

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 50: The Horns of the Altar

*Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast, and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.*

[ “The Land Unknown (The Pound of Flesh Verses)” by Landon Blood ]

*These old hills call  
For the blood of my body  
A pound of flesh for a ton of coal  
So down I go  
Into a dark hell waiting  
Where lungs turn black and hearts grow cold*

*And I'll take to the hills and run from the devil  
Into the dying sun  
Something wicked my way comes  
And tread soft, my friend, into these shadows  
Where the old ones roam  
For in these hills we die alone*

Family. We place a lot of weight on that word in these parts, and there ain't much a person wouldn't do for the ones they name as such. Be it your blood kin or your chosen clan, people will fight, bleed and die for family. For those brought up in this world without a pack to run with, without elders to learn from or traditions to be passed down and questioned, the road is a good bit longer and the incline a mite bit steeper. There is power in that bond. There is safety in numbers.

In the long, hot summer of 1941, beneath the hills of Pennsylvania, in the deep places below Barrow House, a father watched as his favorite child worked tirelessly to regain his favor. She would burn down the whole damn world and lay it at his feet... all for the sake of family.

Meanwhile in Roanoke, Virginia, a clock had just run out, and a second family decided it was done waiting, striking deals with a darkness even more fathomless than their own to bring a lost child back into the fold. The bloodline must continue. The future must be secured by the next generation. No cost was too great.

From the darkest corners of the mountains, agents emerged to descend up on a remote patch of land outside Blackford, Virginia, where a young man stood in the eye of this storm. He had been fed a diet of half truths and outright lies his whole life. He had been deceived, led astray, and now once again, someone was offering to reveal the secret of his origins, promising to take him home, if he would only trust them. This time it was a woman so beautiful he found it hard to breathe when he looked at her, with a voice like cold honey poured over a tombstone.

Jonah eyed her suspiciously.

JONAH: Are you saying you know who I am?

POLLY: Why of course. Why else would we be here?

In spite of everything — the guns and the thugs and the unfortunate fate of Ruth Barber (who, to be honest, he hadn't trusted or much liked anyway) — in spite of the fear, Jonah couldn't quite keep the note of hope from his voice as he asked,

JONAH: Are... are you my... are you my family?

The woman in the white suit stared at Jonah for a moment, as if she were trying to work out whether he was pulling her leg. And then she burst into laughter.

POLLY: Oh no! Did you think I was your mommy, little boy? Oh, that is funny. No. You are no kin of mine. I guess you could consider me your... baby sitter. Your family and mine are... old friends. And it shames me to admit that you were taken on my watch. So you see, I owe it to your family — and most importantly, my own father — to return you to their bosom.

JONAH: Just like that? You just show up, after all these years?

Jonah asked skeptically. The pretty woman shook her head, serious now, the smile vanishing

POLLY: Not at all. We've been searching for you for a very long time. The... woman... who took you in had you hidden very well. Once she passed, however... all her veils and obfuscations became null and void.

Jonah shot a glance at Rachel, muttering angrily under his breath,

JONAH: You see? More of Granny's lies!

RACHEL: You *believe* her?

Rachel hissed back.

JONAH: She's played me straight more'n anybody else ever did. Hell, she even admits it's her fault I got... well, kidnapped, it sounds like.

Raising his voice again, he asked the strange woman,

JONAH: So you say you're here to take me back to my family. My *real* family?

POLLY: That's right. Just step into the car, and we'll be on our way.

The crack of a shotgun blast split the air, and the roar of an engine filled the yard as a battered, rust-stained old white pickup truck came barreling up the late Ruth Barber's narrow drive behind the Cadillacs. Its bed was filled with men dressed similarly to the folks who'd come with the woman in the first car, several of them holding rifles. As the truck skidded to a stop on the grass, the passenger door opened, and a man in a simple brown suit stepped out.

Jonah's stomach dropped, and the hairs rose on the back of his neck. A chill raced up his spine as he realized he had seen that face before, staring out from the pages of the old book tucked into his bag. The man smiled, his eyes twinkling with amusement, as he strolled toward the

gathering in front of the house, flanked by two of the men who'd ridden in the back of the white pickup.

JACK: Why Pretty Polly Barrow! I didn't expect to lay eyes again on you so soon. Your daddy let you out already?

The woman in the white suit glared back at him and spat,

POLLY: What are YOU doing here, old man? You have no interest in this matter. This is private, Family business.

JACK: Well... seems like maybe that boy's family don't trust y'all so much these days. I've been asked to retrieve him as a *neutral party* in this situation.

POLLY: Bullshit!

She turned to the three teenagers and waved an imperious hand in their direction.

POLLY: In the car please, young man. You and your friends.

Jonah took a step backward, pulling his friends along with him.

JONAH: Uh... I don't... I don't know, ma'am. This fella says he comes direct from my people—

POLLY: Enough!

Polly Barrow turned to the man who had shot Ruth Barber.

POLLY: Gentlemen, the children, if you please.

Henricus Crain snapped his fingers, and two of the men who'd come in the second car stepped forward.

The group of men who'd come in the white truck reacted immediately. The ones who carried rifles shouldered them, taking aim at the three who'd approached Jonah and his friends. The others produced various handheld weapons — a crowbar here, a baseball bat there. One of them simply hefted a ball peen hammer, slapping it casually against his opposite hand.

JACK: Stop right there,

The man in the brown suit commanded.

JACK: Now nobody wants things to get ugly, Miss Barrow, but I can't let you leave with that boy. If I have to force the issue, I will.

The stout man at Polly Barrow's side chuckled darkly.

Crain: You and what army, Mr. Fields? This rabble? Please.

Polly Barrow began to roll her shoulders, joints popping under the skin. She stretched her neck, and as Jonah watched in terrified fascination, she began to grow and change. Her arms and legs lengthened as spurs of bone punched through the skin of her fingertips, her elbows and knees. Her fingers seemed to acquire more joints as they grew, forming reticulated spikes. She smiled prettily back at the man in the brown suit — Mr. Fields, apparently — and raised a delicate eyebrow.

If the men who came to do violence on behalf of Mr. Fields were impressed with Miss Barrow's transformation, they didn't show it. Their hands didn't waver, and their eyes remained fixed on the thugs that had accompanied her with a single minded purpose. No one would ever be able to say who fired the first shot or who threw the first punch, but a trigger was pulled, and a blow was unleashed, and the two sides clashed. The employees of the Barrow family were crack shots, to a man. Some had years of military experience. Others were gifted with a little dash of dark luck that had kept their aim true for years... at least until now. Rifles jammed, bullets flew astray. One poor bastard had a pistol blow apart in his hand, taking all five fingers with it. Before the men from the company knew what was happening, the workers from Jack's warehouse were upon them with rifles, swinging bats, and whatever else they had to hand.

Mr. Crain's eyes went dark as he reached for his hollowing, pulling the shadows of men out from under their feet, tangling their steps, a tactic that had worked for him hundreds of times in the past. He grinned as he felt the familiar tug of resistance as the intangible grew solid in his hands. But the old bootlegger's men leapt and danced over the tenebrous tripwires with ease. *What blasted sorcery is this?* Crain thought darkly, and then he caught sight of Jack, standing on the sidelines, smiling grimly and occasionally gesturing with his hands, lending his cursed trickster's luck to his boys on the field.

CRAIN: Miss Barrow!

Crain called, pointing at Jack.

CRAIN: The old man is cheating!

Polly turned to glower at Jack, then spun on her heel and charged toward him with a feral scream. Jack turned, took one look at the glorious juggernaut barreling down upon him, and dove for cover, vanishing into the treeline. Unfortunately for his men, his luck followed. Mr. Churchman, who had as of yet been unable to get close enough to the workers to employ his particular gift, was suddenly upon them. The breath snatched from their lungs, two boys collapsed to the ground, the sclera of their eyes filling with blood as they suffocated in the open air. Another man went down hard as Mr. Crain yanked his own shadow from beneath his feet, and in seconds, one of the Barrow men was on him with a blade, gutting him where he fell.

Polly Barrow kept out of the fray for the time being. She could have strolled through the crowd, eviscerating the cattle who had followed the old man to the slaughterhouse, but she found her attention distracted. There was a faint hint of power in the air, a buzzing hum under her skin that reminded her of... something. She couldn't quite pin down what. Skirting the edges of the battle, trying to discern the source, she drew close to the old immortal's rusty white truck, and something snagged her ankle. The tingling sensation of pins and needles raced up her calf — not painful, but not pleasant. She glanced down to see a small hand gripping the layer of bone that shielded her right ankle, the arm attached to it protruding from the truck's undercarriage.

Polly snapped her foot back, dragging the ragged little girl — Rachel, that was her name — from her hiding place.

POLLY: Well, what have we here — a little rot-witch trying to play with the grown ups?

Before Rachel could reply, Polly hauled her foot back and kicked her in the ribs, punting the girl a good five or six feet across the battlefield. Rachel landed in a heap to one side of the Barber woman's porch.

POLLY: Stay down, little girl. This is none of your business.

A wave of that familiar power slammed into Polly from behind, and she staggered, but didn't quite lose her footing. The bone-armored woman straightened to find Jonah Hellbender standing behind her, his hands outstretched and open as he looked despairingly at them, flexing his fingers, willing something — anything — to happen. He'd managed to call forth some form of power, but whatever it had been fled from him now.

POLLY: *You*. You have been nothing but trouble since the day I laid eyes on you, boy. Up to now, I have been very patient with you, but I have had enough of your sniveling. You are coming with me. We are taking you back to your family, and we can finally — finally! — wash our hands of you.

Polly Barrow stalked toward him, and Jonah slowly backed away, reaching down, down deep within himself, trying to find that weird, dark well of power he had touched before. *Come on, come on...* But could he never seem to do it when he tried, only when he didn't. It was instinctive, like an involuntary muscle. And what good was that to anybody? As the sun sank down behind the ridge, bathing the hillside in a bloody red light, Jonah Hellbender felt his shoulders connect with the edge of the porch. There was nowhere left to run.

Polly's lovely face twisted into a grin of triumph as she reached for the boy with one bony claw, and Jonah was suddenly filled with rage — rage at being abandoned, at being lied to for years, at being kept from his family. His heart burned with fury at the way the world discarded kids like him and Rachel and Skeeter without a single thought. Somewhere, deep in his mind, a half-held

memory rose to the surface. When he was very, very little, if he was scared or alone, hungry or bored, all he had to do... was *call*... and his needs would be met. All would be taken care of and he'd be safe and sated again. All he had to do was reach out. All he had to do... was open... the door.

Jonah's eyes flashed with a silvery light. His head snapped back and his mouth dropped open and that light — the color of moonlight reflected on nickels — blazed out of him. Polly took a step back as the evening air began to shift and change. There was a smell of burning hair as the barrier between this world and... someplace else... weakened, and on either side of young Jonah Hellbender, a door opened. Polly barely had time to register the desolate alien landscape she glimpsed through the closest portal when something massive heaved itself through the doorway on the right.

It moved as if it were underwater, billowing tendrils of flesh extending from a central mass of countless milky-white eyes. As it launched itself towards her, Polly had half a second to notice that its underbelly was simply a giant, snapping maw like a bear trap, although instead of teeth, its gums were lined with what looked like insect stingers, each as long as a hunting knife and dripping venom. And then the beast landed on her chest. The thing's many arms, which appeared smooth and oily, were rubbery on contact, covered in suckers that adhered to her flesh as its tentacles wrapped around her head, pulling her face toward that wasp's nest of a mouth.

Suddenly Polly realized she *knew* this thing. Nearly a dozen families had been fed to the beast over a decade ago. Well meaning union organizers and their sympathizers had taken in a foundling baby left in their path, only to have that kindness repaid with this abomination's foul kiss. The thing screeched as it tried to pull her lovely face into that gaping nightmare of a mouth, her skin burning where its foul tentacles wrenched at her flesh. She wasn't surprised when it began to speak to her deep within her mind: dragging up all of her greatest doubts and fears, replaying images of her time lost in the void beneath Barrow House, the disappointment in her Daddy's voice, the smirk on Conrad's face when he saw her for the first time after her return, the shame of her loss of position, her loyal hollow men cast down into low servitude while she suffered her father's displeasure in the endless night of the inner-dark. No, Polly wasn't surprised at the tactic. She was just surprised at how badly it was employed.



No creature of some barren and distant hell could know what she'd been through, could accurately recreate the shame and torment she had borne and been reforged by. If it thought it could use its many eyes to see into her and find her weakest point, well those eyes would just have to be closed. With a vicious grin, and taking no small amount of pleasure in the task, Polly dug her claws into the clusters of rolling, seeking eyes atop the thing's central mass and raked. She pushed back with her own mind, using all of her rage, her pain, her determination to prove there was only one thing on this field today that should truly be feared — and that was Polly Barrow, the Empress of Bones and Thunder, heir to Barrow House and eventual ruler of this foul little world. The scream that issued from the creature could have caused milk to sour and livestock to throw deformed offspring, but it was cut short as Polly hurled the thing back through the portal from whence it came.

An enormous shadow immediately fell through the left hand portal. The ambient temperature within that shadow plummeted, and frost began to form on the ground in the twilight of a humid July evening. Polly looked up. She knew this one too. She had nicknamed it "Plan B." If the first creature somehow became compromised, or the situation became unsalvageable, the weapon would call upon its second guardian to, uh... clean up the mess. It had never come to that — Polly, Crain, and Churchman had always stepped in before Plan B could emerge from the portal — and looking up into the sky of that other place, where something immense had turned its attention upon the world it could glimpse through that door, Polly was suddenly very grateful.

Jonah let out a pained gasp, his body twitching in response to the thing's approach, to the window between worlds. The silver light surrounding the boy intensified as the portal began to grow. Polly knew the boy had no training in using his gift. Damn Greta Amburgey. The old witch had been suppressing his power all these years, both preventing him from being tracked and from gaining any proficiency in controlling the portals. Bringing something this massive through the gate to their world would probably kill him. And as much as she resented the little shit, she couldn't have him die. Not on her watch, at least. Polly also wasn't entirely certain she could dispatch the second creature as easily as she had the first, but that didn't matter. She could just slam the door in its face. She just needed to handle it delicately — and quickly, as the shadow spilling from the left hand door was growing deeper, the portal larger, with every second.

So Polly Barrow did what she had to do. With all the restraint she could muster, she kicked Jonah Hellbender in the stomach — just hard enough to knock his feet from under him and the breath from his lungs, pinky swear! The boy flew several feet through the air, coming to rest with an audible thud. The portals flickered and died.

Jonah groaned and clutched his belly as he rolled onto his back, gasping. The feeling of power, of connection to something — or somewhere — else had fled from his limbs like something from a dream, leaving him hollow and raw, his gut aching with every labored breath. He stared up into the night sky, stars swimming and twinkling in his vision.

And then a cloud of black velvet rolled over the clearing, plunging them into darkness as the air exploded with the fluttering of enormous wings. Their flapping stirred the hair on top of Jonah's head, and he rolled over, covering his head. The hilltop echoed with a chorus of piercing shrieks, a sound that seemed to reverberate inside his skull, to vibrate his very bones. A sound that was strangely familiar, Jonah realized with a chill. As the sonic onslaught began to fade, Jonah raised his head, and his ears filled with another sort of cry — the screams of men dying alone in the dark.

All around him, the men who had driven up the mountain to Ruth Barber's house were on the ground, writhing and screaming beneath strange figures draped in black. Polly Barrow wrestled with one, halfway across the clearing, her armored claws making short work of it. She pushed herself to her feet, her white suit soaked with red gore, and scanned the grass around her. When her eyes lit on Jonah, she smiled and turned his way. She seemed pleased to see him on his feet. She threw an elbow backward into another of the strange figures, a tall lanky man whose mouth was slicked with blood. Polly spun around to finish him off, but just then, a series of strange chittering, clicking sounds echoed across the clearing, and the man beat a hasty retreat.

Polly turned to face another dark clad figure emerging from the shadows at the edge of the woods. From her shape, Jonah could deduce that she was a woman, and she walked, unhurried and apparently unruffled by the battle raging all about her, into the blood-soaked clearing. Her skin was covered in a fine blend of fur and feathers the color of coal and dappled moonlight, a delicate pattern of black and gray that stretched from her collar up over the bridge of her

bird-like nose, all the way to her hairline. Her eyes were those of a raptor, merciless and black. Her ears were pointed and laid close to her skull. Her nose was a sharp hook of bone, and the mouth below it filled with needle-sharp teeth stained red with blood. The air filled with that ululating, piercing screech as she pointed an accusatory finger at Polly Barrow, and Jonah clapped his hands over his ears. Then before Polly had a chance to respond, the strange woman launched herself across the clearing and tore out the beautiful monster's throat.

Across the field of battle, Henricus Crain saw his mistress go down. He put the man who writhed under the touch of his hollowing to a quick death, and called out to his partner, who was already on his way to their employer's side. Johann Churchman was no prize to look upon himself, but even he seemed unnerved by the appearance of the night folks' matriarch, and he responded accordingly. As he drew close, he reached out one hand, drawing on his hollowing. Crain's teeth rang with the power that Churchman drew upon as he ripped the air from her lungs. The matriarch released her hold on their mistress, and Miss Barrow crumpled to the ground.

Crain had seen many a life meet its end under the touch of Mr. Churchman's hollowing — blood vessels burst, hearts stopped, lungs collapsed, with only a fraction of the force he'd put behind that strike — but the leader of the night folk didn't even lose her footing. Her clawed hand went briefly to her throat as she struggled to draw breath for another soul piercing scream, strained against Churchman's power, and conquered it, backhanding the wraith of a man across the mouth.

Henricus reached them an instant later, reaching for his own gift and plunging the immediate area into an inky, impenetrable darkness. Then he scooped Miss Barrow up into his arms and bellowed,

**CRAIN: RETREAT!**

Grabbing Churchman's sleeve to guide him through the cloud of darkness, Crain raced for the limousine. He knew not whether any of the family's lesser servants had survived the attack, nor did he care. His mistress was all that mattered. He could see her throat was already healing. He

and Johann would get her to safety, and well... then there would be hell to pay. For the old man. For those... creatures. For anyone else who stood in their way.

Jonah Hellbender watched as the long black Cadillac spun its wheels briefly in the grass, then sped off down the mountain at a pace guaranteed to ruin its undercarriage. Coughing in the cloud of dust that rose in its wake, he pushed his way to his feet, careful of his aching ribs and belly. All around him were the shadowy forms of fallen combatants, some twitching and moaning, others still and silent. Dark forms hovered over some of the more lively ones, and he could hear a sort of slurping sound that he had no desire to investigate. For the first time that long and horrific night, no one seemed particularly interested in him, and Jonah couldn't say he was sorry for it. Then somewhere to his left, Rachel screamed.

Jonah turned, looking around as he jogged in the general direction of her voice. He found the two of them around the side of the porch: Rachel standing with her hands pressed to her mouth, and Skeeter struggling with someone else on the ground. The man must have attacked her, Jonah thought. Good on Skeeter for coming to her aid. And then Rachel said in a choked voice,

RACHEL: Oh my god... Skeeter! What... are you? What have you done?

And Skeeter turned from the man writhing in his grip, tilting his face up toward them, and Jonah saw. Skeeter's eyes had gone huge and black from corner to corner. Blood dripped from the raw, wet ring of his mouth, which was filled with needle-sharp teeth. Skeeter met his eyes, those dark orbs seeming to plead for understanding. Jonah looked around them, and nodded. Gently, not wanting to startle her, he put a hand on Rachel's shoulder and squeezed it.

JONAH: It's... it's ok, Rach. He's only protecting you. I think *this* is Skeeter's gift.

Rachel turned to look at him, and Jonah jerked his head at the scene behind him. Following the motion, she gazed upon the remnants of the battle that had raged in the clearing. The strange folk who had suddenly intervened were moving toward the center of the clearing, supporting their injured where it was necessary, as they gathered around the tall, gaunt figure of the unusual woman who was clearly their leader. Rachel's eyes flicked from the woman to Skeeter,

and he saw them widen with understanding. She nodded to Jonah, then turned back to Skeeter, offering him a hand up.

JONAH: So uh... these are your people, huh? I thought you were Portuguese, Skeets?

Skeeter flashed them a gore-daubed grin and shrugged sheepishly.

SKEETER: No. Not... not Portuguese.

A small contingent of the strange folk broke away from the main group and began walking toward them, led by the tall woman. Up close, Jonah could see that they all had similar ash-gray feathering, and that most of the men weren't wearing robes or cloaks as he had thought, but had skin that hung loosely from their shoulders to their hips. It put him in mind of flying squirrels. Jonah's mind flashed back to the rumors on Granny's farm of Skeeter zipping through the trees at night, and chuckled to himself.

The men may have been fascinating, but their leader was downright awe-inspiring. Up close, Jonah could see that, folded neatly against her back, were a pair of intricately jointed wings covered in shiny, oil-slick black feathers. They quivered, the breeze rippling through the feathers, as she knelt down to murmur something to Skeeter in that strange, chittering language. Skeeter returned the words slowly, tentatively, his native tongue finding its way back to his mouth after long years of disuse. The woman nodded at whatever Skeeter said, and opened her arms. Jonah and Rachel watched in surprise as their normally reticent friend launched himself into the folds of her black wings.

As the two teens stood awkwardly in the midst of what obviously was some sort of family reunion, they heard the sound of footsteps approaching, and turned to find the man in the brown suit — Mr. Fields, Jonah remembered — crossing the clearing to join them. As he drew close, the leader of Skeeter's people turned to face him, drawing herself up to her full height, her right hand resting on Skeeter's shoulder, right wing stretching to partially enfold him, protectively. Mr. Fields smiled.

JACK:I didn't think you folks ranged so far from the rock,

he said. The strange woman chittered at him, and seeming to understand, he nodded.

JACK: Fair enough.

JONAH: You know what she said?

Jonah asked him warily.

JACK: Sure. She said, “For a child of our flock? Who would not go to the ends of the earth to bring them safely home?” Looks like your friend has found his family.

He eyed Jonah.

JACK: What about you, kid? You ready to go home?

RACHEL: Whoa now! We don’t know you from Adam, mister, and to be honest, our track record trusting strangers ain’t great.

JACK: That’s fair enough, little lady. So let’s not be strangers then.

The man in the simple brown suit stepped forward and offered Jonah his hand. Jonah responded as he’d been taught and slid his own into the older man’s weathered grip. He met the man’s eyes, and the rest of the world seemed to fall away. The smell of ancient, murky river water and old, wet stone filled Jonah’s senses. The air grew warmer and heavier, with the faint tinge of ozone as thunder rumbled somewhere across the ridge, and the sound of cicadas filled the air.

JACK: I have been known by many names, young sir. Your Granny Amburgey would have known me as Jasper Wallace, and her Mama would have called me Fitzhugh Duncan. Neither of those are right or true. Some might say I’m “of the Wood” or “of the Tales,” and those are closer. I’ve been known to be nimble and quick, but I’ve never cared for the cold. These days most folks know me as JT Fields, of Paradise, but my friends — and I do hope we’ll be friends, young fella — just call me Jack. I have walked this world for as long as it’s been turning, and I plan to keep

walking it even if it stops. I give you this, my solemn word and promise. By my true name, it is my intent to deliver you safely back to the home and hearth that has missed you these many years. May I be stricken down if I speak false.

The old man spoke with a solemnity that Jonah had never heard before, and he met Jonah's eyes head-on, man-to-man, like a grown up. Like he took him seriously. Jonah had always been another mouth to feed, one more body to move from here to there. No one had ever bothered to make him any promise he expected them to keep, nor sealed it with an honest handshake and a bonded word. He didn't quite know how to feel, but he knew that adults, even ones that could talk fancy, had done them more than dirty as of late, so he tried his best to put some iron in his voice as he shook the man's calloused hand and responded.

JONAH: All right. But you've seen what we can do. You try to double-cross us... well, sir, we're prepared to defend ourselves.

Rachel held up a handful of grass she'd gathered from the ground and let it disintegrate in her hand as she stared into Jack's eyes. Skeeter shot him a still-bloody grin.

Jack met and held each of their gazes, and then nodded.

JACK: Understood. Though I believe the young gentleman with cherry pie on his face is about to be moving on, are you not?

Skeeter blinked and looked over his shoulder at the night folk, who were quietly chattering to each other and beginning to depart. He found the eyes of the tall, winged woman. She inclined her head, then half-turned from him to chatter to the other members of her flock. The implication was clear. Say your good-byes. It's time to go.

Jonah and Rachel turned to Skeeter, lingering behind as his family withdrew, heading into the woods. Rachel impulsively threw her arms around the skinny, tan-skinned boy, catching him in a tight squeeze.

RACHEL: Good luck, Skeeter. We'll miss you.

Jonah and Skeeter eyed one another awkwardly, uncertain if they too should hug, and finally settled on a firm handshake.

JONAH: Good luck, Skeets. Uh, have a safe trip and all that.

Skeeter fixed Jonah with a solemn look and muttered softly,

SKEETER: I don't trust that man, Jo Jo. Be careful.

A gentle hooting call sounded from the edge of the field as the matriarch of the night folk unfurled the inky sweep of her wings, flapping them twice. Skeeter gave his friends one last smile and a little wave, then turned and ran into her arms again. She scooped him up, and once more, the air was filled with the deafening flutter of velvety wings as Skeeter's family vanished into the night.

When Jonah and Rachel turned back to Jack, he was speaking quietly with one of the survivors who'd come up the mountain with him. Two others were carrying the bodies of their fallen comrades to the bed of the old white truck.

JACK: Tell the families I'll take care of things when I get back to town now,

Jack told the man he was speaking with, looking up as the two teenagers joined him.

JACK: Well this is unfortunate,

he told them.

JACK: I'm afraid, what with some of my boys, uh, no longer upright, we don't quite have the room for all of us in the truck there.

Rachel chewed her lip for a moment, watching the three surviving men at their grim task, her brow furrowed thoughtfully.



JACK: You got something to say, missy? Spit it out.

RACHEL: Well... Miz Barber has a car. *Had* a car, that she brought us up in. I... guess *she* won't be needing it.

Rachel hooked a thumb over her shoulder.

RACHEL: It's parked around back.

Jack grinned and clapped her on the back.

JACK: Now we're in business. Good thinking, Miss...?

RACHEL: Harlow. Rachel Harlow.

Jack favored her with an appraising look.

JACK: Like the movie star, huh? That's a good name. Fits you. All right then, folks, we'd best get on the road. We've got a long drive ahead of us, and I imagine you have questions, which I will attempt to answer on the way.

Finding Miz Barber's car keys was little trouble — Rachel, ever the observant one, remembered the dead woman leaving them in a little dish by the front door — and soon enough they were on their way, down the mountain and heading east again, down the long ribbon of highway 58. Jack waited until they were past Blackford — where someone might recognize Ruth Barber's car — then stopped to fill up the gas tank at a small country filling station manned by a single attendant. The hour was late, the small diner attached to the station long past closing, so he purchased a few snacks — chips, candy, a few bottles of pop — from the sleepy clerk, distributed them amongst the three of them, and got back on the road.

JACK: Now,

Jack said once he'd settled back in behind the wheel.

JACK: As I said, I imagine you have loads of questions, young man. But why don't y'all save us a little time and tell me what you know so far? Start at the beginning.

Jonah quickly laid out what little he 'd learned of his origins — his memory of growing up on Granny Amburgey's farm, never knowing his real name or understanding where he come from, his disappointment at the lack of information in Granny's book, which held such detailed profiles of the other children in her care. Ruth Barber's hints about "arranging passage for a very special child" to Granny's farm some time ago, and the greedy look in her eyes as she'd eyed Granny's bible.

JACK: Aye. It's a good job you didn't let her get her hands on it, son. She gave it up too easy. That woman never stopped haggling til you felt she'd mostly cheated you. I'd lay odds she planned to *trade* you to the Barrows, in exchange for that book.

He shot Jonah a knowing look.

JACK: She couldn't take it off you herself, but she'd not be above letting them do her dirty work.

JONAH: You don't sound like you care for her much.

Jack snorted.

JACK: No. She is not my favorite person — or she wasn't. Suppose she's no longer a problem. Anyways, go on.

JONAH: That woman... Miss Barrow? She said she was my... baby sitter or something? When I was little. She made it sound like I was kidnapped or something.

JACK: I don't have all the details, now — leastways, not concerning how exactly you left Miss Barrow's custody — but I can certainly fill in some blanks. Your real name is Solomon

Nebuchadnezzar Locke. And Pretty Polly told you true: your family and the Barrow family are old allies. I wouldn't precisely call it a friendship,

Jack chuckled,

JACK: But their interests are often aligned. You kids heard of Barrow & Locke? Or maybe just heard 'em called B&L?

RACHEL: You mean like... the big mining company? Got all them company towns and a... a whole railroad?

She stared at Jonah with wide eyes.

RACHEL: THAT B&L?

JACK: The very same. Your friend here — well, his people — own half of it. His granddaddy Jameson founded Locke Rail.

RACHEL: Solomon Nebuchadnezzar Locke.

Rachel rolled the name around on her tongue, eyeing the boy she had known as Jo Jo and Jonah and finally Jonah Hellbender thoughtfully.

RACHEL: I think I like it.

Jonah scowled.

JONAH: So how did I end up with Miss Barrow then? And what about *my* parents?

JACK: Well, from what I understand, your mommy and daddy passed when you were just an infant. I don't know the circumstances, I'm afraid. Your uncle Brutus and his wife adopted you. I don't know how you came to be under Miss Polly's care, but as I understand it, your uncle and

your cousin Nathaniel searched for you long and hard when you went missing. It's, uh, caused some tension between the two families, as you might imagine.

Jonah's brow furrowed thoughtfully, and he was silent for a moment.

JONAH: So I have an aunt, an uncle and a cousin,

He said ponderously.

JACK: Well... an aunt and an uncle, yes. I'm awful sorry to have to be the bearer of bad news, but your cousin Nathaniel passed away... oh, must be six years ago now. Train derailment. Terrible thing. Nathaniel was Brutus' only child, so... with him gone, *you* are Brutus' new heir, young Solomon.

Jonah slumped back into the cushy bench in the rear of the late shopkeep's Packard, falling silent. It was a lot to absorb, going from no-name orphan to heir to wealthy coal barons in a matter of minutes. It had been a long day, and he was exhausted. He let his head fall onto the back of the seat, his mind beginning to drift.

JACK: Shit!

There was a squeal of brakes and the smell of burnt rubber as the car skidded to a sudden stop, tires spinning, turning them just slightly left. Jonah's eyes snapped open as he and Rachel were hurled against the seat back in front of them.

JACK: What the hell?

Jack swore. The three of them stared through the front windshield at a tall, shapely figure silhouetted in the car's headlights. She stood in the middle of the highway, one hand planted on her hip, a long cigarette holder dangling from the other. And then the world exploded around them, as the car was thrown with a cacophonous crunch into the ditch on the opposite side of the highway. Glass shattered. Someone — probably all three of them — screamed. The car's

headlights winked out, and for a moment, everything was silent but for the heavy, terrified sound of their breathing.

JACK: You kids ok?

Jack asked, a frantic note finding its way into his voice.

JONAH: I.. think so. I think we're fine.

Rachel chuckled.

RACHEL: Oh, I'm all right. This ain't my first rodeo.

The three of them climbed slowly from the ruined car, which listed sharply to its left, not quite on its side, but far enough into the ditch that the left hand doors would not be an option. The Packard had been struck by... something... on its passenger door and right front quarter panel, which didn't much help the situation. Jonah reached for his door, but Jack held up a hand.

JACK: Wait. Just wait. I know it'll be a tight squeeze for a second, but let me go out first.

So Rachel and Jonah squeezed themselves tight against the stuck left rear door to give him room. Jack scrambled out, looked around cautiously for a moment, and then motioned to them to follow. The three of them climbed to the top of the embankment, where another car stood idling, its headlights casting a hazy yellow glow over the highway. Its doors stood open, courtesy light illuminating its interior. Squinting at it, Jonah could see that it was empty.

A woman in a gray velvet dress and matching wool coat stepped into the light from the shadows at the rear of the car.

GRAY LADY 1: Good evening, Jack,

she said.

For a fleeting moment, Jonah saw a look of confusion flit across the man's face, but he quickly covered it with a charming smile.

JACK: Evening, ma'am. Always a pleasure. How's your sisters?

As if on cue, the hollow sound of boot heels echoed on the pavement behind them. Jonah and Rachel turned to see two nearly identical women standing behind them. Each of them was a study in gray, from their neatly curled and pinned silver hair to the eyes like a rainy sky to their dove's wing shoes and smart dresses. The tall one smiled as she answered.

GRAY LADY 2: Oh, we're—

GRAY LADY 3: —just dandy.

The smaller one finished her sister's sentence.

JACK: I wasn't expecting to enjoy your company this evening, ladies, and I'm afraid we can't stay. We're on our way to an important—

GRAY LADY 1: Plans,

said the first of the three women, joining her sisters.

GRAY LADY 2: Have changed—

GRAY LADY 3: —Mister Fields, yes they have.

GRAY LADY 1: We've come—

GRAY LADY 2: —for the—

GRAY LADY 3: —boy,

the third finished with a nasty laugh.

JACK: Well I'm afraid I can't let you do that. Y'see, his family have hired me to collect him, and I've given my word to the boy himself to see him safely home.

GRAY LADY 1: That's funny,

the first of the women said with a smile.

GRAY LADY 1: You see, we—

GRAY LADY 2: —have come to do—

GRAY LADY 3: —the same. Only—

GRAY LADY 1: —we come—

GRAY LADY 2: —on behalf of his—

GRAY LADY 3: —father. *You* are here—

GRAY LADY 1: —at the behest—

GRAY LADY 2: —of a mere uncle. Our claim—

GRAY LADY 3: —is the greater.

Jack nodded thoughtfully, hooking his thumbs into his pockets, seeming to consider their words. Then he shook his head.

JACK: That seems like a private, family matter for the two of them to work out amongst themselves. Now I've given my word, both to Brutus Locke and to his nephew here. I'm afraid I can't allow you to interfere.

The three women laughed delightedly.

GRAY LADY 1: Do you think—

GRAY LADY 2: —you can—

GRAY LADY 3: —stop us?

A slow smile spread across Jack's face, and the two teens felt the air grow warmer, the humidity raising a sweat from their skin as the scent of rattlesnakes and ozone filled their noses.

JACK: Now ladies,

he chided.

JACK: You know you can't harm me. Not in any meaningful way. I just pop right back up every time like a bad habit.

Out of nowhere, a thunderous drumming of hoofbeats filled the air, and the trees at the side of the road exploded, birthing forth a shape out of nightmare. The beast was nearly nine feet tall, with a chest like a war horse. The deep black of his hide stood out in defiance of the night sky, seeming to drink any light that might dare wash across the abomination of its form. His massive cloven feet were soaked to the knee in a smoldering skin of burnt offal and gore. He lowered his massive head, topped with a rack of glowing amber antlers that seemed as though they had been carved of liquid fire. Antlers that plunged straight through the man known as JT Fields of Paradise, Jack to his friends.

For a moment, the air fell utterly silent. Then the monstrous stag gave a great, hard shake of his head, and Jack's impaled body slid slowly from his antlers with a wet sucking sound, dropping bonelessly to the dirt. Rachel screamed and lurched forward, made to drop to his side, but one of the women in gray pulled her up short, clamping one hand over her mouth and twisting her left arm painfully up behind her back with the other.



GRAY LADY 3: Sleep,

the gray lady whispered into Rachel's ear, as a sinuous, dripping black tongue — an appendage far longer than it had any right to be — slithered from between her lips. As Jonah watched in horror, it drew languidly up the side of Rachel's neck. The girl slumped in her hold, and the woman in gray let her fall.

Jonah Hellbender — or Solomon Locke, or whoever the hell he was now — reached for the place deep inside him where he could reach out to his special friends. He found them easily this time the doors that were locked to all but him, because he had the key. He was the key. He reached out and opened—

THE BLACK STAG: STOP THAT. We do not have time for such petty games, young Master Locke..

The voice of the stag filled Jonah's head like a sonic boom, and his concentration snapped, the doors slamming shut beneath his touch.

THE BLACK STAG: We have miles to go to reach your father's loving arms, and over the course of the journey, I would know you better. We should talk of many things. But for now...

The great black stag, lord of lies and black-tongued promises inclined, his great head, the last of Jack's lifeblood cooking to a blackened char, then burning away on the heat of those great horns as he did.

Then the gray lady was upon him, with her venomous tongue, and the world went dark.

The thing whose name sounded like Hornèd Head, but was most certainly not, snorted and stretched its long neck.

GRAY LADY 1: Master, should we—

GRAY LADY 2: Take the girl?

The creature whose name no human tongue could ever fashion stepped forward, lowered its head to take a long sniff of the gifted child who had accompanied their prize across so many miles. He snorted disdainfully.

THE BLACK STAG: Tainted,

the beast spat.

THE BLACK STAG: She's no good to us. Get the boy, and let us be on our way.

[Panthers on the Mountain by Jon Charles Dwyer]

*We laid my mamaw to rest  
The ridge bowed its head  
And I tattooed her name  
on the top of my wrist  
Well six feet too low  
when her heart becomes cold  
We'll sniff our her bones  
and see how bright she glows  
See I hear that time is a cold hammer's blow  
and that days in this holler are caskets to close  
I watch the sun ink and pray it may rise  
and hold in the tales I keep buried in my mind*

*Of panthers on the mountainside  
The freedom that comes of knowing your bite  
I sharpen my teeth, pray my nails become claws  
To finally dig out of this hole we've always called home*

BROTHER NATHAN: Whoa! Hold there, Betty, easy girl. Easy girl. Good girl. Over there, Uncle! See? I wasn't lying, I told ye.

ELDER ADONIJAH: Nobody accused you, boy. It's just easy to mistake things out here after the sun goes down. The dark plays its tricks, it does. Rock preserve us, what do we have here? Dat! Dat, wake up!

ELDER HOSEA: Huh? What? We can't be back to the stonehaus just yet, it's dark still. Is all well? Where are we, boys?

BROTHER NATHAN: We got dead folks on the side of the road, Daadi! They're... they're on the right hand side! Our side!

ELDER ADONIJAH: Nobody said they were dead. Nobody's even had a look at 'em. But we'll see what needs seeing, sure enough.

ELDER HOSEA: Dead on the road to the Rock? An ill omen if it be. Adon, with me. Nathan, stay by the cart, if you will.

BROTHER NATHAN: But—

ELDER ADONIJAH: No buts, nephew. You stay put and mind your grandfather.

BROTHER NATHAN: Aye. Yessir.

ELDER HOSEA: We got a man and a girl. She's breathing, if barely, now. As for him, I'm not too sure. Let's get him turned over and see who we have here.

ELDER ADONIJAH: Och. Bloody. Rock bless him, it looks like he's been run clean through, Daadi. Is he—

ELDER HOSEA: Oh, he's alive all right. You can't kill one such as him so easily. Nathan, boy,

fetch the rope from the work box and bring the chains your cousin Amos sent with us to sell to the English.

EDLER ADONIJAH: The man's been run through, Dat, do you really think you need irons to clap him in?

ELDER HOSEA: Forestall your questions, Adon. Trust me and all will be as well as it can be. This one has much to answer for, and the Rock will see to him good and proper. Bind his feet and his hands — no, no. Chain for him, rope for the girl. Good. Now let's get him... there we go.

NATHAN: We're taking her too?

ELDER ADONIJAH: Bind her hands, but be gentle. She's young. A wisp of a thing, she is.

ELDER HOSEA: Psh. The hearts of the young can blackened be. The dark wears innocence like a new coat when it suits it, Adonijah Waltrip. You know that as well as I. Come, boys, we ride for home. We'll see what *she* would have us do with them.

[I Cannot Escape the Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

*There is a curse upon my every waking breath,  
And I cannot escape the darkness...*

STEVE: Well hey there, family. My name is Steve Shell.

CAM: And I'm Cam Collins.

STEVE: And we want to thank you for joining us for the final episode of season three of Old Gods of Appalachia: As Above, So Below. Now Cam and I are gonna talk to you for a bit, but first let's get this out of the way. This is your every single goldern episode reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media and is distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. The voice of Pretty Polly Barrow was Tracey Johnston-Crum. The voice of Rachel was Sarah Doreen MacPhee. The voice of Brother

Nathan Waltrip was Travis Hollifield. The voice of Elder Adonijah Waltrip was Harlan Guthrie. The voice of Elder Hosea was William Wellman. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood and our outro music, which is available on our bandcamp, is by Jon Charles Dwyer. Our ultimate outro music this time around is of course by our family at Those Poor Bastards.

It is hard to believe, family, we have made it all the way to episode 50 here at the end of our third season.

CAM: Whoo! It is hard to believe. Now, it may be the end of season three, but it is *not* the end of the show, family. There is so much more to come. We're already cooking up some ideas for season four that we're really excited about. And we're working on our 2023 live show, which is set to be a much bigger tour. We'll be visiting some of those places y'all have asked us to come. You invited us, family, so we expect to see you there. And we hope to be able to announce those dates very soon.

STEVE: Now it's been a big year for us here at DeepNerd Media and Old Gods of Appalachia. For example, the Old Gods of Appalachia Role Playing Game is set to drop from our friends at Monte Cook Games later this year, with a record-setting Kickstarter that did number that make my head spin and my stomach kind of queasy when I think about them. So we want to thank all y'all who got in on that. You've been seeing some early playtest materials coming your way, if you've been an upper level Patreon supporter, and there's a whole lot more cool stuff coming. Just stay tuned on that one. Now uh, we didn't get here by ourselves, three seasons in, however many episodes — it's fifty numbered in the regular season — so we've got a ton of people to thank. Cam? Go ahead.

CAM: Well first and foremost, we have to thank our season three cast: Stephanie Hickling Beckman, Dr. Ray Christian, Méabh de Brún, Harlan Guthrie, Travis Hollifield, Shasparay Irvin, Sarah Doreen MacPhee, Betsy Puckett, DJ Rogers, and William Wellman. You guys, wow. And while our holiday specials are *not* part of the regular season, shout out to Jacob Danielsen-Moore, Matt Evans, and Renee Hill for their work in *School Spirit*. All you folks are just absolute rock stars. The show wouldn't be the same without you helping bring our characters to life. Also extra special thanks to DJ Rogers, who not only provided the voice of

Tobias Underwood for episodes 34 and 35, but acted as our script consultant as well. Man, you just... you've helped us out so much, and we appreciate you.

STEVE: Now y'all know Old Gods wouldn't be Old Gods without our music, so we have to thank all of the amazing musicians that contributed this season. From our brother Landon Blood, who is now a five time Audioverse nominee, and probably gonna be a five time winner, if the fates are just. John Lee Bullard did some baller banjo picking for us. Stacie Sexton did some a capella "Pretty Polly" for us back in the early part of the season. Jon Charles freaking Dwyer dropped "Panthers on the Mountainside." If you haven't bought his album, *Junebug*, at [joncharlesdwyer.bandcamp.com](http://joncharlesdwyer.bandcamp.com), you need to go do that. And of course Those Poor Bastards have been more than generous in letting us use the tracks that we have used from them. So huge shout out to the folks that have given us the music that is the heart and soul of this show.

And we also want to thank our family over at Rusty Quill.

- Landon Blood
- John Lee Bullard
- Jon Charles Dwyer
- Stacie Sexton
- Those Poor Bastards

CAM: We also can't forget the folks over at Rusty Quill — Callum, Alex, and Tom — who have done a great job at selling our advertising, 'cause that's what Rusty Quill does for us. Cam has a few more folks that she wants to thank. Go ahead.

CAM: I'd also like to thank my partner, Bryan Gibson, who handles our merch. If you're a supporter on Patreon at the \$15 level or above, Bryan makes sure those care packages get shipped out to you in a usually-timely fashion. We're a little behind right now because we've been moving house, which means moving our shipping operations, but we're about to get y'all caught up. And if you're one of the amazing fans who came out to see us at our live shows, Bryan is in fact the dude who sold you merch — and yes, he does know who I am. He might have been pulling y'all's leg a little bit there.

And also shout out to my friends Sarah Scaccia and Emily Winders. Sarah does my hair and Emily came out to the live shows to do my makeup and shoot those amazing professional photos of the event y'all might have seen on our socials. These two ladies kept me looking great on stage. And special thanks to our friends Chuck and Lauren Cherry. They had tickets to the Big Stone Gap show, and last minute, they jumped behind the merch table to help Bryan get those t-shirts and posters into y'all's hands. Thank all of y'all so much, thanks everyone who helped with the live shows.

STEVE: I know we say it often, family, that we can't do this without you, and we mean that. Whether you're hanging out in the Fellowship Hall or on the Discord server, part of our growing YouTube and Instagram families, which somehow have blown up lately, or whether you're just tweeting into the void over on the rotting corpse of Twitter with us right now, we appreciate each and every one of you. You have given us brand new careers. You've taken what was a fun project and made it into a community, and given us the opportunity to make it worth your while and come spend time with us every other week, or to make your tithe on Patreon to help us keep the lights on. We can't express adequately the things you've made possible for two people who have honestly kind of scraped by as a public schoolteacher and freelance software developer and website designer for years. You guys have let us make art for a living, and we can't thank you enough for that.

Now we're going to take a break, because we need one and frankly we deserve one. I personally — I'm gonna put my stuff up there — I'm gonna be having a medical procedure very shortly that's gonna result in me requiring some speech therapy. After it's done — it's no big deal, don't get excited or scared about that — I'll be back. But we appreciate your patience in advance Season four will come. You're welcome for that ending, by the way. I'm not gonna talk about it past that. But season four will come when the Green and the Dark and everything in between align and allow those ways to come forward. So until that time comes, we'll talk to you soon, family.

CAM: Talk to you real soon.