

## FAMILIAR & BELOVED

### Return To Death Island

#### Part II

*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.*

He set out in the hour before sunrise, that perfect window wherein the night's velvet shroud lay saturated with the coming light of dawn. He'd moved from beneath the porch without a sound, as was his custom. No creaky old doors or busted window latches would give away his comings and goings. No, sir. He had no time to lose, for the day would break soon and with that day, trouble.

The deep, sullen violet would eventually give way to shattered vermillion stretched over the sky above Baker's Gap, and more specifically the death-touched reservoir that sat to its western edge. He'd trod these roads so many times over so many years he didn't need to see the path in front of him in the early morning darkness. The elders of the town had erected barricades and roadblocks on the gravel track that led to the still, black body of water that had claimed too many of their children, but these were no hindrance to the master escapist who traversed them now. No sir, no ma'am.

Slick as the shadow of a preacher's wife on a Saturday night, he slipped under the sawhorses bearing the "CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE" sign, and with the grace of God's own messengers, he slid down to the water's edge to listen and breathe in the scents of fish and pine, and beneath those, the stench of rot and death. The young'uns might think they were ready to come back to this place, to seek whatever foolish errand they might seek, but they didn't know what he knew. They also couldn't see what he could see, but that was always the way with the young pups. Luckily they had an old dog like him to show the way.

Sam, the blind old beagle mix, dearest companion to the boys who had claimed this part of the world as their personal domain, cast his senses out over the lake toward that ancient stand of pines that stood shrouded now in the pre-dawn fog. Beyond that fog, Sam could sense the

hunger that inhabited that once joyful place. It was a pitiful, scrabbling thing, Sam thought, robbed of most of its strength when the littlest pup — Cowboy, his Dallas had called him — had drawn on an old and dark power to free his friend from its grasp.

Sam had walked these hills as a watcher and a guardian for a long time before coming to be with the Shepherd family in the brick house out by the church, and he hadn't seen the old power called forth like that since... well, he couldn't say how long. He hadn't ever seen nothing as old as the wolf called forth in his long life, but there it was. He'd seen the wolf, and it had seen him. They weren't cut from the same cloth — hell, they weren't even woven on the same loom — but they had the same purpose: protect their boys.

Sam had charged forward, all teeth and fearsome cry, snapping at the thing's featureless form, and had managed to knock it down. He could see it in the special way that he saw such things, all naked greed and full of mouths — mouths that sucked and bit and fed on grief and misery, mouths that had drained the Kilgore family, especially young Curtis, almost dry.

Marsh Kilgore had found it in the woods behind their house, near the spot where he'd buried his firstborn. Charlotte had miscarried the child two years before they had Curtis, and they buried the babe in a quiet clearing that would eventually become their family graveyard. Marsh had taken to drinking out in that place, and it was there late on the night of a new moon, something slinked out of the woods, all whispers and sweet words, and asked Marsh if he'd like to hold his baby boy one more time. Marsh, half-drunk on grief and the rest of the way hammered on a jar of 'shine, entered into a bargain that would blacken his soul forever, the details of which are known to nobody but Marsh. So mind your business, family. Once the thing had driven Marsh half mad with shame and hate, it threw him off a roof to an almost merciful demise.

Shortly thereafter it had moved on to his oldest boy Curtis, and would have tormented him for many years before finally breaking him. It had planned to take its time. What this thing hadn't anticipated was that while Marsh Kilgore was a bitter and solitary man, Curtis Kilgore had friends, good friends who would fight for him. And oh, sweet Nelly, did they fight that night out by the reservoir.

To this day, Sam thought he could have handled that mouthy thing on his own. It might have cost him, but he would have taken it down. Luckily, the wolf had made that unnecessary. Its roar had scattered the thing's form, and by the time it set in with its jaws and claws, there were but wisps of it left seeping back into the earth. Sam had run about, snapping and barking at these to make sure they were good and gone. He'd seen one reach for Dallas as the boys scrambled to escape the storm that shook the trees, and he and the wolf did their toothsome work. It hadn't even gotten close to Dallas, Sam thought proudly.

Shane, however, had fallen down. Sam had hoped it was just the clumsy little pup's complete lack of coordination that had caused it, but he knew now that a tendril — a whip-thin line of that darkness — had snagged Shane's ankle and been carried home to the house on the other side of the water. Sam had tried to root it out whenever his Dallas had brought him over to visit Shane, but the thing had burrowed deep and would hide itself when Sam looked for it. Sam knew that little bit of shadow wasn't all that was left of what they'd faced out on Death Island, as the young pups called it. The remnant of that sorrow-sucking varmint was still out there, feeding its many mouths and gaining strength, and he meant to put it down before it did any more damage than it already had. Yes sir, yes ma'am.

[ "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*

“Y’all c’mon. It ain’t gonna stay dark forever,” hissed Dallas Shepherd as his friends clambered down from the back of Terry Davis’ pick up truck.

Shane’s papaw Tim had charged Terry’s daddy Harold with taking the Shepherd boys and their friends out to trailhead leading up to Whistler’s Knob, where ostensibly they would camp for the weekend and have themselves a good old time. The Davis family ran a hunting supply store situated at the base of Roan Mountain that provided much of the game harvested by the residents of Baker’s Gap. Harold would be headed out to open up the shop anyway, so Tim Duncan had slid him a little gas money and a favor to be repaid later in exchange for giving the boys a lift. Never a man who liked to open the store early on a Saturday, Harold had pawned the errand off on his oldest, who was only a couple of years older than the boys themselves.

Once Terry had let Archie Stallard know he’d be the one driving them come that weekend, all it took was a good pouch of ‘baccer, a few choice comic books, and a half-dollar to convince young Terry to re-route their journey to the old Gilliam Family Cemetery. That scrubby old patch of land where some of Baker’s Gaps earliest criminals were buried was a notorious gathering place for younger folks to do their own share of drinking and carrying on, so Terry Davis had no questions about why the boys would want him to take them down that way instead of where their folks thought they were gonna be.

Predictably, Terry didn’t think twice about the trail that wound off the back of the old boneyard and snaked down the side of the hill through the marshy swamp that led right into the northernmost edge of the lake. Archie knew that the year before the county had done some restructuring and earth moving around that area, so it was likely their passage directly to the cliffs of ol’ Dirk Rockbone would be blocked. They’d have to go down and around Copperhead’s Den to get to the path that would lead them to the island, but it should be manageable. Hell, Archie and Curt had come in this way a thousand times before it seemed like, and backtracking a little bit wouldn’t hurt that much, would it?

The Gilliam family cemetery wasn’t much of anything but a flat patch of coarse grass that held the markers for Silas and Ronnie Gilliam, the first bank robbers to ever meet the rope in Baker’s Gap. Their stones hadn’t been tended for years, and the grass around them was overgrown and littered with cigarette butts, empty liquor bottles, and other detritus of youthful rebellion and

celebration. A few other scattered stones and dilapidated wooden crosses dotted the landscape as various branches of the Gilliam family had planted their poorer and less desirable relations here on the back side of the valley. There was a clear divide between the GILLYUMS — who buried their dead in the big church graveyards out behind Rising Creek Baptist and Baker’s Gap Methodist in town — and the GILLUMS planted out here. In these parts, the slightest change in the pronunciation of a last name could be the clearest indicator of a family feud or the delineation of haves and the have-nots among folks who shared and spelled that name exactly the same.

As the sound of the Davis’ pickup faded into the distance and sunrise threatened to break over the mountains, the boys assembled around the meager moments of the infamous Gilliam brothers. In most parts of East Tennessee, it had been morning for a good hour by now, but Baker’s Gap sat deep in the Tennessee Valley. As far as most folks here were concerned, the rest of the area could keep those first few hours of sunlight. Better to sleep in or work in the dark than miss out on the lush beauty of their little gem of a town.

“This... this ain’t a good place,” Shane muttered to Dallas as his eyes flitted over the trash strewn field. On the heels of his jubilant proclamation that they must return to the island earlier that week, Shane had fallen back into one of his darker moods. The black clouds had returned to his shoulders, and he carried himself smaller than his newly acquired five-foot-five of adolescent height would normally allow.

“It’s creepy as all get-out, that’s for sure,” Dallas answered. “Arch, you couldn’t find us a better starting place than a field full of dead Gilliams?”

Archie rolled his eyes and shrugged exaggeratedly. “I mean, I could have asked Terry to drive us down to the Sheriff’s office and request a police escort out to the lake, I guess.” He reached over and thumped Dallas on the head playfully, and Dal almost snatched his hand in a wristlock, but Archie was too quick. “This is the best we can do, and we’re here, so let’s go. Expedition ho!”

Archie had stepped up to what remained of an old wire fence and was holding the strands wide for the other boys when Shane spoke again, a note of panic slipping into his voice. “Where’s Sam? Dal, your daddy didn’t take him out to the Davis’ store to wait on us, did he?”

Dal put his hand on his cousin's shoulder. "No, bud, Sam had already set out by the time I got up this morning. Don't you worry. He'll find us. He always does." He kept his hand on Shane's shoulder until the smaller boy met his eyes and nodded.

"Yeah, he does. Sorry, y'all. Let's go."

The journey down the back of Cemetery Hill was uneventful as the boys carefully picked their way through the brush until the path revealed itself, the going getting considerably easier if a tad wetter. The ground here was marshy and sucked at the four friends' feet as they trudged the long way into the bounds of Bear Creek Reservoir. Within a hundred yards of finding the path though, the trail widened into a proper gravel lane that passed between two man-made barriers of earth and timber that pushed the woods on the north side of the lake into a whole other configuration.

Archie cursed under his breath as he noted that the reconstruction he'd heard about was more than just the relocation of some dirt and rocks. A new maintenance road had been constructed, and damnit, everything looked different now. He'd expected to have to hike up and around some mounds of displaced dirt and rock to get to Copperhead's Den, but this new road would take them all the way out to the dam, and that was going half way around your backside to scratch your elbow. The newly-formed hillocks on either side, terraced with thick wooden beams, were easily twenty feet tall or more and would be difficult and probably unsafe to try to climb in the early morning gloom. Archie thought his daddy might be right. Things were changing around here, and too much progress wasn't always a good thing.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Floyd from the back of the pack. "This wasn't here last time, was it, Arch?"

"County done lost their damn mind, looks like," Archie said as he peered about the unfamiliar terrain. "I'm trying to find us a way over to Copperhead's, but they've blocked everything up. Hell, it might not even be there now."

"How is that a bad thing? Less snakes is always a good thing, right?" asked Shane.

Archie shook his head distractedly and kept peering into the distance. “Snakes will always find a place to be. It’s just.. it was nice knowing where they was so we could look out for them. Also, the den was the marker for the path onto the island. If they’ve messed with that, then...”

Dallas’ face fell almost slack. “They could have flooded the island. It could all be underwater.”

Shane shook his head with a grim certainty that scared Dallas a little. “It ain’t. I know that much. We got farther to walk, we got farther to walk. Let’s go, y’all.”

Before Archie could even call “Expedition ho!” Shane Shepherd pushed past his friends, leading the way down the strange backroad toward the dam.

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He’d watched the changes down by the water for months now. The men who tended this place had decided it would be easier to do whatever it was they did to the water if they had a road for their machines on the far side. So as men often do, they set about mucking around in matters they did not understand. They cleared out trees older than the first name of the town and tore up a creek bed that had lain undisturbed since the giantfolk moved through these hills.

The remnant of the thing out in the pines was growing stronger, and these disruptions in the natural defenses of the Green were helping it right along. It had begun to twist and shape that corner of the lake to its whims, and those changes appeared as warped places in the usually well ordered pattern of the Green that Sam used to navigate the world. His blind old eyes might not see shapes and faces that well, but he could see how that shadow that crept and hobbled within the pines was crafting a lair for itself, and that would not do. No sir, no ma’am, it would not.

Sam tilted his head as the wind carried to him the sound and scent of his Dallas and the others, and without a second thought, the good old boy charged into the woods, stepping swift and true to those whom he was sworn to protect.

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They'd been walking in the shadow of the man-made slopes for about twenty minutes when Archie called for a stop. Shane kept walking, either oblivious or obstinate, and Archie had to holler again.

"Hey, Churchboy, go get your cousin before he wanders off and..." Archie reconsidered the joke he was about to make in light of recent events and altered course. "Just go get Shane, Dallas. Something's not right."

Dallas nodded and trotted on ahead to catch Shane gently by the elbow. The way Shane jumped when Dallas touched him made Archie's heart hurt just a little.

"C'mon, y'all," Shane argued. "I want to get my pack and we can get out of here before anybody ever notices—"

Archie drew a finger across his throat, which was the expedition code-sign for "shut up and stand down." After a minute's silence, he whispered, "Y'all hear that?"

Floyd's expression grew puzzled as he looked up and down the strange road and to his left and to his right. "Hear what, Arch?"

Archie Stallard's eyes narrowed in a way that made him look remarkably like his daddy, but it was an expression that the other boys knew meant he wasn't playing around or showing out. "Exactly. Given where we are, we should hear water, critters in the brush. Hell, at this hour we should definitely hear birdsong. There ain't even no wind."

Dallas blinked. "You're right. Maybe it's where we're walking between these things? Like maybe they're cutting off sound from the lake?"

Archie shook his head. "We should still hear the wind, Dallas. Or at least our own footsteps." Archie took three exaggerated steps to the left, and then to the right, which by all means should have generated the crunching sound of his size 15 boot on the gravel of the new road, but no sound came.



“What kind of gravel is this?” Shane pondered, kneeling down to examine the crushed rock that lined the path. “I’ve never seen anything like this on a road before.” He held up a chunk of the pulverized stone, frowning at the way the gray morning light passed through it, revealing a color not dissimilar to a medicine or liquor bottle, a translucent brownish-black. “Obsidian?” he muttered in surprise.

“Ob-what now?” Archie asked.

“Obsidian,” Shane repeated clearly. “It was used by ancient people, like back before bible times, for tools and such. I read about it in the old National Geographics that Uncle Jeff brought me. There shouldn’t be none around here though, not like this and for sure not lining a county road. It’s too fragile for that. And I ain’t never read nothing that said it don’t make no sound when you walk on it neither.”

The boys all looked at the strange glassy stone that Shane held up to the light, and their eyes fixed on it. A multitude of worlds swirled within that translucent rock that Shane Shepherd had mistaken for obsidian, and the boys of Bakers Gap appeared lost in all of them. The silence of the place deepened, and Archie — being the tallest of the bunch — was the first to sway on his feet. He would have fallen over had the ranger hat that he’d worn on every one of their expeditions not slipped over his eyes for a moment, blocking his line of sight and removing the strange dark stone from his view, breaking its hold.

“Stop looking at it!” Archie croaked — he’d meant to yell, but his voice came out weak and far away. He stumbled over to Floyd, grabbed his shoulders, and spun him around so that he faced the long stretch of empty road rather than Shane and that cursed rock. Floyd put his hands over Dallas’s eyes and pulled him away next.

“Man, what are you doing? Get off me!” Dallas cried, but his voice too was reedy and dry.

Archie kept his hat in front of his face and called out, “Shane! Shane, man, put it down. Don’t look, y’all! I don’t know what’s happening, but we can’t look at that thing.”

Dallas turned back to his cousin — “Shane! Bud, you gotta put that rock down!” — but Floyd and Archie grabbed him and spun him to face away.

Shane Shepherd was lost. His eyes were glazed and unfocused, his mind cast into the dark amber of the stone he held, one of hundreds of thousands that lined the road they stood on in this strange place that had not existed the last time they’d come here — the Night of The Wolf, as he’d come to think of that horrible evening. But now he felt like he held the answer in his fingertips. His friends couldn’t see it as they had all turned away from him, their voices beseeching him to drop the thing, to get away from it, but Shane could not. He didn’t want to. If he had been a little bit younger, he would have wanted to swallow the rock, to put it in his mouth like candy. From what seemed like very far away, he could faintly hear Dallas calling to him, and his brow furrowed in annoyance at the distraction. He was *so close*, so close to finding the answer...

Dallas had turned halfway back toward Shane, eyeing his cousin nervously through his peripheral vision. Shane had gone pale, his breath growing shallow, and his lips and fingers were beginning to take on a bluish cast. Shane rattled out a long, slow breath and did not breathe in again for a long, long moment. Dallas froze, listening, the seconds crawling by as he strained to hear Shane’s next breath. *C’mon, damnit, BREATHE.* Until finally, Shane’s knees buckled and he fell forward, the rock skittering back amongst its fellows, and Dallas heard him suck in a long, ragged breath. He ran to him, and the others followed.

“Shane? Shane, hey man, are you ok? Talk to me, buddy,” Dallas called, slapping Shane’s cheeks until his eyes snapped open. Dallas pulled the smaller boy to him in a tight hug, and then leaned back to look into his wide, terrified eyes.

“Hey Arch,” Shane called over Dallas’ shoulder to the tall boy who had gone nearly as pale as he was.

“Yeah?”

“You were right,” Shane barked with a small, hysterical laugh.

“About what, kid?” Archie asked crossly, thinking Shane must be teasing, that somehow the whole thing with the rock had been some sort of prank.

Shane pointed a shaking finger down the road, and his voice threatened to break into laughter again. “Snakes. They always find a place to be.”

“What in the name of all that is holy are you talking about, son?” Archie spat.

Archie had taken a step toward Shane when Floyd cried out with the volume and urgency appropriate to the situation:

“Y’ALL, SNAKE! SNAAAAAKE!”

Archie turned, sensing that this had, in-fact, been one big joke on him. “Oh very funny, Absher, ha-ha...”

The words died in his throat as a snake larger than any reptile Archie had ever witnessed in the wild emerged from the gravel. The small black stones seemed to melt and ooze into the shape of a massive copperhead, the markings clear as day, though its coloring matched that of the strange rocks that resembled but could not be obsidian at all. The sinewy creature coiled in on itself, ready to strike.

“Snake! There’s another! SNAAAAAKE!” shouted Dallas, pointing in the opposite direction as the rocks on the road liquified and swirled into a massive timber rattler that twisted and reared, its rattle unnaturally loud and deep. It had too many eyes, a single bright, slit pupil open in the middle of its forehead surrounded by a half dozen more. Its jaw flexed open to reveal far more fangs than any single mouth should hold, each the length of a good pocket knife. All around the boys the sounds of rocks shifting and sliding like sand through an hourglass broke the oppressive silence as more and more snakes of various species and sizes emerged from the strange gravel underfoot.

The boys moved to stand back to back as more and more of the ground shifted into scaled monstrosities. Archie blinked and rubbed his eyes as two of the copperheads twined around each other and merged into a larger, two headed serpent that shook and writhed, seeming to relish its new form before it began slithering steadily forward. Archie readied his trusty walking stick, which in the past had sent many a copperhead soaring into the deeper woods, far away from the tall boy's path. But there were so many of them. Could he possibly deal with them all? Could he even hit one of the things if he tried? These snakes moved with an unnatural speed and grace, even for their kind. At times it was hard to distinguish where the ground stopped and the snakes began, and Archie was beginning to wonder what happened if the whole road turned into snakes?

He needn't have worried, because in the near distance, a familiar rustling came to his ears — the sound of paws and claws tearing through the brush on the other side of the high hillocks, followed by the unmistakable battle cry of the mighty beagle. The boys felt something blow past their legs with the speed of a bottle rocket, and before they even knew what was happening, Sam had descended upon the snakes. With terrifying efficiency, he moved among the writhing mass of black scaled death, biting the horrifying things behind their heads and slinging them off the path into the woods, just as if they were any old rattlers or copperheads or black snakes on any other day.

“Sam, no!” Shane cried as two huge rattlers lunged at the old blind boy at the same time. Sam seemed almost to blur as he leapt out of the way, and then tore into the snakes as they struck at the air where he'd been a split second before. The two-headed monstrosity that Archie had watched birth itself reared back and struck at Sam and once again, that fearless, good boy leapt back with an unnatural quickness.

Sam threw back his head and let out a rolling bay, that ear-splitting bark that can only come from the stout chest of a full-grown beagle. As the sound resounded through the woods, it struck the two headed thing like a physical blow. The two snakes burst apart into two more manageable creatures, which Sam set upon instantly, tearing them to gory bits. Sensing the presence of a greater predator, the remaining snakes scattered, attempting to flee, but Sam was relentless, chasing down and shredding all those he could catch — a fair number, Dallas noted

with pride. When the last of the children of Copperhead's Den had been slain or fled, Sam padded over to Dallas, who knelt and hugged him.

"Good boy, Sam! How in the world did you do that?"

"Is he bit? There was so many of them! Ain't no way at least one of them didn't get him," worried Shane.

Dallas and Archie pored over the old pup, lifting his paws and tail and examining his hide for any punctures or scratches. Sam bore these indignities patiently, rewarding his boy and his friend with the occasional lick when they brought their faces within range. Archie spoke first, his voice touched with awe. "There's not a mark on him. I mean he's fine. His breath is still nasty and dog slobber is disgusting, but he's fine."

Shane knelt down and threw his arms around Sam. "Thank you, boy," he whispered.

Sam chuffed and went around to each of them, wagging and sniffing, checking them for any injuries and their pockets for any hidden snacks.

Floyd scritch Sam around the ears and leaned over to speak softly to Dallas Shepherd. "Dal, did you see how he moved out there? There's no way he should have been able to—"

"Not now, Floyd. I seen him, okay? We'll talk about it later, but right now we gotta get out of here."

When Sam was satisfied that none of them were hurt or harboring any contraband chicken legs, he gave a low bark and trotted down the road in the direction they'd been heading. When the boys didn't follow right away, he turned his blind old eyes back over his shoulder as if to ask "Well?"

The boys looked at each other, and one by one, they nodded and followed Sam down the new road to the reservoir, and thus to Death Island.

[ “Familiar and Beloved” by Landon Blood ]

Thus concludes part two of “Return to Death Island.” Today’s story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. Our theme song is by Landon Blood. Join us next time for the finale of “Return to Death Island,” exclusively on Patreon.

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