

## FAMILIAR AND BELOVED

Kith and Kin

Part III

*Familiar and Beloved is a whole new collection of stories set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, and while we will honor our promise not to harm or kill our furry friends, listener discretion is still advised. This story takes place in the years following the events of Black Mouthed Dog, so if you haven't finished that tale yet, we recommend you do that before coming on this journey with us. Go on if you need to. We'll wait right here for you, family.*

Waylon Boggs sat on the porch with his mama and her younger brother, Digger. It was a calm, peaceful sort of evening, the sky above clear and full of stars. Crickets chirped in the darkness. Frogs sang on the banks of a creek that ran along the back edge of the property. Somewhere in the trees, a lonesome hoot owl called into the night, looking for a mate to help feather his nest. Digger McCoy, however, had fallen silent. In the glow of the lamplight through the window behind them, he looked pale and haunted, a hollow-eyed ghost of the affable storyteller who had held forth when they first brought their dessert out onto the porch.

Waylon glanced nervously over at his mama as the lull in their conversation began to grow awkward. Oanetta tipped him a reassuring nod and gently cleared her throat.

OANETTA: Well, I think I'm 'bout ready for another cup of coffee. What about you boys? 'Nother slice of pie?

As Oanetta gave a long stretch and pushed herself up out of her chair, Waylon picked up her cue, answering as if he hadn't even noticed the shift in his uncle's mood.

WAYLON: I'll take some, Mama. Coffee anyway. Maybe not pie.

Digger chuckled darkly, not looking at his sister, his eyes fixed on the dark woods beyond the yard.

DIGGER: Aye. Maybe something a little stronger for me, 'Netta.

Oanetta nodded and squeezed her brother's shoulder gently before she gathered up their plates and cups and retreated into the kitchen.

The two men fell quiet again at her departure, though the air between them had grown lighter, no longer straining under the weight of past horrors and years of hurt left unspoken. Digger busied himself with packing his pipe with fresh tobacco, the familiar motions of a routine he could have carried out blind-folded soothing his troubled heart. When he began to hum absent-mindedly, Waylon finally found the nerve to give voice to one of the multitude of questions tumbling through his head.

WAYLON: The water source you found, was it... infected somehow? With the Dark?

DIGGER: No. No, boy. What you don't understand — what a *lot* of people don't understand, and damn well should — is not everything of the Green has mankind's best interest at heart. Human beings are the smartest and most capable creatures this old world has ever produced. We were meant to be her stewards, her protectors — at least that's the feeling I get — but what have we done with all her gifts? Plundered and ravaged them. Poisoned the soil. There's some that do their duty by her, tend their patch with care and respect. But most folks are oblivious at best. At worst? We've become the worst kind of infestation. And there are parts of the Green that seem to feel it would be best to pull us out by the roots.

[ “Familiar and Beloved” by Landon Blood ]

*Walk with me my little friend*

*Through these hills until we reach the end*

*The magic of fire, the whisper of wind*

*The depths of the earth*

*Reaches in*

*Soft little paws step lively now*

*A howl in the night*

*Forest comes alive*

*Ooh the moon starts to rise*

*Cat's on the prowl*

*Dog's on the trail*

*A lonesome call, familiar song*

*Oh brings us home*

*Bring us home*

Waylon and Digger sat in silence for a time after his uncle's grim pronouncement. Although Digger's tone had darkened, he didn't go still as he had before. He finished readying his pipe and lit up a smoke, leaning back comfortably into the old rocking chair where he sat. He gave the porch a gentle nudge with his foot and began to rock, gazing out into the night again, but not as before. No, he felt more... *present* now, and so Waylon ventured another question.

WAYLON: So... how did you get away? From the water, I mean.

DIGGER: I didn't. I laid in that clearing for something like thirty hours before Daddy and the other boys' fathers found us. Jeremiah, Hank, Ansel... all dead. Drowned on dry land. No survivors. Only me.

OANETTA: And thank the stars for that! Who knows what could have happened to you out there if it'd taken Daddy much longer to find you!

Oanetta Boggs exclaimed as the door swung open behind them, interrupting her brother's increasingly agitated rambling with the no-nonsense cheer that Waylon found both endearing and exasperating. In this instance, he felt particularly grateful for it as his mama bustled back onto the porch with a tray bearing three fresh cups of coffee and a little jug of something stronger, as Digger had requested. She set the tray on the table between them, taking a cup for herself and returning to the rocker she had previously occupied. Allowing Digger a moment to collect himself, she turned to Waylon and picked up the thread of the story.

OANETTA: Your uncle was still unconscious when they found him. Daddy thought it might be a sleeping sickness at first, kinda thing you don't ever wake up from. Mama just said no, put him to bed, that he'd be fine.

She smiled sadly at her brother.

OANETTA: We were all worried, but... Mama was right, as she always was. He slept another half a day, but then he woke up, and he was fine.

Digger snorted.

DIGGER: Yeah, though things might have been better if I hadn't.

OANETTA: Elphius McCoy! You take that back. It would have broken Mama and Daddy's hearts — and *mine* — if you—

DIGGER: I know. I know you all loved me, 'Netta. But Uriel Adams made a lot of trouble for our family when I came back down off the ridge and Jeremiah didn't.

When young Digger McCoy and three other holler boys had not returned from their well-digging mission on a remote ridge at the edge of the county, their fathers had gone to the landowner, Shelton Bond, and demanded he lead them out to his claim to search for their missing sons. The men had found Jeremiah Adams, Hank Webb, and Ansel Bentley dead at the scene and Digger McCoy insensate on the ground nearby. They had retrieved Uriel Adams' cart — which he had loaned to the young men for their task — and used it to transport their dead back down the mountain to Glamorgan.

The decision to take the boys to Glamorgan first, rather than to their homes outside town, was made at the insistence of Uriel Adams, whose shock at the discovery of his son's lifeless body had been quickly consumed by the flames of anger. His firstborn was dead, and by god, somebody was gonna answer for that. When Shelton Bond offered his sincere condolences but suggested they head on home to grieve in peace — as the hour was getting late and his wife would have supper on the table — Uriel had drawn his pistol and suggested firmly that Mr. Bond accompany them to the county seat and the sheriff's office.

Only with some gentle coaxing from both Frank Webb and Joseph Bentley was Uriel convinced to allow Elphius McCoy to take his own still living boy home to the tender care of his mother. Once he regained his senses, they assured him, young Elphius Jr. could be brought into town to offer his account of the afternoon's events to the sheriff. For the moment more focused on

whatever villainy Shelton Bond might have perpetrated on the boys, Uriel Adams had agreed. The force of the man's rage — just barely contained beneath his stiff, upright demeanor — was such that, once the decision was made, he seemed to all but forget about the McCoy's as Elphius gently strapped his youngest son over his horse's back and led the biddable mare toward home.

Would that he had truly forgotten about Digger altogether. However, when the sheriff looked over the dead boys and could find no wounds nor other sign of injury, the doctor was summoned to inspect the bodies. Old Doc Ingram maintained a tidy practice on the first floor of his home just a few blocks from the Esau County Courthouse. Ingram had finished his medical training just in time to be drafted into the war, where he had acquired a wealth of practical experience as a field medic. He was a skilled physician and a fair diagnostician, and he declared himself downright flummoxed by the state of Jeremiah Adams, Ansel Bentley, and Hank Webb.

There was no question about the manner of death. The amount of water found in their lungs left no doubt as to that. But as to the means? He couldn't offer so much as a theory. How had three strapping young men managed to drown on dry land on a sunny summer afternoon? But that, he reasoned, was the sheriff's unfortunate problem to wrestle with, and he had packed up his medical bag and excused himself.

Doc Ingram might not have a clue what had happened to his boy, but Uriel Adams felt he had an inkling. They had gone out there to dowse, had they not? Surely the boy who had earned such a reputation for seeking out water would have their answer. Adams had demanded they visit the McCoy's that very night, but as the hour was growing late and the boy ill, the sheriff had put his foot down. They could wait, and call upon Elphius McCoy's son the following day.

Although Uriel was waiting on the sheriff's office doorstep come sunup, what with one thing and another, it was mid afternoon before the delegation of grieving fathers and the lawman arrived on Elphius McCoy's doorstep, and that was for the best. By then, Digger had awakened and told his mommy and daddy everything that had happened out on the ridge. Everything that was *still* happening, he had confided to them quietly, his eyes swimming with unshed tears. He couldn't seem to silence the water's voice in his head — she had her hooks in him, and the song went on and on and on...

Viola McCoy had soothed her son and given him a draft of strong herbal tea that helped to ease his nerves, though it could not quiet the song that wormed its way into his brain. His sister sat at his side, reading books to him to try to help drown them out. And Elphius McCoy was waiting on the porch when the men came to question the youngest of their clan. One of the neighbors had heard talk about the things Uriel Adams was saying, had come early in the morning to warn them that the man would not wait for Elphius Jr. to come to town to give his statement. And so the family was as prepared as they could be when the sheriff came to call.

Digger's parents sat protectively at his bedside, and 'Netta was banished to the kitchen to make room for the sheriff, Mr. Adams, Mr. Webb, Mr. Bentley, and a reedy little man from the courthouse who had come along to record Digger's statement. At his daddy's gentle encouragement — just tell them what happened, son, take your time — Elphius McCoy Jr. haltingly recounted what he recalled of the previous afternoon. The trip up the mountain and out onto the ridge, hearing the voice of the water — which was difficult to explain, but he did his best to describe the way he dowsed for wellsprings — and the way it suddenly turned on him and attacked his friends. His face was wet with tears as he described the way they struggled and choked and died, his own inability to help them.

When his story was finished, no one said anything for a long time. The room was silent save for the gentle rasp of the court recorder's pen on paper. Then Uriel Adams muttered "Bullshit," slapped his hat onto his head, and stormed from the room. The sheriff didn't quite manage to conceal a wince as the McCoy's front door slammed behind him. Frank Webb and Joseph Bentley exchanged a dark look. Mr. Webb glanced up at Digger and shook his head, and then the two of them followed, though they shut the door behind them more respectfully.

The sheriff dismissed the court recorder, and then stepped outside with Elphius McCoy to speak privately. Digger held his tears until all but his mother had departed, and Viola did her best to comfort him. The anger in the room had been palpable. It was clear his friends' fathers blamed him for their deaths, and he couldn't blame them. He *had* led them to whatever strange, wicked sort of water source lived out on Sheldon Bond's ridge. He had failed to save them. He carried the weight of that like a stone in his heart. Who could blame the men for holding him responsible as well?

Elphius and Viola assured him that he was not at fault, and that Uriel Adams and the others would soon see that.

“They’re hurting, son,” Viola soothed. “Their hearts are full up with pain right now. There’s no greater pain for a father or mother than to lose a child. Sometimes when folks are hurting, it feels so big that they can’t keep it inside ‘em. They want to make the whole world feel what they feel, and so they lash out. But this will pass. They’ll soon see that you are not to blame. You were hurt as well, though your gift probably saved you, bless it.”

Over the course of her long life, Digger and ‘Netta had rarely known their mother to be wrong, but about this one matter, Viola McCoy could not have been more mistaken.

The sheriff had assured Elphius McCoy that his son would face no charges. Although his story was unbelievable — and the sheriff theorized that perhaps he’d taken a good knock upside the head — there was no evidence to suggest that Digger had harmed the boys in any way. He had, after all, been injured himself, however those mysterious injuries may have occurred. The incident was written off as an unfortunate accident — death by misadventure — and as far as Esau County was concerned, the matter was settled.

It was not settled for Uriel Adams, nor for Frank Webb or Joseph Bentley, who though less vocal than Mr. Adams could be easily stirred to his cause, and nonetheless stood with him anytime the opportunity to speak against the youngest McCoy arose. And Uriel Adams appeared to make it his business from then on to manufacture those opportunities as often — and loudly — as possible. Word spread throughout the county that the three men held Digger responsible for their sons’ deaths, and speculation about just what had happened up on Bond’s ridge spread like wildfire. Before long, many folks were whispering that Digger — whom they now called *Gravedigger* — had not merely led the boys to their deaths. He had murdered them.

OANETTA: Nobody really thought that. They were hurting and trying to make sense of things. But no one honestly thought you—

DIGGER: Didn't they? 'Netta, I thought Hank's brothers were gonna kill me when they cornered me in the back of the feed shop that day. And anyway, that wasn't all of it. You know that. I figure that's why you brought the boy here to begin with.

Oanetta shot her brother a fleeting, pained glance — there and gone in a heartbeat — but Waylon knew his mama. His eyes narrowed as he saw the look that passed between them, the wheels beginning to turn in his head.

WAYLON: The water. It killed the other boys but let you go. Why?

DIGGER: It didn't let me go. It got what it wanted from me. And I thought that'd be the end of it — that I should just be more careful, or hell, stop divining altogether — but I was wrong.

Digger's parents assured him the strange song of the water he had encountered on the ridge would fade, so long as he stayed well clear of the place. But he saw the worried looks they exchanged. They didn't know. Not really. Although Elphius and Viola had encountered similar manifestations of the natural world — what they referred to as the “feral Green” — neither was a dowser, nor did their gifts manifest themselves the way their son's did. As it turned out, that feral water had her hooks buried deep in Digger McCoy, and she wasn't letting go without a fight.

He heard that voice calling to him, distant but ever present, morning, noon and night. Some days it was faint, and he could forget about it for a while. Some days the mental and spiritual tools his mama and daddy taught him to block it out worked better than others. But in the end, that voice was relentless. Insidious. It would give him no peace. And it *wanted* things. Digger's friends had given it just a taste. It wanted more. It wanted... well, everyone. Every man, woman, and child in Boggs Holler, near as he could figure. Maybe even more than that. That song rattled through his head day in and day out, begging, pleading, tempting, promising, threatening.

*Bring me more, Elphius McCoy. Bring me MORE.*

Digger began to think he was going crazy. The song was just so constant, so unrelenting, he began to contemplate the worst. What if... what if he found... someone bad? A man who beat his



wife and children, say. Would it be so bad if he lured that man up on the ridge? On other days — days he felt less afraid and more filled with despair — he contemplated offering himself up. *Take me, then! Just take me! Enough already!* But the water would fall strangely silent then, unimpressed with that offer.

So Digger held on, trying every trick he knew to clear his mind, settle his heart, block any outside influences. He did his best to ignore the stares and the gossip, to turn the other cheek when boys his age shouldered checked him in the schoolyard and younger children threw stones when he walked past on the road home. He bore it all, and he prayed to every god he'd ever heard of to help him, and the voice of the water laughed and laughed.

Until a bright Saturday morning when he stepped outside to begin his chores before breakfast. The voice of the water had been a low murmur for the past day or so, and he was actually feeling pretty cheerful. He whistled an old tune his mama sang to them as babies as he fetched a bag of feed from the barn and headed toward the chicken coop to turn the hens out into the yard and feed them. He spotted his older sister across the yard, drawing a bucket of water up from the well—

Suddenly the water's insistent wail swelled in his ears, howling like a banshee and twice as loud. *WANT HER WANT HER GIVE HER GIVE HER PUSH PUSH PUSH—*

Digger fell to his knees, his hands clapping uselessly over his ears, screaming.

DIGGER: That's when I realized I had to get away — not from the water. You can't really get away from water. It's in our blood. But away from Esau County, from that water source out on the ridge. Away from everybody I was puttin' in danger by being there.

OANETTA: Oh, Dig. You didn't have to do that. We would have found a way—

DIGGER: And then what, 'Netta? Even if we'd found a way to control it back home, do you really think I could live in Esau County with that hanging over me? Everybody calling me *Gravedigger*? People would cross the road to keep their kids away from me when I walked down the street in Glamorgan. What kind of life would I have had there?

OANETTA: And what kind of life is this?

Oanetta's arm swept the side, the gesture encompassing the hillside around them.

OANETTA: Living up on top of this mountain like a hermit in a shack?

DIGGER: I'll have you know it's a very nice shack, *Miz Boggs*.

Waylon looked stricken.

WAYLON: Is this your idea, Mama? I should just go out and live in the woods? I've got responsibilities! I've got—

Oanetta and Digger responded at once.

OANETTA: No!

DIGGER: No!

The siblings glanced at each other, and Oanetta nodded, signaling her brother should continue. He looked at Waylon kindly.

DIGGER: No, son, nobody is suggesting that. I'll admit at first, that was all I could think to do. And I hoped it'd be enough, that if I got far enough away from that place on the ridge, I wouldn't hear that strange water calling me anymore. I could just... go back to normal. But water... water is everywhere, and on some level, it's all connected. I figured that out pretty quick. It was in my head all the time, whispering, cajoling. *Compelling* me to... do things. No, just going off by myself wasn't enough. But then Creature showed up on my doorstep.

At the sound of Digger's pet name for him, Borgia the regal Maine Coon emerged from beneath the porch with an inquisitive mew, twining around the older man's ankles enthusiastically

before hopping up onto his lap. Emmaline Undermoot followed at a more graceful pace, settling by Waylon's feet.

Digger scratched Creature's chin affectionately.

DIGGER: Creature made all the difference. Didn't you, boy?

WAYLON: Creature?

DIGGER: Oh, Creature's not just any old cat. He's special — just like Miss Emmaline. Well not *just* like her, but no ordinary ball of fur.

Creature's special talent, Digger explained, was that he grew larger when danger was near. All cats had ways of appearing larger, of course, when they sensed danger — they hunched their backs and fluffed up their coats and tails, seeming to grow in size in the blink of an eye. But that was mostly stagecraft, a bit of the old razzle-dazzle. When Creature meant to grow bigger, he grew bigger for real, his spine and legs lengthening, his weight increasing considerably. He could grow to cover Digger like a warm and cozy blanket — a *heavy* blanket that he wasn't quite strong enough to move. What's more, his deep and melodious purr increased in volume, growing loud enough to drown out even that discordant, feral shrieking in Digger's head, replacing it with a warm, peaceful rumbling.

DIGGER: Now I'm not saying Miss Emmaline is the answer here. Her gifts aren't the same as Creature's. Hell, I don't think Creature's would help *you*. What I mean is, you have to find something that will help you control it, or even better, use it. Undermine it. Make it do what *you* want, not the other way round.

WAYLON: But what would that even be? Nothing I've tried so far has worked.

Digger rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

DIGGER: I have a few ideas. Things we can try. In the meantime, there's something else. Something I think you might be able to help *me* with.

Waylon glanced at his mama nervously, then returned his gaze to his uncle.

WAYLON: Oh yeah? What's that?

DIGGER: Your mama says you got the gift from your daddy's side of the family. That right?

Waylon looked to his mama, who gave him a reassuring nod. Digger went on.

DIGGER: There's an old schoolhouse down the mountain, just outside of town. Friend of mine has been trying to fix it up, turn it into something useful again. He's not having much luck. Seems its former occupants haven't quite moved on, if you catch my meaning. If you're anywhere near as good as your daddy, I think you could help him out.

Digger glanced at Oanetta, some unspoken communication passing between them that Waylon couldn't fathom.

DIGGER: I know you don't know me, Waylon. I've not exactly been living up to my duty as an uncle. But I'd appreciate it if you'd try.

Waylon looked back and forth between the two of them, trying to gauge if there was some trick hidden in his uncle's words, in his mama's hopeful smile. Finally, he shrugged.

WAYLON: I won't make you any promises, but sure. I can try.

Digger clapped him on the shoulder.

DIGGER: Good man! We'll walk down in the morning and have us a look.

Digger retreated into the house, and after a moment, they heard his bedroom door shut firmly behind him. Waylon and his mama gathered up the plates and cups, carrying them into the kitchen. Waylon volunteered to do what little remained of the washing up, and sent his mama off to get comfortable on the sofa in Digger's living room. He would make do with the cot

Digger had set up in the kitchen — and no, Mama, he would be *fine*. Oanetta had driven them a long way, and she should get some rest.

Outside, Emmaline Underfoot, the Gray Ghost of Black Mountain, and Borgia the mighty Maine Coon — called Creature — loafed companionably under the porch steps, listening as their human companions made their nightly ablutions.

EMMALINE: I am pleased to hear you take such good care of the boy who I once considered one of mine.

Creature preened.

CREATURE: It is as I said. I am Elphius' protector. He would simply be *lost* without me.

EMMALINE: I am sure he would. But tell me, what do you know of this schoolhouse Digger mentioned? Should I be concerned for my girl and her kit?

Creature flexed his claws, anchoring them into the boards of the porch as he flexed his back in a long, contemplative stretch.

CREATURE: Elphius' friend came up the mountain... oh, about a moon past... carrying some tale of rappings and tappings on walls, old books being hurled through the air, and other such nonsense. The poor man seemed terrified, but after all, he is only human, and an ungifted one at that. Elphius *has* attempted to rid the place of whatever lurks there, but as I'm sure you already know, O Gray Ghost, he doesn't really truck with spirits. If the kit is as talented as you say, I'm sure he will have little trouble.

Emmaline gave a thoughtful purr and rested her paws on her chin.

EMMALINE: That is good to know, young one. I appreciate your insight,

she told him. And it was helpful information, and reassuring that Borgia did not appear to fear for his boy's safety. Still, they were in unfamiliar territory here, and Emmaline Underfoot, the

Gray Ghost of Black Mountain, planned to accompany Waylon and his uncle on this little excursion in the morning. Just in case.

[ “Familiar and Beloved” by Landon Blood ]

Thus concludes part three of volume two of Familiar & Beloved: Kith and Kin. Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood. Today’s story was written by Cam Collins. The voice of Oanetta Boggs was. Betsy Puckett The voice of Waylon Boggs was Brandon Bentley. The voice of Digger McCoy was John Patrick McAfee. The voice of the water was Saro Lynch-Thomason. The voice of Borgia the Mighty Maine Coon was Shane Burke, and the voice of Emmaline Underfoot, Grey Ghost of Black Mountain, was Amerie Helton. Join us for the next installment of Familiar and Beloved, exclusively on Patreon.