

## FAMILIAR & BELOVED

Return To Death Island

Part III

*Familiar and Beloved is a whole new collection of stories set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, and while we will honor our promise not to harm or kill our furry friends, listener discretion is still advised.*

One Week Before the Reservoir Closed

Baker's Gap, TN

1929

Tina Powers waved to her friends as the last stragglers of Tuesday night Youth League at Rising Creek Baptist dispersed on bicycles and in family sedans bound for their respective family domiciles. "Bye, Jacob! Bye, Dallas!" she called, waving frantically at Jacob Blanton and Dallas Shepherd as the two handsome deacons' sons set out in the back of Jacob's daddy's truck, bound for the east side of town where the Blantons kept cows and the woods were ripe with squirrels and other small critters to be hunted now that the season was right.

*Sing songs about God and then blow his creations to the high heavens afterwards, I guess, thought Tina, watching the two boys — either of which she'd gladly call her beau, if they wanted — fade into the distance.*

Tina was thirteen and seemed to have noticed every boy in the youth league in the past couple of months. She didn't like how distracting Jacob had become with his pretty blue eyes and light blonde hair, a relatively rare combination of features around these parts, or how suddenly chiseled and mature his best friend Timothy Gilliam had become since last summer. Timothy's family didn't come to Rising Creek Baptist as much these days, as the widower Burl Gilliam had re-married a Methodist woman and they'd taken to attending services at Baker's Gap Methodist on the north side of town. The church was popular with a lot of the well-off town folk who'd moved to Baker's Gap to manage the boom that had come with the railroad expansion.

Tina sighed. She didn't have time for boys. She had her own studies and lessons to tend to. She intended to become a horse doctor and get out of this, well, one horse town, to provide quality veterinary care for other horses out in the wide world. But the eyes see, and the heart longs, she supposed.

From behind her, a grating voice called, "You ready to go home, Chicken?"

Tina closed her eyes and turned around, taking a deep breath and releasing it as she did so. "Mama told you not to call me that, Jimmy," she replied as calmly and sweetly as she could.

Tina Powers' little brother Jimmy was nine years old, freckled as the day was long, with a mop of unruly auburn hair. He had a nasal voice that could curdle milk when he really applied himself to whining or teasing his siblings, or other children, or the Sunday school teacher — hell, the pastor himself. He was what was known in many parenting circles as "a little shit." Jimmy and Tina had not gotten along growing up. They had added many a violent public row to their family name, including the fork stabbing incident at the church homecoming picnic that got Tina put on extended chores for six months, and the infamous "I didn't push her in front of that truck, Paw, I swear she fell" incident that ended with Jimmy going to live briefly with their Uncle Pat over near Ernie for a summer until he learned to act right.

"I know. She can tell me all she wants, but you still look like a chicken. Pastor Jordan says we ought not tell lies, and I'd be lying if I didn't say with your long neck, and that beak of a nose, you look just like one of mamaw's prize hen—" Jimmy Powers didn't get that last word all the way out, as his sister moved quick and hit quicker. She'd stepped to Jimmy and delivered a just-hard-enough knee to his green beans and taters that stole his breath.

"Say it again, you freckled toad toucher, and see if I don't end the family line right here and now."

Jimmy wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but nobody likes getting hit in the jibblies, so he groaned out a weak "Sorry, Tina" and panted and groaned appropriately. She'd gotten him a lot worse in the past, but he figured it was best to sell the blow rather than risk her having another go at him.

Tina Powers was somewhat mollified. “All right then. Get up. Let’s get on home.”

If you took the blacktop and gravel from Rising Creek Baptist to the Powers homestead out on Little Creek, you’d be walking or riding for a good fifteen minutes to get there. But if you cut through the woods a little ways and walked real careful over the rocks around the back of the reservoir, you could be there in just under ten. The Powers family walked to church together every Sunday, and the bigger young’uns went to Youth League on their own on Tuesday nights every week. It was a route they knew well, and it should have been perfectly safe.

The blue-gray light of early evening lit their way for the first few minutes of the walk. If they made their way across the cliffs quick enough, they might make it home before full dark. As the two siblings drew close to those massive moss-kissed stones, though, a wind picked up and the sky darkened a touch quicker than seemed proper.

Tina glanced up at the clouds gathering overhead. “Is it gonna storm? Did Mamaw say anything to you about rain this evening?”

Jimmy, still exaggeratedly limping from his earlier chastising, shook his head. “Naw, she sure didn’t. You know she ain’t let Mama let us walk to church if it was gonna come a storm.” Coetta Powers was a stern old woman with a knack for divining the weather from the flight paths of birds and other common portents with the help of the good lord and the *Farmer’s Almanac*. She was the touchstone of all wisdom for the current generation of Powers’ grandchildren who stood in awe of her prognostications and mundane prophecies.

Thunder rolled, and the sky grew darker still. A damp, nasty wind cut through the woods on the edge of the cliffs. In the distance, Tina thought she could hear something. Was that a voice? It sounded almost like a woman crying or calling for help. Tina had grown up in these hills, and she knew better than to answer. According to the old folks, there were things in the woods that employed such tricks to lure folks out to their doom. She rushed to the edge of the cliffs and strained her ears all the same. It did sound like a person, and she’d feel just awful if somebody fell and got hurt down by the water and she didn’t respond to their calls for help because of some old wives’ tale. There had been some awful luck around the lake these past months.

Behind in the trees, she *could* hear a voice — one she could do without most of the time. Jimmy was whining at her for running off and leaving him behind after she'd done near gelded him. The least she could do was wait for him.

Tina rolled her eyes and shook her head, straining her ears to listen again. The sounds of her little brother's whining had stopped, but the wind had picked up, distorting the sound. She closed her eyes and willed herself to make sense of what she was hearing from down below. Shoot, if nothing else, she could have a spooky story to tell their younger siblings when she got home. Tina stepped out onto the edge of the rocks, peering carefully over the edge. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned in irritation to Jimmy. "It's about time you caught up," she groused, but the words died on her lips.

Jimmy Powers stood on the spot where the dirt path gave way to the rocks, but he was not whining. He stood frozen, as if rooted in place, not a single muscle twitching. If Tina could have seen better in the gathering gloom, she might have realized her little brother wasn't even breathing.

"Jimmy...?" she called uncertainly. "Are you—"

The smile that split her younger brother's face in that moment sent a chill down Tina's spine. It was both too wide, too full of mischief, and empty at the same time. That smile didn't reach Jimmy's eyes, which were as dark and expressionless as a moonless night. The hairs on the back of Tina's neck rose.

"Jimmy," she said again, imitating the stern, no-nonsense voice their mama used when she'd had just about enough of their foolishness for one day. "Knock it off. I said we gotta get home—" Tina took one step toward her younger brother, reaching for his shoulder, in the same instant that he sprang into motion, shouldering past her at a dead run and heading straight for the cliff's edge. "Jimmy!" Tina shrieked.

At the last moment before he ran right over the edge, Jimmy Powers let out a strangled scream, his feet scrabbling at the edge of the rocks as he tried to stop himself. His hind end hit the

ground hard, and his hands scraped against the rocks. For a moment, crisis averted, there was silence, and Tina let out the breath she'd been holding, bracing herself for the tears and caterwauling that was sure to come.

“All right, kid, let's get you—” she began. And then Jimmy screamed, and Tina watched as he went sliding over the edge of the cliff with a jerk, as if somebody had grabbed him by the ankles and yanked.

“Jimmy!” Tina ran to the edge of the rocks, throwing herself to her knees to peer over the edge into the darkness below.

About six feet down, her little brother clung to the rocks. His chin was scraped raw, and his fingers were bloody, the little knuckles white against the stone in the gathering dark. Tears began to pool in the corners of his eyes as he stared up at her. “Tina?” he sniffed, his voice growing warbly with fear.

“It's ok, buddy,” his big sister reassured him instantly. “Just hang on. I can almost reach you.” She'd better reach him, Tina thought to herself. Mama would be so mad if she let anything happen to him. Lowering herself the rest of the way to the ground, she stretched out flat on her stomach and began to ease closer to the edge. If she could just buy herself a few more inches, she'd have him. “Take my hand.”

Below her, Jimmy shook his head fiercely, wedging his fingers more firmly into the rocks that supported him. “Nuh uh,” he squeaked.

“Come on, Jim-jam,” Tina coaxed. “I can pull you up, but you gotta help me out, ok? I need you to grab my hand.”

“I'll fall!”

“You won't. I won't let you. I just need you to—”

Behind her, Tina Powers heard the sound of hurried footfalls coming through the grass. “What are you doing, Chicken?” a voice called from the dark.

Tina glanced over her shoulder. She couldn't quite make out the features of the small figure approaching through the growing shadows. It sounded like... like Jimmy. But it couldn't be. Jimmy was... Tina turned back to look over the cliff's edge, and she had just enough time to register a wide red slash of a mouth and gleaming white teeth as something grabbed her hand and yanked.

[ “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 strange new access road that had carried Archie Stallard, Floyd Absher and Shane and Dallas Shepherd through a living nightmare ended in a gravel lot. No weird translucent stones waited to melt into masses of serpentine death here, just simple crushed rock like you'd see anywhere else. The sun was full up and the sky was overcast, but thus far, the weather was pleasant enough. The world seemed almost shocking in its normalcy. The boys could see the dam and the drainage ponds from where they stood, and Archie surveyed the landscape for any more unexpected shifts in the topography of the territory that these boys had once called their own.

“All right. So, it looks like we gotta hang a U-ey up here, then loop back around the water for about twenty yards, and then we can duck in.” The tall boy pointed with his walking stick. “Looks like the way up to the cliffs is still there.”

Dallas Shepherd looked at his cousin Shane with worry-filled eyes and put a hand on his shoulder. The smaller boy was sweating and pale. He'd taken to giggling and whispering to himself whenever he thought the other boys weren't listening. Even now, he shielded his eyes against the sun as he peered about the open water. He looked like he wanted to run back into the woods, or back up that road with its canopy of trees, like a creature flushed from its den and unsure where to turn next.

“I don't know, Arch. Maybe we should keep going around and head back out to the main road — call this whole thing off.”

“No, absolutely not, my good fellers!” Shane cried, shaking free of his cousin's touch. “My pack is on the island, and I will have my pack. Yes I will!” Shane vibrated with a manic, tight-throated energy. He met each of their eyes, daring them to argue. “Why even our loyal guide and companion knows that our destiny lies in that ill-fated clutch of pines and murkwater!” He pointed down the shoreline in the direction of Death Island and looked down at Sam, whose blind canine eyes pointed in the direction of Shane's voice. “What do you say, boy? Do we proceed to glory and adventure, or do we turn back with our tails between our legs?”

Sam considered the barking boy for a moment. His Shane was sick. Sam usually only thought of Dallas as his boy, but it had become clear to the old guardian that he'd been brought to Dallas first so he'd be ready to protect Shane as well. The Green had its ways, and he wasn't one to question them. Shane was his boy too, but that tendril of darkness inside him was driving him, that was for sure. It was just a little shadow, and Sam was sure he could tear it to shreds if he could get at it — yes ma'am, yes sir — but he couldn't do that in the warm house on the other side of the water. It had to be here, in the thing's lair. So Sam gave an affirmative *ruff* and trotted off along the water's edge, and the boys followed.

As they drew closer, Archie pulled up short, staring in disbelief at the altered landscape that greeted them. The five rocks that had once marked the original location of Copperhead's Den were gone. The smooth, time-worn boulders — perfect for hopping from one to the next with the threat of certain snakebite (or more oftentimes not) down below — were now sunk beneath the flat-black water of Bear Creek Reservoir. In their place, a neat and polite walkway had been laid that wound back into the swampy shade by the water's edge. Cattails and high weeds thrived there. It was right pretty to look at, if Archie was honest, even if it did look man-made. It would be an easy walk from the dam to the cattails, then off onto the unmarked trail to the cliffs.

In that little swamp, however, a grim totem of death and loss stood out against the picturesque green. Four sawhorses formed a square around a marshy patch of ground. One of the wooden barriers had tipped over, revealing the bare earth where they'd found Marley Shelton, daughter of Rafe Shelton, self appointed pastor of the Blessed House of Faith in Jesus Name.

The House of Faith — or the House of Rafe, as some more skeptical members of the community called it — was a snake handling affair whose entire congregation consisted of Rafe and his sister Elaine's families. The church made its home in a small barn that had been whitewashed and sanctified by Rafe himself. Elaine's husband Tate served as head deacon and snake catcher. The body of the flock consisted of the siblings' respective children — eleven born to Rafe and his wife Fern, and fourteen of Elaine and Tate's — though to be fair the first five of those were the issue of Tate's first marriage to Rebecca Thacker, who'd died of a snakebite at her youngest son's baptism some years ago. Most of the children were near grown except for Marley and Jaben, who were just old enough to play outside alone.

Rafe was a known quantity to the citizens of Baker's Gap, often preaching fiery sermons on the courthouse steps about the dangers of drinking and whoring and dancing and just about anything else a body might deem fun. No one really liked the man, but no one had wanted to see his youngest daughter come to harm. Marley's death had been like something out of the tribulation. She'd been bitten dozens of times by venomous snakes — which is horrific enough, but the wounds were massive, gaping things. Her face had been torn to bloody tatters by the bites taken from it, which wasn't normal snake behavior at all. Archie had lived his whole life terrified of dying in the deep woods with venom racing through his veins, and seeing this place,



where someone — a child even — had died that way? That was almost as bad as confronting whatever those things were back on the road.

Floyd stepped up beside him and pointed over at the wooden markers. “That’s where they found—”

Archie cut him off. “Yeah, it is. I’d rather not think about it, Floyd, if that’s ok with you. I think we’ve had enough snakes today—”

There was movement in the treeline, and Archie stopped cold as a child’s voice drifted from the high cattails that grew beyond the scene of little Marley Shelton’s tragic death.

“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; and they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.”

What stepped from amongst the cattails and high weeds was not Marley Shelton, but it wore the shape of her. Floyd thought he’d read in the paper she was ten or eleven, but she’d been a tall, lanky girl for her age. Her body was bloated with both death and the ravages of venom. What skin they could see was a waxy, bluish white in the best of places and crusted a dark, reddish black in the worst. She splashed towards them through the shallows with childish enthusiasm as she crossed out of the swamp, her bare feet mottled with that awful purpley-black of settled blood and death. Her hair was matted with blood and something sticky-black, and her one good eye was nearly swollen shut. The other was gone, the skin around the socket scored with the long, jagged marks of two very large fangs. The skin below her upper lip was a ragged mask of shredded meat that hung down like a ruined veil. Her bloody jawbone and teeth glinted white in the sunlight from beneath that torn flesh.

“Oh Jesus,” muttered Floyd, fighting the urge to run.

The thing tilted its head, one eye bright with what would have been a smile if it had still possessed lips.

“Yes! It was Jesus, Floyd Absher! Very good! Our Lord said, ‘Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall by any means hurt you.’”

Softly, as if he were indeed speaking only to a younger child, Floyd said, “Sweetie, I don’t know how to tell you this, but... you’ve been hurt. You been hurt real bad, darling.”

“Look upon me and see how I am blessed. See how I was chosen and anointed.” She stretched her arms wide, fanning her skirt out to show her dress, soaked in dark blood where it wasn’t ripped and torn. Her ruined face twisted into its best impression of a sneer. “I saw y’all back there on the road. You turned from his blessing and chased his angels away. You didn’t accept him into your heart the way I did.” She tilted her head the other way, pity touching her voice. “You bear the mark and the curse of suffering. I can see it.”

All at once, the voice of the thing wearing Marley Shelton’s corpse shifted from that of a young girl into a familiar flat growl. “Especially you, Shane. Don’t you want that burden lifted? Don’t you want to be made whole? Come do my work, kneel at my altar, and all will be made right, boy. But don’t wait too long now.”

Shane had been watching her with wild eyes and was about to speak when Sam’s growl filled the air like low thunder, and the thing turned its attention to him.

“You! I thought I’d felt you out here sniffing around,” the thing growled as a couple of teeth fell from Marley’s dead mouth. “Come. Do your worst, watcher. You don’t have the dead boy or his special friends to help you now, little mutt. Shane! Step to, son. We’re waiting on you out here. ”

Sam let out one sharp, full-throated bay and charged, jaws open to bite, but closed on empty air as the thing that had taken on the shape of a little dead girl released that form, and young Marley Shelton — or at least a semblance of what was left of her — vanished.

It was just a short, muddy walk and a duck under some low tree branches out of the blunted autumn light and into the deep shade of the cliffs. Usually it was a nice relief from the heat of the sun that blazed down upon the lake, but this time... This time, of course, it was different. As the branches Archie had pushed aside so they could step through fell back into place, the temperature dropped like a coin down a well. If it was mid-autumn out around the water, in here, the skeletal hands of winter were already scrabbling for purchase. The leaves overhead clung to the trees, dead and rattling. The stench of rot and decay permeated the air with a nauseating sweetness, the heady stench of trashbags behind the butcher shop mixed with the old apple tree in Shane's front yard, the fallen fruit soft and mushy, swarmed by countless bees. The smell of death and home mingled into a fine perfume.

Sam let out a yip and scampered on ahead. Dallas and his friends followed at a more cautious pace. The place that had been their refuge — their own secret realm, by god — felt strange now, an alien land that did not welcome their kind. The ground beneath their feet — always a little swampy even in the heat of summer — was slick and almost sticky, the muck sucking at their shoes and slowing their progress down the narrow trail. It seemed they'd only traveled a few yards, though Sam had already disappeared through the brush up ahead, when Dallas heard another voice calling from the shadows.

"Dallas," a high, feminine voice called in a teasing sing-song. "Dallas Shepherd! Did you come all the way down here to see me?"

There was a soft rustle of dead leaves, and Tina Powers stepped onto the path ahead of them from behind a dense stand of locust trees, leading her younger brother Jimmy by one hand. As she came to a stop, the younger boy clung to her, wrapping one arm clad in a ragged, muddy blue Easter suit, around her waist, and Tina ran a hand gently over the top of his head as she draped her arm around his skinny shoulders. Jimmy plopped a dirty, black-nailed thumb into his mouth and regarded the older boys with wide, empty eyes.

Tina gave them a simpering smile. "Will you look at that, Jimmy! All these handsome boys come all the way up to the reservoir just to see me."

Tina didn't look all that different than she had the last time the boys had seen her, at the annual inter-congregational picnic organized by the combined might of the Ladies Auxiliaries of Rising Creek Baptist, Baker's Gap Methodist, and a handful of smaller churches every Fourth of July. Her skin glowed a waxy white in the deep shadows under the trees, and her eyes were ringed with dark circles the purple-black of a bruise, and her head tilted at an odd, sideways angle that looked neither natural nor comfortable. Dallas could see a ragged edge of bone not quite poking through the skin on the right side of her neck. Her dress — the white sundress edged in delicate lace that she'd been dressed in for the funeral — was stained with all manner of foulness, and her bare feet were caked to the knee in the black muck of the marsh. For all that, Tina Powers didn't look too bad — not compared to the ruined face of Marley Shelton, anyway. No, what struck Dallas was the way she and Jimmy clung to each other.

Tina and Jimmy Powers had never got on. To say their fights were the stuff of local legend would have been a gross understatement. If the real Jimmy Powers had come up to his sister and wrapped an arm around her, Tina would have responded with a preemptive strike, anticipating a slug down the back of her blouse or a rotten egg cracked into her hair. The sisterly affection on display in this clearing was... simply not Tina. Nor was the bashful, thumb-sucking silence anything like the Jimmy Powers they had known.

The thing that wore Tina's face shuffled toward them, turning its head coquettishly and grinning wide, showing a row of blackened and broken teeth. Its gait was lopsided, one ankle twisted ninety degrees off center, the other foot dragging behind. "You were always the best-looking of all of 'em, Dallas Shepherd," she crooned, looking up at him from under lashes crusted with god-knew-what. "I'll let you kiss me, if you want to."

Dallas stumbled backward in horror as she reached one pale, bloated hand for him, the nails torn and fingertips shredded as if she'd clawed her way out of the ground.

"Back!" Archie's voice boomed from Dallas' right, as the taller boy brought his walking stick to bear once again, the stout length of oak swinging up to bar the thing's path.

The thing that was not Tina Powers rounded on Archie, its mouth stretching wide in fetid, stomach-churning hiss, rotten teeth dripping black bile. "Stay out of this, Stallard!" it spat.

“You are not Tina Powers, and that is not Jimmy,” Arch pronounced. “Begone!” He reached back with the stick in both hands, fully prepared to bring all his schoolyard batting skill to bear.

The Tina-thing hissed again, snarling at Archie, and began slowly backing away. The thing that wore little Jimmy’s face followed, the pair of them melting almost gracefully back into the underbrush. At the edge of the trees, the thing that was not Tina smirked. “Y’all be careful now. Them rocks are slick. She ya ‘round, Dallas,” it cooed, before the pair of them vanished wholly into the dark.

The four boys stared after her in silence for a moment, until Archie let out a low whistle. “Hoo boy, she sure took a shine to you, Churchboy!” he chuckled. “You sure you don’t want that kiss? I can call her back for ya— ow!”

Dallas socked his friend in the arm, grumbling, “Jesus, could you shut up, Arch?” But there was relief in his smile, and gratitude in the playful shove he gave the taller boy.

Archie grabbed Dallas in a headlock, ruffling his hair with one fist. “You sure, buddy? She’s awful cute, ya know.”

Shane rolled his eyes in impatience and started walking. “You boys want to be out here all night? Come on. Let’s go get my pack and go.”

The descent from the Cliffs of Rockbone to the island itself had always been their moment of triumph. To reach the island, you needed to move quickly and deftly down a narrow slope — water on either side of the slender trail if the lake was high — and then make one last leap over the old fallen pine tree that had been there since God was a boy. It was a feat they had all taken pride in mastering, young princes sauntering fancy as you please into their kingdom. Little Cowboy had gotten it on the first try, and they’d cheered and clapped him on the back, celebrating as the island accepted him as the newest member of the royal family.

But not today. Today they found the boulders coated in some sort of iridescent, greenish-black ichor. Today no one's feet found purchase on the slimy rocks, and to a man, they found themselves cast down from their high perch into the muck and stagnant water, beggars at the gates of their own holy city. Shane had landed in the shallow nastiness that lined the left side of the slope and cursed to beat the band as he slogged over onto relatively dry land to unlace and dump water from his shoes. Dallas had rolled and hit hard, his head narrowly missing the old fallen pine. A few inches more and he might have skewered his face on a stub of a forever-ago broken branch. Archie had gone ass-over-fishbucket and landed at the edge of sloppy wet on the other side, the impact of his massive feet splattering the surrounding trees. Floyd came down right behind Dallas, but managed to miss the other boy by a good foot doing a log-roll into the brambles that had grown up around the mouth of the entrance of the island. It was humiliating. Demoralizing even.

As if to add a little insult to injury, Sam came trotting in their wake as if it were any other Sunday and went to stand by Dallas, licking the boy's head. They took another minute or three to collect themselves before they moved to the break in the trees that should have shown them their most beloved secret place but instead looked upon what might have been the heart of hell.

Death Island finally lived up to its name. All around the pine-shaded peninsula, the dead labored. Shane saw young Jeffery Cook, who had drowned in the drainage pond on the other side of the dam, pushing a wheelbarrow filled with earth and things that writhed and squirmed within that earth. The Cook boy's face was blue and swollen. Gray water streamed from his eyes and ears, leaving a slimy trail behind him. The sound of digging and the clang of tools drifted from the over on the north side of the island, nearest the lake. Shane tapped his cousin on the arm and pointed out the slumped figure of their friend Curt's daddy, Marsh Kilgore, rising from the ground, his head hanging unnaturally to one side of its broken neck as he struggled to pull himself up. Two flat black shadows, roughly the size of children, stood over the dead man, harshly whispering things the boys could not hear and lashing his body with something like sticks. Marsh begged and pleaded, stumbling out of their line of sight with the shadow children close behind.

Before anyone could say a word, Archie Stallard snapped his fingers three times, quiet and quick, which was expedition hand sign for "look here, look now: danger." Archie crouched low

and edged out of the brushline behind one of the thickest pines on the island, motioning for the others to follow. They all ducked and crept over to join him, even Sam seeming to understand the need for silence and stealth.

When the north side of the island came into view, the horrors of the rest of the day faded to almost pleasant memory. Dozens of the reanimated dead toiled around a great pit in the middle of the grove of ancient, towering pines. The deep hole seemed to pulse and shift with a life of its own, a mouth with a throat that had not opened yet. All the children Baker's Gap had lost that summer were there, as well as seven men the boys recognized as workers who'd been caught in a machine shop fire last year out on the west end of town. Mister Sproles, the old choir director, who they found strangled out behind the parlor house that nobody talked about being a parlor house down by the south tracks, dug with his hands at the edge of the pit, along with others they didn't know — men dressed in prison stripes with nooses still hung around their necks, picks and shovels in hand. What looked like a large group of Cherokee men and women, their bodies riddled with gunshot, some with slit throats and missing ears, shuffled boxes of dark earth to the foot of a makeshift throne composed of a thick tree stump and the saplings that had grown up behind it.

The boys recognized the seat of that throne. This was the armory of their imagined Camelot, the place they had tucked their swords away at the end of the day to protect them from the elements. But the swords were no longer stowed away. They could see that quite clearly as they gazed up on the thing that hunched upon the throne.

The word sword is a very generous term for the imagined artifacts of Arthur and his round table of Baker's Gap. These were long, fairly stout poplar branches, each of them painted whatever color the boy had wished to represent his coat of arms. Each stick had nails driven into the lower section to form a hilt and handguard. How effective that handguard was depended on who was driving the nails. Many a duel had been halted when a nail gave way, resulting in bloodied knuckles for that particular sword's wielder. Hell, there was almost as much of the boys' blood as there was paint on these holy artifacts of boyhood. The thing that crouched upon the remains of what had once been their armory had taken them and used them to craft itself a body.

It was massive, at least seven feet tall and shaped roughly like a man. Its arm bones were made up of the Shepherd boys' broken blades, named Gallyhad and Percival. Floyd's Lancelot and Curt's G'wayne had been cracked in half and used to form roughly jointed legs. Darkness swirled about those makeshift bones like hot, churning tar. Archie had once visited a sweet shop over in Tipton with a taffy making machine in the window that kept churning and stretching and shaping that sugary treat until it looked almost like something that was alive. If that taffy had been the color of black licorice, it would look a lot like the swirling ooze of this thing's body. The darkness twined around its limbs, stretching to cover the skeleton it had made for itself but not quite doing the job. Protruding an odd angle from the center of the thing's chest as if in a fairy tale was the gleaming white painted hilt of Archie's 'Scalibur — its nails dipped in some fancy gold paint he'd found in his daddy's shed — which seemed to serve as the thing's crooked spine.

The one sword that wasn't incorporated into this foul amalgamation was Cowboy's. The little poplar short sword that he had named Mordred — Cowboy, of all of them, never minded playing the bad guy — lay at the thing's feet. It was blackened and charred, and Dallas noticed the tip had broken off. *Huh*, he thought. He didn't remember Mordred ever being burned.

The thing's head — what you could see of it under the old, busted tarp it wore like a cowl — slumped forward, hanging loosely, as if missing the last critical piece of its spine. A good piece of hemp rope circled that wobbling neck, and from it dangled six trinkets of varying shapes and sizes. Spotting the six lucky charms he'd stowed in his pack, Shane bristled, lunging forward. Floyd and Dallas caught him under the arms and hauled him back, but the smaller boy struggled furiously in their grip.

“That bastard went through my pack!” Shane snarled. “Breaking the swords is one thing, but you don't go through another man's pack and steal from him!”

“Easy, bud!” Dallas hissed. “You really wanna go in there and face down...” Dallas faltered as he took in the overwhelming horror of the scene. “*That...* over some busted up sticks and some camping gear?”



“Of course he does. All y’all do. Look at you. Little pissant cowards. Mad as hell, ain’t ye? I done took your place, broke your precious swords, and parked my everliving ass right here on your round table,” the thing sneered in a voice that still sounded like Marsh Kilgore, a man who had rightly scared the bejeezus out of all of them when they were little. It laughed as its drooping head tilted up, revealing the flat black void beneath it. “But I can be reasonable. If little Shane there comes up here, kneels at my altar, and gives me what I’m due, I might let the rest of ye live. Probably not, but hell, after my little project here is complete, y’all might not have too much to worry about nohow.”

Shane surged forward again, but his friends held him tight. Sam growled and moved to stand between his boys and the beast that sought to claim them.

The thing gave a phlegmy snort. “Don’t you ever learn, dog? You ain’t got the juice to stop the likes of me. Ain’t nobody bearing the kiss of the old dark here to help you. Ain’t none of them boys got a lick of power. I smack any *y’all* against a tree, you ain’t gettin’ back up,” The thing said as it stood, looming over Sam and the boys.

“Don’t you talk about Cowboy!” Shane frothed. His skin and shirt were soaked with sweat, the veins on his neck standing out against his taut skin, eyes wide and all pupil. “You ain’t got no right talking about what happened to him, you sloppy looking stickboned scarecrow sumbitch!” Shane finally shook off his friends, throwing Floyd to the ground with the motion. “That little booger could barely tie his shoes, and he still whooped the shit out of you, didn’t he, you half-assed h’aint? You think you’re big and bad because you got dead folk doing your dirty work? You think after the dreams you give me the past two years that I’m afraid of dead people?”

He rushed forward and threw himself down at the foot of the throne, staring brazenly up into the darkness beneath the cowl, his eyes wide and touched with madness. “Come on then. Come take me.”

Sam’s heart nearly stopped as he watched his Shane kneeling at the feet of the thing. He barked his warning bark over and over, but neither Shane nor that monstrosity looming over him paid Sam mind. Through the green-blessed way he saw the world, the beagle could see the swirling

darkness that animated the awkward hulk that had threatened him twice now. He could smell the boys on that old wood from there, poplar and iron and blood smothered in writhing darkness. He could see Archie's stick the best, sticking out of the creature's chest. He could see how the lines of dark energy converged around it. That painted piece of wood had once been a boy's pride and joy, something Archie had loved and cherished. It was the only one of the wooden swords the creature had not broken. If Sam could somehow get to it, they might have a chance — yes sir, yes ma'am.

With an air of triumph, the giant made of shadows and shattered poplar branches reared up over Shane, raising the arm made of Gallyhad over its head, a claw-like hand dripping with the darkness that held it together grasping at Shane. Then, with a roar of sudden pain, it drew back. Shane looked down and saw that the thing had stepped on the cracked and scorched remnant of Cowboy's little short sword, Mordred. Smoke rose from the point where the weapon had touched the writhing darkness of the thing's lower appendage.

Shane blinked as he made the connection. The only sword it didn't — or *couldn't* — use was Cowboy's. And Cowboy had sent this thing packing once before. Shane's mind spun back to the first sword fight that Cowboy had with his big brother, how he'd gotten his knuckles skinned. The little guy hadn't cried or been scared at all. He'd just wiped his bloody knuckles on the short sword he'd named after King Arthur's traitorous son and said, "Little blood never hurt nobody. Let's go again."

Shane looked up at the thing as it slapped at its smoking foot and hoped Cowboy was wrong. In a flash, he dove for the charred stick. As his fingers grasped its makeshift hilt, pain lanced through his arm, and Shane watched in horror as his own wrist cracked open like a busted watermelon. A slithering tendril of the same darkness that coated the giant swirled around Mordred, trying to wrest it from Shane's grip. As he held on, more and more of that awful black ribbon seeped from the hole in his wrist, wrapping itself about what would have been the blade if the sword had been real. It kept winding around the old piece of poplar until it reached the holes where the nails had been placed as a makeshift crossguard, the place where Cowboy had wiped his bloody knuckles.

As soon as it touched them, the sliver of darkness that had lived inside of Shane Shepherd for two years burst into brilliant flame. Shane felt as though someone had lifted the weight of a whole mountain from his shoulders. The sadness, the loss — all that was still there — but without the darkness to amplify it, Shane felt like a new man. Without a second thought, he plunged the burning sword into the right leg of the thing that had stolen their kingdom and watched as the tarp that formed its cloak erupted into emerald flames. The beast screamed.

Before Shane could rise, he heard the scurrying of steady paws through the carpet of pine needles, and suddenly Sam was on his back, racing up to leap over his shoulders, a feat that should have been nigh impossible for a dog his age. “Sam! No!” Shane cried as their beloved companion sailed into the mass of twisting darkness and eerie green fire.

As the four boys watched in terror, Sam twisted in the air, his jaws latching onto the white painted grip of Archie’s ‘Scalibur and yanking the sword free from the darkness that had claimed it as surely as any stone. A blinding white flash lit up the whole island as the lynchpin of the creature’s form was pulled loose. The sudden flare of illumination faded slowly, taking with it the dead the creature had summoned to serve it and to dig its pit.

Sam twisted away from the beast with the long branch of poplar in his teeth. Trotting over to the water’s edge, he gave a sharp shake of his head, like a terrier with a rat, and threw it into the lake. Behind him, the construct of darkness began to collapse in on itself, its body melting as it clawed toward the pit that had seemingly been its purpose. Before it could reach the edge of that fel opening, Sam was there, barking and snarling and snapping. As with the snakes before, Sam’s bays landed like physical blows, knocking the thing back again and again as it tried to hold its burning body together. Finally, it staggered back from the pit and the gnashing teeth of the beagle, toppling over the stump that had been its throne and falling bonelessly into the water with a splash.

Dallas, Shane, Archie and Floyd rushed to the edge of the trees, gazing down on the smoldering remains of the beast as it flailed in the murky water, the emerald flames that had consumed its cloak faltering and then dying. The creature righted itself and tried to stand, turning that awful, empty cowl to face them, prepared to spring.

The lake behind it exploded as something impossibly huge surged from the depths of Bear Creek Reservoir, something vast and dark, made of ancient bones and ever-hungering death — something with a roaring maw that descended on the false king of Death Island, carrying it down to the bottom of the lake, where it would never trouble the boys of Baker’s Gap again.

The boys stood there in stunned silence for a moment, watching the lake as the waves stirred up by the vast thing slowly settled and receded into the reservoir’s usual lapping at the shore. Then Sam gave a cheerful bark and padded up to Dallas, the white tip of his tail wagging in clear evidence of pride at a job well done. When his boy smiled down at him, he made a soft chuffing noise and nudged suggestively at Dallas’ pockets, hoping perhaps a stowaway chicken leg had crept into them.

“All right, you mutt,” Dallas chuckled, dropping to his knees to hug the wiggling beagle. “Anybody got a treat for our hero here?”

Archie dug into his knapsack and pulled out half a turkey sandwich wrapped in wax paper — or what remained of it after his tumble down the hill to the island. “He’s more than earned it,” the boy acknowledged as he began tearing it into smaller pieces, which he passed to Sam.

“Damn right he has,” Floyd agreed. “That dog is just fearless, Dallas!”

Shane knelt down on the ground by his cousin, surrounded by his closest friends, and gazed thoughtfully into Sam’s hazy, blind eyes — eyes that somehow still saw so much — and gently ruffled his velvety ears. “Were you?” he said softly, in that teasing voice reserved for babies, both of the human and four-footed variety. “Who’s a fearless boy?”

Sam rewarded him with an excited *woof* and launched himself into Shane’s lap, his long pink tickling the boy’s face. Shane squawked with surprise, and the laughter that spilled out of him was a balm to the hearts of his friends, who hadn’t realized how long it had been since they’d heard that sound until just this moment.

Sam turned back to Dallas, tail wagging fiercely, and let loose the long, distinctive bay that is nature's gift to the distinguished beagle, and Dallas gave him a scratch behind the ear. "Good boy, Sam," he said. "Fearless... and good."

[ "Familiar and Beloved" by Landon Blood ]

And thus ends volume one of *Familiar & Beloved*. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. Our intro music is by Landon Blood. Join us next time for the beginning of volume two, a brand new story, exclusively here on Patreon.

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