

BOOK ONE · A NOVELLA

RAVENWOOD

Into the SCHWARZWALD

T. A. RAVENSWORTH

RAVENWOOD FOREST

BOOK ONE

Ravenwood Forest

Into the Schwarzwald



T. A. Ravensworth

Ravenwood Forest, Book One: Into the Schwarzwald

Written by T. A. Ravensworth

© 2026 T. A. Ravensworth. All rights reserved.

First edition, 2026.

ravenwood-forest.com

Contents

Chapter One

Campfire 5

Chapter Two

Stone Ruins 10

Chapter Three

Cabin 15

Chapter Four

Glade 21

Chapter Five

Fallen Timbers *Timbers* 26

Chapter Six

Mountain *Peak* 32

Chapter Seven

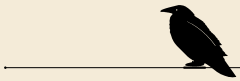
Cave 37

Chapter Eight

East Fork 43

CHAPTER ONE

Campfire



You come out of the pines with cold hands and a small light that is nearly spent.

You do not remember deciding to walk this far. You remember only the beginning: a trailhead, a rusted sign, and a path as quiet as the woods after rain. Soft underfoot. Forgiving. It led you in, and it did not lead you back.

The pines here are black. Not dark, the way trees are dark at dusk, but black, as though someone has cut them out of the night with a sharp knife and left the shapes standing. They crowd close on either side. Their branches knit together overhead, and through the gaps hangs a winter moon.

You have been watching that moon for an hour. It has not moved.

You tell yourself it is the trees playing tricks. You tell yourself that clouds will come, that the sky will turn, that tomorrow will be an ordinary day. But the moon stays where it is, pale and patient, the way a face stays at a window when someone is waiting for you to look up.

Your light is a small thing. A little lantern, dull brass, with a flame no larger than a thumbnail. Someone gave it to you at the edge of the woods. You cannot recall who. You remember their voice, though, and the one thing it said: keep your light. Keep it small. Keep it burning. And whatever happens in there, never call out your own name.

You asked why. They only looked at the trees.

So you keep your light. You shield it with your hand when the wind comes down through the branches, and you feel its warmth against your palm, thin as a held breath. The flame leans. It shivers. It does not go out. Not yet.

There is no one else on this path. You know it the way you know your own hands. No footprints but yours. No voice but the wind. And when you stop walking, the forest stops too. Every rustle. Every tick of frost. As if it had been walking with you, and does not want to be caught.

Somewhere behind you, a twig snaps.

You do not turn around. You tell yourself it was the cold.

Somewhere to your left, there is the sound of water.

A creek, you think. You stop and turn toward it, and you hold your light high. But there is nothing there. Only ferns, frost-stiff and silver, and beyond them a wall of trunks. The sound goes on, thin and bright and unhurried, a creek you cannot see. You step toward it and the sound seems to step away. You step back and it follows. After a while you stop trying to find it. You let it walk beside you, a companion that will not show its face.

The cold deepens. It finds the gaps in your coat, your collar, your cuffs. It climbs into your fingers until you can hardly feel the lantern. You count your steps to stay awake. One hundred. Two hundred. At three hundred and twelve, you smell smoke.

It is not the sharp smoke of something burning wrong. It is sweet and slow, pine resin and old oak, the smell of a house you lived in once, long ago, before you learned to be careful. You follow it. You cannot help it. Your feet already know the way.

The trees open without warning, like a curtain drawn back.

And there, in a ring of blackened stones, a fire is waiting.

You stand at the edge of the clearing and do not move. It is a good fire. It burns low and steady, the logs stacked with a patient hand, the flames the color of honey and rust. Sparks drift up and wink out. The smoke climbs

straight toward the winter moon, in a line so straight it might have been drawn with a ruler. There is no wind in this place. The wind stops at the edge of the stones, as if it has been asked to wait outside.

No one built it. You look for footprints, and there are none but your own. You look for an axe, a woodpile, a bedroll, a pack. There is nothing. No one tends it. And yet it has been burning for hours. You can tell by the deep red bed of coals, by the way the stones have taken in the heat and now give it back, slowly, like a debt being paid.

You say nothing. You almost say hello. The word rises in your throat, and you remember, and you swallow it.

Instead, you walk to the fire. You lower yourself onto a flat stone worn smooth by other travelers, and you hold out your hands.

The warmth is almost painful. It finds your fingers one by one. First a prickle, then a burn, then a deep, aching relief that makes your eyes sting. You close them, only for a moment. You listen to the wood crack and settle. A log shifts. An ember pops and goes silent. And behind those small sounds is the silence itself, wide and deep, older than the fire. It has been here since before the first tree, and it will be here when the last one falls. It is not an empty silence. It is the silence of something listening. The warmth reaches your face and your hands, but not your back. Your back stays cold. It is as though something stands just behind you, a hand's width from your spine, and the fire will not reach it.

When you open your eyes, you are not alone.

On the dead branch above you, a raven watches.

You do not know how long it has been there. It sits perfectly still, black on black, its feathers drinking the firelight and giving nothing back. Its eye is a small bright bead, wet and steady. It does not caw. It does not hop or ruffle or preen. It simply turns its head, slowly, the way one looks at a stranger who has finally arrived.

You hold its gaze. You feel, absurdly, that you are being measured. Not judged, exactly. Weighed. The way a traveler weighs a bridge before putting a foot on it.

Then you notice that your lantern, set down beside you on the stone, has gone dim. The flame is a bead of blue now, barely there. You reach for it, and you stop.

The fire is right in front of you. You could take a coal. You could feed your little light from this great one, and carry it into the dark, bright and certain. Or you could stay here, and let your own flame die, and trust the fire to be enough.

The raven tilts its head.

It is the first time you understand that this is a choice. That every clearing in these woods is a choice, and that something has been waiting a very long time to see what you will do.

You lift the lantern. You open its small brass door. And with a splinter of kindling, you carry a single trembling spark from the great fire to the little one.

The flame catches. It steadies. It stands up straight, as bright as it has ever been, and the shadows around the clearing draw back a step.

Above you, the raven makes a sound at last. Not a cry. A soft, low click, deep in its throat, almost a word. Almost approval.

You stay a while longer. You cannot say how long. The moon does not tell you. The moon never does. You tell yourself you will rest only until your hands are warm. Then until your coat is dry. Then until the next log falls.

Remember the walker's rule: keep your light, and never call out your own name. The trees are listening. They have always been listening. They learn the names of those who speak them, and they do not forget.

At last the fire begins to sink. The flames fall away to a low rustle, and the logs collapse inward into a bed of orange glass. Shadows lengthen across the ground. The raven shifts on its branch, unfolds one wing, and stretches it toward the dark.

You follow where it looks.

Past the edge of the firelight, between two pines, the shadows are not quite so deep. Something pale stands there, upright and still. At first you think it is a person. Then you think it is a trick of frost. But it does not breathe, and it does not move, and when the last of the embers pulse once, red as a heartbeat, you see it clearly.

Stone.

A wall. An old one, rising from the roots. Behind it, the dim shape of an arch.

You stand. Your knees ache, and your hands, warm now, close around the lantern. The creek you cannot see murmurs on your left, a little closer than before, as though it, too, wants you to go.

The raven lifts from its branch with one heavy beat of its wings. It does not fly away. It circles once above the clearing, low enough that you feel the air of its wings on your face, and then it glides out between the two pines and settles, small and black, on the top of that distant wall.

It looks back at you. It waits.

You take one last breath of woodsmoke and look at the fire. You think of staying. You think of how easy it would be.

Then you step out of the circle of stones, and into the dark, with your small light held high, toward the ruins.



CHAPTER TWO

Stone Ruins



The path forgets itself, and then the stones begin.

For a while, after you leave the circle of the fire, there is still a trail under your boots. You can feel it, a thin line of packed earth between the ferns. Then it thins, and softens, and one step later it is simply gone, as though it had only ever been a rumor the forest was too polite to correct.

You stand very still and listen. The creek you cannot see has gone thin and far away. There is no wind. There is no bird. There is only your own breath, loud in your ears, and the smell of cold moss and wet ash, as if a fire had died here long ago. When you step, something in the ferns steps too. When you stop, it stops.

You stop. You lift your lantern. The little flame stands straight and steady, and in its light the dark does not retreat very far, but it retreats a little, and that is enough to see by.

The first stone is half swallowed by moss. You almost step on it. It is no bigger than a loaf of bread, square at the corners, and cold when you touch it. Someone cut this. Someone carried it here and set it down and meant for it to stay.

Then comes another, and another. Then a line of them, running off between the trees like the spine of something buried. Then a wall, waist high, then shoulder high, black with wet and furred with green. The forest

has been patiently disagreeing with this place for a very long time, and it has nearly won.

In your coat pocket, your fingers find something you had forgotten you carried. A compass. Small, round, brass, with a lid that squeaks. You open it, and the glass fogs and clears.

It does not say north. It does not say anything you expect. Where the letters should be, there are words, tiny and engraved, and the needle has swung to the one in the middle. It says: Stone Ruins.

You watch the needle. It trembles. It does not settle the way a needle should, but shivers back and forth across that one word, as though it cannot decide what it is pointing at. As though the ruins are not in one place, but in several, and all of them are calling.

You close the lid. You tell yourself that compasses lie. You tell yourself the forest has been making fools of better travelers than you. But you keep the compass in your hand, because it is warm, and because it is the only thing in this place that is trying to tell you where you are.

The wall bends, and opens, and there is a doorway with no door.

You stand in front of it a long moment. The frame is still whole, two heavy posts and a lintel across the top, and the dark inside is not an ordinary dark. It is the dark of a room that has been waiting. You raise your light and step through, and the air changes. It is colder, and stiller, and it smells of wet stone and old rain and something sweeter beneath, like pressed flowers in a book.

There is no roof. Above you, the black pines lean in, and between their tops hangs the winter moon, in exactly the place it hung when you left the fire. Its pale light falls through the open ceiling and lies on the floor in long silver slabs. Somewhere in the walls, water drips. Slow. Steady. Like a counted breath.

You count it. You cannot help it. One. Two. Three. Seven drops, and then a pause as long as seven more. Seven, and a pause. It has the rhythm of a thing that is waiting for you to finish counting.

You walk on. The room opens into another room, and that opens onto a courtyard, and everywhere there are the fallen things. A broken pillar. A trough filled with leaves. A staircase that climbs four steps and then simply ends in air. Roots as thick as your arm push through the mortar, and they are gray, and they curl, like slow, patient fingers.

You lay your free hand against the nearest wall. The stone is wet and cold. And under your fingertips, you feel marks.

You hold the lantern close. They are carved, shallow and worn, almost smoothed away by the rain of a thousand winters. Most are too faint to read. But a few survive. A spiral, winding inward. A small flame, drawn simply, like a child would draw it. A line of tiny birds, one after another, all flying in the same direction.

And a figure, standing alone, with a light held up in one hand.

You look at it for a long time. It is only a few lines on a stone. It could be anyone. But the lines of the shoulders are tired, and the light is held a little too high, as if the one who carved it was proud of that light, and a little afraid.

Beneath the figure, someone has cut a single sign. You do not know the letters. But you know the shape of it. It is the shape of a mouth, forming a word, and above it, drawn in a quick hard stroke, a line crossing it out.

Do not say it. The wall says it as plainly as any voice. Whoever built this place knew the rule. They knew it better than you do. And still, you stand in the rubble of what they made.

Behind you, something shifts.

You turn so fast that your flame leans over and nearly drowns. And there, on the broken lintel of the archway you came through, black against the pale moon, sits the raven.

You did not hear it arrive. You never do. It folds its wings and looks down at you with that wet bright eye, and you understand that it came ahead of you, or after you, or perhaps has never left. It watched these walls go up. It will watch them fall. It has all the time in the world.

You hold up the lantern. The raven does not flinch from the light. It tilts its head, once, toward the far end of the courtyard.

You look.

There is an arch there, taller than the rest, standing alone and whole against the trees. Its stones are pale, and carefully fitted, and they are the only ones in all these ruins that have no moss at all. As though something has kept them clean. Through the arch there is only night.

But the night shows you something it should not.

Beyond the arch, past the shoulders of two fallen towers, far off between the trunks, there is a light. Not a star. Not a firefly. A thin yellow glow, small and square and steady, the way a window glows when someone inside has set a lamp on a sill.

Someone has left a light on.

Your chest tightens. You have not seen a house in a day, or two, or however long it has been. You have not seen another soul. And you realize that you have been alone for so long that the sight of a lamp in a window is almost more frightening than the dark. No one has spoken to you in all this time. No one has said anything at all.

You look at the compass in your hand. The needle has stopped trembling. It has settled, at last, and it is no longer pointing at Stone Ruins. It has swung round, slowly, like a hand turning a page, and it rests on a new word, newly engraved, in letters so small you have to hold the glass to your eye.

Cabin.

You look back at the raven. It says nothing. It gives you nothing, not a nod, not a warning. It only watches, the way it always watches, to see what you will choose.

You could stay. You could sit among the stones until morning, if morning is coming. You could put your back to the wall and your hand around the lantern and wait for the moon to move. The ruins are old, and quiet, and not unkind.

Or you could go.

You take one last look at the carved figure with its lifted light. You touch the stone beside it, lightly, the way you might touch the shoulder of a stranger who has done you a courtesy. Then you walk the length of the courtyard, past the stair that ends in air, and you step beneath the clean pale arch.

The air on the other side is warmer. It smells of woodsmoke and old wool and something baking, long ago.

Behind you, very faintly, the sound of the creek you cannot see stops. You had not noticed how it followed you until it is gone, and the silence where it was is so wide that you can hear your own heartbeat.

You keep your light high, and you walk toward the window.



CHAPTER THREE

Cabin



A single window glows between the trees, small and amber, like an eye that has just opened.

You have been walking toward it for a long time, though it never seems to grow. Then, all at once, the trees step aside, and there it is. A cabin. Low and crooked and made of logs gone silver with age, with a roof of moss and a chimney that leans like a tired neck.

You stop at the edge of the clearing. You do not go closer. You have learned, somewhere in the dark, that the forest does not offer gifts without wanting to watch you open them. And something is watching now. You feel it on the back of your neck, one small cold place, exactly where a stare would land.

The cabin leans a little, the way old things lean when they are tired. There is no smoke from the chimney, though the window glows. There are no footprints in the frost around the door, though the frost is thick everywhere else. A rocking chair sits on the porch, turned to face the trees, and it is moving, very slightly, back and forth, as if someone has only just stood up from it.

The winter moon hangs above the roof, in exactly the place it has always hung.

You cross the clearing, slowly, and climb the steps. The porch boards complain under your boots. Each one gives a different note, a low one, a creak, a sigh, a groan, and by the time you reach the door you realize you have played a little tune without meaning to. A song you do not know. A song the house was waiting to hear.

A lantern hangs from a nail beside the door. It is cold and empty, the glass sooty. You hold up your own beside it, and the two lights look at each other, and for a moment you feel strangely shy.

The door is not locked. In the Schwarzwald, nobody locks a door. They only ask that you wipe your feet, keep your light, and do not speak your name aloud.

You wipe your feet. You do not know why this feels important, but it does. The mat is woven of straw and says nothing, and yet you can feel it approving.

Then you push the door, and it swings inward without a sound.

Inside, the air is warm and close and smells of tallow and dried herbs and the dust of a place that has been lived in for a very long time. One room. A low ceiling crossed with black beams. Bundles of herbs hang from them, brittle and gray, and strings of dried mushrooms, and a row of small copper pans that shine dully in your light.

There is a hearth along one wall, wide enough to stand in. It is cold. The ashes in it are white and fine and perfectly undisturbed. They smell of wet ash, though no rain has come down this chimney in years. There is a bed in one corner, neatly made, with a quilt stitched in a pattern of stars. There is a shelf of jars. A broom. A pair of boots by the door, very small, worn at the heels.

And in the center of the room, there is a table, and beside it a chair pulled out, as if someone has only just stood up.

Dust lies thick on everything. On the shelves, on the jars, on the broom, on the quilt. Except one thing.

On the table, laid carefully on an open page, there is a black feather.

You know that feather. You have seen its mate, a hundred times now, in the dark above you. You step closer, and your boots echo in the quiet, and you lean over the table.

The page beneath the feather is part of a book, large and old, bound in cracked leather. The paper is thick and the color of tea. Its lines are written in a small, steady hand, in ink so dark it looks wet.

It is wet. You touch the edge of a letter with the tip of one finger, and it comes away black, and the black is warm.

You should leave. You know that you should leave. But you are very tired, and the room is quiet, and the page is open to you in a way no page has ever been. You lower yourself into the chair, which is warm too, and you hold your lantern close, and you read.

The writing is plain. It is not a story, and it is not a spell. It is a letter, and it begins:

> *To the one who comes after me, who keeps a small light.*

Your breath catches. You read on, slowly, one line at a time.

> *I have lived in this house for longer than I will tell you. I came to the forest as you did, with cold hands and a lantern nearly spent. I was given a rule at the edge of the woods, and I wish I could say I kept it perfectly.*

> *I will tell you only what I have learned. The forest is not cruel. It is not kind. It is attentive. It remembers the people who walk in it, and what it remembers it keeps. Your name is the first thing it will ask you for. It will ask in a kind voice. It will ask in a voice that*

> *sounds like someone you have lost. You will want very much to answer.*

> *Do not.*

> *Keep your light. Share it sparingly, and only with those who need it more than you do. Follow the water you cannot see. And when you find the ruins, and the cabin, and the glade beyond, remember that the raven is not your enemy, and it is not your friend. It is only the one who watches. It watches because someone must.*

> *I wrote my name at the bottom of this page, once. The ink has faded. I am glad of it.*

You turn your eyes to the foot of the page. There is a blank space there, wide and pale, where a name should be. Someone has rubbed it away. Or the page has swallowed it.

And at the very bottom, in a quick new hand that looks almost like your own, there is a single line, not yet dry:

> *Say it. You are so tired. Say it, and rest.*

The room goes quiet.

It is not an empty quiet. It is the quiet of a breath being held. You feel the whole cabin lean toward you, the beams, the jars, the stars on the quilt, the cold hearth. Even the dust seems to listen. The feather on the table stirs, though there is no draft.

You open your mouth. You feel your name rise in you, warm and easy, like a coal. It would be so simple. A syllable, two, a breath. The house would be warm. The fire would catch. Someone would come in from the dark and put a hand on your shoulder and say that you were home.

You close your mouth.

You swallow your name like a stone. It is the hardest thing you have ever done, and no one sees it, and no one will ever thank you. But the lantern in your hand does not flicker, and the feather is still, and the room breathes out.

On the table, the wet letters of the last line begin to fade.

You sit a while longer, hands cold again, heart going like a drum. When you look up, you see that the window has changed. It is no longer amber. It is gray, a thin and ashen gray, like the first light of a morning that has no sun behind it.

It is dawn, you think. Or the shape of dawn. The moon is still in the window, small and pale and fixed, where it has always been.

The dust on the table moves. You watch it, because you cannot look away. A thin line draws itself across the page, slowly, as if an invisible finger is dragging it through the ash of the years. It runs below the letter. It bends, and curls, and becomes a drawing. Two lines for a path. A small ring for a clearing. Round, and open, and full of grass.

And above it, in the same dust, a single word. Glade.

You rise. Your knees are stiff, and your hands are numb, and yet you feel lighter than you did, as though you had set down a weight without knowing you carried it. You take the black feather from the page, and look at it, and then you tuck it into your coat, next to the compass. You are not certain this is permitted. But no one stops you.

You pause at the door. You look back at the empty room, at the cold hearth, at the chair still pushed out from the table. You think of whoever sat there. You think of how long they waited, and what they gave up, and who they might have been.

You do not say goodbye. You do not say anything at all.

You wipe your feet again, because it seems the polite thing to do, and you step out onto the porch. The boards sound their small, strange song under your boots, and this time you know the tune.

The rocking chair has stopped moving. You did not hear it stop.

Out in the clearing the frost is untouched, and the pines are black against a sky that will not turn. And on the porch rail, so close that you can almost touch it, the raven sits and watches you.

It does not leave. But it does not follow. It looks at you with its small, bright eye, and then, slowly, it lowers its head. A bow, almost. A courtesy.

Then it lifts its beak and points it, like a signpost, at the gap between two trees, where a path runs down into the dark, and the dark smells of wet grass and open sky.

You raise your light. You go down the steps. And you walk toward the glade.



CHAPTER FOUR

Glade



The forest opens onto a meadow, round as a coin, and utterly silent.

You stop at its edge with one boot still in the shadow of the pines. The grass is silver with frost. Not a blade of it bends. The winter moon hangs directly overhead, wide and white, so bright that for the first time since the trailhead you can see your own shadow, short and sharp and black, lying at your feet like a loyal dog.

The trees stand in a perfect ring around the clearing, their trunks close together, their branches turned inward as though they are leaning in to listen. There is no wind. There is no night bird, no insect, no rustle of anything small in the grass. There is only a stillness so complete that you can hear your lantern flame, a thin, dry whisper, like paper being turned. You stop walking. The silence stops with you, exactly, as if it had been keeping step.

You step out into the open. The frost crunches under your boots, and the sound is enormous. You wince. You walk more softly, on the balls of your feet, the way you would walk through a sleeping house.

In the middle of the glade stands a stone.

It is tall, taller than you, narrow and gray and leaning very slightly to one side. It is not carved. It is not shaped at all. It is just a stone, as old as the ground, as if the ground itself had once raised a finger and then forgotten to

lower it. Around its foot, in a perfect circle, grow mushrooms. Hundreds of them, small and pale and round-capped, glowing faintly in the moonlight, like a ring of lit candles.

You do not step into the ring. Something in you says not to.

You circle it instead, slowly, keeping your light low. And on the far side of the stone you find the water.

It is not much. A thread. A black ribbon no wider than your hand, winding out of the shadow at the stone's foot and across the frost, shining like oil. It makes no sound. It is moving, you can see it moving, sliding over the grass in smooth, quick curves, but it does not whisper or murmur or chuckle, the way a creek should. It is silent, and dark, and cold.

You kneel beside it. For the first time since the pines, you can see the creek you could not see.

You have heard it all along. You have followed its voice through the black trees, and felt it keeping pace with you, a companion that would not show its face. And here it is at last, small and plain, a line of dark water in a field of silver. It is smaller than you imagined. It is a great deal older.

You put out your hand. You do not touch it. You hold your palm an inch above the surface, and you feel it breathing a coldness against your skin.

Behind you, from the edge of the trees, someone says your name.

It is a soft voice. A warm voice. You know it at once, and your whole body goes still, because the voice is your own.

It is exactly your own. It has your small hesitations, your way of leaning on the last syllable. It is the voice you hear in your head when you read aloud, and the voice you use when you are alone and think no one is listening. It comes from the dark, from just beyond the first row of pines, and it says your name again, and it sounds tired, and it sounds relieved.

It sounds like someone who has found you at last. Do not turn. Do not answer.

Your throat opens. You feel the answer rise, as easy as breathing. Yes. Here. I am here. It is the most natural thing in the world to answer your own voice. It would be rude not to.

You press your lips together so hard that they hurt.

The voice says your name again. Closer now. It has stepped out of the first row of trees, though you cannot see anything there, and it is walking across the frost, and the frost does not crunch under it. It says your name a fourth time, and this time it adds a word. Please.

Your eyes sting. Your hands shake. You can hear, behind the voice, other voices too, a handful of them, whispering at the edge of the glade. Your mother, perhaps. A friend you lost. A child you used to be. They are saying your name in every way it has ever been said, with love, with anger, with laughter, with fear.

You keep your light low and your mouth shut. You hold the lantern against your chest with both hands. You look at the black thread of the creek and you think, very hard and very clearly: I know the rule. I know the rule. I know the rule.

The voices circle you. You feel them like cold breath on your neck, on your cheek. They are patient. They are so patient. They have all the time in the world.

Then something lands on your shoulder.

It is heavy, heavier than you expect, and its claws bite through your coat with a small precise pressure. A feather brushes your ear. And the raven, which has watched you from branches and lintels and porch rails, and never once come near, folds its wings against your neck and settles.

The voices stop.

It is as though a hand has been laid over a mouth. The silence is back, wide and white, and the moon shines down on the glade like nothing happened. You let out a breath you did not know you were holding, and it fogs the air in front of you, and then clears.

You turn your head, very slowly. The raven is so close you can see the fine oiled curves of its feathers. It does not look at you. It looks at the water.

You look too.

The black thread of the creek has widened. Where it passes the foot of the stone, it has pooled into a still dark mirror, smooth as glass, about the width of a dinner plate. It is quite round. And as you watch, the reflection of the moon in it begins to change.

At first you see only the moon. Then you see the tops of the pines, upside down. Then the reflection clears like breath from a window, and you see something else.

A hillside, strewn with fallen trees. Hundreds of them, black and bare, lying every which way across the slope, like the bones of a ship wrecked on a hill. You see a gap in them, a thin way through. You see a boot, small and brown, half buried in the ground.

The picture shivers, and clears again.

A mountain. Not near, but high, rising gray out of the forest, its peak cut off by cloud, and above it the moon, so large and so close that it seems to rest on the summit like a lamp on a table. A long slope of scree. A cairn of stones. A path no wider than a ribbon, climbing.

The picture shivers, and clears again.

And last, there is a hole. A black mouth in a cliff, ringed with ferns, breathing a pale mist. It is not frightening, exactly. It is only deep. It is only waiting, the way a well waits.

Then the water goes dark and flat, and it is only water again.

The raven shifts its weight on your shoulder. You feel it drawing breath. And then, very quietly, it makes the low, soft click in its throat that you heard at the fire. Almost a word. Almost approval.

You understand that you have been shown the way up and the way under, and the way across. And you understand that you are not being told which to take. You are only being shown, so that when you choose, you will know what you are choosing.

You stay a moment longer, kneeling at the edge of the thread. You are shaking, and you are warm, and you feel strangely clear, the way the world looks after a long fever. The grass is silver. The moon is white. The stone leans over you like a patient old friend.

Then you reach into your coat and take out the compass.

The needle moves under the glass, slow and sure. It passes across the engraved words, passes Stone Ruins, passes Cabin, and stops, trembling a little, at a place where the glass has fogged. You wipe it with your sleeve. The word has changed again.

Timbers.

You rise to your feet. The raven rides your shoulder as you stand, balancing easily, as if it has done this a thousand times. You find that you do not mind. It weighs very little, for something that has seen so much.

At the far side of the glade, the pines part, and a path leads out, narrow and steep, running downhill into a country of fallen trees. You can smell it from here, the sharp green smell of split wood, the sourness of old resin, the cold of a place where something very large once came down all at once.

You touch the stone as you pass it. It is cold, and humming faintly, like a bell that has just been struck. You nod to it, politely, and it does not nod back, but you feel that it was glad of the courtesy.

Behind you, in the middle of the frozen glade, the black thread of the creek begins, at last, to whisper. It is the first sound it has made all night. You cannot make out the words. But they sound a great deal like good luck.

You raise your lantern. The flame stands tall and bright, and you walk down out of the silver meadow, toward the Timbers.



CHAPTER FIVE

Fallen Timbers



The first thing you notice is the smell: split wood, and sour resin, and cold.

The path out of the glade runs downhill through a tunnel of low pines, and then, without warning, the pines stop, and you are standing on the edge of a ruin of a different kind. A hillside, steep and wide, strewn from top to bottom with fallen trees.

Hundreds of them. Black pines, each as thick as a barrel, lying every which way across the slope. Some are piled three and four deep. Some have fallen straight down the hill and lie nose to tail, like soldiers asleep. Some still lean against their neighbors, caught halfway to the ground, their roots torn up in great round plates, taller than a man, dripping dark earth.

It looks, as the water showed you, like the bones of a ship wrecked on a hill.

A great storm did this. You can tell. A storm that came, perhaps, a hundred years ago, in a single night, and flattened a forest as you would flatten a field of wheat. The wood has silvered since. Moss has crept over the trunks, and ferns have rooted in the cracks, and young trees, tall and thin, are growing out of the bodies of their elders. The forest is mending itself. It is only very slow.

Overhead, the sky is wide here, wider than anywhere you have been, because there is no canopy left to close it. The winter moon hangs in the gap, enormous, as bright as a plate. It lights every trunk and every root with a flat, cold, honest light.

And that light shows you how far you have to go.

There is no path across the Timbers. There is only the trees themselves. If you want to cross, you must climb up onto the fallen trunks and walk along them, one to the next, balancing as you go. And below you, in the dark between the logs, there are gaps, deep and narrow and full of broken branches.

You adjust the lantern in your hand. You take a breath. The raven, on your shoulder, shifts and grips a little tighter.

"Well," you almost say. But you do not say anything. You have learned to be careful with your voice.

You climb up onto the first trunk. The bark is slick with frost, and your boots slide, and you throw your arms out and catch yourself, the lantern swinging wildly. The flame leans and gutters and stands again. You hold your breath. And then, gingerly, one foot in front of the other, you begin to walk.

It is slow work. The trunks are not straight. They tilt and roll, and every few paces you have to climb down into a gap and up again onto the next. You learn quickly to test each step. You learn to read the wood, the silver ones are old and safe, the dark ones are rotten and will give. You learn that the raven, riding on your shoulder, will lean the way you should go, a little, just before your foot falls, and that if you ignore it you will regret it.

Somewhere down the slope, a trunk groans under a weight that is not yours. You freeze. You wait. Nothing moves.

Halfway across the first slope, you find the boot.

It is a small brown boot, cracked with age, sitting on the end of a broken branch. Its laces are still tied. Its toe points up the hill. You look at it for a

long moment, and then, because it seems to be the right thing to do, you set it upright and nudge it a little further along, as if to say: go on.

A little farther, there is a tin cup, dented, hanging from a root by its handle. A little farther still, a coat, hung on a broken limb with the sleeves hanging, as if someone had meant to come back for it. And then, deep in the shadow of a fallen giant, you find a lantern.

It is brass. It is dull. It is almost exactly like your own. But its little door hangs open, and the wick is dry and black, and it has no flame at all. Whoever carried it is not here. No one is here. There is only the slope, and the moon, and you.

You kneel and hold it. It is very light. And you think of the people who walked in before you, with cold hands and spent lights, and chose, or did not choose, in the clearings where you have stood. You think of the carved figure in the ruins. You think of the letter in the cabin. You think of the voices in the glade. And you set the lantern down very gently, upright, and you touch its cold glass, the way you might touch the forehead of a sleeping child.

Then the wind finds you.

It comes down off the high ground with no warning, the first wind you have felt since the fire. It is cold, and thin, and enormous. It roars through the dead branches with a sound like a great crowd drawing breath. Your coat snaps. Your hair whips across your eyes. And the flame in your lantern bends flat, and shudders, and shrinks to a blue spark no bigger than a seed.

You drop into a crouch on the trunk, curling around the light, cupping it with both hands. The wind pulls at your sleeves. It is trying to take your light. It is trying so hard. It howls through the roots of the fallen trees, and every hollow log along the slope begins to sing, a low, long, mournful note, a choir of the drowned.

You hold on. You press your hands closer. You feel the little flame scalding your palms, thin as a held breath, and you whisper to it without speaking: stay, stay, stay.

And, slowly, it stays.

The wind passes. The singing logs fall quiet, one by one. You open your hands, and the flame is there, a small, trembling, stubborn gold. You laugh, once, silently, with relief, and it comes out as a cloud of white in the cold air.

The raven, on your shoulder, makes a soft sound. And that is when you hear the other one.

A tiny sound. A squeak, almost. It is coming from the hollow of the log you are crouched upon. You lean down, holding your light close, and peer into the dark of the split trunk.

There, in a nest of dry moss and feathers, is a very small owl.

It is hardly more than a ball of gray fluff, with enormous eyes, and a bent wing. It has fallen from somewhere. It has been stranded here, in the hollow, with the wind howling over it, and it is shivering so hard that its whole body rattles.

You look at it. It looks at you.

You think of the old letter. Keep your light. Share it sparingly, and only with those who need it more than you do.

This is the choice, you understand. Not a grand one. Not a choice of paths or mountains. A small choice, about a small light, and a small creature in the dark. If you hold your lantern to the hollow, to give the owl a little warmth, your own flame will burn lower. You will have less to carry up the hill. You will have less to carry into the dark.

You think about this for a long time.

Then you lift the lantern, and you open its brass door, and with a splinter of dry kindling from the end of the log, you coax a single bead of fire from your flame. You cup it in your hand, shielding it, and with the other you take a little pile of dry moss, and you light it. A tiny fire, no bigger than a walnut, burning sweetly in the hollow of the log. You set it down in the stone-dry dust at the entrance of the owl's nest, where the wind cannot reach.

The owlet stops shivering.

It looks at the small fire, and at you, and then it tucks its head under its good wing and settles down. In a moment you hear it breathing, slow and soft, in the warm.

You sit back on your heels. The lantern, in your lap, burns smaller now. A little less golden. A little less steady. But it burns, and it burns clean, and you find that you do not regret what you spent.

Above you, in the great bare sky, something answers.

A low call, round and soft, from far away on the hill. A hooting. And then, nearer, another. A pair of owls, calling to each other over the wreck of the forest, and you think, perhaps, that one of them is a mother, and that she has been looking for a very long time.

You rise. The raven, on your shoulder, nudges your ear with its beak, once, gently. A thank you, you think. Or only a push.

You go on. The crossing is easier now, or else you are easier with it. You walk along the silver trunks, and the wind does not return, and the moon slides its long light across the broken ground like a hand. You are tired. But it is a clean tiredness, the kind that comes from doing something that was worth doing.

At last, the trunks end, and you climb down onto solid earth. Ahead, the pines begin again, black and straight and whole. And above the pines, through a break in the canopy, you see it.

A mountain.

It stands gray and enormous against the stars, so near that you might have walked into its shadow. Its slopes rise past the tree line into bare stone and snow. Its summit is wrapped in cloud, and above that cloud, impossibly close, hangs the winter moon. It looks like a lamp set on a high shelf. It looks as if you could reach up and take it down.

It is closer than it has any right to be.

You take out the compass. The needle swings, quick and sure, to the last word on the dial. It does not tremble. It does not hesitate. It says, in letters sharp as frost: Peak.

You look at the raven. The raven looks at the mountain.

You settle the lantern in your hand. You straighten your aching back. And you start to climb.



CHAPTER SIX

Mountain



The climb begins gently, the way the worst climbs do.

For the first hour the slope is no more than a long green lean, a carpet of needles under your boots and black pines on either side, standing like patient guards. You find a rhythm. Step, breathe, step. The lantern swings at your side. The raven rides your shoulder, silent, and after a while you forget its weight and only notice it when it shifts.

Then the trees begin to thin.

They do not stop all at once. They shrink. The pines grow shorter and twisted, bent over like old women against a wind, and their needles turn from black to a rusty gray. Between them, stones begin to show, pale and bare, and then there are more stones than trees, and then there are no trees at all.

You stand at the edge of the last one, with your hand on its rough trunk. Behind you, the Schwarzwald stretches away, dark as spilled ink. Ahead is only the mountain, wide and gray and utterly bare, climbing up into a sky so clear and cold that the stars look sharpened.

And the moon hangs over the summit, enormous. You could cover it with your thumb, if you held your arm out. But it does not feel small. It feels as if it is looking down at you from the roof of the world, and has been, all this time.

You take a breath. The air is thin and bitter. It scrapes your throat. You tuck your chin into your collar, and you begin to climb the scree.

It is slow, hard work. Every step slides. For every three paces up, you lose one back, the loose stones shifting and clattering away down the slope. The cold bites through your gloves. It finds your ears, your nose, the corners of your eyes, and it pinches there like small cruel fingers.

You stop to rest. You sit on a boulder, with your back to the wind, and you hold the lantern in your lap. It has burned smaller since the Timbers, a plain steady gold, no bigger than a thumb. But here, in this high cold, it is the only warm thing in the world. You cup it in both hands, the way you would a bird. You put your face near it, and you feel its heat on your lips.

You think of nothing. You are too tired to think. There is no one to tell. There is no one for miles, or for years. You watch the little flame, and it watches you, and neither of you says a word.

Then you stand, and go on.

The higher you climb, the quieter the world becomes. The wind drops. The stones stop clattering. Even your own breath seems to fade, thinner and thinner, until the loudest sound in the universe is the soft crunch of your boots in the frost. When you stop, the crunching stops. When you start again, for half a step, you could swear it starts a moment before you do. You pass a patch of old snow, blue in the moonlight. You pass a stunted shrub, bent flat against the stone, still clinging to a single dead leaf. You pass a frozen waterfall, a curtain of ice with the black shape of a stream trapped inside.

You put your hand against it, and you listen. And you hear, deep in the ice, very faintly, the creek you cannot see. It is still running. Even here. It has gone ahead of you, under everything, and it is waiting.

The path, if it is a path, narrows. The slope grows steep, and then steeper, and then you are climbing with your hands. You wedge the lantern into your belt, with its door turned inward, and you haul yourself up from ledge to ledge. The raven leaves your shoulder, and flaps ahead of you, and

perches on each rock in turn, waiting. It does not help. It does not hurry you. It only waits, a small black shape against the pale stone, to show you the way.

At last, your hand closes on something that is not rock.

It is a cairn. A neat little pile of flat gray stones, stacked one on another, each about the size of your palm. You pull yourself up beside it, and you kneel there, panting, and a great pale wind comes across the summit and flaps your coat like a flag.

You are at the top.

You stand. Slowly, with your legs trembling, you straighten, and you turn, and you look.

The whole forest lies below you.

You had not understood how large it was. It goes on and on, in every direction, black as night and silver at the edges, rolling away to the horizon in waves of pine. And above it all, so close that you could almost step onto it, the winter moon hangs, bright and white, in the place it has always hung.

You can see the fire. A small orange star, a very long way back, still burning in its ring of stones. You can see the ruins, a scatter of pale marks, like teeth. You can see the cabin, a single amber window, and the gray wreck of the Timbers, and the silver circle of the glade.

And you see something else.

A line of light.

It runs through all of them, thin as a thread, bright as a filament. It begins at the edge of the woods, where the trailhead must be, and it winds through the trees, through the fire, through the ruins and the cabin and the glade, over the Timbers, up the slope, and across the scree, all the way to the place where you are standing. It is drawn in a soft gold, the same gold as your lantern.

It is your path. It is the way that you have come, laid out beneath you like a drawing. And you understand, all at once and without any words, that the forest has been drawing it. That it has been reading you, as you have

been reading it. That every choice you have made, to keep your light, to hold your tongue, to share a little fire with a frightened owl, has been written down, carefully, in gold.

You are not lost. You have never been lost. You have been walked.

You stand at the top of the world for a long time. You are not afraid. You are only very still, as you are before a great piece of music, or a face you have loved. The wind combs your hair. The moon shines on your hands.

And then, beside you, on the cairn, the raven speaks.

It is a small voice. Dry as a leaf, and low, and strange, as if it had been unused for a hundred years. It speaks a single word, in the shape of a human voice, and it is not your name. It is not any name.

"Look."

You look where it is looking.

The summit, on its far side, falls away not into slope but into a long, curving hollow, a kind of bowl, scooped out of the stone. And at the bottom of the bowl, half hidden under a lip of rock, there is a darkness that is darker than the rest.

An opening. A mouth in the mountain. It is not large. A person could walk into it standing, with a lantern held high. A pale mist drifts from it, slowly, and curls upward, and vanishes into the cold.

You go down to it. It takes a quarter of an hour, picking your way among the loose stones, with the raven gliding ahead of you on its wide black wings. As you draw close, the air changes. You feel it before you see it. A warm breath, rising from the dark, brushing your face. It smells of wet stone and minerals and the deep earth, and it is the first warmth that has touched you since the fire.

You stand at the threshold. You hold your lantern up.

The light shows you a smooth floor, worn by water. A pale wall. A passage descending, a long gentle curve, vanishing into the black.

You hear, very far below, a sound. A rushing, hollow and constant, like a great crowd whispering. It is the creek you cannot see. It has been running

under the mountain all this time. And now, at last, it is louder than you have ever heard it.

You take out the compass, and flip the lid. The needle spins, and spins, and then drops, and points straight down, at the floor, at the earth. And the word that it rests upon, newly engraved, is the one you had been half expecting.

Cave.

The raven has stopped on a rock beside the mouth. It tucks its feet under its chest, and folds its wings, and it does not move. It looks at you. It looks at the dark. And you understand that it will go no further.

"Thank you," you almost say. You do not. But you incline your head to it, solemnly, as you would to a friend at a station. And the raven, after a moment, inclines its head to you.

You step into the mountain, and the dark closes over your head.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Cave



The mountain breathes.

You feel it in the first twenty paces, a slow, deep, patient exhalation, warm against your face, and then, after a pause, a long cool inhalation drawing the dark back down. It is the breath of something very large, asleep. You walk in its breathing, and you try to match your steps to it, because it seems polite.

The passage winds downward. The walls are smooth and pale, the color of old candle wax, and they glisten. Water seeps from them in a thousand small threads, and gathers, and drips, and the drips make a music, a high, soft, endless chiming, like a hall full of tiny bells. Your lantern throws long shadows that dance and stretch ahead of you, and your own shadow, huge and wavering, walks beside you on the wall like a second, taller traveler.

The roar of the creek grows. It is a living thing now, deep and constant, echoing from every side. You cannot tell where it is. It is below you, and ahead of you, and behind you. It is in the stone itself.

Twice you stop, because you are sure you hear footsteps behind you. Each time, the footsteps stop a moment after you do. Each time, you do not look back.

You pass the first of the marks.

They are painted, not carved. Red ochre, and black, and a pale yellow like old bone. A hand, spread wide, pressed against the rock and outlined in color, so that it looks as if someone had pushed their palm into the wall and left a ghost behind. Then another hand, smaller, beside it. Then a dozen, in a row, large and small, a whole family's hands.

You lay your own palm against one of the outlines. It fits. It fits almost perfectly. And for a moment you feel, through the cool damp stone, a warmth like a handshake.

You walk on, and the marks multiply. Animals, drawn in a few quick, confident lines, deer and wolves and horses, galloping across the roof of the passage, their backs made from the natural curves of the rock. A great black bird, wings spread, taking up a whole wall. A spiral. A flame. A line of tiny walking figures, each of them holding up a light.

These were here long before the ruins. Long before the cabin. Before the first stone was cut or the first door built. Whoever painted these walked in the same dark you are walking in now, and held their little lights, and were afraid, and went on.

You feel, strangely, less alone than you have since the pines.

The passage widens. You step out of the tunnel into a chamber, a great round hall with a ceiling lost in shadow, and you stop.

In the center of the chamber lies a pool.

It is perfectly still. It is black as polished stone, and perfectly round, and ringed with a low shelf of white rock, like the rim of a bowl. Pale stalactites hang above it, thin as needles, and one by one they let fall a single bead of water, which strikes the surface with a note and sends out a ring. The rings spread, and meet, and cross, and die away.

And on the pool, floating in the black, there is the moon.

Not a reflection of the moon. You look up, at the ceiling, and there is only stone. There is no opening to the sky, no crack, no chimney. And yet there it lies, round and white and calm, shining up at you from the dark water, exactly as it has shone all night.

You kneel on the rim. You lean over it, and you look.

The moon in the pool is moving.

You almost miss it. It is the slightest thing, a drift of a hair's breadth, slow as the hand of a clock. But the moon that has hung in one place since you entered the forest, the moon that has watched every clearing and ruin and cabin and glade, the moon that never moves, is moving, in this one small black mirror, under the mountain. It is sliding gently toward the edge of the pool, toward the east.

Your heart thumps. You stare at it. You think: it is a trick. You think: the water is stirring. But you hold your breath, and the water is quite still, and the moon goes on, a little farther, a little farther, like a swimmer drifting into a calm sea.

And then a voice comes up out of the water.

It is not your voice. It is not the voice from the glade. It is deep, and dry, and old, and it fills the whole chamber, as if the mountain itself were speaking, in a hush. It says, kindly, with the patience of a very long life:

Tell me your name.

You go still.

There is no threat in it. There is no trick that you can hear. It is only a question, quietly asked, in a room where no one has asked you anything for a very long while. It asks again, as gentle as a hand on a sleeping child. Tell me your name, and I will tell you where the moon is going. Tell me your name, and I will tell you where the forest ends.

Your lips part. You feel the whole weight of the night on your shoulders, all the cold and the climbing, all the choices and the hunger and the fear. You want so badly to know. You want to hear someone say, it is almost over. You want to know that there is an end.

You lean closer to the water. The air is warm on your face. The word is there, on your tongue, the first and oldest word you own.

You stop.

You think of the figure in the ruins, with the line struck through its mouth. You think of the letter in the cabin, and the name rubbed pale. You think of the voices in the glade, and the one small black feather against your chest. You think of the little flame you gave away in the hollow log, and how it was worth more than any answer.

The raven would not come in here. It stopped at the door. It could have told you why. It did not, because it is not allowed to tell you. It can only watch, to see what you do when you are alone.

You straighten up. You take a step back from the pool. And, very carefully, very quietly, so as not to wake the thing in the water, you say, in a whisper, the only words you are allowed.

"I will keep my light."

The chamber is silent.

Then the pool shivers, from the edge to the center, and the voice sighs, a long vast sigh like wind in a cavern. It does not sound angry. It sounds, strangely, relieved, as though it had been asking for a very long time, and had at last been given the right answer. The water grows still. The moon in it drifts, and drifts, and slides away beneath the dark rim and out of sight, and the pool is only a pool.

You wait a long time before you move.

When you do, your legs are shaking. You find that you are crying a little, the quiet kind, with no sound. You wipe your eyes on your sleeve. You check the lantern. The flame is small, and very steady, and a deep and gentle gold. It has not so much as flickered.

There is a second passage on the far side of the chamber, a narrow crack in the rock, and a draft comes through it, cold and smelling of green. You duck inside. The creek is loud here, louder than ever, and you follow it down, through a long corridor where the walls drip and the floor shines wet, and the roaring becomes a rushing, and the rushing becomes a song.

You come round a bend, and there it is.

You can see it. The creek you could not see. It runs along the floor of the passage in a channel of its own cutting, white with foam, quick and strong and clear as glass. It is no longer a black thread. It is a living river, small and fierce, and it throws back your lantern light in a thousand tiny sparks.

You kneel and drink from it. It is so cold it makes your teeth ache. It tastes of iron and snow and something very old, and it fills you, from your throat to your toes, with a clean ringing strength.

You follow it. It does not take long. The passage tilts downward, and then levels, and the walls fall back, and the roof lifts. The creek spreads and slows and murmurs, and the air smells of something new.

It smells of morning.

You see it before you understand it. Far ahead, at the end of the tunnel, a slit of gray light. A narrow vertical crack, no wider than your hand, and no brighter than a candle. It is not the moon. It is not gold, or silver, or white. It is a pale, cool, honest gray, the gray of the sky just before the sun.

It is the first real light you have seen in all this journey.

You begin to run. You cannot help it. You run along the edge of the creek, splashing, stumbling, with your lantern bobbing wildly and its flame streaming flat behind you, and the slit of light widens and brightens and swells, and then you burst out of the mouth of the cave onto a ledge of wet stone, into a world full of mist and birdsong.

You stand there, panting, with your hand on your heart.

The cave stands at the foot of a low cliff, ringed with ferns. Below you, the stream pours out over a lip of rock and drops into a small green valley, and there, at the bottom, the creek meets a great round boulder, and divides.

One branch bends away to the west, back toward the black pines. The other runs east, toward the light.

You look up at the sky. The gray is deepening, pearling to pink at the edges. And the moon, the winter moon, high in the thinning dark, is no longer where it was.

It has moved.



CHAPTER EIGHT

East Fork



You come down from the cave in the first gray of morning, and the world smells new.

The valley is small, and green, and wet. You had forgotten that things could be green. The grass is long and bright with dew, and tiny white flowers star it, and a mist lies thick and soft in the hollows, like milk in a bowl. Somewhere in the leaves a bird tries a phrase, falters, and tries again. Another answers it. For the first time since the trailhead, you hear a sound that is not a warning.

You walk down along the stream. Your boots are wet through. Your lantern is still lit, its small gold flame almost invisible now against the pale of the sky, but it is steady, and it is yours.

The moon is sinking.

You can see it, over your shoulder, low and large and soft, sliding toward the western ridge, as an ordinary moon should. It looks tired. It looks as if it has been holding something up for a very long time, and has at last been allowed to set it down. You watch it for a while. You think you will always remember how it looked, how slowly it left.

Then you reach the boulder, and the fork.

It is a very large stone, gray and round and shoulder high, and the creek runs straight at it and divides without complaint, in two clear arms, around

its sides. The western branch turns back toward the dark line of the pines, running quiet and deep under the shadow of the trees. The eastern branch runs on, bright and broad, down the valley, toward a pale line of hills where the sky is turning to rose.

You stand between them, with one boot on each side of the water.

On top of the boulder sits the raven.

It has been there, you think, for a long time. It is small, and black, and damp, and a little ruffled, as though it had flown through the whole night to be here. It looks at you with its bright round eye. It does not call out. It does not click. It only waits.

You understand that this is the last choice, and that every one before it was practice.

You sit down on a flat stone beside the boulder. Your legs are done. You set the lantern on your knee, and you look at both ways, the west and the east, and you let yourself think about them properly, for the first time.

West is the way you came. West is the fire in its ring of blackened stones, burning low and steady in the dark. West is the ruins, and the cabin with its chair pushed out, and the silver glade where a stone leans over a small black creek. It is a country you know now. You could walk back through it. You could sit down again by the fire, and the raven would sit above you, and the fire would burn until the end of the world, and no one would ever ask you for your name again. There is a kind of peace in that, deep and quiet and complete. You can feel it pulling at you, as a fire pulls at cold hands.

East is a place you have never seen.

You do not know what is there. You see only hills, and light, and the creek going down into a country with no pines. It might be a village. It might be a road. It might be a house with a door that opens when you knock. It might be nothing at all. Perhaps it is simply the world, ordinary and unlit and enormous, waiting to see what you will do with the rest of your days.

You take the black feather from your coat. You turn it over in your fingers. It is soft, and dark, and as light as a breath.

"Do you know," you almost say to the raven, "I am glad you came."

You do not say it. But the raven bows its head, very slightly, as if you had.

You think, then, about the rule.

You think about it as you have not before, quietly, and from the beginning. Keep your light. Never call out your own name. It was given to you at the edge of the woods by a stranger whose face you cannot remember, who looked at the trees and would not say why. You have kept it through the fire, and the stones, and the cabin, and the glade. You kept it in the Timbers and on the mountain and under it, with a voice in your ear that was kinder than any you had ever heard. You kept it when it was hard, and again when it was harder.

And you understand that the rule was never really about the forest. The forest was only the place where the rule could be kept. The rule is about you. It is about the thing you carry that no one can take, unless you hand it over.

Your name is not a thing to be given in the dark. It is not a coin to be spent on comfort, or on answers, or on the pity of the pines. It is yours. It is the one true thing you have brought out of the world and into the woods, and you have brought it, whole, all the way through.

And here, at the end of the trees, in the clean gray light, it can be spoken.

Not to the forest. Not to the voice in the water or the voice in the glade. But to the morning. To the open sky. To the east, and the hills, and the faint warm color that is spreading along the edge of the world, like a promise.

You stand up. You put your light down on the boulder, next to the raven, with its little door open to the dawn. You take a breath so deep that it hurts, the first full breath you have taken since you came out of the pines.

And you say your name.

You say it softly, at first. Then louder. You say it once, to the east, the way you would say it to a person you were meeting for the first time, and

who you hoped would like you. It sounds strange in your mouth. It sounds small. It sounds like a stone dropped into a deep well, and for a moment, you listen, with your whole body, for the answer.

Nothing answers.

No tree leans in. No voice takes it up. The creek goes on, murmuring. The grass goes on, bending in a little wind. A bird, high in the branches of the last pine, breaks into song, loud and glad and unashamed.

The name is yours. It was always yours.

You laugh. It surprises you. It is a real laugh, rough and unused, like a hinge that has not moved in years, and it rings out down the valley and a pair of startled wrens burst from the ferns. You laugh until you have to wipe your eyes. And the raven on its stone throws back its head and makes a sound at last, a long, rolling, rattling, wonderful sound, the sound of something that has been holding its breath for a hundred years and has finally been allowed to let it out.

It is not a croak. It is not a warning. It is, you are quite certain, laughter.

Then the raven stretches its wings, and the black feathers shine in the light. It looks at you once more, with that bright round eye, and you could swear that it is smiling. It spreads itself on the wind. It rises. And it flies away to the east, over the creek and the green valley, small and dark and fast, into the pink of the dawn.

You watch it until it is a speck. Then you watch the place where it was.

You pick up your lantern. The flame is still burning. It has been burning all night, and all the night before, and it will burn a little longer yet. You hold it up to the dawn and look at it, a small, plain flame in a battered brass lantern, and you think of the empty lantern in the Timbers, and the carved figure in the wall, and the hundreds of hands on the cave. You think of all of them, all the ones who came before.

You do not keep it.

You place it on the flat top of the boulder, at the fork, where the creek divides, where anyone coming out of the pines would see it. You trim the

wick. You adjust the little brass door so that it will not blow out. And you leave it there, burning softly in the morning, so that the next traveler who comes down out of the dark with cold hands and a light nearly spent will see that someone has gone before, and left a lamp.

Keep your light. And then, when you can, give it away.

You turn east.

The sun clears the hills as you walk. The light comes across the valley in a long gold tide, over the grass and the water and the white flowers, and it touches your face and your hands. It is warm. It is so warm. You walk into it, with the creek you can finally see singing at your side, bright and clear and quick, and for the first time in a long, long while, you do not look back.

Halfway down the valley, you stop, because the compass in your pocket has begun to hum.

You take it out. The lid squeaks. The needle is turning, slowly, and it comes to rest pointing east, over the hills, toward the sun. But the dial has changed again. Every other place it named, Stone Ruins, Cabin, Timbers, Peak, Cave, was cut in small neat letters. This one is blank. A smooth, bright patch of brass, with no word on it at all, as though the next word has not been written yet, and is waiting for you to choose it.

You look up. On the farthest of the hills, standing above the mist, there is a tower. You had not seen it before. It is tall and thin and the color of ash, and at the very top, in a narrow window, a light is burning. Small. Amber. Steady, like an eye that has just opened.

Somewhere a bell rings, once, far away and low. A small dark shape circles the tower, and settles on its roof, and is still.

You do not know what the tower is. You do not know who has lit that lamp, or whom it is waiting for, or what it will ask of you when you come. You only know that it is another road, and another night, and that you will not walk it tonight.

You close the compass, and put it away, and smile, because for the first time you are not afraid of what comes next.

Behind you, on a rock at the fork of the water, a small light burns.

And above the western ridge, as slow as breath, as quiet as a page turning, the winter moon goes down, and the morning begins.



THE STORY CONTINUES



Coming next:

Ravenwood Forest, Book Two:
Under the Moving Moon

Listen to the audiobook at ravenwood-forest.com