes through the entry hole he and his friends carved a few summers before, then carefully plugs it behind him.

Roan reaches for the first carved handhold and then works his way up, aiming for the top, where the light streams in. Beside each handhold is the mark of one of his friends: Max, Esta, Lem, Rolf, Aide. He remembers how the six of them would clamber up together, a knot of warmth and laughter. No more. At the very top he sees his sister’s spot, her name carved in big letters. Stowe. That was his place, always. He reaches across, sliding his finger through the S. Where is she now? His hand burns where hers was torn from his grip.

Soaked with sweat, his pockets heavy with rocks, Roan pokes his head cautiously from the broken treetop. With the sun pouring down on him, he sits on the rope seat they all strung together so long ago. He strains his eyes, searching. Has the stranger given up the chase? Roan decides to stay as long as it’s light, not start traveling until the cover of night. But travel where? He’s never been outside the valley. He has no idea what’s out there. All he knows is he can’t stay here. Home is dead. Then he sees him.

A hundred feet below, Saint drives slowly through the trees, eyes on the ground. Roan knows the stranger will spot the broken lichen, the grass crushed by his feet. He was running too fast to cover his tracks.

As Saint rides straight to Big Empty, Roan lowers his head and presses his back against the tree wall, heart thumping. Will the man find the entrance? A rush of air from below answers his question.

“I have no wish to hurt you,” the man calls up, his head masked in shadows far below. “I saw the smoke. Was that your home?”

“Yes.”

“I can feed you, clothe you. After what you’ve been through, I’m sure you can use a friend.”

“I’m fine. Leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that,” says Saint. “You’ll die out here alone.”

But when Roan looks down, he sees that Saint is gone.

The tree sways. But there’s no wind. Roan feels it move again. It creaks, its whole length trembling. He anxiously grips his handhold with the realization: Saint is pushing on the tree. Can a man push a tree of this size over? Not a live, healthy one, but a long-dead tree with rotting roots is fair game for two or three very strong men. This is one man. But no ordinary man. Saint is twice the size of Roan’s father.

The old roots snap and the tree buckles. Big Empty starts to fall. Roan falls too, his hands flailing uselessly, his body bouncing against the sides of the hollow.

THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS

THE FRIEND GAVE HIM THE WORD. AND THE PROPHET TOOK THE WORD AND SPOKE IT. AND THOSE WHO HEARD HIM, FOLLOWED. AND SO THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE FRIEND BEGAN.

—ORIN'S HISTORY OF THE FRIEND

A MOUNTAIN LION SITS ON A FIELD OF SHORT GREEN GRASS, A SPARKLING RIVER BEHIND, THE SUN BRIGHT AND WARM. THE SPECKLED BROWN RAT SITS BY THE BIG CAT, THEIR EYES INTENT ON EACH OTHER.

AN ANCIENT WOMAN, TWO SMALL HORNS ON HER HEAD, LEGS AND TAIL OF A GOAT, APPEARS BESIDE THEM. "YOU BELIEVE HE'S WAKING?"

THE RAT TWITCHES. "HE IS AWAKE."

THE LION CLEANS HER PAW, THEN GLANCES AT THE GOAT-WOMAN. "IT'S TOO SOON. HE'S NOT READY."

"IT CANNOT BE HELPED."

THE GOAT-WOMAN SIGHS. "CAN WE MOVE HIM?"

"HE IS SAFEST WHERE HE IS."

THE LION LOOKS AT THE RAT. "HOW WILL WE SHIELD HIM?"

"IF WE EVEN CAN," ADDS THE GOAT-WOMAN.

THE RAT RISES. "THERE IS NO CHOICE."

Roan wakes to the pungent smell of incense. He's alive. He was sure the tree fall would kill him. That rat again. What was this dream trying to say? But the memory of it drifts when he feels a wriggler in his shirt pocket. The snow cricket. Roan's sore all over, but nothing seems to be broken or swollen. His eyes blearily take in his surroundings, a room with walls of black fabric. Some kind of tent.

As he pulls himself up for a better look around, a gaunt young man steps through the wool threshold. "So you're finally awake." He gawks at Roan with stark inquisitiveness, as if he's in the presence of some strange, foreign creature.

"What are you staring at?"

"Sorry," the boy says. "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm here to see if you're hungry."

Roan looks at him, confused. "Where am I?"

"With friends."

"How long?"

"Almost two days since he brought you, I think. You were pretty banged up," the boy replies. He is small, with green eyes, and looks a little older than Roan. "They call me Feeder, on account of I do most of the feeding around here." Feeder hands Roan a bowl filled with a dark gruel. "Mostly potato and tripe."

"What's tripe?" Roan asks.

"Sheep gut. Just spit out the chewy bits, everybody does."

Roan stares at the stew, aghast. In Longlight, sheep's milk and wool were taken, but the animals were never eaten.

"Saint will see you once you're done eating," says Feeder.

Saint. The tree-breaker. He was the one who'd brought him here. Aching, heart-sick, Roan sniffs the gruel. It has a pleasant enough smell, and the terrible rumbling in his stomach is a fierce reminder of how long it's been since he's had any food. He dips in the spoon, closes his eyes, and tastes. He has to work to swallow, and it's an effort to hold the food down, but the second bite is easier, and by the third he is eating without pause. Wiping his mouth, he stands shakily, takes a deep breath, and pushes through the knit doorway.

The room he steps into is much larger, with a tall pole holding up the canopy's peak. His eyes need a moment to adjust to the candlelight, but then he sees Saint across the room, sitting with his back to Roan. Saint has the strongest-looking torso Roan's ever seen, all muscle and tendon. Yet he sits delicately cross-legged on a woven carpet, facing an altar, deep in meditation. As he waits, Roan studies the dimly lit statue that dominates this place of worship. A man half-straddles a bull, pulling its head back by the nostrils and plunging a dagger into its neck. A raven sits on the bull's tail, and a serpent, a scorpion, and a dog are grouped at the bull's feet. In the silence and the flickering light, Roan puzzles over the meaning of the scene.

Saint bends over the incense smoke, brushing it toward his face with his hands. Roan sees that each of the big man's arms is laddered with a column of thin white scars, climbing from his wrist to his elbow. Turning abruptly, Saint locks his deep-set eyes with Roan's. Roan returns the gaze, wondering what Saint hopes to glean from him. Finally, Saint breaks the impasse, puts on his shirt, and speaks as if nothing at all has occurred.

"I'm sorry I had to bring you here this way, but you left me no alternative. You would not have survived out there on your own."

"That should have been my choice."

"I couldn't let that happen," says Saint. "Our faith does not allow it."

"Is that statue part of your faith?" asks Roan, nodding at the altar.

"It's the center of it. The Friend kills the bull, destroying evil and creating life. Like him, we fight evil and nurture life."

"So you couldn't let me die."

"Exactly."

"And when I'm ready, you'll let me leave?"

"Spend some time with us," says Saint, a gentle smile on his face. "Accept our hospitality and let yourself heal. There's much for you to learn here from me and my followers."

Saint doesn't appear to want to hurt him, but Roan's still not willing to trust him. He has too many questions. What was Saint doing in Shrouded Valley? How did he know where to find Roan? And why does he want Roan to stay in this place? Roan suspects that Saint's connected to what happened in Longlight, and he wants to find out how.

“Alright,” says Roan, “I’ll stay a while.”

“Then you have to tell me your name.”

“Roan.”

“You lived in that house?”

“That’s right,” replies Roan. “Did you get everything you wanted from there?”

“I saved some books. Whose were they?”

“My father’s.”

“He could read?”

“Of course.”

“He taught you to read?”

“He, and my mother.”

Saint’s brow furrows. His voice acquires an almost reverential tone. “Your mother was a reader too?”

Puzzled, Roan nods.

“Did everyone in Longlight know how to read?”

“Yes.”

“Amazing,” Saint mutters.

“Why do you say that?”

“You’ve never been outside your village, or that valley, have you?”

Roan, cautious, makes no reply.

“If you had, you’d be aware that few people know how to read,” says Saint. “People are suspicious of learning.”

Roan is bewildered, though he hides his real concern. No one in Longlight ever spoke much about the Outside, and it had never occurred to him to ask why. What else was hidden from him?

“Why are they suspicious?” he asks.

Saint sighs. “They blame the Abominations on books.”

“And you don’t?”

“I blame men.” Saint moves close to Roan and bends down to face him. “You have a gift that became even rarer when your people were lost. Share it with me. Teach me to read, Roan of Longlight.”

I have something he wants, Roan thinks. Should I give it to him? If Saint has some darker purpose, teaching him to read could be disastrous. But then Roan remembers what his father often said: *Reading is like breathing. Words are like air.*

“I’ve never taught before,” Roan says cautiously.

“I’m patient. It may take us a long time, but I’m sure you’ll manage. Help me with this. Of course we would have to agree on some form of compensation.”

Roan chooses his words carefully. “You’re already providing me with food and shelter,” he says.

“I’ve done nothing more than help someone in need.” Saint breathes slowly, contemplating Roan.

face. “Perhaps there are others in need. You may not have been the only one from your village to survive.”

Roan can't stop the quake that surges through his body.

Saint's eyebrow lifts. “You agree. It might be possible.”

Despite himself, Roan whispers, “It might be.”

A smile spreads across Saint's face.

“Teach me to read, and if any are alive, we'll find them.”

If any are alive. The words make Roan shudder. Suddenly he's overwhelmed with rage, an emotion he's unable to hide.

“My offer makes you angry?”

“Your offer seems...fair,” Roan chokes out.

“Could it be the thought of what was done to your people?”

Roan nods, not trusting himself to speak.

“You want vengeance.”

Roan imagines finding the killers of Longlight, the skull-masked invaders; pictures himself clubbing them, then throwing them screaming into the Fire Hole. He tries to stop the hideous thought but he can't. They're too strong. Roan looks up at the giant and the word lurches out. “Yes.” The snow cricket stirs in his pocket, scratching hard against his heart.

“I can help with that too,” says Saint. “I will teach you the Way of the Friend. You will find He is always there when we are in need.”

For a moment boy and man regard each other in silence.

“So, Roan of Longlight, do we have an agreement?”

“We do.”

Saint smiles and pats Roan on the shoulder.

The camp is on a rise overlooking a wide valley. A stream leads off to a nearby mountain. In a paddock, powerful horses stand grazing. Everywhere Roan looks there are tents and looming tent-like structures. All of them are covered with grass and branches, no doubt making their presence invisible from a distance. Under a low canopy protected by a rock wall, seven men bundled in black fur with cowls over their heads sit silently tapping grains of colored sand into the center of a giant flat stone.

“It's a form of meditation,” explains Saint. “It takes four seasons to complete the image. When finished, it's swept away and they begin again.”

“What will the image be?”

“A tribute to Him we serve.”

Roan's attention is drawn by a clanging sound.

“Come. There are other activities you may find intriguing.”

Saint takes Roan to a flat area at the edge of another rise, where men in loose tunics practice intricate sword movements, led by a brawny man with a shaven head. Slashing, leaping, they move with grace and precision. Despite his misgivings, Roan watches with fascination.

“Did they practice like this in Longlight?” Saint asks.

“We had no swords,” says Roan. “They were forbidden.”

“How did you protect yourselves?”

“We didn’t.”

“But I saw evidence of a great battle.”

“There was no battle.”

“Surely when attacked, your people defended themselves.”

“We do not fight,” repeats Roan, his eyes locked on the flashing blades.

Saint makes a small gesture to the man leading the exercises. With a word to his brothers, the band of men joins them, bowing to Saint.

“Friends to all,” he says.

“The Friend is true,” Saint replies, also bowing, though not as deeply. “Roan of Longlight, meet Brother Wolf, our movement master. Roan has joined us today, Brother. His journey here has been a hard one.”

“Everything is only as difficult as the mind perceives it to be,” Brother Wolf says, his eyes meeting Roan’s.

“The massacre of my village was more than a perception,” retorts Roan.

“The greater the pain, the greater your will must be to master it,” Wolf tells Roan, “unless you wish to be a slave to it.”

“I’m not a slave.”

“Then you will find our training useful,” says Wolf, and returns to the acolytes.

A numbness sweeps over Roan. The commitment he’s made to this strange place suffocates him. There is no going back, no hope of rescue. Longlight is gone. And now he is here.

Touring the camp with Saint, Roan sees that though no walls surround it, a formidable gully of jagged rocks protects the perimeter. High in the trees, wooden platforms are manned by cowl-wearing Brothers whose eyes never stop scanning the valley below. Saint draws Roan away from the camp’s defenses, introducing him to the Brothers’ other activities. Some Brothers are horse trainers, some are metal craftsmen, some are hunters. Seventy-five Brothers in all, Saint tells him.

At a tent that stands between two alder trees, a gray-bearded man greets them.

“Brother Saint! I have a salve I think may help that sore wrist of yours.”

“Thank you, Brother Asp.”

Brother Asp’s eyes pore over Roan’s face, penetrating beneath the surface. But the examination doesn’t threaten Roan; quite the opposite. The Brother has a kind, open face that puts Roan at ease.

“Roan of Longlight. I’m sorry I didn’t meet you earlier, but I’ve been tied up with some medical emergencies.”

Roan wonders why Brother Asp seems so different, so much softer than the others. Almost like someone from Longlight. Perhaps it’s because he’s a healer.

Dinner gathers everyone in the main tent around five long tables. Feeder delivers steaming pots

stew and potatoes, ignored by the Brothers as if he's invisible. Roan's about to dig in when he notices that no one is touching the food. All stand in silence behind their seats.

Saint enters and comes to the empty space beside Roan. He lowers his head and speaks. "Born from stone, the First Friend reaches from the sky, giving us all that we have."

The seventy-five men speak in one voice: "Born from man, we reach for the sky."

"His heavenly blade freed us from evil," intones Saint.

"With His love we will free the world."

"We are Brothers. We are Friends."

"We are Friends."

Saint looks around at the assembled Brothers. "Before we eat, I would like you to meet our newest novice: Roan of Longlight."

There's an awkward moment before someone shouts, "Welcome, Brother!" from a far table. The men applaud loudly and stamp their feet with no sign of stopping. A wild-eyed man with long yellow hair winks at Roan.

"They'll keep going until you return the courtesy."

Roan, catching on, claps his hands. The Friends cease applauding and break into a huge cheer. Everyone around Roan grins and shakes his hand. Then Saint sits and begins to eat and all the Brothers follow his lead.

Saint nods to the yellow-haired man. "This is Brother Raven, Roan. One of my most valued companions."

"You are unique, Roan of Longlight," says Raven, a crooked smile on his face. "Most novices don't arrive strapped on the back of Saint's motorcycle."

"He didn't leave me much choice."

Brother Raven emits a high-pitched cackle. "Choice! That's good!" Raven leans into Roan. Roan notices that the brother's breath has an unfamiliar scent, thick and tart. "If you have any problems, talk to me. I'm the helper and the fixer. That's me."

"Good to meet you," Roan replies courteously, but he can sense the knife behind the man's smile. The Brother is insincere, it's obvious, he doesn't even bother to hide it. Roan eats his stew in silence, mulling over his situation. The Brothers talk quietly amongst themselves, and though he can tell he is the focus of their conversation, no one interrupts his ruminations.

When supper comes to a close, Saint speaks to finish the meal, raising his right hand. "Friends to all."

"The Friend is true," the brethren reply, raising their right hands in response. Then the clearing of tables begins.

As Roan adds his dirty plate to the pile, Feeder takes it. "You'll get used to this place soon enough," he whispers. "It's an honor to have you here."

Before Roan can ask him what he means, Feeder scurries away, and Brother Raven is quick to fill the gap. "Roan, let me show you to your quarters."

Raven escorts him out of the crowded dining tent. The pathway is lined with lit torches, and as the

walk, Raven points out the Assembly, a small sloped amphitheater, with tiered benches looking down on a round, flat area. Before Roan can inquire as to its purpose, Raven indicates the “all-important multiple outhouse structure and the communal washing area, where wooden basins are used for bathing. Roan stares at the very public space.

“Confused?” asks Raven.

“You wash together?”

“And we all crap together, too,” chuckles Raven. “So uncivilized, don’t you think?”

“Just different.”

Raven lifts an eyebrow. “Different? How do you mean, different?”

Roan peers at this strange Brother, feeling he’s somehow being tested. “It’s all new to me,” he carefully replies. “Unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

Raven chuckles. “A very politic response!”

“It’s the truth.”

“Of course, of course! Don’t worry, I come from the middle of nowhere too. A little hamlet near the Rain Plateau. We barely had a visitor in all the time I lived there. I was younger than you are when I left.”

“Where did you go?”

Raven gives Roan a probing look. Then, with a glint in his eye, he says, “To training school.”

“What kind of training?”

“To tell the truth, I never completed it. I heard a fascinating tale: that a mortal man had become a Prophet. Gone to a mountaintop and descended with a message from a new God. I was curious, so I volunteered to leave and join the Prophet. I was one of the first to meet Saint. I’ll have been with him and the Friend eleven years next spring.”

Stopping in front of one of a long row of smaller tents, Raven opens its knit doorway. “This is yours,” Raven says. “Get a good night’s sleep, because tomorrow you start the schedule Saint has devised for you. You won’t be needing those clothes anymore. You’ll find the proper attire in your tent. After we raise the sun, you’ll spend your mornings with Brother Wolf and your afternoons with Brother Stinger. Oh, and Brother Asp has requested what remains of your free time.” Raven gives Roan a confidential look. “You might find the routine a little onerous. If you do, talk to me. I’ll speak to Saint for you. Fix things. Remember, any problems at all, my tent’s next to yours. Barge in anytime.”

“Thank you,” Roan says, ducking into his doorway, glad to get away from the cloying man. Inside his tent, by the light of a few candles, he sees the floor’s covered with rugs. A thick black tunic lies folded at the foot of his bed, which is a simple wool mat. Roan crawls under the warm blankets, but he still feels cold. He reaches for his pack and pulls his father’s shoe out of the pocket, fingering a patch as he lies back down.

The faces of the Brothers whirl before him. In one day, he’s met seventy-five strangers, yet it was only a few days ago that he’d encountered the first stranger of his life. The first who had ever come

Longlight. Early that morning, an envoy riding a white horse had arrived unannounced at their gate. Everyone was stunned, but there seemed no reason to turn a single man away. Even more peculiar was the stranger's clothing: a gown completely covered in feathers. On his head was a helmet in the shape of a beak.

In the Shrouded Valley, birds other than chickens and crows were scarce, and no one had ever seen feathers like these before: bright yellow flecked with dazzling vermilion; iridescent shades of mauve and silver; feathers a foot long, ivory with red speckles. The children of Longlight followed the Bird Man as he walked through the village, trying to touch his amazing gown. He welcomed their touches, letting out a high, cackling laugh. The children laughed too. But the adults were not amused. Roan could see the fear in their eyes, and for the first time in his life, he felt uneasy.

The councillors of the village escorted the Bird Man into the community's meeting room. Before the doors were pulled shut, Roan saw their worried glances, their trembling hands. Roan's father, his face set in a grim mask, was one of the ten who heard the envoy speak. The meeting went on and on as the children hovered outside the doors, brimming with curiosity. The twins Max and Esta, born a year after Stowe, tried to peek in but were quickly shooed away. Most of the children were excited, certain the envoy was here to sell feathers. But Roan's best friend, Aiden, was his usual cynical self. "What good are feathers?" he sniped. "It's not as if you can eat them." Stowe protested. "They're beautiful! I'd trade my two favorite drinking bowls for one of the shiny red ones."

Roan recognized some of the stranger's plumes from books. As they waited, Stowe begged him to name the long-extinct birds. Peacock. Eagle. Swan. Cardinal. She loved the sound of the words and made Roan repeat them over and over, made him write them down as she chanted them. To her it was an event like no other. This fabulous stranger was a feast for the eyes, a springtime in midwinter.

After a few hours, the meeting room doors swung open. The Bird Man left abruptly. His smile had vanished. Ignoring the children who begged for another touch of his plumes, he climbed onto his horse and was gone. Roan lingered behind, watching as the councillors emerged somberly from the building, his father in the lead.

Later that night, he was awakened by his parents' agitated discussion.

"Couldn't we pay him?" his mother asked.

"The only price he would accept," Roan's father said, "we would not pay." What he said next was obscured by the sound of a bowl, thrown, shattering on the floor.

"We have to leave," Roan's mother said. "We have to leave now!"

"No. It's the Prophecy."

"That's only a myth!"

"It's our reason for being here. It's the fulfillment of our existence."

"You'd sacrifice our lives—our children—for what could be nothing more than a fairy tale?"

"Look at me. Your instincts cry out against this. But you know the truth. We always knew this time would come."

Roan heard something in their voices he'd never heard before: terror. He wasn't cold, but he found

himself shivering. His mother's voice, wracked with sobs, tore through him.

"Why today? Why now?"

"There can only be one reason," his father replied.

Suddenly, a rumbling sound. Something like thunder, but thunder had never made the floor tremble at Roan's feet. And then, silence. It was as if everyone in the village had caught their breath in the same moment.

"All will not be lost," said his father. Then his mother's voice, strong and focused: "Wake them. Go, go, go! Get them out of here!"

In his new tent, in the camp of the Brothers, Roan's stomach churns. Where is he? What is this place? Who are these people? What do they want from him? He slips his father's shoe back into his pack and steps outside for a glimpse of the moon. It's waning, and he can see craters on the shadowed side.

"Nightmares?" Roan cringes at Brother Raven's honeyed voice. "It's fortunate that I was coming by."

Roan doesn't take the bait, but Brother Raven is undeterred.

"Don't you like your quarters?"

"They're fine."

"Then why out so soon?"

"For some air."

"Be careful of the night air."

"Why?"

"You never know what might bite you." Raven laughs. "You're a very lucky boy, and you don't even seem to realize it."

"What do you mean?"

"You're here in our camp, instead of out there. You could be roasting on a spit, or being swallowed by Blood Drinkers, or having your head severed and stuck up on a stake. But instead you're under the protection of a man touched by God. Lucky boy."

Roan, not letting on how unsettled he is by Raven's words, smiles politely, nods good-night, and returns to the relative peace of his quarters.

He lies on his bed and closes his eyes.

A piercing scream. Stowe's fingernails rip his palm. The raider in the hideous red skull lifts her hand. Stowe is reaching, reaching for Roan.

Roan's eyes fly open as he tries to shake the terrible memory. Heart pounding, aching to run, he forces himself to be still. The snow cricket scrambles out of his pocket and onto his chest. In a sliver of light, Roan gazes at its delicate antennae, its eyes unwavering black dots. A comforting sight. The cricket is content, Roan thinks. The cricket stays. So will I. Roan's eyes, heavy, finally close.

THE NOVITIATE

THE CITY ISSUED THE EDICT. BULLDOZE THE SCHOOLS, BOMB THE LIBRARIES, BURN EVERY BOOK. DISSENT WILL NOT BE TOLERATED. EVERYONE AGREED AND IT WAS DONE.

—THE WAR CHRONICLES

IN THE DIM LIGHT of near-dawn, a tolling bell awakens Roan. His breath clouds in the frigid air. He slips into his new black tunic and pants, woven wool, thick but supple. To all outside eyes, he is one of the Brothers, the Friends. Feeder appears in the doorway with a covered bowl. “I brought you a snack to tide you over till breakfast. Eat it fast, we’re due to make the sun rise.”

Roan quickly swallows the porridge. Feeder seems content watching his every gesture, so Roan says nothing. As soon as he is ready, they step out of the tent and follow the other Brothers.

In a voice filled with trepidation and awe, Feeder whispers, “Is there really such a place as Longlight?”

The question puzzles Roan. “Why wouldn’t there be?”

“Everyone’s heard about it, but nobody’s ever seen it. I didn’t know if it was real.”

“Well, it is.” A pain flashes through his chest as Roan corrects himself. “It was.” Before Feeder can ask him anything else, Roan speaks again. “How did you come to this place?”

Feeder gives him a nervous look. “Same as everyone.”

Same as me? Roan wonders.

As they approach a rise at the perimeter of the camp, Saint joins them. “Thank you for escorting Roan here, Brother Feeder.”

“You’re wel...welcome, Brother Saint,” Feeder stammers, apparently tongue-tied in the presence of the great man.

Turning to Roan, Saint nods. “Follow me.”

Roan doesn’t miss the look of disappointment on Feeder’s face as he leaves him behind to follow Saint in the half-light. They climb in silence to the highest clearing in the camp. In this gray predawn, Roan gasps at the sight of seventy-five men standing in rows, looking down at the dark valley below. Its vast expanse is seemingly commanded by the sound of their breath, exhaling and inhaling in slow unison.

Saint cries out, fist to the sky. “For us He raises the sun! For us He brings the dawn.”

While all watch in silence, Brother Wolf hands Saint a crossbow. Saint fits an arrow, its tip wrapped in cloth, into the bow. Wolf lights the cloth, and Saint sends the flaming arrow into the sky. Reaching its pinnacle, the bolt of fire arches downward, disappearing from view.

For a moment, nothing. No one speaks, no one seems to breathe. Then, at the edge of the horizon,

blaze of light appears. The sun. The Brothers cheer, a roar so loud Roan's ears hurt. Saint raises his hand. The assembled men fall silent.

"Thank you, Friend."

And all repeat: "Thank you, Friend."

The Brothers bow deeply to the sun, a gesture Roan joins. The silence almost seems to echo a reply but the spell is broken as the procession heads back down to camp for breakfast.

Roan is finishing his second bowl of porridge, blissfully free of meat, when Brother Raven appears. "Good, you're ready. Time for your morning class."

Along the way, Raven stops at a well, where he pumps some water into a drinking cup. "Go ahead and taste it! Best water in three hundred miles!"

Roan drinks. "It's good," he says politely. But it has a metallic taste, not like the water in Longlight. That water was fresh and sweet.

"Completely untreated," brags Raven. "Fed by the mountain snows. This little area is uniquely untainted. You can even drink the water from that stream. But in the villages, it's bad. Utterly toxic. Everyone needs water, though, don't they?"

"Didn't you say it was time for class?"

"Yes, yes, of course," says Raven. "Mustn't dawdle."

He escorts Roan to a clearing where Brother Wolf is leading twenty men through an elaborate series of kicks and arm thrusts. "I'll be on my way. The rigor of the noble warrior has a deleterious effect on my appetite." Raven grins, and with a pat on his stomach, he goes.

Brother Wolf looks up to see Roan. "You're late," he snaps. "Never be late again."

Roan nods, biting back his desire to blame Raven.

"Do your best to imitate what we're doing. I'll fill in the gaps for you later."

Wolf pivots, swoops, and jabs. With each movement, he makes a huge exhalation, a booming noise. His students copy both movement and sound. Beneath the cacophony, from his tunic's pocket, Roan hears the cricket sing.

Roan focuses on Brother Wolf's movements. Although he knows it's impossible, the exercises seem familiar to him. He throws himself with fierce precision into every extension and kick, losing all sense of time and place, until the master dismisses the group. At that moment the cricket stops singing, and Roan stops moving too. He's surprised to see how high the sun is in the sky; the entire morning has passed in a blink. Brother Wolf calls him over.

"Where did you learn these movements?"

"I've never seen them before," Roan replies. "I just followed, as you asked."

Wolf eyes him curiously, then retrieves a sword that's shaped like two crossed crescents from the weapons rack. "Have you ever encountered one of these? It's called a hook-sword."

Roan stares, fascinated. He's never come across anything like it.

Wolf takes Roan's hand. "The hook-sword is held like this," he says. Then he lifts out a battle-axe. "Defend yourself."

He brings the axe down on Roan, who instinctively blocks it with his sword. Wolf shifts his weight back and swings the axe at Roan's head. Roan dives, avoiding the blow, then is up again, ready to ward off the next strike.

Wolf holds up his weapon and shouts, "Attack!"

Roan just stands there.

"Attack! Now! Go!"

Roan looks at him, confused. He can understand warding off a blow. But to attack? That kind of thing was forbidden in Longlight, even in play.

Brother Wolf puts down his weapon and gazes at Roan for a long time. Roan seems to detect a trace of concern in his eyes, but Wolf's hard exterior is an effective mask. "Good balance, excellent reflexes, internal calm. You've had no training, ever?"

"None," Roan mutters. Then he remembers the new and waning moon celebrations in Longlight. They'd practice the postures and movements practically every day. "Well, we did work on a series of stances. Rising Tide...Dragon Eats Its Tail...they were like dances."

"So you're a dancer." Wolf laughs, then turns serious. "With some work, you might turn into something. This discipline requires power, speed, and technique. You have potential for speed, an obvious aptitude for technique, but you have to work on strength, stamina, and skill. Not to mention determined offense, which was obviously not a priority in your dance class."

Roan senses that Wolf is a good, serious teacher, and the Brother exhibits no trace of Raven's deceit. Training with him would be wholly against the precepts of Longlight, would fill his parents with horror. How can it be that the movements had seemed right, made Roan's body exalt? But now his survival depends on partaking in these practices.

Brother Wolf smiles, taking back the sword, and for the first time since his arrival in the camp, Roan smiles back.

Roan leaves the clearing and heads for the well. In the distance, he observes Brother Wolf talking to Saint. After a few minutes, Wolf bows to Saint, who goes back into his tent. Roan can't help wondering if the meeting was about him.

Pulling up the pail, Roan drinks deeply. The hook-sword felt so comfortable in his hands. The fighting, the thing Longlight most abhorred, seemed like second nature to him. It makes him sick and exhilarated at the same time. Roan douses himself with the remaining water, trying to wash away the tension.

Collapsing against a tree, he closes his eyes. The snow cricket wriggles out of his pocket, settles on his chest, and sings.

STANDING ACROSS FROM ROAN, BRIGHT IN THE MOONLIGHT, IS THE ANCIENT CREATURE.

"WHO ARE YOU?" HE ASKS.

HE REACHES FOR HER, BUT WITH A SWIFT JERK OF HER HAND, SHE KNOCKS HIM DOWN. HE LEAPS UP. SHE GRABS HIS ARM AND THROWS HIM BACK ON THE GROUND, HER CLOVEN HOOF PLANTED ON HIS CHEST. ROAN STRUGGLES, BUT HER HOOF IS FIRM.

"LET ME GO!"

“MAKE ME,” SHE WHISPERS.

A bell sounds and Roan wakes into the glare of the afternoon sun, feeling agitated. He can remember ever having had dreams as vivid and strange as these back in Longlight. But having uncanny dreams after your life's been torn in pieces might not be so unusual.

Roan feels his grief welling up, and he's grateful to see Feeder wave to him, a perfect distraction. Containing his emotions, Roan joins Feeder outside the cook tent. The enticing smell of food causes Roan's stomach to growl.

“This is my favorite part...Watch!” calls Feeder. With one pull, he yanks off a rabbit's entire skin, revealing the pink musculature.

Roan tries not to vomit. In Longlight, they consumed eggs from chickens and milk from goats, but to take the animals' flesh was unthinkable. But now that he's eating meat, he'd be a hypocrite to avoid the sight of an animal being butchered or skinned. And when the time comes for him to leave the camp, knowing how to prepare meat will be a useful survival skill. So he forces himself to watch his stomach churning. Feeder grins.

“I can do it blindfolded with one hand. Wanna see?”

“No, that's alright.”

“You're not gonna believe this.”

“No, I do, I do.”

Feeder flicks his knife on a rabbit's neck, then turns his back to it, reaches behind himself, yanks the skin off, and holds the dripping skin proudly in the air. “Not bad, eh?”

“Impressive,” murmurs Roan.

“Come on,” says Feeder, “let's get you some lunch.”

“Not hungry.”

“You will be.” Feeder drags him into the empty cook tent, sits him down at the table, and pours him a glass of goat's milk. “I bet you never saw a rabbit being skinned before.”

“How'd you know?”

“Your face is green.”

Roan laughs and sips the milk. “How did you end up being a cook here?”

Feeder doesn't look at him, just sharpens a knife. “That's what I'm best suited for.”

“So you picked what you do?”

Feeder lets out a low laugh. “Nobody picks their job. That's up to the Five. Brothers Saint, Raven, Stinger, Wolf, and Asp. As for me, it wasn't much of a decision. This is all I'm good for.”

“I don't understand.”

“This is what I do best,” Feeder says, with finality.

Roan, realizing the subject is delicate, changes direction. “I understand what each of the five do except for Brother Raven. Does he have a function?”

“Yes. A very important one.”

“What?”

Feeder gives Roan a guarded look. "Business affairs."

Roan nods, not quite sure what to make of that. "Have you noticed the smell on his breath?" he asks.

Feeder.

Feeder bites his lip.

"Do you know what it is?" Roan persists.

"Scorpion hooch."

"It's a drink?"

"Scorpion tails marinated in corn liquor."

"Wouldn't that kill you?"

"It contains just enough poison to numb the brain and make you a little crazy."

"But Brother Raven likes it."

Feeder motions Roan closer and whispers, "I've heard Brother Asp nagging him not to drink so much. The scorpion hooch is hard to come by, and Asp's usually the only one who's got a supply. He keeps it for medicinal purposes. Brother Raven can't mooch more than a couple of sips a night. I've heard Brother Stinger say to him, 'If you got your hands on a whole bottle, I'd hate to see what would happen.'"

Roan hesitates, fearing to breach protocol.

"What is it?" asks the cook.

"I'm probably imagining it."

"What?"

"Brother Raven seems to be following me around."

Feeder laughs with what seems to Roan a twinge of bitterness. "When you finish the milk, leave the glass there." He walks out of the tent, leaving a bewildered Roan behind.

Roan throws back the drink and turns, startled to find a dark man with a short, black beard standing before him. "I am Brother Stinger," the man says, and he motions for Roan to follow.

The seven devotees sit bent over the circle on the huge flat stone. The inner part of the circle now contains the charcoal outline of an intricate drawing that's partially complete, though it's still impossible to make out the subject of the artwork. Brother Stinger looks at Roan. "Your color will be sienna."

He hands Roan some furs and some fingerless gloves. After Roan has put them on, Stinger gives him a small, tube-like funnel and a pot filled with red-brown sand.

"What's the purpose of this?" asks Roan.

"Its purpose is to allow the Brothers to practice patience, perseverance, and concentration. When the design has small diamonds, you place your color. These are the last words I will speak to you."

The rest of the afternoon is spent in silence, each Friend gently tapping his funnel to drop a few grains of sand at a time into their appointed place. Roan tries to stay with the task, but his mind drifts.

Stowe is reaching, reaching for Roan. He grasps for her, so close, but before he can touch her fingers, the rider's bone club swoops down.

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