

Chapter One

The Fall of Adam

If on that Autumn morning someone had visited the cabin of Adam Green, the timid young northland farmer whose uncle grew giant apples, to tell him that his life was about to get ripped apart, that his humble patch of land would soon be saturated with blood, oil, and smoke, he might have jumped off a cliff. All he wanted was peace, and all life had given him was horseshit.

The family cabin atop Green Hill was slightly ramshackle and bore the stamp of generations—a long porch, thick logs well-trodden, a tribe of rough-hewn chairs, a change of wood color on one side where extra rooms were added to accommodate new children. When folks passed on the way to town, wagons heavy with harvest from the grangelands, they often commented, a touch of pity in their voices, on how large this cabin was now for only a solitary farmer. The glassless windows were shuttered against encroachment by bears.

The front door opened and Adam stepped onto the porch. Adam Green was muscular and lean, a step or two into adulthood. His hands in the pockets of his leather breeches, his shaggy brown hair moving with the breeze, he walked across the clearing to the edge of the hill.

It was a modest hill. You could descend to the base, where Mills Trail snaked between the hill and the Forbidden Forest, in less time than it takes to draw water from a well. Yet Adam could see the whole world from here.

To the north and east, as far as the eye could see, the vast woods descended in a series of furrowed terraces, shrinking and darkening into the distance until they disappeared on the horizon. To the south and west, the forest rose. The land climbed steadily into a chain of mountains with rocky peaks that were white all year round and rose halfway to the top of the sky.

From the top of humble Green Hill Adam could see in one direction the planet drop away into magnificent green and brown swells, like the cascades of some unimaginable river, then turn around and see the world rise to breathtaking, unreachable heights.

About a hundred yards to the south was the other farm on Green Hill. Adam's uncle was in his garden, stooped under his famous apple tree. This year the apples were even more gigantic, bigger than human heads, and with a lush sheen on the skins that bespoke an intoxicating deliciousness. Adam's sister Daisy was circling Uncle Walt, hopping

around on one foot in her green smock, her red hair flying from under a sky-blue bonnet. She didn't remember any of it, the deaths of their parents seven years before. Seven years since their aunt and uncle took her in like their own infant, and seven years since Adam had refused, out of some principle of adolescent stubbornness, to move with her.

To Adam, it seemed much longer.

He went behind his cabin and approached the barn to feed his horse. His wagon was out, the hitching rod on the ground. He noticed a wheel leaning askew. He crouched in front of it. A spoke was split. A crack ran along one side, deepening toward the center until light showed through at the place where the rod vanished into the rusty iron core.

A noise in the clearing made Adam jerk his head around. A sort of hissing squeal that ended so abruptly he wondered if he'd heard it at all. He started in to looking at the wheel and the sound came again. Then stopped.

He walked around the house and crossed to the edge of the clearing. All was quiet. Below him, at the base of the hill, the trees were the same as usual. The curving wall of the forest had been there since Adam's earliest memories, the same endless star-flicker of leaves in the breeze.

Adam scraped the ground with his foot and the sound came again, louder. Damnedest thing he'd ever heard, like a cat hiss. This time it didn't stop. He sidled down the slope.

Mill's Trail marked a separation between the peopled land and the forest that was as stark as the meeting of oil and water. He stepped across the trail and reached the woods. The noise was now stronger and higher, an unchanging, sibilant hiss.

He stopped at the first trees, uncertain. The forest was dangerous. Tribes of carnivorous bears. Treacherous soil that appeared safe but turned to broth when stepped on and sucked you into the earth.

Fighting the urge to flee, Adam pressed his face into the leaves and squinted. Through the dimly-lit tangle of branches and twigs came the heavy odor of mold and water and rich, moist soil.

To the right, low to the ground, an odd shape.

"Hello?"

As if in answer to his voice, the tone jumped higher. The thing, whose outline he could begin to make out through the gloom and tangled branches, was square and squat, crouching twenty feet off.

It was moving.

Adam took a deep breath. The thing didn't shift from its place. The movement came from within the creature itself, at its center, like the desperate thrashing of the legs of a great insect caught on its back. The motion possessed the same quality as the trickling vibrations of light that dappled the leaves, but tighter, more controlled. Adam was dazzled by the strangeness of it.

Then he understood. Of course. Adam let out a sigh of relief. A bee's nest.

He took a few steps down. He found a small clearing through the outer trees where it wasn't so dark, the light leaking through the canopy. The trees around the perimeter glowed a curious pale green, as if underwater.

Adam spread the top branches and pushed himself through the wall. His foot caught on something and he fell.

On his knees. Red ants scrambled up and down the blades of grass near his face. Beyond, there were two oak trees, one small and one large. Their branches were scorched from a lightning strike. One had a fractured branch bent up against its burned trunk. The trees leaned together, propping each other up.

The thing was between them.

It wasn't a hive. There were no bees. The noise was not of many small things but of one big thing.

It was trilling frantically from within, thousands of tiny dots prancing and skittering in—on?—the creature's middle. Gnats? Adam grabbed at the thought, trying to find anything to explain the impossibility in front of him.

The body of the creature was the strangest of all, devilishly unnatural, squared off like a dough box, black as the scars of the scorched oaks, fine-angled as saw teeth.

Adam, rigid, sweat dripping off his cheeks. His breath came in gasps. With each gulp of air he felt his panic recede a little, boil up again.

The dots vanished. They didn't fly away, didn't go anywhere, yet they were gone. And more unfathomable was that in their place another thing appeared, all pink and familiar and smiling through the leaves.

It was a human head. And it spoke to him.