

## FAMILIAR AND BELOVED

Kith and Kin

Part IV

*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.*

The air was thick with the sticky heat of a summer that would not surrender fully to the armies of the oncoming autumn for at least another month and a half as three men and two cats made their way through the stretch of woods separating the town of Holly Creek, Virginia, from the failed settlement that had preceded it. In the shadow of those who were taking this trip on two legs, Emmaline Underfoot, Gray Ghost of Black Mountain, unexpectedly found herself beginning to enjoy the company of the mighty Maine Coon who had introduced himself as Borgia and whom his human companion called Creature. Beneath the fussy, somewhat pompous exterior, she found him to be quite chatty and friendly. Of course it didn't hurt that he was clearly devoted to the man who had fallen under her own care as a child.

EMMALINE: Tell me more about this schoolhouse, young friend. What do you know of the place?

CREATURE: Hmm... let me see. Folks around these parts have carried stories of the place to Elphius since he first came to our mountain. I came some years later, of course — I was but a kit at that time — and I had lived here... oh, a few moons at least... when I first heard of it. Mrs. Sexton — the widow who lives on the other side of the mountain — brought us a pot of soup beans after the boy helped repair her well. She said that her son was coming home late from the mines and saw strange lights in the old schoolhouse by the river. He thought perhaps it was local children playing a prank, and went to run them out of the old wreck lest they meet with some injury. But when he peered through the windows, he saw no one within. Turning to leave, he heard a loud bang. Thinking the youths had merely been hiding, he turned back to chastise them, but still he found not a soul within. Yet all the doors to the coat cupboard stood open.

EMMALINE: Hmm. That seems little more than idle gossip, a campfire tale at best.

CREATURE: True enough. But it was far from the first report of its kind, nor would it be the last. When the widow Sexton left us, Elphius told me the whole sordid tale. In the early days, when white men first came to settle in this part of Virginia, local families worked together to build a schoolhouse for the kits they had begun to raise. The woman whom they chose for the position — a Miss Stanley — had never married nor had a litter of her own, but had dedicated her life to educating the young, and was by all accounts an excellent teacher. They say she was very kind and much beloved by both her students and their families. She was known to be a great friend to animals and particularly gifted with training dogs. Something in the way she spoke to them brought even the most vicious of them right to heel.

There was never any reason to question her suitability. The kits she taught liked her so well that they would volunteer to stay behind after school every day to help her tidy up the classroom. Miss Stanley joined the local church, and attended Sunday services faithfully. She was never known to drink, nor did she associate with men outside of the church or her conversations with her students' parents. She was, so far as anyone could observe, an ideal schoolmistress. Until the day the children did not return home.

It was a Friday, the day when Miss Stanley usually declined her students' assistance with cleaning the school and sent them on home to their families so that they might get a head start on their chores and enjoy the evening. When their kits did not arrive home at the usual hour, at first their mothers didn't think much of it. Perhaps Miss Stanley was tired today and welcomed the children's help, they thought. Or perhaps they had struck up a game of stickball after the class was dismissed. It was a beautiful day, after all, and kits will be kits. As the hour grew late and their mates returned from the fields for the evening meal, with still no sign of their sons and daughters, they grew concerned. They went to their neighbors, the parents of their children's friends — thinking perhaps that Johnny had lingered at Tommy's house, or Sally was visiting Jane — only to find them entertaining the same questions.

And so they went to the school, converging upon it as sunset neared and the shadows stretched long across the schoolyard. All was quiet. At first, they thought the building was empty.

Through the windows, they could see the desks were unoccupied. When they tried the door, however, they found it unlocked. Miss Stanley was known to be quite conscientious about locking up, so they thought perhaps she was still tidying up and they could ask her about the students' whereabouts.

When they entered the building, however, they saw immediately that Miss Stanely would be answering no more questions. They found her hanging from the rafters, high enough up that they didn't see her through the windows. No one could figure out how she climbed up there; they found no ladder nor nearby chair. Her body was soaked to the bone, her long hair unbound and plastered to her face, her long dress still dripping into the wide puddle that was spread across the floor.

That was how they knew where to look for the kits. The schoolhouse, you see, was built along the banks of Beaver Creek, so that it might have easy access to fresh water. And that was there they found them — thirteen in all, seven boys and six girls — all laid out in a neat row by the creekside. They had been tied together at hand and foot, and every last one was drowned.

EMMALINE: How old were these kits?

CREATURE: I asked my boy the same. He said they ranged in age from seven to twelve, long past their weaning.

EMMALINE: How could one woman manage to bind them all? Much less hold them all down to drown? Was this Miss Stanley of giant stock?

CREATURE: Not as far as I ever heard. By all accounts, she was a small woman, of average height but thin. It's been suggested perhaps she poisoned them, though the local doctor found no sign of it. It was hardly his specialty, of course, so you can make of that what you will, but I'm told it was quite clear they died of drowning.

EMMALINE: Why would she commit such a monstrous act?

CREATURE: No one knows, though everyone had a theory. Some thought she had a secret lover who was killed in the war, and that his death drove her mad. Others say she was driven to it by her own childless state, that she was so jealous of those who had been so blessed that she murdered their kits, and then took her own life in remorse for her evil deed. Which seems a damn fool conclusion, if you ask me, given her choice of occupation. In the end, it's a mystery that was never solved.

EMMALINE: If anyone had ever done such a thing to one of my kits, they'd have a very unpleasant afterlife. I'd have the boy tether them out behind the barn where I could teach them the error of their ways again and again and again.

CREATURE: As any good mother might feel. These poor kits' mothers and fathers couldn't bear the thought of sending any other children back into a place that had witnessed such horrors, so the schoolhouse was boarded up and abandoned. It wasn't long before the stories began spreading that the place was haunted.

Creature flinched and leaped nimbly aside as the stout bald man in overalls who strode beside his master launched a volley of tobacco spit a little too close for comfort as the men came to a stop. Micah Hobbs, longtime friend and closest neighbor, whose domicile sat a mere three miles down an unmarked road under the ridge where Digger had built his little house, worked to clear tobacco related detritus from his lips as he described the various strange phenomena he had observed at the abandoned school to Waylon.

MICAH: ...and at night, they's still lights in the windows that flicker and blow up like lightning. All sorts of unholy racket echoing and coming out of that little schoolhouse. You can hear old Miz Stanley like she was still in there teaching her lessons. You can hear the littl'uns too. But they don't sound like they're learning, though. Awful sounds. Just plain awful.

Micah Hobbs was the perfect best friend for a man like Digger McCoy. The pair saw each other in town once or twice a month, occasionally went fishing, and exchanged perhaps a grand total of fifty words over the course of a given year. Dressed for a hike through the woods in denim overalls, heavy work boots and a white under shirt, he was thick around the middle and wore a pair of round, wire-rimmed spectacles of similar girth. Where Digger had given Waylon the

impression of an underfed owl, Micah Hobbs looked rather like an overfed mole. Though taciturn while in the company of his peers, given an audience of younger folks, Mr. Hobbs was sharp as a tack, even funny. The very luckiest of those young folks might even enjoy the privilege of a peek at his collection of ties that were shaped like fish.

WAYLON: Spirits can be like that when they're lost or they're hurting. Likely she don't know what she's doing, poor thing. But the children still being here worries me. If she can make them stay, then it sounds like something else is going on, maybe something dark. You say it gets dangerous if you try to go in there at night, though?

MICAH: You could say that. See, look. Right down there. That used to be where the original town of Crane's Nest was gonna be. Town hall was right there — big as life, or as big as was needed for the twenty or so folks who were trying to get the town up and going. Post office never did get built, but they did finish the school. Whole place mighta took root if the war hadn't found its way up here.

DIGGER: You'd think we'd be far enough away from anything most folks would give a damn about, but no. You get enough people with ideas in their head about who controls what territory and acting like state lines actually mean anything out here and the next thing you know you got neighbors bushwhacking each other and little children almost getting shot in their beds and the newspapers callin' it the "Battle of Crane's Nest" like it was something to be proud of.

MICAH: Wasn't nothing to brag about at all. Bunch of petty family squabbles and feuds dressed up to look like something else. Tell a man there's a war in his backyard, he'll run around killing everybody he ever had two sour words with. And then they'll up and pin a medal on him for it.

DIGGER: That's about the size of it. The Noble family hated the Hoskinses, the Hoskinses hated the Blairs, and the Blairs had issues with the Nobles and the Hoskinses both. Dress them up in blue and gray, and the dirty looks at sunrise service turn into gunfire after sundown real quick like.

WAYLON: I mean, what this Miss Stanley did was an awful thing, and something like that, carried to the grave, could hold a spirit and keep it from moving on, but you'd think there'd be

more dead folks wandering around these parts with all these people killing each other for god and country.

DIGGER: Do the dearly departed usually make sense, boy? I thought the great Boggs family had the mysteries of the dead all figured out. The rest of us aren't so lucky as to see our dead relatives peeping at us through the outhouse door while we're doing our business.

WAYLON: No, sir, they don't, but in places like this — where the story of the people here is still being set down on the page — there are observable patterns and reasonable conclusions that can be drawn. Anybody talk about seeing other ghosts or h'aunts out this way?

DIGGER: Not out at my place. Not that I've seen.

MICAH: Past couple years people say they see a man made outta fire walking the north ridge out over at Russell Fork. I'd bet that was old Billy Noble. He got shot during one of the late night raids out that way. Died right there on the spot. Bad thing was the spot he died on was right next to a big old bonfire. Fell right in like a rotten old log. His body burned for two days before his mama and uncle could fish him out. Sad. Billy was a rough one. Ain't no wonder his soul don't know no peace.

DIGGER: Was Billy Noble one of the meaner sumbitches to walk these parts? Yes. Was he smart enough to pick a side in a manner that actually required critical thought? Hell, no. He killed who his daddy told him to, and drew the wrong night to have guard duty, is all. Now is he actually still out there walking around? I doubt it. People love a good story, and "I got chased by Burnin' Billy Noble" sounds a whole lot better than "I don't know how to run a proper still and it blew up in my face and about killed me!"

As the afternoon wore on, Waylon was treated to a detailed account of the collapse of the town of Crane's Nest and various other factors contributing to its failure to thrive. The learned professors Hobbs and McCoy walked him through the remains of old buildings, pointed out proposed sites for structures that were never built, and held forth in the way men of a certain age do when given a chance to speak about their long-time special interests. Waylon dutifully scribbled a small fraction of what he was told into the small journal his daddy had given him for

recording information that might come in handy in their line of work. He often took note of local lore, historical details, and the dates and times when ghostly activity was commonly observed and the like — the hard data that accumulates in the life of someone who works with the dead.

Mr. Hobbs had just begun to expound on his theories regarding the importance of the variety of species of trout in the nearby lake and the potential ways those fish were linked to the failure of the town when Waylon spotted a familiar figure bustling through the treeline. Oanetta Boggs — who had stayed behind to rest and wrangle her brother's little house into something more sanitary — strode towards them carrying a heavily laden picnic basket.

OANETTA: I figured if y'all are staying out here til dark, you wouldn't make it back for supper, so I packed it up and brought it to you.

DIGGER: 'Netta, you didn't have to do all that, now. But something does smell awful good in there. You didn't leave my clean kitchen a mess, now did you?

OANETTA: Oh please! That kitchen of yours could be called many things but clean ain't one of them.

WAYLON: Mama, I coulda come and helped you.

OANETTA: Hush, Waylon. I ain't as young as I used to be, but the day I can't feed my family is the day you'll bury me. So you just take this basket and make sure everybody gets as much as they want.

Oanetta held the heavy basket out for her only child to take from her, but Waylon was so busy scribbling in his notebook that it took him a full minute to realize his mother was waiting on him to be a good son and relieve her burden.

WAYLON: Oh! Sorry, Mama, I got distracted. I think I might have an idea of how to handle Mr. Hobbs' schoolhouse situation. It reminds me of that time that me and Daddy had to turn Ernest Hall out of—

OANETTA: Waylon, honey... are you sure you're ready for this?

WAYLON: Mama, Uncle Digger's asked for my help and is willing to help me in return. How can I not?

OANETTA: I know. It's just... You know what happened last time you turned a ghost, and I just now got you back up on your feet again. I'm worried it might be too soon, sweetie.

WAYLON: Oh, I remember, mama. I'm not likely to forget it. You go on back to Uncle Digger's house. Whatever happens here ain't gonna be pretty.

[ "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*

Two months before Oanetta hitched up her wagon and dragged her death-sick son around to the far side of the mountain, Waylon Boggs and his daddy had been called out to Ammons' Mill. There had been a ghost in Ammons' Mill for a long, long time. Nobody knew its name nor from whence it came. None of the Ammons family had buried anyone on the property, and they'd built the grist mill from the ground up. The ghost had never caused much trouble in all the years



the mill had been in operation, and in fact at times had been quite helpful. Spilled flour was swept up, torn sacks were mended, and long-mislaid belongings found and left where they could be easily retrieved on a regular basis. Heath, the oldest Ammons boy, had taken to calling the spirit “Bernard” after the family’s old hunting dog that had passed.

The Ammons family was quite content with sharing the mill with their incorporeal guest until Heath, now grown, brought home his new bride, Calliope, a snooty girl from a well-off family up around Winchester. Bernard, it seemed, did not approve of the young man’s choice. Small items began going missing. Grain sacks turned up moth-eaten and rotten. A huge order of ground corn for the new bake-house opening up in South Fork tipped over into the river, cart and all, without a soul around. The straw that dropped the proverbial dromedary though came when Calliope was down at the mill one Sunday evening with one Mr. Carter Meade.

The pair were supposedly discussing an outstanding bill Mr. Meade’s dry-goods store owed the Ammonses, though how they planned to go over the account in the dark of night without a candle lit or a ledger book in sight is anybody’s guess. In any case, at some point one of the thick beams that supported the roof gave way. When the dust cleared, Miz Calliope was without a scratch, and Carter Meade had been knocked silly. Heath Ammons, trusting soul that he was, apologized to Meade most profusely and sent for Lewis Boggs and his boy to sort the whole mess out as it was clearly time for their pet ghost to be sent on its way.

Lewis had another appointment out in South Fork proper that day, so he sent Waylon to handle the roof-rattling h’aint on his own. Waylon felt confident enough going in. He hadn’t had a bleeding hand in almost a month at that point, though the dreams still disturbed his sleep more often than not. He’d gone into the sturdy fortress of the mill with his usual tools in hand and his mind focused on turning the unruly spirit out the old black door with a gentle kick in the pants. He had called for the spirit using the only name they had for him, Bernard, and the spirit had manifested just as easy as you please.

Bernard was not what Waylon expected. Based on what the Ammons family had told him, he expected this to be some long-dead member of a displaced tribe, or perhaps the ghost of some prior settler who had claimed the land and then met his end before he could make it into anything worth having. What crouched before Waylon there in the dark halls of the Ammons’

family mill was neither of those things. The form it wore was that of a small, ratty man, malnourished and nigh skeletal. His belly was swollen, his neck a bent broomstick of a thing, his eyes empty sockets that carried nary a flicker of light or color.

WAYLON: Bernard — or that which has been called Bernard in this place by the folk who you have haunted — your time here is up, old soul. I commend you on to the—

The shabby spirit shook his head and croaked out:

GHOST: Not old. Not Bernard. Bernard was his dog.

Waylon was taken aback at the sound of the ghost's voice. It creaked and growled like an old coffin lid, but carried the sullen tone of a little boy caught red-handed at some form of mischief.

WAYLON: Excuse me, then good sir! I should know a man's name before I send him on. What name would you be called?

The thing that bent low in the late afternoon shadow within the grist mill tilted its head as it looked at Waylon with those deep, empty sockets.

GHOST: They called me Clinton. Just let the family know I tried to keep little brother safe, will you? She'll kill him when she can, you know. I heard her telling Carter Meade about it. Tell him to get her gone if he knows what's good for him.

The sad little specter seemed to ponder saying more, then dipped his head in a deep nod, as if to say, "That's all I got."

WAYLON: Um. Nice to meet you, Mr. Clinton. If you'll excuse me, your time in this world is at an end, and I must ask you to leave this place and face what waits for you on the other side of the door.

Sure enough, the old black door materialized out of thin air and hung a good three feet from the ground, a pale light flickering around its edges, throwing the coarse grain of the wood that made

up this incarnation of that dread portal into stark relief. Waylon stood with his hand outstretched, commanding it to swing wide and suck the little ghost out into whatever lay on the other side of it for him. The door, however, did not open. The h'aint who'd called himself Clinton stared at it for a moment, then turned back to Waylon in confusion. Waylon looked back at him, just as perplexed. Then both their eyes were drawn to Waylon's outstretched hand, which was now soaked scarlet and dripping blood onto the floor of the mill.

The light behind the door suddenly pulsed with a hateful surge of orange and rattled against its frame. The two of them watched in horror as the bones in Waylon's hand cracked and shifted beneath the skin. Waylon screamed. Then, like some horrid hand-puppet come to life, the collection of bones and joints he had possessed his entire life vanished, replaced with the head of a vicious, snarling dog. Its eyes burned with that same dirty orange glow, and a whirling void roared beyond its gnashing teeth. Before either the living or the dead had time to process this horrific new development, the beast lunged, latching onto the scrawny neck of the ghost who had introduced himself as Clinton, and began to eat.

The little ghost howled. With each mouthful of spectral flesh the canine abomination swallowed, its manifested form visibly waned, and Waylon found his mind flooded with the pitiful little creature's memories. They slammed through his psyche like thunderbolts. His name had been Clinton. He had been Heath Ammons' twin brother. He'd emerged from their mother's womb first, blue and unbreathing, whereas Heath had come pink-faced and squalling, healthy as a horse and twice as happy. The Ammonses had mourned their stillborn son, but were thankful for the boy who survived. Though they had buried him on the edge of a field back in the old country, Clinton Ammons had never left his brother. Twins can be special that way.

Clinton had shadowed Heath, keeping watch over him as he grew up, fell in and out of love, crossed an ocean, and helped his parents to build a fine business — a livelihood that was now being threatened by some petty jezebel. Clinton had been determined to stop her no matter what the cost. He had maintained a half-life of sorts, living as his brother's guardian angel. Now here was Waylon taking that away from Heath Ammons, literally a bite at a time, and there seemed to be nothing he could do to stop it. When the last, faint shred of Clinton Ammons had been consumed, the dog gave a great baying howl and melted away, leaving Waylon alone with a bloody hand, a broken heart, and a head full of memories that were not his.

That was when the fevers started. He'd get dizzy, his head swimming with fragments of a life he never lived. When he managed to push them down or silence them, the dog grew bigger and louder. He felt as though he wasn't in control of his own body half the time. His mama and daddy had tried pretty near everything to help him get a handle on it, but one thing after another failed. Now here he stood in the dying light of a late summer's day on the other side of the mountain about to try again, and for the first time in ages, he felt hope kindle. Perhaps his long lost uncle could indeed help him to overcome his cracked and corrupted gift, as Digger had learned to manage his own.

As the mountains pulled the sun beneath the covers of their shared marriage bed, the three men found themselves standing before the schoolhouse, which had already begun to creak and groan like a ship at sea. Flickers of bluish white light danced around the window sills, and a chill wind seemed to emanate from within the weatherworn structure, blowing cold air into the coming night.

MICAH: Boys, if y'all don't mind, I'm gonna head back to the house before my heart gives out or I piss my pants, either one of which would be a sure tragedy. I think y'all can handle it from here.

WAYLON: All right. Uncle Digger, you go with Micah and check on Mama. I'll be along directly once I handle all this.

DIGGER: The hell I will. Micah can go on back, but I ain't leaving you here, boy. Let's go see what this old biddy's made of.

As if on cue the voice of Miss Stanley boomed, distorted and lost in a torrent of wind and rain, inside the building. The sky was clear and the air around them was humid and still, save for the icy blasts issuing from the schoolhouse. Out of nowhere, there was a flash of blinding lightning and a crack of thunder, and Viola Stanley appeared in the center of the classroom, her neck bent to one side, her hands held out like our lord on the cross. Water flowed from her eyes and nose and mouth, any words she might have said snatched away by the gurgling flood.

DIGGER: There she is, boy! Be careful, now. Your mama won't ever forgive me if you don't come back in one piece.

Walking into the school proper was like stepping into the heart of a thunderstorm. Wind howled and rain poured down within its walls, Miss Stanley holding dominion over the scene as the ghosts of thirteen children of various ages appeared, seated in a circle beneath her, water pouring from their eyes and ears and mouths, just like the forsaken teacher hanging in the air above them. Waylon cleared his throat, centered himself, and began.

WAYLON: Viola Stanley! Your time on this earth is long past. You have held these children captive against the will of time and death for long enough. I commend you through the old black—

A gust of wind tore at Waylon's body and sent him tumbling to the floor. The howling wind battered his skin and whipped at his clothes. The rain stung his eyes. Through the onslaught, he extended his turning hand toward the wraith in the rafters.

DIGGER: You got this, son. Don't back down!

Unfortunately Waylon did not share his uncle's confidence. Try as he might to fight it, he felt his hand begin to twist in that horrifyingly familiar way, the bones shifting and cracking, reforming themselves into the mutated shape of a dog's head. The dog howled and reared, seeming to scent the air. Then its eyes locked on the hovering, dripping shade that had once been Viola Stanley and lunged at her, dragging the unwilling owner of the appendage to which it was attached in its wake. Waylon struggled to regain control of his arm, fighting as the dog-thing's jaws snapped at the ghostly woman. Its teeth snagged the edge of her sleeve, tearing smoke-like tendrils of insubstantial flesh from her arm, and Waylon felt a sense of calm purpose fill him, a shadow of what the schoolmistress must have been like in life. There was a quiet confidence to it, a self-assurance and a sense of peace that helped to settle his mind.

As he watched, Miss Stanley's brows drew together in a frown. Her lips pursed. Her hand whipped forward in a sudden, sharp motion, and quick as a snake, she rapped the dog on the nose with two fingers. "No!" she said firmly, her voice full of quiet authority. "Leave it! *Sit.*"

To Waylon's amazement, the strange manifestation at the end of his wrist gave a whine, and he felt the pulling sensation at the end of his arm relax. Stretching his senses out along the length of the limb, he found he was able to pull it back to his side. Finding within himself a kernel of that same benevolent authority he heard in the spectral teacher's voice, he focused on the remembered feeling of having fingers, of his hand as it should be, whole and unmarked. As he watched, his bones began to shift again, lengthening and straightening until his fingers found their proper shapes once more.

He lifted his gaze back to Miss Stanley, who stared down at his hand with an expression of satisfaction. "Naughty dogs don't get treats," she pronounced. Remembering his purpose here, Waylon cleared his throat and reached out with his turning hand again. To his relief, it retained the form it was meant to hold as he reached for the old black door.

WAYLON: Viola Lynn Stanley, your time in this world is done! Release whatever hold it is you have over these young'uns so that they may find peace. Release your grip on this world that is no longer yours, and go to find what awaits you beyond the Old. Black. Door.

Waylon watched as the portal he had summoned appeared, hovering in the air just beyond the figure of the spectral teacher. The children gathered at her feet turned to look at Waylon, and then glanced nervously toward the door. He smiled and gave them an encouraging nod, waving his other hand in a little shooing gesture. One by one, they rose to their feet, floating a few inches above the floor. They began drifting toward the gateway to the afterlife, hesitant at first, peeking back over their shoulders at what remained of the woman who was once their teacher. When Miss Stanley made no effort to call them back, they turned and fled, racing through the old black door one after another.

Once they had disappeared into whatever awaited them, their teacher turned back to Waylon, who nodded at the door, still holding it open for her. Whatever had driven her to do what she'd done, it wasn't his place to stand in judgment. Everybody got to move on from life the same.

What happened on the other side of the door? Well that was anybody's guess. As he watched, Viola Stanley seemed to accept her fate. She turned, straightening her back, though her head still hung at that unnatural angle, and walked through the door after the students she had once taught, and then dragged down into death with her.

As the weight of the door settled back into its frame and that timeless portal faded from Waylon's view, he expected his heart to feel light, accomplished even. Whatever Miss Stanley had done to the dog had stopped it. He could still feel a bit of her essence, all jumbled up inside himself, although the nip the dog had taken of her hadn't filled him with confusing memories the way its attack on Clinton Ammons had done. The spirits of the children were freed, and their tormentor had been sent on her way. And yet he didn't feel the sense of relief and satisfaction he anticipated. Something was off about this. Waylon realized that the wind still howled. Water still ran down the walls in a torrent. There was something still here, something other than the lingering echo of a mad schoolteacher.

As the door vanished, Waylon turned to his Uncle Digger, opening his mouth to comment on the situation, but the words died on his lips. Clearly Digger was aware that all was not yet right, because he looked absolutely terrified.

An icy tension filled the air and the sound of running water rose around them. To Digger McCoy's ears, it sounded like an all too familiar song.

WAYLON: Uncle Dig? What's going on? What's wrong?

From behind Waylon came a great groaning, as if the worn floorboards of the schoolhouse strained beneath a tremendous weight. Waylon spun to investigate just as a massive wave of ice cold water came crashing down, knocking him from his feet and blasting him through the open door of the building. Waylon tumbled into the schoolyard like driftwood helpless in the grip of a mighty river. As Waylon sputtered and scrambled to regain his footing, the door slammed shut and latched itself. Boards that had been pried from the windows and discarded in a pile nearby zipped through the air to refasten themselves, shutting Waylon out and trapping Digger inside. Waylon threw himself against the door, pounding with his fists.

WAYLON: Uncle Dig! UNCLE DIG! Can you hear me!?

Inside the school, Digger McCoy's worst nightmare rose before him. The water had drawn itself up into a whirling column of churning death that stretched to the rafters. Lights flashed and flickered in that freestanding whirlpool, and Digger could see the limp bodies of dead men and women floating within, spun about like dead leaves caught in an eddy. He knew them all. Jeremiah Adams. Hank Webb. Ansel Bentley. Ansel spun around the edge of the column, floating past with his back bowed to an extent that would have been painful had he not been dead, his head ratcheted back so far that his face was upside down. His skin was a pale blue, his eyes open and rolled back to show the whites. His mouth gaped in a wordless scream. The water held him there, taunting Digger with the vision of one of the friends he'd helped kill, the one whose daddy would never forgive him.

Ansel's colorless eyes shimmered with a pale blue light, and his upside-down mouth began to work. The voice that issued from it was not that of the boy with the rust colored hair whom Digger had called a friend since they were little more than toddlers. And yet he knew it. Digger would know that voice anywhere, though until this point he'd only heard it sing.

THE WATER: Oh, little seeker. Look at you. You were so young, so full of promise last we met. How you've withered on the vine. Such potential gone to rot. Did you think you could hide forever? Did you think your measures of time mean anything to us? We are eternal. We do not forget.

DIGGER: No, no. It can't be. I can't... I can't—

THE WATER: From the day the first of you swung an ax, lit a fire or dumped your stinking refuse into the raging glory of our waters, you ensured your own demise.

DIGGER: I can't... I can't...

THE WATER: You have eluded us for far too long, little seeker. It's time to come home.



Ansel floated away, and the water's song rose to its full power, overwhelming Digger and the last of his resolve.

DIGGER: Oh, all right, I guess I can. Just gimme a minute. I'm coming. I'm coming.

Digger had taken one step towards the whirling column of water when a massive shape erupted from the shadows and tackled him to the ground, trapping the old man easily under a fluffy creature the size of a young bear. Borgia, called Creature by his boy, growled with fury at the thing that would take his master from him.

CREATURE: This mortal is my ward. The green has spoken it to my heart, and not even a cousin from the deep and feral places will take him from me. We may not understand why these mortals are allowed to do as they do, but I know the voice that commands my kind when I hear it, and it sounds nothing like you. Return to the deepest shade and dream of this world as it was. Use the might granted unto you to pretend it has not changed if you must, but you will not defy a command given to one such as I.

THE WATER: Stand down, guardian. You have neglected your post for too long, taking food and shelter from these wretched things instead of driving them from this place as you were charged to do. The fact that we even need to rise up and defend ourselves speaks to your failure, beast. Now step aside and let us take what is ours.

CREATURE: No! You may not have him!

The water swirled and twisted into a massive, whiplike tendril, arcing like a great serpent preparing to strike down the gigantic feline, whose body had grown large enough to obscure his master under a mountain of muscle and floof. Before the elemental horror could bring its attack to bear however, a smaller gray shadow streaked in front of the larger cat to stare unblinking into the looming pillar of water. Silver sparks danced along the pattern of her coat, and her green eyes were tiny lanterns of emerald flame.

EMMALINE: My little cousin speaks true, river-kin. There is no justification to take these mortal lives. We are miles from your place of power, and you have come here in mummer's

clothes to try and steal the ones we watch over in the name of spite and cruelty. Walk away, or you might find that not all cats fear water. Some of us fear nothing at all.

And the avatar of the water sneered at them with Ansel Bentley's borrowed face, disdain dripping from its voice like snowmelt.

THE WATER: As if this land needed the likes of you to defend it. We are unending and boundless.

EMMALINE: Cousin Borgia, keep your boy where he is. I will do what must be done.

The Gray Ghost of Black Mountain locked eyes with the inverted face of the Bentley boy as readily as if they belonged to an invading tomcat caught trespassing upon her territory. The stripes of iron in the ancient cat's coat began to shimmer, then glow, then burn, as arcs of silver fire erupted from the ancient tabby. She stalked forward, setting one paw in front of the other, her head lowered, eyes locked on her prey, pinning it in place with the certain knowledge that there was no escape, no place to hide. The churning pillar flinched away from the cat-shaped bonfire that moved steadily towards it like a viking funeral ship, its pyre blazing in defiance of the night.

THE WATER: What— what are you doing? You dare bring the shining of the Bright to bear against us?

Miss Emmaline did not answer. The time for talk was done. She began to circle the water, leaning in as if marking her territory, her flames creating great hissing gouts of steam wherever she made contact. The water howled. It lashed and thrashed and struck the ground, but Miss Emmaline never hurried, never moved quicker than that deadly panther's pace.

THE WATER: You cannot... you fool cat! What have you done? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?

Emmaline Underfoot closed her green eyes and stepped into the water, allowing it to flow over her, to cover her while it writhed, desperately trying to escape by splitting itself into streams and rivulets, only to be roped in by hungry licks of steel colored flames. Her fire grew hotter and

brighter, until its light obscured her tabby stripes, her whiskers and fur and tail. Miss Emmaline had become the Bright, the white hot fire of judgment and purification that had been bestowed upon her as a guardian of this land. As she burned, the water became a scalding steam that smelled of the dense, rich earth from a time before it witnessed the first steps of man. And then even that was gone, evaporating on the warm air of a summer night, as steam is meant to do. Not slain, not destroyed, but changed, and sent away to find a different form somewhere in the deep and untouched reaches of the green.

When the steam had cleared, a very waterlogged yet satisfied cat sat in the center of the old schoolhouse. She gave a mighty shake and then began to groom the unwelcome wet from her fur as if nothing of any consequence had occurred, as cats are wont to do.

On the sagging, weathered floor between two rows of old desks, Digger McCoy began to stir, finding Creature — now returned to his usual, no less impressive Maine Coon size — perched upon his chest. His eyes snapped open, and he cast a wild look about the room, searching for his tormentor. Seeing no sign of the feral water, nor hearing her wretched song, he sat up and hugged the immense housecat to his chest like a child with a beloved stuffed animal.

DIGGER: Oh my. Oh that's... that's the worst it's ever been. She almost got me that time. Thank you, boy. You saved my bacon for sure, you old bear.

Borgia the Mighty Maine Coon, called Creature by his boy, considered squirming and running away to be with his queen, to accept her praise and the honors a hero such as he deserved. But he found himself quite comfortable, allowing the deep basso rumbling of a purr to escape his chest, timed perfectly with the steady beat of his master's heart. Creature closed his eyes and leaned into the cuddle. There would be time enough for honors and praise. Right now his boy needed him, and thus he would endure.

For a moment, all was quiet and calm, save for the contented purring of cats. And then the door swung open with a crash as Waylon Boggs threw himself into it with his full weight. Now freed from the control of the water's avatar, the door — which hitherto had resisted his attempts to open it — parted ways with its rusty old hinges and flew unceremoniously across the room,

landing at Emmaline's feet. For her part, the Gray Ghost appeared nonplussed, rising to her feet to greet her own boy with a happy chirp.

Waylon helped his uncle to his feet, and the pair of them set about inspecting the schoolhouse and its grounds for any lingering spirits, either of water or the dead. Finding no further evidence of either, they reckoned it was a job well done, and headed back to Digger's house to inform Micah that renovations could proceed.

The two men slept long that night and peacefully, not rising until late in the morning, when the smell of fresh coffee and Oanetta's biscuits and gravy set their mouths to watering and swept the last of slumber's cobwebs from their heads. Once their bellies were filled, Oanetta had announced that she longed for the comforts of home and the embrace of her loving husband, and she and Waylon began packing their belongings back into the sturdy little wagon they had arrived in. They had not packed for a long visit, and thus the task was accomplished quickly. Soon enough, they found themselves standing on Digger's porch to say their goodbyes.

OANETTA: Well, little brother, it's been good to see you again. Thank you for helping my boy. Please come visit us over in the holler. You're always welcome in our house. Always.

DIGGER: If you can manage to convince that dead-speaking ogre you're married to to be polite, I might think about it, 'Netta. It's been nice being around kinfolk. This new batch might be worth something. I'll see you, boy. Write to me. Let me know how things are going in there.

Elphius McCoy Junior tapped the side of his head gently, then reached out and tapped his nephew's breastbone.

DIGGER: And more importantly, in here.

While her companions bid their kin farewell, Emmaline Underfoot, the Gray Ghost of Black Mountain, stood in the shadow of the front porch to take her leave of the brave young cat who watched over the boy she had once protected like her own kit.

CREATURE: O Gray Ghost, it has been an honor to meet you. You are even more fierce in battle than your reputation suggests. I am humbled to have faced this threat at your side.

EMMALINE: It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, little kit. You are a credit to your line, and the boy whom I once called one of mine is fortunate to have you as his protector. I hope one day we meet again.

Digger McCoy watched his sister and the nephew he never knew he had until these past few days disappear around the side of the mountain as their cart rounded the near-dog-leg turn. It was good to know more of his family, and Waylon was a good boy with a good heart. It made Digger ache inside knowing that if Waylon's journey was anything like his, he had many hard miles to go before he'd ever know any peace. But as long as he had his family behind him, he'd probably end up just fine. Wouldn't he?

[ "Familiar and Beloved" by Landon Blood ]

Thus concludes volume two of Familiar & Beloved: Kith and Kin. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood. The voice of Micah Hobbs was Kelson Stallard. The voice of Digger McCoy was John Patrick McAfee. The voice of Waylon Boggs was Brandon Bentley. The voice of Oanetta Boggs was Betsy Puckett. The voice of Emmaline Underfoot, Grey Ghost of Black Mountain was Amerie Helton. The Voice of Borgia the Mighty Maine Coon was Shane Burke, and the voice of the water was Saro Lynch-Thomason. We, along with our furbabies, will talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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