

## FAMILIAR AND BELOVED

Kith and Kin

Part I

*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.*

Near Holly Creek, VA

1869

Oanetta Boggs was bone tired. Her hips hurt. Her back hurt. The ache in her grip was such that she couldn't allow herself to think about it. She'd been driving this godforsaken cart with its worn wheels and uncomfortable, church pew-like bench seat for two days now. It had been years since she'd set out in a wagon without her husband Lewis at the helm, but here she was. Lewis had his own business to attend to, and had objected to this particular bit of travel on principle. A misguided principle, Oanetta thought, but a principle all the same. So after a tense discussion — not an argument, family, a *discussion* — she made it clear to her beloved that if her solution to their current problem did not work, they would try his way without complaint. Lewis, though reluctant to allow his wife to undertake this journey without him — and even moreso when it came to the individual she would be seeking out — had agreed. He'd helped her hitch their horse, Butternut, to the wagon and loaded them up with three days of supplies. They'd set out from Boggs Holler the previous Sunday, and what a motley little crew they were.

Oanetta shifted in her seat, trying to find some relief from her aching spine while her co-pilot stretched out on the bench beside her, sunning herself in the afternoon brightness that beat down from on high, warming her striped belly and soft, trout gray coat.

OANETTA: Oh, sure, go ahead Miss Girl, you soak up that there sunbeam. Never you mind your mama over here working her way into an early grave driving this old cart like some kinda coachman. You just enjoy the ride, your highness.

Oanetta said with an only halfway resentful grin.

Emmaline Underfoot, the Grey Ghost of Black Mountain, longtime feline familiar and companion to Oanetta's family, purred as she looked up at her girl. Emmaline allowed that Oanetta wasn't much of a girl anymore — she was a woman grown, and a mother, if only to a litter of one. And a good mother at that. One of the best of her line, in fact. Emmaline's years stretched far beyond those of any of the bloodlines that wound through the hills and hollers of central Appalachia, as time worked differently for creatures like her.

To Emmaline Underfoot, Daughter of Bathsheba, it had not been so long ago that she and Viola McCoy's youngest were out playing in the garden that her parents kept on the edge of the McClure River, after leaving the land that would one day be known as West Virginia. Emmaline loved her girl, whether she was young and spry, chasing down grasshoppers and lightning bugs in the high grass, or she was stiff and crotchety and wearing herself out to protect her own young. And right now, that young'un needed protecting. Emmaline had grown quite fond of Oanetta's lone kit, and her heart was heavy as she twisted around to her feet, gave a long stretch, and prowled into the back of the cart where the boy-kit, who was not an actual cat — would that he had been; all of this would have been much simpler — curled, shivering, under a blanket and tarp.

OANETTA: How's he doing back there, girl? Any better?

Emmaline sniffed around Waylon Boggs sleeping head and licked his eyebrows. She trotted across his chest, letting her tail snake under his nose, giving him a momentary mustache. She looked at the boy's face again and chattered back to her Oanetta in a tongue that was exclusive to the two of them.

OANETTA: No worse, though? Right?

Her examination complete, Emmaline hopped back up on the bench seat and settled herself against her companion. Purring loudly, she began to give herself a bath.

OANETTA: Well, that's something. Still breathin. Fever's not worse. So we'll take our blessings where they come, I suppose. Thank you, girl.

Oanetta Boggs scritchd her old friend behind her right ear and the Gray Ghost of Black Mountain's song rumbled ever more mightily in her chest.

In the back of the cart, Waylon Boggs stirred.

WAYLON: *[yawns]* Mama?

OANETTA: Right here, boy. How are you feeling? Any better?

WAYLON: I'm all right. How long have I been asleep? Where are we? Why is everything... damp?

OANETTA: It come a big frog-strangler about three hours ago when we crossed Mill Creek. The sun's been steaming us like a pot of turnip greens ever since. Now it looks like you got a little color back. That's good.

Emmaline gave an affectionate trill as she climbed back down to rub herself across Waylon's chest again and again, nudging her head under his chin. Her black and silver tabby stripes shimmered with that strange light that most folks couldn't see and others didn't usually survive seeing. Waylon felt his bones warm and his clothes begin to dry out a little bit.

WAYLON: Hey there, old lady. Aww. Thank you, Miss Emmaline. Much obliged.

Waylon said, almost dreamily, as he stroked the cat that had been a part of his family since the day he was born.

The ancient beast placed her paws on Waylon's chest and booped her nose against his. She knew that Oanetta's kit would take this as a mere gesture of affection, but he would hold still long enough for her to get a good look into his eyes to see how he was really doing. She did not flinch when she spotted the pacing darkness that had stowed away inside the boy for too long now. She

was not a cat who ran from dogs, black mouthed or otherwise. She could feel that it saw her as well. It growled and brooded, but was not eager to move against her, choosing to lay low, biding its time, lurking in the boy's blood.

*Good dog*, Emmaline thought with a disdainful curl of her lip. *Stay.*

[ "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*

The ride from Boggs Holler had not been easy. Improving and repairing — hell, even building roads in Appalachia following the war betwixt the states had not been a priority for anyone. Getting from one side of a mountain that bore the weight of many of the founding families of southwestern Virginia and eastern Kentucky was at times a task barely worth the bother. Mudslides and poor planning seemed to erase roads from maps every time it rained. Oanetta had been forced to turn back and detour around various obstacles three separate times while Waylon had been resting in the back of the wagon. Poor thing.

Almost five years ago, while Oanetta and other local elders had been tending to an urgent matter down in Tennessee, the young'uns had stepped up alongside Oanetta's war-worn brother-in-law, Batch Boggs, to face down a tide of darkness that would have been a tough row

to hoe for even the most experienced practitioners of the Green. There are places in this world where the barrier between *here* and *somewhere else* wears mighty thin, and occasionally things on the other side get bold enough to come through. Boggs Holler was just such a place. Long story short, the rain had come and brought hungry mouths with it. Waylon, Verna, Glory Ann, Kyle and Batch had beat back the tide of rising darkness, though it came at a terrible cost. Uncle Batch had not survived the battle, and one of those dark mouths got a hold of Waylon, leaving him scarred and tainted with the infectious darkness that can come from being bodily wounded by something not of our world.

It had started with the dreams, Waylon said. Dreams of a dead and desolate place where all the Green had been scoured from the land. No crops, no grass, no thick woods sprawling over the bones of mountains — nothing but barren, empty earth and a yawning, starless sky above. In his dreams, he and his friend were hounded by the creatures they'd driven back. Not pursued, Waylon had clarified — herded. They were being herded toward the edge of a jagged cliff beneath which something vast and horrible waited, breathing its hot, foul breath with a mouth stretched so wide it would miss not a crumb of them. It was a maw that could swallow the whole world.

After a while, Waylon had tried to sleep as little as he could to avoid the dreams, and we all know where that gets you. Stumbling around like the mostly-dead, cranky and miserable. When he would sleep, he'd take measures to keep from dreaming. Whether it came from a bottle or in the practices he learned from his Daddy, there were times where Waylon made it to sleep. But for every night he managed to get a measure of rest, there were others when he'd bolt awake and find himself standing on the back porch of the tidy house he shared with his wife and their two young boys, hand extended to the darkness of the back yard, blood dripping from his re-opened dog bite as the sounds of something loping through the woods faded into the distance.

The wound would always close quickly and completely between these somnambulatory episodes, so quickly in fact that at first Waylon thought he'd dreamed the whole thing. He was disabused of that notion by his four year old, Vernard, who loudly proclaimed "Daddy's bleeding!" at breakfast one morning after one such nighttime stroll. Waylon had played it off as best he could, assuring his little man that Daddy was fine, just fine. Then he'd hurried to the washroom to

clean the wound only to find it healed shut, the dried blood crusted on his hand the only evidence it had ever reopened.

These agonies alone were enough to have the Boggs family, as well as Waylon's in-laws the Teaseleys, working hard to find some sort of solution to Waylon's woes. On the one year anniversary of the coming of the dogs, the rage had begun building in him. Bursts of ill temper and anger mixed with a dark need to feel things break beneath his hands began to rise in the young necromancer, so much that he would leave Boggs Holler for days at a time to avoid unleashing these foul humors on his wife and children. Waylon's daddy Lewis had helped him learn to steady his mind through various forms of meditative breathing, and that helped a bunch at first. Meanwhile, Glory Ann's daddy, the towering and taciturn Oliver Teasley — Tall Ollie to his friends — would often accompany Waylon into the woods on the far side of Pound Gap.

While serving in the army during that bloody mess with Mexico when he was younger, Ollie had learned a lot about the violence of men and what happened when bloodlust took them. His gifts allowed him to soothe the hurts of others with tinctures and medicines he had learned in long study with his mother and her mother. Ollie Teasley also carried with him an air of tranquility that seemed to naturally soothe any anger or frustration arising in those around him. If a man needed to clear his head or talk out a problem, a walk in the woods or a hunting trip with Tall Ollie Teasley would see him right.

The family had done their best to help Waylon with his struggles, but after what happened down at the mill Saturday last, Oanetta Boggs had decided they had to cast their net beyond the holler in their quest for a remedy. So they had come to Holly Creek, where homesteading was sparse but folks were doing their level best to build a prosperous new county. At least if you believed what the papers said. The roads, such as they were, threatened to become too narrow for their cart, and Oanetta worried they would be forced to unhitch Butternut and lead her on with Waylon on her back. Just as it seemed like this course of action would prove inevitable, Waylon called out from the back of the wagon.

WAYLON: Over there, Mama. Chimney smoke, looks like.

Oanetta strained her eyes to make out the source of the thin smudge of woodsmoke drifting up

in the late afternoon air. It looked like it came from somewhere not far from the road, about another quarter of a mile. They cautiously pushed along the rapidly narrowing track until they reached a bend that was almost a dog-leg turn. Mother and son climbed down and carefully picked their way along the uneven track to peer around the blind spot. There, perched a ways up on the side of the mountain, was a little house with a tidy front yard and a small garden. Smoke drifted upward from its chimney, and a monstrous fluffy beast of a cat drowsed lazily on the front porch. A small older man knelt at the edge of the neat garden that took up about a quarter of the cleared land out front. He was dressed in choring clothes and an old cap. His hands were dirty with work he did there in the rich earth of Holly Creek. Oanetta looked at him and sighed.

OANETTA: Waylon, go back to the cart and lie down, honey. If that's who I think it is, he might be able to help us. Now I don't know if he'll be willing. It's been a long time since we seen each other, so this might take a while. Go on back, now. I'll be along one way or t'other directly.

WAYLON: Mama, I don't wanna leave you alone with some stranger. What if he's dangerous? I mean if he were to try to hurt you—

OANETTA: Honey, if that *is* who I think it is, he wouldn't hurt me for the world. He might turn us away, but I ain't in no danger of physical harm. I mean look at him! Just as skinny as a bunch of brooms tied together. A stiff breeze or a good fart might knock him right over. Now get on back there and do your breathing like your daddy taught you.

Waylon did not respond at first. His eyes were fixed on the old man kneeling by his neat rows of small crops in the smaller yard carved out of the green of the mountainside. How easy it would be to strike him down. He'd never see it coming. The softness of his neck, the obvious brittleness of his bones. Hell, he was old. Maybe his time was about up anyway.

WAYLON: You sure, Mama? I'd never forgive myself if I left you alone and something bad hap—

OANETTA: Son, look at your hands. Take a breath. Take a *deep* breath.

Waylon looked down to find his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. The veins in his arms stood out like bowstrings, and the scar in the shape of a dog's bite pulsed with an angry redness, the skin threatening to crack and bleed.

OANETTA: Go back to the wagon. Feed Butternut and brush her if that'll help you calm down. I'll take Miss Emmaline along if you're concerned for my safety. She ain't gonna wanna sit still anyways. You get some rest and... get ahold of yourself, honey.

Waylon closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a minute, then nodded slowly.

WAYLON: Yes'm. I'm sorry, Mama. I don't know how to stop it when I feel like this.

OANETTA: Shhh. It's ok, baby. It's ok. Mama knows. Get on now. Let me get this over with.

Waylon walked back around the curve in the mountain to the cart, a slinky gray shadow slipping past him in that half run, half I'll-get-there-when-I-damn-well-please trot that most cats have mastered before they're even weaned.

WAYLON: She's done asked for you, girl. You better hurry and catch up!

Emmaline Underfoot picked up the pace for a moment, coming to a dead stop as she spotted her Oanetta approaching a small man who knelt on the ground, digging in the earth. Emmaline could smell a considerable gift on the thin man, whose familiar scent rang true even after all this time. She blinked once and settled into a state of perfect stillness, as cats do, watching her girl from the edge of the road.

OANETTA: 'Scuse me! Sir? I'm lookin' for a friend of mine. I heard he was livin' out this way. One Elphius Josiah McCoy Jr.? Would you know where I could find him?

DIGGER: No one here that answers to that name. No ma'am. Sorry. Can't help you.

OANETTA: What about E.J. McCoy? You know him?

DIGGER: Now, they called my daddy E.J., but I can't rightly say there's anyone *here* that would answer to that foolishness, nor E.J. Jr., or even just Junior. Naw. Sorry, young lady. Ain't nobody here by that name either. E.J.! Psh! That ain't even a name. Just letters. Your friend go by any other name?

OANETTA: Uh... Digger. I used to have a friend they called Digger. Though it wasn't always meant kindly, that's what they called him.

DIGGER: No, you did not!

OANETTA: Excuse me!? I did so!

DIGGER: You did not, Oanetta McCoy Boggs! You did *not* have a friend that your asshole runnin' buddies called Digger. They called him *Gravedigger* because they were mean, and shortsighted... and mostly right. You called him Digger for short to soften the blow, and because it stuck. But he's not just your friend, was he, *Mrs. Boggs*?

OANETTA: You got me. He was not just my friend. You're right. But then you usually were, you smarmy little possum-licker.

DIGGER My my m, you come all this way to talk to your baby brother like that? Hm? Good to see you, Netta. Been a long, long time.

Oanetta Boggs ran to her brother then and threw her arms around him and sobbed. Sobbed for years misunderstood and lost. Sobbed for seeing the one person who knew her better even than Lewis and for longer. Sobbed to be in the presence of her kin for the first time in a long time. There were hard talks they needed to have, but for the moment, that could wait.

OANETTA: I need your help, little brother. My boy's sick.

Oanetta Boggs followed her youngest brother into the confines of his mountain retreat, and Miss Emmaline made to follow, approaching the small cabin the way she would any human

domicile — as if she owned the place. Before she could mount the steps, however, the huge brown Maine Coon on the porch leapt into her path.

CREATURE: Oh no no no, little stray! You will not just prance into *this* palace, pretty as you please. There is only room and food enough for one companion here, and that is *me*. Do you *know* who my keeper is? Do you know whose house it is you seek to beg from? Do you not understand the grand company you seek to impose your ragged self upon? Hmmm?

The Grey Ghost of Black Mountain looked the larger cat up and down, taking in his massive paws and his huge pointed ears, each kissed with a small tuft of white that indicated that he was no kitten by mortal cat standards. He was a handsome boy, all things considered. His shadowy brown coat looked thick and soft, and he clearly hadn't gone hungry in a long time. Good looks notwithstanding, she had no time for this relative youngling's foolishness. She also recognized that they stood at the threshold of his home, and he was protecting it the way she would protect hers, so she opted for diplomacy over disembowelment.

EMMALINE: I know your boy of old, cousin. He was a kitten himself last I saw him, and was never one to put on airs.

The immense tower of feline fluff that stood above her cocked its head and peered down at her as she spoke, stunned and confused that she had not fled in terror at his disparagement.

CREATURE: Cousin? My *boy*? Psh! What would a common tabby such as you know of *my* bloodline? I am Borgia, advisor and protector of Elphius McCoy, master of this mountain. I, and I alone, am worthy to stand by his side in this brave new land —

The great brown bulk that was called Borgia drew himself up to his full height with every expectation that the old gray huntress on his doorstep would sprint for the trees at any moment, but was bitterly surprised to find her peering up at him as though puzzled, clearly unafraid, and even worse, completely unimpressed. The familiar of Digger McCoy stumbled for a moment but carried on.

CREATURE: — where the very trees come to life birthing nightmares that seek his blood! I, and I alone, stand between him and the horrors of the night. The wing-ed rats that screech and flap overhead. The silent gray tick-eaters with their hordes of mewling young latched upon their back. I keep him safe so that he might enrich the world with his discoveries and great deeds. There is no place for you here, little stray. Scurry away and find your own supper!

Miss Emmaline blinked once. She had not been spoken to in such a way in a very long time, and for a brief moment reconsidered the diplomacy versus disemboweling argument, but thought better of it.

EMMALINE: Little kit, I will forgive your ignorance, as you are very young and clearly not of this place. I bet you came from... mmmm... up north? Yes. Someone brought you here and left you and the old man took you in. Good for you, cousin, good for you. Your boy *is* gifted and you clearly know of the deeds of his kind, so... I will give you this one chance. See me, scent me, and name me, little floof. Let us know each other, as cats do.

The cat called Borgia gave a haughty sniff. Then he opened his eyes wider to see in the way that only cats can see and immediately fell back a step. He saw what sat at the base of his porch. He saw her silver fire and dagger claws. He saw her ageless eyes and the way the Green fed her, how she blazed against the rest of the mundane world. Not a princess, not even a queen, but a goddess of war. Her scent carried the tale of her lineage and the blood of those she had vanquished. The satisfied purr that rolled from her chest as she saw the larger cat make himself small in her presence spoke of who she called kith and kin and the mighty list of deeds attached thereto. Borgia, the mighty Maine Coon, who had been brought here by loggers from the north and then forgotten until Digger McCoy took him in years ago, cowered in submission as he recognized her.

CREATURE: OH. Oh. Oh my. Forgive me, get-of-Bathsheba! Forgive me, O Grey Ghost. I may not be of these hills, but even a lowborn wretch such as I knows your name and your deeds. Forgive me, Mistress Underfoot. My bowl, my bed, my warm place by the stove... all are yours. Please, please forgive me, Your Grace.

Emmaline Underfoot was pleased. The big cat feared her — as well he should — but she had no reason to strike him down. After all, this kit's boy was a littermate of her Oanetta. That counted for something. He might be big and pompous, but Emmaline sensed that this Borgia might not be completely useless.

EMMALINE: Rise, little cousin. It is a wide world, and *filled* with our people. It is easy to mistake one set of ears and tail for another. I accept your apology and your offer of hospitality. No harm shall come to you or your boy whilst I am here. Now tell me more about this warm spot by the stove.

Both cats looked up as the sound of footfalls grew closer and the front door opened.

DIGGER: Creature? Creature! It's suppertime — oh, there you are. What are you doing? You silly old bear, you leave her alone. C'mere, you.

The thin man bent down and scooped up the immense loaf that was his feline companion, cradling the great brown beast in his arms like a baby. Borgia's eyes went wide with humiliation. Emmaline felt both sympathy and amusement as she watched her new friend get lifted into his boy's arms and mercilessly cuddled.

DIGGER: You got yourself a girlfriend there, old boy? Last thing we need around here is a litter of kittens to feed... Well, I'll be! Netta!

OANETTA: What is it? What's wrong? Is it Waylon?

DIGGER: No, no, nothing like that. But have I finally lost my damn mind, or is that Mama's old cat sitting on my porch?

OANETTA: Oh! Yes, yes it is. You remember Miss Emmaline. She pretty much goes wherever I go. You might also remember she can be right helpful when she deigns to be.

Digger McCoy inclined his head to the gray tabby and blinked his eyes slowly. The ancient cat returned the gesture placidly.

DIGGER: I do indeed. I learned my lessons regarding cats and their desire to be left the hell alone from Miss Emmaline. Still got the marks on the back of my head to prove it. Good to see you, Old Ghost. I see you've met my Creature!

Digger Hefted his gigantic companion upright and puppeted his tufted paw in a wave to Emmaline Underfoot.

DIGGER: Hello, Miss Emmaline. I'm Mister Creature, and—

Before Oanetta Boggs' little brother could continue, Borgia the Mighty Main Coone — called Creature by his person — squirmed free, and landed on the porch with a heavy thump, glaring up at Digger with a hiss. Then he bolted inside and vanished into a hiding place known only to him.

OANETTA: I think you're gonna pay for that later.

DIGGER: Aw, he's just a big baby. He'll get over it once I put some food in his bowl.

Oanetta Boggs regarded her beloved girl with a gentle smile and bent down to address her directly

OANETTA: You wanna come in, girl, or you gonna keep watch?

Emmaline leapt up onto the railing of the cabin's small porch, folded her feet neatly beneath her, and gave a soft meow. Oanetta Boggs stroked her old lady from snoot to tail three times and crouched down beside her.

OANETTA: Go check on our boy in a little bit, would you, girl? Hopefully this won't take long.

With a final pat on Emmaline's head, Oanetta walked back into the house, closed the door behind her, and left the Gray Ghost of Black Mountain to her watch.

[ "Familiar and Beloved" by Landon Blood ]

Thus concludes part one of volume two of *Familiar & Beloved*, "Kith and Kin." Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood. Today's story was written and narrated by Steve Shell and edited by Cam Collins. The voice of Oanetta Boggs was Betsy Puckett. The voice of Waylon Boggs was Brandon Bentley. The voice of Digger McCoy was John Patrick MacAfee. The voice of Borgia the Mighty Maine Coone was Shane Burke. The voice of Emaline Underfoot, Gray Ghost of Black Mountain, was Amerie Helton. Join us for the next installment of *Familiar & Beloved* right here, exclusively on Patreon.

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