

BOOK TWO · A NOVELLA

RAVENWOOD

Under the MOVING MOON

T. A. RAVENSWORTH

RAVENWOOD FOREST

BOOK TWO

Ravenwood Forest

Under the Moving Moon



T. A. Ravensworth

Ravenwood Forest, Book Two: Under the Moving Moon

Written by T. A. Ravensworth

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

First edition, 2026.

ravenwood-forest.com

Contents

Chapter One

The Green Valley *Valley* 5

Chapter Two

The Hamlet *Hamlet* 10

Chapter Three

The Ash Hill *Hill* 15

Chapter Four

The Unlocked Door *Door* 20

Chapter Five

The Watcher's Stair *Stair* 25

Chapter Six

The Bell *Bell* 30

Chapter Seven

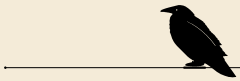
The Narrow Window *Lamp* 35

Chapter Eight

The Watch *Watch* 40

CHAPTER ONE

The Green Valley



The morning is still new when you begin to walk.

Behind you, on the boulder at the fork, a small light burns. You left it there. You trimmed the wick and turned the little brass door against the wind. You meant it kindly. You still do.

You said your name. Out loud. To the morning. And nothing took it.

You hold on to that. You walk with it, the way you once walked with the lantern, close against your chest. The creek runs at your side, bright and shallow, the creek you can finally see. The sun lies warm on your shoulders. A bird sings somewhere in the thorn trees.

For a little while, you let yourself believe it is over.

Then the bird stops.

It does not fly away. You do not hear wings. It simply stops, in the middle of a phrase, as if a hand had closed over its beak. You stand still in the long wet grass and wait for it to begin again.

It does not begin again.

You walk on. The grass hisses against your knees. The creek talks over its stones. And you notice, after a while, that the valley is very quiet. No bees. No wind. Only the creek, and your boots, and your own breath.

You reach for your lantern, to trim the wick, the way you have done a hundred times in the dark.

Your hand closes on nothing.

You stop and look down at your fingers. They are cold. Even in the sun, they are cold. You gave the light away. You know that. Your hand does not know it. Your hand keeps reaching, the way a tongue keeps finding the place where a tooth used to be.

You turn and look back.

There it is. Far up the valley, at the foot of the black pines. A point of gold, steady on its stone. So small you have to hold your breath to see it.

Then the land folds, and a green shoulder of hill slides between you, and the little light is gone.

You are alone.

You were alone in the forest, too. But there you had the fire, and the raven, and the flame in your hand. Here you have nothing to hold. The sky is very wide. The valley is very open. There is nowhere to put your back.

You walk faster.

In your pocket, the compass hums. You take it out. The lid squeaks. The needle points east, down the valley. And on the dial, the old words sit in their small neat letters. Stone Ruins. Cabin. Glade. Timbers. Peak. Cave. And beside them, the blank. A smooth bright patch of brass, with no word on it.

You run your thumb over it.

It is warm. Warmer than your hand. Warm the way skin is warm.

You shut the lid and put it away, quickly, and you look up. And there is the tower.

You saw it first at dawn, above the mist, on the farthest hill. It is still far. Tall and thin and the color of ash. The gray that is left in a hearth when the fire has been dead a week. It does not lean. It does not crumble. It is the only straight thing in all that soft green land.

Near the top, in a narrow window, there is a light.

It is noon now. The sun is white and high. Every shadow has crept in close under its owner and hidden there. A candle should vanish in light like this.

The lamp in the tower does not vanish.

It burns against the day. Small. Amber. Steady. And you understand, with a slow cold feeling in your stomach, that it is wrong in the same way the moon was wrong. It does not belong to the day. It belongs to something else.

You keep walking. There is nothing else to do.

Your boots squelch in the wet ground. Squelch. Squelch. Squelch.

Then, somewhere behind you, a beat late, another squelch.

You stop.

Silence. The creek. Your breath.

You turn around. The valley lies empty behind you, long and green and bright. Your own trail goes back through the grass, a line of bent blades. Only one line.

You walk on. Squelch. Squelch. Squelch. And behind you, a beat late, soft, patient, the same.

You stop. It stops.

You do not turn around this time. You stand very still with your hands at your sides, and you count to ten, slowly, the way you counted the drops in the ruins. Nothing moves. Nothing breathes, except you.

When you walk again, you walk on the stones of the creek bed, where your feet make no sound. Whatever is behind you makes no sound either. That is worse.

The afternoon goes on and on.

Once, you stop to drink. The water is cold and clean. It tastes of nothing. You kneel there a long time with your hands in it, and you do not look at your reflection. You are afraid of what might be standing behind it.

Once, you sit down on a stone to rest your legs. You do not mean to close your eyes. When you open them, the shadows have grown long and blue.

And the tower is closer.

You did not walk. You are certain you did not walk. But the tower is closer, and the lamp in its window is brighter, and it seems to you that the window is not looking at the valley. It is looking at you.

The sun goes down behind you, over the pines. Red. Then rose. Then violet. You have not seen an evening since you went into the woods. You had forgotten how it feels, to watch the day leave. It feels like a door closing in another room.

Then the moon rises.

It comes up over the eastern hills, huge and pale, the color of old bone. It is the same moon. You would know it anywhere. But it does not stop. It does not hang. It climbs. And as it climbs, the shadows of the thorn trees turn on the grass, slowly, like the hands of a clock.

You watch your own shadow move around your feet.

The long night is over. You understand that. One night, held still so long it forgot it was a night at all. Now it has let go.

But a thing that has been held still for a hundred years does not wake gently. Things that wait a long time wake hungry.

You do not go toward the tower in the dark. You promised yourself that at the fork. So you find a hollow by the water, where a low bank keeps off the wind, and you lie down in your coat with your arms crossed tight over your chest.

There is no lantern beside you. For the first time since the trailhead, you lie in the dark with no light at all.

It is very dark.

Far off, on the tower roof, against the moving moon, there is a small black shape. The raven. It sits as still as a chimney pot. It does not come to you. It does not call.

The creek murmurs beside your head. You listen to it, half asleep. And after a while, the murmur begins to sound like words. Not words. The shape of words, the way a voice sounds through a wall. Low. Patient. Coming closer.

Something about a name.

You press your face into your sleeve. You hold your name behind your teeth, where it has always been safe. You do not answer.

The murmuring stops.

Not slowly. All at once. As if the water had heard you not answering, and was listening now, very hard, to the silence.

You do not breathe.

After a long time, you open the compass by moonlight. The needle points at the tower. And in the blank place, where there was nothing at dawn, a word has been cut into the brass. Small and neat. As if it had always been there.

Valley.

You did not hear it being written. You close the lid. You do not sleep for a very long time.

And the moon walks on across the sky, without you.



CHAPTER TWO

The Hamlet



You wake to the smell of smoke.

Not forest smoke. Chimney smoke. Thin and blue, with bread somewhere inside it. You lie still in your hollow and breathe it in, and for a moment you think you are dreaming.

The moon is gone. It set while you slept, as a moon should. The sun is up. Your coat is soaked with dew. Your bones ache.

You sit up. Below you, where the valley narrows under the tower hill, there is a village.

It was not there last night. You are almost certain.

A dozen houses of black timber and white plaster, huddled close. Steep roofs pulled down low over the windows, like hats over eyes. A well. A great old linden tree. A little church with a squat stone steeple, and no bell in it. Smoke rises from every chimney. It goes straight up, into air so still it does not bend.

You go down. You are hungry. There is nowhere else to go.

The cobbles are worn into shallow cups by a great many feet. Your boots ring on them. Tock. Tock. Tock. The sound comes back off the white walls, a little late, as if the street were repeating you.

A dog lies on a doorstep. It lifts its head and watches you pass. It does not bark. It does not wag. It only watches, until you are gone.

In an upper window, a woman is shaking a cloth. She sees you. Her hands stop. She does not call out. She draws the cloth in, and she closes the shutter. Gently. The way you would close a door on a sleeping child.

Then another shutter closes. And another. All along the street, soft wooden clicks.

Then silence.

In the square by the well, the children are skipping rope. Two turning. Three jumping. They sing as they jump, in thin flat voices, the way children sing a rhyme they no longer hear.

Lamp on the hill, never asleep. Name in your mouth, and keep, keep, keep. Moon in the sky, walking away. Who will watch at the end of the day?

They see you.

The rope slaps the dust once more, and lies still. The singing stops. Not slowly. In the middle of a word.

Five small faces turn toward you. Nobody asks who you are. Not one of them. And you realize you have been waiting for it, the way you wait for a step that is not there in the dark.

Nobody here asks for a name.

Then an old woman comes out of the house beside the well.

She is small and very straight, in a black shawl pinned under her chin with a pin of polished bone. Her face is creased like a walnut. She does not hurry. She stops in front of you and looks at you for a long time.

Her eyes go to your hands. Empty.

Then to your coat, where the tip of a black feather shows above the pocket.

And she looks at you the way the raven looked at you, that first night by the fire. The way one looks at a stranger who has finally arrived.

"You came down by the water," she says.

It is not a question. You nod.

"There is a light on the stone at the fork," she says. "My grandson saw it from the hill. There has not been a light on that stone in my lifetime." She tilts her head. "You left it."

You nod again. Your throat has closed.

"Come inside," she says. "Everyone who comes out of those woods wants to sit down."

Her house is low and dark and too warm. A stove of green tiles ticks in the corner. Tick. Tick. Tick. A table, scrubbed white. A cat on the bench, which opens one yellow eye and does not close it again.

She gives you soup in a wooden bowl. Barley, and onion. You eat it too fast. It is the first warm thing you have swallowed since the fire, and it hurts going down.

While you eat, you notice the walls. There is a small shelf by the door, and on it, a row of lanterns. Dull brass. Seven of them. Every one is cold. Every one has its little door hanging open.

You stop eating. The old woman follows your eyes.

"They come down the valley sometimes," she says. "On the water. Empty." She does not say who carried them. She does not need to.

You look at the seventh lantern for a long time. There is room on the shelf for an eighth.

She does not tell you her name. You do not tell her yours. It is not unfriendly. It is careful. It is how people live, in a country where names are worth something.

When you have finished, she folds her hands.

"While the moon hung still," she says, "we lived in a long dusk. Gray. Always the edge of evening. The bread would not rise. The children did not grow. We did not grow old, either." She looks at the window. Through the small thick panes, the tower stands on its hill. "Two nights ago, we heard the bell. And the moon began to walk."

"Who rang it?" you ask. Your voice sounds strange. Rusty. Too loud in that small room.

The stove stops ticking.

The old woman does not answer. The cat does not blink. And after a moment, very softly, the stove begins to tick again.

"The tower wants a keeper," she says. "Someone to watch, now the moon is walking. Someone who kept the rule." Her eyes go to the feather. "You kept it."

"I said my name," you whisper. "At the fork. To the morning."

"I know. We felt it. Like a door opening in another room." She leans across the table and lays her hand on yours. It is dry and light and very cold. "Listen to me. A name spoken to the morning is safe in the morning. But the night does not forget what it has heard."

Her fingers tighten.

"A name spoken once can still be spent."

You sleep that night under the eaves, in a narrow bed, beneath a quilt so heavy it pins you down like snow. The shutters are barred. She told you not to open them.

You wake in the deep of the night.

You do not know what woke you. The house is silent. The stove has gone out. There is a thin bright line of moonlight lying across the floor where the shutters do not quite meet. And it is moving. Crawling over the boards, slow as a snail, as the moon walks on outside.

Then you hear it.

Footsteps. In the street below. Slow. Tock. Tock. Tock. On the cups of the cobbles.

They stop under your window.

You lie still. You do not breathe. You can hear your heart in the pillow.

Nothing knocks. Nothing calls. Whatever stands below simply waits. You feel it waiting the way you feel cold coming off a stone.

Then, very softly, through the shutter, someone hums the children's rhyme.

Lamp on the hill, never asleep.

It stops. Mid-word.

After a long, long time, the footsteps go away. Tock. Tock. Tock. Toward the hill.

You get up. You should not. You put your eye to the gap in the shutters.

The street is empty. The tower stands black against the silver sky. The lamp burns in its narrow window. And as you watch, a figure passes in front of it. Tall. Thin. Like someone standing up from a chair.

It pauses in the window. It seems to look down. At the village. At this house. At you.

Then it is gone. The lamp burns on alone.

You do not sleep again.

In the morning, the old woman gives you bread in a cloth and a clay bottle of water. She walks with you to the edge of the village, where the cobbles end and a pale path begins. She does not wish you luck. She touches the feather in your pocket with one finger.

Then she turns and walks back. She does not look round.

Behind you, one by one, the shutters close.

At the last house, you open the compass. The needle points up the hill. Beside Valley, a new word has been cut in the night.

Hamlet.

You begin to climb.



CHAPTER THREE

The Ash Hill



The path up the hill is the color of ash.

It is not gravel. It is not dust. It is finer than that. Pale and gray and soft, and it takes the print of your boot and keeps it. Twenty steps up, you look back. Your footprints climb behind you, sharp and exact, as if pressed into wax.

There are no other prints. Not one.

The path goes back and forth across the hill in long, patient turns. The grass on either side is cropped short, though there are no sheep. There are no trees. There is no moss. Someone keeps this hill swept. Someone has kept it swept for a very long time.

Below you, the hamlet shrinks. Its smoke still goes straight up. You watch for a face at a window. There is none.

The creek follows you for a while, in a stony channel beside the path. It chatters. It is almost company.

Then, at the third turning, it goes into the hill.

It slides under a lip of gray rock and is gone. You hear it a few steps more, hollow, somewhere under your boots. Then you do not hear it at all.

You stop.

The silence is very large. No wind. No birds. No water. Only your breath, too loud, and the blood in your ears.

You put your hand in your pocket for the lantern. Again. Your fingers close on nothing. Again. You make a fist and you put the fist away.

You walk on. Your footprints follow you up the hill, one turning below, then two, then three, a neat gray ladder of them. Once you look back and count them. Then you count them again.

There is one more than there should be.

It is set a little apart from the rest. Bare. Narrow. Pressed deep, as if whoever made it had stood in that one place for a long while, watching you climb.

You do not go back down to look. You turn your face to the hill, and you keep your eyes there, and you do not count again.

You eat the old woman's bread sitting on the edge of the path. Rye and caraway. It is the only warm memory you have left, and you eat it slowly, to make it last.

Halfway up, the stones begin.

Flat gray slabs, set upright in the grass beside the path, like headstones. They are not headstones. They are carved. And you know the carvings. You saw them in the forest, worn almost to nothing, on the wet walls of the ruins.

A spiral, winding inward.

A small flame.

A line of tiny birds, all flying the same way.

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

But these are not worn. These are sharp. The grooves are pale and new where the chisel bit. Someone has knelt here, in the grass, and recut every line, so the rain cannot take them.

Beneath the figure is the other sign. The mouth, forming a word. The hard stroke that crosses it out.

That stroke is the freshest of all. There is still a little gray dust in the bottom of the groove.

You lean close, and blow. The dust lifts, and drifts away.

And somewhere above you on the hill, very faintly, a chisel taps on stone. Tap. Tap. Tap.

You straighten. You hold your breath. The tapping stops.

You wait. Nothing. The hill is empty in every direction. Short gray grass. Gray path. Gray sky.

You take a step. Tap.

You stop. Silence.

You understand then that it is keeping time with you. When you walk, it works. When you stand still, it waits. You do not know what that means. You do not want to know.

On the next post sits the raven.

You did not hear it arrive. You never do. Small and black and a little ruffled, with that one bright eye. The last time you saw it, it was laughing, on the boulder at the fork, and you thought perhaps that was the end of it.

It is not laughing now.

It looks at you. It looks at the carved stone. It says nothing.

You bow to it, a little. After a long moment, it dips its head. Then it flies ahead, post to post, the way it led you through the Timbers. You follow. The tapping follows too, always just above, always just out of sight.

The light fails early. The cloud breaks in the west, and the sun bleeds through it, and then the evening comes in cold. You are still far from the top.

The old woman said, do not climb in the dark.

There is no shelter on this bare hill. There is no way down that is shorter than the way up. So you climb.

The moon rises behind you.

It throws your shadow up the path ahead. Long. Thin. Like someone else going on before you. And because the moon moves, the shadow moves. It slides. It swings across the path. And the path seems to turn under your feet.

The stones that line it shift in the moving light. You cannot tell which way they lean. Twice you step off into the grass without knowing it. Twice the raven calls, once, short and sharp, out of the dark, and you find your way back.

You have no lantern. You have only the moon. And the moon will not hold still.

Near the top, there is a niche cut into the rock beside the path. Square. Shoulder high. Just the size for a lamp.

It is empty. The stone at the back is black with old soot.

You stand in front of it and feel your empty hands like two cold coins.

Then the wind comes.

It comes down off the top of the hill, thin and cold, and it brings a voice with it.

Your voice.

It says your name.

You go very still.

You have heard this voice before. In the glade, at the edge of the black pines. Then it was warm and close and tired, the most natural thing in the world to answer.

Now it is thin. Stretched. Like a voice down a long pipe. It says your name again, and it cracks on the second syllable, like a plate.

It knows you said your name at the fork. You can hear it trying. Trying to say it the way you said it, to the morning.

It cannot. It has never seen a morning.

It says your name a third time. Closer. Just behind your left ear.

You do not turn. You do not answer. You do not even whisper. You think, very clearly, I know the rule.

The wind drops.

The voice stops, mid-word.

And the tapping stops too. Somewhere just above you, in the dark, something has set down its chisel. And is listening.

You walk the last turning with your eyes on your boots.

The top of the hill is flat. The tower stands in front of you.

It is taller than you thought. Much taller. Round and gray and smooth, without a crack or a vine, going up and up into the moving sky. Near the top, the narrow window glows. At the bottom, set deep in the stone, there is a door of dark iron.

Beside the door, leaning against the wall, there is a chisel and a small iron hammer.

No one is holding them.

You look back once, down the long hill and across the valley. And there, far away, at the foot of the black pines, is a tiny point of gold. Steady on its stone. Still burning.

It is very small.

You open the compass. Beside Valley and Hamlet, a new word.

Hill.

The raven does not use the door. It flies up the side of the tower and slips in through a slit in the stone, high above, and is gone.

You wipe your feet on the flat stone before the door. One. Then the other. You do not know why it still feels important.

The door is not locked. Nothing here is ever locked.

You push it open.



CHAPTER FOUR

The Unlocked Door



The door swings shut behind you. Softly. On its own.

The moonlight goes out.

You stand in perfect darkness, with your back against the cold iron and your palms flat on it. You breathe. You wait for your eyes to learn the dark. They do not. There is nothing to learn. Only black, and the smell of wet ash.

Then, behind you, the door opens again. A hand's width. By itself. As if it had only been taking a breath.

A slab of moonlight falls through the gap and lies across the floor.

You can see by it. Just. You let go of the iron and step away, and your boots scrape on stone, and the scrape goes up and up above you, into the hollow of the tower, and comes back down a long time later, very small.

You are in a round hall. The walls are the same smooth ash gray as the outside. They curve away on either side and meet again behind a stair. The air is cold. It smells of ash, and old wool, and something underneath, faint and sweet. Like pressed flowers in a book.

You know that smell. It is the cabin. It is the chair pulled out from the table. It is a house where someone lived alone for a very long time, and then stopped.

On the bench beside the hearth, there is a coat. Folded. Neatly. Its collar is worn thin, and its cuffs are frayed, and it is the same cut and the same dull color as your own. A pair of boots stands under the bench, toes together, the way someone stands their boots when they mean to come back for them in the morning.

There is dust on the coat. A great deal of dust. Nobody has come back for it in the morning.

You do not touch it. You put your hands in your own pockets, and hold on to the cloth of your own coat, hard.

There is a hearth, cold, with a little heap of gray ash in it. There is a bench, worn smooth by years of sitting. There is the stair, winding up against the wall, round and round into the black.

And there is another door.

It is low and narrow and made of old black wood, bound with iron. It stands in the wall opposite the hearth. Beyond it, you can just see the first few steps of a second stair.

That one goes down.

Down into the hill. Into the rock. Into the place where the creek went when it left you.

You do not go near it. But you can feel it from where you stand. A slow cold breath, coming out from under the door. In. And out. Like the cave under the mountain. And behind the door, very faintly, water running in the dark.

Then the water stops.

You are not moving. You are not breathing. And still it stops. As if it, too, had heard something, and was listening.

You turn away from the low door. Your neck prickles. You do not look back.

Above the foot of the upward stair there is a low arch, and carved into its lintel there is a line of letters.

They are the old letters, the ones you could not read in the ruins. You can read them now. You do not know how. Perhaps you have walked so far through this country that its letters have walked into you.

Keep your light. Never call out your own name.

And below that, in a smaller, steadier hand, cut more recently, a line you have never seen.

When you have given your light, do not take another that is not offered.

You read it three times. You think of the lantern on the boulder. You think of the empty niche on the hill, black with soot. You think of your own cold hands.

Whoever cut this knew what it was to walk on after giving something away.

Beside the stair, against the curve of the wall, there is a table.

You know it before you reach it. Scrubbed pale wood. A book lying open on it, large and old and bound in cracked brown leather. And beside the book, a small clay saucer. In the saucer, ink.

It is black. It shines in the moonlight.

You lean close. It is wet.

There is no pen. There is only the ink. Waiting.

You read the open page.

It is not a letter this time. It is a list. Names, written one below another, in a great many different hands. Some large and proud. Some small and cramped. Some in black. Some in brown. Some in something that has faded to the pale rust of old blood.

You turn back a page. Another. Another. The names go back and back, further than you can bear to follow.

Walkers, you think. Everyone who came out of the woods.

But most of the names are gone.

Not crossed out. Gone. Faded to gray smudges. Rubbed thin, until only a first letter is left, like the stump of a felled tree. Here and there, where a

name should be, there is only a soft gray stain on the paper. The shape of a word the page has swallowed.

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

You turn forward again, to the open page.

At the bottom of the list there is one line in a hand you almost know. Narrow. Slanting. Careful. The hand of someone who wrote slowly, because they did not write often.

The name is gone. Worn to a pale ghost.

But beside it, in the margin, the same hand has drawn a small picture.

A lantern. Dull brass. Its little door open.

You stare at it.

Something turns over, deep at the back of your memory. The edge of the woods. The trailhead and the rusted sign. A stranger, putting a lantern into your cold hands. Looking at the trees. Not saying why.

You never saw their face. But your hands remember being given the lantern. And the hands that gave it were thin, and dry. And stained, at the fingertips, with ink.

Below that line, there is a space. Wide. Pale. Empty.

Waiting.

The tower holds its breath.

You feel it. The same as the cabin, when the wet letters said, Say it, and rest. The whole round hall leans in. The hearth leans. The bench. The stair. Even the dust.

The saucer of ink lies shining and still.

It would be so easy. Dip a finger. A few letters. Just the name you already spoke at the fork, to the morning, and which nothing took. It has already been said. What harm in writing it?

A name spoken once can still be spent.

You fold your hands behind your back, like a child in a shop full of glass. You step away from the table.

The hall breathes out. A small sigh of air, under the low black door.

You cannot tell if it is relief. Or disappointment. You do not want to know.

You write nothing. You turn to the stair that goes up. Because the lamp is up there. And the bell. And the raven. And because you have come this far to find out who keeps that light.

You set your foot on the first step.

A sound comes up out of the stone.

One deep note. So low you feel it in your teeth and in the soles of your feet more than you hear it. It is not the bell. It does not come from above. It comes from inside the walls. From inside the hill. From everywhere at once. It rolls slowly through the tower and dies away.

Like the beat of an enormous heart.

You stand frozen on the first step.

It does not come again. But you know it will. A heart does not beat only once.

You take out the compass and tip it to the moonlight from the door. Beside Valley, and Hamlet, and Hill, there is a new word, sharp and clean.

Door.

Behind you, the iron door still stands a hand's width open. Through the gap, the moon lays its slow silver slab across the floor. As you watch, the slab creeps forward. It touches the foot of the table.

It begins, very slowly, to climb the leg.

And under the low black door, the water begins to run again.

You climb.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Watcher's Stair



The stair winds up the inside of the wall. Round and round. It is very long.

The steps are worn into hollows in the middle, by a great many feet going up. You wonder how many came down. There is no rail. On one side, the smooth gray wall, cold under your palm. On the other, the open dark of the tower's heart. Going down. Going up.

Every so often there is a slit in the wall, narrow as a hand. The moon comes in through it, thin and silver, and lies across a step or two. You climb from one slit to the next. Light to light. Like a swimmer coming up for air.

Your boots scuff on the stone. Scuff. Scuff. Scuff.

Somewhere far above you, a beat late, something scuffs too.

You stop. It stops.

You do not call out. You know better now. You press your back to the wall and wait, and the dark above you waits as well. Then you climb again. And it climbs with you, always one turn ahead. Always out of sight.

After the first long turning, the stair comes out onto a landing.

You stop at the top step. You do not go forward.

Because the landing is not a landing. It is a clearing.

There is no stone floor. There is earth, and needles, and frost. Black pines stand close all around, their tops lost in the dark. And in the middle, in a ring of blackened stones, there is a fire.

It burns low and steady. Honey and rust. The smoke climbs straight up.

There is no crackle. No hiss. No sound at all.

You hold out your hand toward it, slowly, the way you did that first night with your frozen fingers.

There is no warmth. Nothing. The fire burns, and it gives nothing back. Like a picture of a fire, painted on glass.

You remember the letter in the cabin. 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.

This is where it keeps them.

You edge around the cold fire, as far from it as you can, and find the stair again on the far side. You climb.

The next landing is a doorway with no door. Beyond it, fallen stones, and gray roots like fingers, and water dripping somewhere in the walls. Seven drops. A pause. Seven drops.

You do not count. You walk straight through, eyes on the far stair. You do not touch the walls.

Behind you, the dripping stops.

The next is a room with a table and a cold hearth and a chair pulled out, as if someone had only just stood up. On the table, an open page. At its foot, a pale blank where a name was swallowed.

You do not go near the table.

The chair creaks. As if someone had sat back down in it.

You do not turn around.

The next is a meadow of silver frost, with a thin black creek through it. Around its edge stand watchers. Not ravens. Shapes. Gray and tall and still. You keep your eyes on the ground. You walk the edge.

You can feel them turning their heads to follow you. You hear nothing. Not a footstep. Not a breath. Only, when you stop to steady yourself, a soft rustle all around the meadow, as if a great many people had stopped too.

The next is a slope of fallen trees, crossed and tangled, and in the middle, a hollow log. You know what you will find in it. You look anyway.

No owl. A lantern. Dull brass. Its little door hangs open. Its wick is dry and black.

You stand there a long time. Then you go on.

And on the next landing, someone is waiting.

A walker. You know it at once, though you cannot see them clearly. They are thin. So thin the moonlight goes partly through them, the way light goes through a curtain. They sit hunched on the top step, arms around their knees.

Their coat is the same as yours. Their boots are the same as yours. In their two cupped hands they hold nothing at all.

They lift their head when you come up.

There is no face. Only a pale smudge. Soft and gray. Like a name rubbed off a page.

"Oh," they say. Their voice is very quiet. Very kind. "Oh, you came. I hoped someone would."

You stop two steps below them.

"I am so cold," they say. "I have been cold for such a long time. I had a light, once." They hold out their empty hands. "Only a spark. Only a little. I only want to be warm."

Your heart turns over.

You remember the owl in the Timbers, shivering in the hollow log. How you held your lantern to it, and let your own flame burn lower. How it was worth more than any answer. Share it sparingly, and only with those who need it more than you do.

You would give a spark to this walker. Gladly. If you had one.

But you gave it all away at the fork. Your hands are as empty as theirs.

"I have nothing," you say. "I am sorry."

The smudge of their face tilts. It seems to soften. To smile.

"You have something," they say. "The warmest thing of all. I can feel it from here. So bright."

They lean toward you. Just a little.

"You said it at the fork. To the morning. It is already out in the world. Already spent, a little. What is one more time? Say it to me. Only once. And I will be warm. And I will let you pass."

You stand on the stair. Very still.

Their voice is so kind. It sounds like someone you have lost. You want, very badly, to answer.

A name spoken once can still be spent.

Behind them, above them, the dark on the stair has gone very quiet. Listening. Everything in the tower is listening.

You shake your head.

"No," you say. "I am sorry. But no."

The walker looks at you for a long moment.

Then, without a sound, they begin to fade. Not in anger. Not with a cry. They simply grow thinner, and thinner, like breath on a cold window. Until there is only moonlight on an empty step, and a faint smell of old wool.

Your face is wet. You wipe it on your sleeve. You climb past the place where they sat, and you do not look back.

The landings come faster now. A cairn, on a bare summit, in a cold wind. A still black pool ringed with white stone. And in this pool the moon does not hang. It races. It rolls across the black water like a coin across a table, again, and again, and again.

Above the pool, at the seventh landing, there is a wider slit in the wall. And in it, against the moving sky, sits the raven.

It looks at you. Then it opens its beak and speaks.

The same voice as on the mountain. Small. Dry as a leaf. As if it had not been used for a hundred years. A single word, in the shape of a human voice. It is not your name. It is not any name.

"Higher."

So you climb higher.

The stair narrows. The air grows thin and cold, as it did near the peak. Your breath comes short. Your legs burn. The landings stop. There is only the stair, and the wall, and the slits of moonlight sliding slowly across the steps.

The scuffing above you has stopped. You do not know when. You do not know where it went.

At last you stop, with your back to the wall and your heart pounding, and you take out the compass.

Valley. Hamlet. Hill. Door. And a new word, cut small and clean.

Stair.

Above you, close now, you can feel the top of the tower. A slow cold wind comes down the stair. Then goes back up. Then down again.

In. And out.

Like something very large, breathing in its sleep.



CHAPTER SIX

The Bell



The stair ends at a trapdoor of old gray wood. The trapdoor is open. Through it, you can see the sky.

You put your head up through the opening, and the wind finds you at once. A high, thin, clean wind. The wind of very tall places. It smells of nothing but cold and stars.

You pull yourself up and kneel on the boards.

You are in the belfry. A small round room with a floor of gray planks and a roof of slates, held up on eight stone pillars. Between the pillars there are no walls. Only open arches. And through every arch, the night.

You can see the whole world from here. The hamlet, its roofs like scattered seeds. Not one window lit. The long pale valley. The black line of the pines. And beyond them, gray and enormous, the mountain, with snow on its shoulders.

Nothing moves down there. Nothing at all.

You have never felt so far from another living thing.

You think of the trailhead. The rusted sign. The quiet path after rain. You try to remember what was there before it. A road, perhaps. A house. A voice that called you in for supper. You reach for it, and it slides away, like the creek you could not see, stepping back each time you stepped toward it.

How long have you been walking? Days? Years? There is no one up here to tell you. There is no one anywhere.

And the moon.

It is close again. Almost as close as on the summit, when it seemed to rest on the peak like a lamp on a table. But it is not resting now. It is sliding. You can see it move without waiting. Along the rim of the sky, low over the eastern hills. Slow. Patient. Like a great pale boat, drifting downstream, toward a weir.

You think of the voice in the pool, under the mountain. Tell me your name, and I will tell you where the moon is going.

You did not tell it. The moon is going there anyway. And you still do not know where there is.

In the middle of the belfry hangs the bell.

It is not large, as bells go. It hangs from a beam of black oak. It is green bronze, and very old, and the rim of it is worn bright, like the edge of a coin passed through a thousand hands.

The wind pours through the arches. It tugs at your coat. It stings your eyes.

The bell does not move. Not at all. As if the wind cannot touch it.

Around its shoulder there is a band of carving. You crawl closer on your knees and look.

A spiral, winding inward. A small flame. A line of tiny birds, all flying the same way.

From inside the bell, down through a hole in the floor, hangs a rope. Thick and rough and gray with age. It sways very slightly, beside you, though the bell is still. The end is frayed soft. A little way up, there is a dark place, worn smooth, where a great many hands have held it.

You do not touch it.

You sit back on your heels. And you remember.

At the fork of the water, when you had said your name, and the raven had laughed, and flown away, you stood in the valley and saw this tower for the first time. And a bell rang. Once. Far off and low.

You did not ring it.

Someone did. Someone in this tower heard you say your name to the morning. Or felt the moon begin to move. Or saw the little lantern burning on its stone. And climbed these stairs. And put their hands on this rope. And rang the bell. Once.

For you.

Or perhaps no one did. Perhaps the tower rang it for itself, the way the cabin wrote its own lines, the way the compass cuts its own words. In this country it is hard to know where the people end and the places begin.

You look at the rope. The dark worn place on it. And you wonder whose hands made that.

And how many of them came back down.

It was a call. You have answered it, all the way up the hill, all the way up the stair. But ringing it yourself is something else.

We have not heard the bell in a hundred years, the old woman said. When it rang, the moon began to walk.

If you ring it, they will hear it in the hamlet. They will wake in their narrow beds, and lie listening, and not move. They will hear it in the woods. In the ruins. In the cabin. In the glade, where the voices circle. In the cave under the mountain, in the black still pool, where something with the patience of a very long life is waiting to be told a name.

Everything the still moon was holding shut, it will wake.

The wind drops.

All at once. As if it, too, were waiting to see what you will do.

In the silence you can hear the rope creak, very softly, against the edge of the hole. Creak. Creak. Then nothing.

You sit for a long time.

Then you think of the old woman's cold hand on yours. Whatever it offers you, remember that you are not obliged to take it.

And you think of the stone at the edge of the glade, standing alone in the frost. How you nodded to it as you went by. How it did not nod back. How you felt that it was glad.

You stand up.

You take the rope in both hands. It is rough. It is cold. It is heavier than you expected, and faintly damp, as if someone had been holding it only a moment ago.

You do not pull it to claim anything. You do not pull it to summon anyone. You pull it the way you would answer a knock on your door at night. Because you were called. Because it would be wrong not to answer.

You pull. Once.

The bell swings up. Slow. Heavy. The clapper falls.

The sound is enormous.

Not loud. Deep. It goes through the boards and up through your bones and out the top of your skull. It fills the belfry. It pours out of all eight arches at once, into the night. You would swear you see it go. A ring of trembling air, spreading across the valley, like a ripple across black water.

It reaches the hamlet. And one by one, the windows light. Small yellow squares. Every house.

Nobody comes out.

It reaches the pines. It goes into the woods. And far away, at the foot of the trees, the little point of gold on the boulder leans. Flickers. Nearly goes out.

Then stands up straight again. Steady.

It reaches the mountain. The mountain takes it, and gives it back. A long low echo, rolling round the hills like thunder going home.

And the moon, the moving moon, hitches.

Once. For an instant, it stops. It trembles. Like a boat that has struck something under the water.

Then it goes on.

The bell swings back. Swings again, smaller. Smaller. And hangs still.

The sound fades. The wind comes back. You stand with the rope in your hands and your heart hammering, and you wait for something terrible to happen.

Nothing happens.

That is worse.

Then, behind the bell, in the curved wall where you are certain there was only stone a moment ago, there is a door. Small. Narrow. Painted the same ash gray as everything else. It stands open. A few last steps go up beyond it, steep as a ladder. And down those steps falls a warm amber light.

The lamp.

There is a soft sound of feathers. The raven has come in through an arch. It lands on the black beam beside the bell, and looks at you with its bright round eye.

Then it lifts one wing, slowly, and holds it out toward the narrow door. Like a host showing a guest into a room.

Or like someone showing a prisoner to a cell.

It waits.

You let go of the rope. You take out the compass with shaking fingers. Valley. Hamlet. Hill. Door. Stair. And a new word, still warm.

Bell.

You go to the narrow door.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Narrow Window



The last steps are steep and few. At the top is a small round room. In the room, there is a lamp.

The room is no bigger than the inside of a well. Bare gray stone, curving close on every side. No bed. No chair. No table. Nothing to sit on but the floor. Nothing to look at but the wall.

There is one window. Tall and thin as a blade, cut through the stone on the side that faces the valley. And on its sill, burning, is the lamp.

You stand at the top of the steps and look at it.

It is small. Smaller than you imagined, after all this way. A little round lamp of plain dark clay, with a curved handle and a short spout. In the spout, a flame. Amber. No larger than a thumbnail.

It is perfectly still.

The wind comes through the narrow window, cold and thin. It lifts your hair. It moves the dust on the floor. It passes over the flame as if the flame were not there.

The flame does not lean. It does not flicker. It does not make a sound.

No one tends it. There is no oil that you can see. No wicks. No flask. It simply burns. It has burned, you think, longer than the hamlet has stood. Longer, perhaps, than the ruins. Through all the long gray dusk. Through the days, against the sun. Never once going out.

It is like the window of the cabin, glowing between the trees. Like an eye that has just opened.

And has not closed since.

You notice the floor, then. Around the sill, the stone is worn. Two shallow hollows, side by side, smooth as the inside of a bowl.

Knees. Someone has knelt here. For a very long time.

You kneel in the same place. The hollows fit you. Almost perfectly.

You look into the lamp.

You did not mean to. But something in the clay, or the flame, or the stillness of the room, draws your eyes in, the way the coals of a fire draw your eyes. The flame seems to grow. The room seems to fall away behind you.

And in the heart of the light, you do not see your face.

You see the east fork.

The great gray boulder. The creek dividing around it in two arms. And on top of the boulder, your own lantern, small and battered, its door turned against the wind. Still burning.

And someone coming.

They come down out of the black pines, slowly, the way you came. Hands tucked into their sleeves. They carry a light, and it is nearly spent. Guttering. Blue at the edges.

They stop at the edge of the trees. They lift their head. They see the lantern on the stone.

You cannot see their face. You never can, in this country. But you see their shoulders change. You see them start to run.

Is it the next traveler? Is it you, on that first gray morning, seen from the far side? Is it both?

You cannot tell.

The picture slides, the way pictures slide in water. And under it, dimmer, deeper, there is another.

A room. Far down. Under the tower, or under the hill, or under the mountain itself. Long and low and black. The creek runs through it in a channel cut in the floor, quick and cold and silver.

And along the walls, shelf above shelf above shelf, there are books.

Hundreds. Thousands. Old and fat and bound in cracked leather. And between their pages, you know without being told, the forest keeps the names it has been given.

Pressed flat. Like flowers.

Kept.

As you watch, one of the books moves. Only a little. A cover, lifting, and settling. As if something inside had turned over in its sleep.

The picture goes out.

You are kneeling on cold stone in a small round room. Your knees ache in the hollows. Your face is very close to a little clay lamp.

And the lamp speaks.

Not in words, at first. It is more like warmth coming off a stove. But the warmth has a meaning in it, and the meaning becomes a voice, and the voice is kind.

You know this voice. The glade. The pool. The stair.

But it does not ask you for your name.

Someone must watch, it says.

You hold very still.

Someone must keep the light in the window, now that the moon is walking. So that those who come out of the woods will see it, and know there is a way. Someone must go down to the edge of the trees, when it is time, and put a lantern into cold hands. And give them the rule. Someone must keep the book.

You think of the narrow, slanting hand in the book below. The faded name. The little lantern drawn in the margin, with its door open.

And you understand. Kneeling there, in the hollows another pair of knees has worn, you understand who the stranger at the edge of the woods was.

A keeper.

They knelt here. They watched this lamp, in this window, for who knows how many years. Alone. With nothing to sit on but the floor and nothing to look at but the wall. And one day they saw someone coming. Someone with no light at all.

And they took a lantern, and went down the stair, and out the iron door, and across the valley, all the way to the trailhead and the rusted sign. And they put the lantern into your hands. And told you the rule. And looked at the trees.

And then they did not come back.

Perhaps they walked into the woods. Perhaps they could not find the way. Perhaps the forest asked them, in a kind voice, for their name. You do not know. You only know that their name is a pale gray ghost on a page. And the lamp has been waiting, ever since, for someone else to kneel.

There is a rustle of feathers. The raven hops up the steps behind you, past your knee, onto the sill. It stands there between you and the long drop, black against the moving moon.

It looks at you. It says nothing.

It is not your enemy. It is not your friend. It is only the one who watches. It watches because someone must.

Take the lamp, says the kind voice. Keep it. You will never be cold again. Never be in the dark again. You will see every path in the woods from this window, drawn in gold, the way you saw them from the summit. You will have a light. Your hands will not be empty.

You look down at your hands.

And you see the other thing, as plainly as if it were written on the sill.

If you take this lamp, you will keep it. And you will stay. In this small round room, at the top of this tall gray tower, on your knees. You will

watch. And you will not leave. Not until another walker comes who has kept the rule, and climbs the stair, and kneels where you kneel now.

It could be a year. It could be a hundred.

No one will speak to you. No one will knock. You will hear the bell, perhaps, once in a lifetime. And you will grow thin. So thin the moonlight goes through you.

And if you do not take it, the lamp will burn on, alone, as it has burned. And the next walker who comes down out of the pines may find no one at the edge of the woods. No lantern. No rule. And they may not be as careful as you were. And their name may end up pressed flat in the dark, in that long low room under the hill.

A duty. And a snare. A gift. And a cage.

Perhaps, in this country, it is always both.

The wind stops. The room is utterly silent. Even your heart seems to stop, to listen for your answer.

You do not give one. Not yet.

You kneel in the amber light, with the raven on the sill and the moon sliding past the window, and you let the choice sit in your hands. Heavy. And warm.

The compass, in your pocket, has grown warm too. You take it out. The lid squeaks, very loud in the silence. You tip it to the lamplight.

Valley. Hamlet. Hill. Door. Stair. Bell. And a new word, small and neat.

Lamp.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Watch



You keep the lamp until morning.

Not forever. You decide that much, kneeling in the hollows of the floor, with the raven on the sill. Not forever. Not as a claim. Not because the kind voice asked. Only for one night. Only as a courtesy. The way you would sit up with a neighbor's fire, so it does not go out while they sleep.

You do not lift the lamp. You do not take it into your hands. It was offered to be watched, not to be kept. The line over the stair is cut into your mind now, as deep as into the stone.

When you have given your light, do not take another that is not offered.

So you do not take it. You only sit beside it.

You put your back against the curve of the wall and draw up your knees. The little clay lamp burns on the sill above your shoulder. The raven stays where it is, between the flame and the drop, its feathers fluffed against the cold.

And for one night, you are the one who watches.

You are the stranger at the edge of the woods.

It is very quiet. No footsteps on the stair. No water under the floor. No wind. Only the faint tick of the raven's claws, now and then, shifting on the stone.

You look out of the narrow window. You watch.

All of the woods lie below you.

You can see it all, the way you saw it from the cairn. Clearer now. Closer. Far to the west, at the foot of the black pines, the ring of blackened stones, and the fire in it, still burning. The ruin, with its doorway that has no door. The cabin, and its one amber window. The silver glade. The Timbers, crossed like the ribs of a wreck. The mountain, with the dark mouth in its side.

And there, where the creek comes out of the hill, the boulder at the fork. Your lantern still burns on it. A tiny point of gold.

And there is the path. Your path. Drawn in thin gold light, as it was from the summit. It begins at the edge of the woods and winds through every place you have stood. Out of the cave. Along the valley. Through the hamlet. Up the gray hill. In at the iron door. Up the long stair.

And it ends here. At your own knees.

It is strange, to see your life laid out like a line on a map. To see how much of it was walked in the dark. How much of it was walked alone.

The moon walks on.

Slow. Low. Pale. And behind it, as it goes, a road appears. A faint silver road, laid across the land by the moonlight, the way moonlight lays a path across a lake.

It does not run east, toward the morning. It does not run on, into some new country.

It runs west.

Back down the hill. Back across the valley. Back over the fork, and the boulder, and your own small light. And on, into the black pines. Into the Schwarzwald. It goes in under the trees and does not come out.

Tell me your name, and I will tell you where the moon is going.

You did not tell. And now you know. It is going home. Back to the woods it hung over for a hundred years.

And something in you goes with it. A small cold tug, under your ribs. Like a thread caught on a branch, behind you, in the dark.

Then you feel something stir.

Not out there. Down here. Under you. Far below the tower, below the hill, in that long low room where the creek runs through. Something is moving.

Pages.

You hear them. You are sure you hear them. A soft dry rustle, rising up through the stone. Not many. A few. Like a great many old books, breathing out.

The bell has been rung. The moon is walking. And some of the names the forest has kept, pressed flat for a hundred years, have begun to stir.

The rustling stops.

All at once. Exactly when you stop breathing to listen.

You wait. A long time. It does not come again. But you know, the way you know your own hand in the dark, that something down there is lying still now. Very still. Listening up through the stone. For you.

You do not move until the sky begins to change.

Before dawn, a small light comes out of the pines.

It is very far away. Faint. Blue at the edges. Guttering. It comes out of the trees, slowly, the way you came.

It stops.

For a long, long moment it does not move. You hold your breath with it.

Then it begins again. Faster. Toward the fork. Toward the steady gold point of your lantern.

You watch until the two lights meet. Until they are one light, small and steady, at the fork of the water.

Your throat aches. You find that you are smiling. It feels strange on your face, like a hinge that has not moved in years.

Then the sky begins to gray.

It pearls. It goes rose at the edges. The moon slides down behind the western hills. The lamp on the sill grows pale against the morning. It does

not go out. It never goes out. But it shrinks to a little gold seed in the narrow window, the way it looked from the valley, on that first day.

You stand. Your legs are stiff. Your back aches. You feel as if you have not slept in a hundred years.

And you do what you learned at the fork.

You do not keep the lamp.

You leave it burning on the sill for the one who must watch next. You do not know who that will be. The walker with the blue light, perhaps, standing now at the fork with your lantern in their hands. Or someone who has not yet come to the edge of the woods. Or you, one day, a long time from now, when you are old, and tired, and ready to kneel.

But not today.

You bow to the lamp. You bow to the raven. It bows back.

You do not say your name to the tower. Not to the lamp. Not to the book. Not to the kind voice. You said it once, to the morning, and the morning did not take it. That will have to be enough.

You go down the steep last steps. Through the narrow door behind the bell. Down the long stair, round and round, past landings that are only landings now. Bare. Swept. Silent.

Too silent. You listen for the scuffing above you. It does not come.

You cross the round hall. The cold hearth. The table. The open book. The ink in its saucer, still wet. Still waiting. You do not touch it. You do not look at the low black door.

You go out through the iron door into an ordinary morning.

The air is cold and clean. The grass is wet. Far below, in the hamlet, the smoke rises straight up from every chimney. And every shutter is still closed.

The raven flies with you a little way down the hill. Post to post. Ahead of you, as it always has.

At the last turning, it stops. It looks back at you, one last time, with its bright round eye.

Then it turns.

Not east, toward the morning. It spreads its wings and flies west, small and black and fast, along the last faint silver of the moon's road. Back over the valley. Back over the fork. Back toward the black line of the pines.

Back into the Schwarzwald.

You watch it until it is a speck against the trees. Then you watch the place where it went in.

You are alone again.

You take out the compass. Valley. Hamlet. Hill. Door. Stair. Bell. Lamp. And a new word, small and neat and certain.

Watch.

And beside it, a new blank. Smooth. Bright. Waiting.

The needle trembles. Then, slowly, like a hand turning a page, it swings away from the hill. Away from the morning. It comes to rest pointing west. At the pines.

You shake the compass. The needle does not move.

You think of the fire in its ring of stones. The doorway with no door. The chair pulled out from the table. The voice in the glade, wearing your own voice. The hands on the cave wall. The kind thing in the pool. You had thought you were done with them. You had thought you could leave them behind, like a lantern on a stone.

But the forest is attentive. It remembers the people who walk in it. And what it remembers, it keeps.

It remembers you.

Not today. Not this year, perhaps. But one day you will have to go back.

In the valley below, the creek runs on, east, away from the trees. But you find that you are listening, the way you used to, for another creek. One you cannot see. Back there, under the pines.

Then, under your feet, under the gray hill, deep in the dark, there is a sound.

A small sound.

A latch, lifting.

And an old black door, which you did not open, swinging slowly outward. From the inside.

You stand very still.

So does whatever is on the stair.



THE STORY CONTINUES



Coming next:

Ravenwood Forest, Book Two:
Under the Moving Moon

Listen to the audiobook at ravenwood-forest.com