

Prologue

Of a hundred crew, he'd tendered forty to the sea, and of those rest whose feet found land, not one would count themselves fortunèd.

—Alton Carnimeo

The Fog Glaive ebbed in her shallow anchorage; her sails furled against the coastal breeze. On her stern Captain Moraine stood bearded, ocean-wearied, and starving. His crew laid around him, wasting in the autumn gloom after mustering the last of their hopes to lower a single lifeboat. That last hope crawled over sun-sparked waves bound for a forested shoreline.

From his coat, he fetched an eyeglass to witness the landing. A wan smile flickered on his lips as he watched the crewmen signaling and hauling the lifeboat onto shore. He remained upright until they filtered into the timberline and then collapsed, his head striking the deck like a dropped gourd. Blood leaked from his mouth and nose, forming a stamp around his head as he laid against his beloved vessel.

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“There’s a spring, and the fruit falls plenty! Thousands! Thousands of apples!”

Captain Moraine stirred, propped up against a mast. Crewmen dumped bright morsels from their shirts to thud over the ship’s deck. The blood on his face dried to rust while the sunlight faded over the timbered coast. Someone thrust an apple into his hand, ruby red and inviting. Laughter fluttered like a bird in his chest not yet strong enough to leave. He bit into the perfect apple.

Campfires soon glittered along the forest's edge while the ship moored in pale moonlight. Mourning and hope flickered among the dancing sparks. All the while, Captain Moraine sat against a tree as he had *The Fog Glaive's* mast, his belly tumid with apples, and his face awash in relief.

Several men fetched muskets from the ship the following morning. Many of the crew laid catatonic around the inchoate camp while others built shelters or scouted the forest. The captain himself joined in the hunt, killing a tender-faced deer and a multitude of squirrels who clung unmoving to their trees. The ease of those slayings portended a land which would throw itself to his enterprise, yet the dim-eyed leisure with which those creatures offered their flesh unnerved him.

Campfires lapped at the victories of morning hunts, filling the air with the savory smells of home. The stores swelled so rife with apples that many went toward fermentation in the oak barrels that once held water. Within a month, Captain Moraine enjoyed the first sip of alcohol on that new world, and so autumn was ushered in by a cider warm and sweet.

Shelters grew into houses which cannibalized their way deeper into the forest. Crewmen erected a formidable wall out of downed trees, buffering the winds that blew eternally off the ocean and from the unexplored interior. The captain, his face then full and clean-shaven, assured his crew that prosperity would follow them through the depths of winter.

It was not to be.

The creature came at night on the edge of autumn, sweeping through the camp as would a storm. It roared with elk-like bellows, destroying the walls and houses in a veil of smoke and plunder. It took up the whole of an apple barrel in its jaws and crushed it, the juice cascading

over its chin as it raised its horned head to screech. The gathered torches illuminated the beast as it ripped apart the storehouses. Muskets discharged into its flanks and haunches until, as suddenly as it had appeared, the beast fled into the night.

A battered Captain Moraine wandered the settlement, tallying the dead whose number was greater than that of the remaining apples. Only the fermented cider had gone untouched. Hundreds of jars glistened nacreous in the early sun, and the barrels waited in the shade of ravaged houses. Nobody spoke of the coming winter. Nobody spoke of home.

The woods surrounding the camp lay destroyed and burning as if a wildfire had passed through. There remained a few of the oldest trees whose bulwarks stood marked by many earlier assaults. No longer did the deer or squirrels tarry about the settlement. The stream coagulated, all turbid and undrinkable. In that state of desolation, a true winter commenced.

Everyone subsisted on cider and the occasional animal that strayed through. Those errant deer, reduced to skin and bones, proved useful for little more than broth. Drinking made up the bulk of their consumption, and the stores of alcohol lasted for mere weeks of sodden reverie. From then on out, every meal had a name and face.

Snow fell, accumulating into mounds as the days never warmed. It did little to dampen the scent of the mounting dead. Winter galed on, and some saw spirits of the deceased. Others spoke with them, and Captain Moraine became plagued by long visitations. He strolled about the camp as if astride a friend, his breath conjuring phantoms in the chilly air as he droned on, closer to the dead than to the living.

When winter at last broke and the spring brought with it fresh morsels, the crew gathered what they could and set off for a return voyage to the mainland, hoping to sustain themselves on

fishing. Despite many pleas, the captain continued traipsing about the camp, chewing on bones and talking to the unseen. *The Fog Glaive* pulled anchor and disappeared with the easterlies as its captain stood feral-eyed and longing.

A few crewmen survived to see the mainland, and in the intervening years, word spread of the strange island, catching the ears of those who had nothing to lose or everything to gain. Using the maps which Captain Moraine himself had drawn, ships arrived along the coast, laden with the necessities for proper settlement. One such vessel dropped anchor near a beach where young forest grew, sending a scouting party that pressed into the vibrant wilds. There, half-consumed by undergrowth, they came across the ruins of that first ill-fated venture.

The settlers found a threadbare man huddled in the dark of a wall, gnawing on an apple and casting his voice to nothing. When they asked him his name, he rose to his feet, his eyes darting.

“Tornatore,” he said, shaking mad with fear. “Tornatore is a place of ghosts.”

Chapter 1

The storm clawed against the cabin with countless creatures carved out of electricity and rain. Water seeped through a darkened spot on the ceiling, having drilled through the cabin's roof over the course of a three-week deluge. Levi rushed with a wooden bowl meant for that evening's stew, placing it on the soaked hardwood so that beads of water plunked inside.

“I patched that darned roof before I died, you know?” A figure groaned from a rickety table. An aura surrounded its body, paling its clothes to ghostly stone while competing with the warm lamplight.

Levi stood. Drops continued to plunk into the bowl. “Three weeks of rain would cut through anyone's patchwork.”

“Liable to dig on deep down into the dirt and let up what lives below.”

His father cautioned against everything. Too much rain would dig a hole through the land and bring out sightless monsters.