

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 70: The Burden of Proof

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

The front door of the house Lee Underwood had built for his bride exploded inward in a shower of busted wood and icy wind. Doc dove for cover and stared up in terror at the thing that stood on the threshold of their home. His vision swam as the creature crouched to duck its head beneath the lintel.

It walked upright, like a man, but its proportions more closely resembled those of some monster out of legend. It was covered in long, silky fur that wafted in the chill air like steam off quenched iron. Its thick arms hung low, almost like those of an ape, and the tips of its massive fingers were crowned with glossy black claws as long and sharp as knives. The beast's torso was supported by legs that bent backwards like a great cat, its feet long, clawed affairs with three talon-like toes and a single hooked claw that protruded from a narrow heel. Its face was like something out of a nightmare. To all intents and purposes, it appeared human — not only that, but well-formed, beautiful even, like something from a renaissance painting. But when it opened its mouth, he could see that it was filled with teeth — no tongue with which to speak like a man, just a gaping maw of needles like a lamprey. Its eyes were black, like a shark's, and worse than that. If they had been merely empty, soulless, that would have been one thing. But Doc could see things *in* those eyes — shifting shadows and glints of some deeper darkness it would not do to examine. Oh, no. Lee shuddered and looked away as the thing in the doorway leered down at him, lips twisting into a sneer as they closed over those rows of teeth.

DEMON: Oh, look at that. No need to huff n puff at all, for you have already invited me in and carried me across the threshold like a blushing bride. How kind of you, Lee.

DOC: How do you know my name? You know what, never mind. Don't matter. You are not welcome here. You are not a guest in this house, nor have you been summoned here. As the master of this place, I command you — begone!

The walking nightmare paused and took a moment to run its gaze up and down the door frame and over the lintel, taking in the wards that Lee and Marigold had so carefully carved into them, and then stepped over them into the parlor. It grinned at Lee and gave a mocking little bow.

DEMON: There we disagree, my friend. You have made it quite clear that I am welcome here — I am treasured. You brought me here with a smile on your face and a song in your heart, Lee Underwood, flung wide the gates so I might pass into the inner sanctum of your family manse. Now, what sort of father does that? What sort of loving da finds himself in league with something like me? Hmm? Brings home strangers that want nothing more than to strip you of your skin and meat and use your bones to pick my teeth. Oh, imagine if Marigold was here. Imagine if that baby of yours were already out in the world. Oh my, Lee, you'd be quite helpless. Quite useless indeed. But what do they say about the apple and the tree, eh little pig? What would you know about being a father?

The beast moved deeper into the room, its long, white fur trailing behind like wisps of smoke as it moved. Doc scrambled to his feet, his hand outstretched.

DOC: Shut your mouth, spirit. I know you not, and you know nothing of me and mine. I'll abide no more of your lies. Again, as the master of this place I command you—

The great beast spun and smashed a heavy fist into the side table, reducing it to kindling with a single stroke. A vase of preserved flowers and Marigold's small collection of knickknacks scattered across the room like shooting stars, and the thing laughed.

DEMON: So you're as incompetent in your knowledge of the unseen as you are useless as a father and protector? Psh. Spirit indeed. Come now, Lee, you can do better than that.

In a single heartbeat, the creature lunged, backing Lee into a corner, its fetid breath steaming over his face like meat left to spoil. An animal musk radiated off its body, a sour odor like something left to molder under dead leaves that made his stomach roil.

DEMON: Am I real enough for you now, little pig?

One massive, claw-tipped hand came to rest on his shoulder, and the weight of it nearly drove Doc to his knees.

DEMON: I could tear you apart where you stand, little pig, make a meal of you before you could draw a breath to scream. But I find a meal digests so much more easily when one takes the time to savor it.

Without warning, the thing dropped the hand that rested on his shoulder and backhanded him with the other. Doc flew across the room, smashed into the opposite wall and crumpled to the floor. His head swam, his ears ringing, as he stared up at the thing, tasting blood in his mouth. It crouched, preparing for another charge, and Doc braced himself for the impact of claws and teeth. But then suddenly it vanished, disintegrating in a cloud of that wispy smoke. The house rang with vile laughter.

Lee Underwood sat bolt upright in bed, his heart hammering, sheets soaked in sweat. A nightmare. It had all been a nightmare. Oh thank the lord, thank the green, thank whatever might have had a hand in him waking up. He didn't even remember coming to bed last night. He was having supper, and then there was someone... or *something* at the door... and then, what?

Doc shivered as a cold draft blew through the room he shared with Marigold. Warily, he climbed out of bed, still fully dressed from the day before. The frigid air dried the sweat on his skin with an icy kiss. However long he had slept, he seemed to have gained no rest from it. His body ached, sorer at the joints as though he'd taken a fall down the stairs. The watery light of dawn shone through the bedroom windows, and Doc's heart lightened by degrees with its coming. The house was very cold though. The fire in the wood stove must have gone out again. He'd have to see to that too, just as he'd done with the door.

Lee chuckled to himself. Folks always joked about the many headaches that came along with the pride of home ownership. He supposed he was finding the truth of that out for himself now.

Doc pulled his robe on right over yesterday's clothes to fend off the chill, then made his way downstairs, intent on starting a pot of coffee tending to the fire. To his immediate left as his feet reached the downstairs hallway was the open door that led into the parlor. The hem of his robe

billowed as an icy breeze blew through it, and Lee froze. He turned his head slowly, reluctantly, to gaze upon the debris that littered their front room: the splinters of what had once been the coffee table; the remnants of a china vase painted with blue roses; the head of a porcelain owl, the rest of its body scattered to hell and gone; a delicate horse figurine that had been crushed almost to powder, only its legs remaining; and various other items his wife had treasured, now rendered unrecognizable to Lee's eyes.

And of course, there were the shattered remains of what had once been Lee and Marigold Underwood's front door. One hinge still clung to the door frame by a single screw, a long strip of wood hanging from it, swinging back and forth in the wind. The hardwood floor was white with plaster dust where the iron fittings he had hung the previous day to hold a heavy wooden bar had torn free of the wall, the bar itself reduced to kindling. The portal yawned open on the Underwoods' front yard like a mouth full of broken teeth.

["The Land Unknown (The Bloody Roots Verses)" by Landon Blood]

*These old roots run
into a ground so bloody
Full of broken dreams and dusty bones
They feed a tree so dark and hungry
where its branches split and new blood flows
And the ghosts of a past you thought long-buried
rise to haunt the young
The shadow falls as judgment comes
Tread soft, my friend, amongst your fellows
Make your bond your word
Lest you get what you deserve*

The next three days were nigh-unbearable for Lee Underwood. The thing that had broken into his home and wreaked havoc through his parlor would allow him no rest. His daylight hours — usually reserved for choring, tending to the sick and injured, and the myriad other tasks that accompanied the life of a healer — devolved into a fever dream of destruction and delirium. The white-haired beast did not appear when the sun was in the sky, but Doc kept finding more things broken in and around the house that required his immediate attention. One morning he found half of Marigold's chickens slain, their necks wrung and throats torn out. He'd barely

finished cleaning up that mess when he saw smoke rising from the southern boundary of the property, as if somebody had set the winter woods ablaze. By the time he reached the area from whence he'd seen the smoke rising, he found nothing at all.

Any time he tried to leave Oak Mountain, the sound of crying babies and screaming children would drift from somewhere upstairs in his house, or down in the cellar, or from the swampy patch off in the woods behind the house. Doc, sleep deprived and delirious, would tear through every room of the house, or through the thick brambles and stinking muck, in a desperate search for the source of the wailing, only to find himself as alone as before.

When night fell, the creature would return in all its baleful glory to terrorize Lee, chasing him out of the house and through the woods, all the while berating him about what a failure he was as a man and a husband, and what a terrible father he would soon be.

DEMON: A man learns how to be a father from his father, doesn't he, little pig? So who taught you? Your own daddy couldn't even be bothered to stay on this side of the veil. Seems like death was preferable to raising the likes of you. Dumped you on your granddaddy's doorstep, and oh, what a fine role model that old fraud was. He chose the grave over raising you too. Tsk. What is wrong with you, Lee, that two men would choose leaving this world over teaching you how to be a man? Oh, poor little piggy.

Doc couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, could barely find a moment's respite to gather his wits. He paced the house, furiously working the pinky ring on his left hand, trying to think of a means to cast the thing out. Nothing seemed to work. The strange, talon-footed entity had strutted across the wards that Doc and Goldie had so carefully laid around their threshold, a barrier that should have repelled any being of the dark or the green that meant them harm. It laughed at Doc's attempts to cast it out, mocking his gifts as it continued its assault on the homestead he'd worked so hard to build. When he tried to defend himself, it tossed him about as if he weighed nothing. The thing never moved to kill him, only to keep him living in a constant state of fear and isolation.

DEMON: So will you teach your son to be a henchman too? Will you teach them how to hustle little old ladies out of their family heirlooms? The proper way to write a note for a bank

robbery? Will you find them their own dime-store mob boss to sell them to, or will you just give them to the man Jack yourself, little piggy?

As the sun rose on the fourth day, Doc sat shivering in the front parlor amongst the shattered remains of their furniture and a scattering of dead leaves that had blown in through the gaping maw of their front door. He would die soon. He could not hold on for much longer. He had attempted every working he could think of. He had tried to reinforce their wards, only to have the nightmare breach them again and again. He gazed out bleakly at the weak, watery light of dawn, wondering what subtle horrors the thing might visit upon him today.

From outside he heard... voices? Lee squeezed his eyes shut in fear. No. No, not again. He thought he heard Marigold, but the thing had mimicked her voice before, making a cruel mockery of her sweet tones. It had been almost more than he could bear. He'd run through the woods, desperately searching, as the screams of his beloved, clearly in pain — clearly dying — echoed through the trees. He'd arrived at the source of the horrible shrieking to find the thing waiting for him, taunting, feasting on his misery.

Lee braced himself for more of the same, but instead of the sound of his wife weeping and screaming, this time he heard only the low murmur of her voice, quiet and calm, clearly engaged in simple conversation. As it grew louder — coming closer, it seemed — Goldie's voice was joined by another that seemed familiar to him. Boot heels clomped up the front porch steps, and finally he could make out the words as his wife's voice rose in alarm.

MARIGOLD: Oh my lord! What's happened to the door? Lee? Lee! Baby, where are you!?

LESTER: Goldie, get back! It could be dangerous. We don't know what's happened here. You go rushing in, in your condition. Whoever did this might still be here.

Feet pounded across the floorboards as Marigold Underwood, ignoring this cautionary advice, raced over the porch and came tearing through the broken front door, Lester Graves hot on her heels. Marigold skidded to a stop as she took in the chaos that surrounded her. The walls were smeared with blood. Family photos had been ripped from the walls and lay shattered on the floor. Furniture was overturned, its stuffing ripped out like entrails. Animals had wandered in

and out of the house at night, leaving the floor a stinking mess. And there, in the middle of it all, his eyes wild and weeping slow, hopeless tears, lips trembling, sat her husband.

Lee's face was scratched and bruised. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and he had clearly lost weight. He had tucked his legs up to his chest like a child, his arms folded around his head as if to protect himself from being struck. Lee had made himself so small his wife didn't even see him huddled on the couch at first, but once she did, she called his name gently.

Lee wouldn't look at her at first, shaking his head in denial. This had to be a trick. The thing had told him he'd never see his wife again. That he was unworthy to see his unborn child come into this world. That he'd make such a bad father that it would be a sin to burden a child's life with his incompetence.

MARIGOLD: Lee, honey. Look at me. Baby, can you hear me?

Lee began to sob, and Marigold felt her heart break.

MARIGOLD: It's me, baby. It's me. Shhh. It's ok now. Everything is gonna be alright. Who did this to you? Was it them boys from down at the First Baptist? Did Jibber Watts have anything to do with this? Tell me their names, baby. I'll take care of them.

Lester Graves gazed around at the ruined parlor, his expression thoughtful.

LESTER: You know any of them good ol' boys that can crawl all over your ceiling?

Lester pointed up at the wood planks a good ten feet over their heads, now adorned with a series of long, ragged scratches. Strange tracks sprawled across the upper reaches of the room as if some huge thing had prowled about up there as easily as it might run through the woods of Oak Mountain.

LESTER: I believe our Lee suffered a different sort of attack here.

While Marigold crouched down next to Lee, speaking to him in low tones, her father set to work.

Lester Graves had discovered he had the gift of banishing h'aunts and boogers and spirits and whatnot when he was still a child. His father had been a skilled witchdoctor himself, and recognizing the same talent in his youngest son, began training up young Lester as soon as the boy began to show the signs. These days, those people who believed in the power of exorcism were often of the opinion that it took a holy man to effect a banishing, or at least that the bible must of necessity be involved in the process. Lester knew damn well that wasn't true — he could usually rid a house of whatever plagued it with little to nothing in the way of herbs, roots, and the sundry other trappings of many workings. He also knew that most folks were wary of those who were different from them, and even more suspicious of any ideas that might challenge their heartfelt beliefs.

Lester considered himself a student of history. He knew well the sort of misfortune that could befall folks under such circumstances. Thus, he went to church every Sunday with his wife and daughter, both believers in that great paternal being in the sky. He donated to the congregation's widows and orphans fund whenever he could spare a nickel, and at the annual church picnic, he told the minister's wife she made the best fried chicken he had ever tasted — which was a lie, but if god did exist, Lester imagined he would forgive him a fib spoken only in kindness. And these days when Lester performed a banishing, he trotted out the words and props that folks expected to accompany an exorcism, a bit of stagecraft for the sake of his clients' comfort and his family's peace of mind.

LESTER: I reclaim this house in the name of the father and his son, our lord and savior Jesus Christ, and the holy spirit that sustains us all. Hear me, whatever foul thing dares invade this place that is sanctified by this young couple's bonds of holy matrimony. You are unwanted and unwelcome here, and in the name of all that is good, I cast you out!

Lester felt his gift push outward from his center, the power of the green infusing the words that brought comfort and reassurance to those who usually called upon him. Whether he believed those things didn't matter. His daughter did, and he believed in her, so if he could exercise his talents in a way that eased her fear and suffering, he would. Lester expected to feel some

resistance. The boogers and h'aints he banished from people's homes and barns, or from under bridges and the like, never wanted to go peacefully into that good night. But this was different. It was as though the power of whatever this was had submerged the house under deep, dark water. His working — one packed with enough fury and conviction to blast the most stubborn of spirits out of this world — did little more than create a bubble of space that gave them room to breathe a little freer. Whatever was attacking his son-in-law had yielded the parlor to them, but no more than that.

On the ruined couch, Marigold held a shivering and weeping Lee to her bosom, rocking him like a baby. Lester Graves knelt down in front of them, looking first to his daughter.

LESTER: He been able to tell you anything?

Marigold shook her head and continued comforting her husband, who seemed to have finally accepted the reality of her.

LESTER: All right then. I need to ask y'all some questions. Answer as best you can, and answer truthfully. Don't look at me like that, Goldie. I ain't here to judge y'all, but this thing ain't gone yet, and I don't know how long we got til it starts acting up again. You hear?

From deep within his wife's comforting embrace, Lee nodded.

LESTER: Have you noticed any strange occurrences in the past seven days? Milk turning sour? Fire not wanting to burn? That sorta thing?

MARIGOLD: No, Daddy. You think I wouldn't notice if there were signs to be read in my own house?

LESTER: You'd be *surprised* what folks don't see when it's right under their nose, missy. But I hear you. Have you noticed any strange tracks or unusual animal activity on the property?

Doc sat up, pulling away from his wife but taking her hand, maintaining that connection with her.

DOC: Something tore up the fence around the edge of the property. It left some strange tracks — I couldn't make head nor tail of them.

LESTER: When was this?

DOC: It was the day after Goldie went to stay with y'all. Within the next day or so this thing, this big white-furred booger—

MARIGOLD: I asked you if Jibber Watts was involved! I'll skin that gray-bearded sumbitch myself—

DOC: Baby I told you it wasn't Jibber — this was an *actual* booger. Tall as the ceiling, long white hair all over its body, claws. Beat the everloving shit out of me — uh, pardon my French, sir.

Marigold's brow furrowed.

MARIGOLD: What about the wards?

DOC: Whatever this... thing... is, it walked through our wards like they was nothing. It said that I invited it in, but I ain't done nothing. You know me better than that, Goldie.

Lester Graves thought for a moment.

LESTER: Has anything new been brought into the house lately? Something willingly carried across the wards? Second hand furniture, maybe. Something you felt drawn to, or an inexplicable fondness for?

Marigold Underwood's eyes flashed as she gripped her husband's hand and held it up.

MARIGOLD: Or a ring you never wanna take off?

Doc's eyes widened as the tiger's eye flashed in the morning sunlight. Lester's face grew dark.

LESTER: Where'd you find that pinky ring, Lee?

MARIGOLD: I'll tell you where he got it. Working with that devil, J.T. Fields.

DOC: Baby, please. Do you recognize it, sir?

LESTER: I've seen one like it. Had to cut it off the finger of a dead man who was known to be cruel to his wife. When she fell pregnant, her mama decided no man alive was gonna mistreat her grandbabies. So she give him that ring. Told him it was to congratulate him on the birth of his firstborn. The thing she bound up in that band was a nightmare. A creature of pure spite and malice. A h'aint like that preys on the vanity of men, then breaks their bodies and their minds. Old boy was dead within a week of putting it on. When they found him, every bone in his body was busted up like matchsticks. Didn't have a sane thought left in his head til he passed.

DOC: I swear, sir, I ain't never been mean to Goldie nor raised a hand to her.

Lester Graves lifted a hand to forestall his son in law.

LESTER: Son, if I thought you ever had, or would, you wouldn't have made it to your wedding day. You got this ring on one of your little... adventures with that white man?

DOC: You know about Mr. Fields?

LESTER: Boy, every person round these parts with a gift knows Jack. Not all of us are foolish enough to throw in with him the way you have, but we know what he is. He give you that ring?

DOC: No, sir... not exactly. It was part of the... proceeds... of the last job we worked together. We split everything up, and this was one of the things I kept.

LESTER: That's something at least. This sort of curse needs to be given as a gift to do the worst.

Lee shivered as he remembered the ring's inscription: *For Daddy. May it keep you well.*

LESTER: We're lucky that baby ain't been born yet, else I bet it would hit you twice as hard. All the same, we gotta get it off you. Goldie, honey, fetch me my bag out the cart and we'll get started. I don't know how much time we have.

As it turns out, Lester Graves had enough time to remove the ring without costing Lee his little finger. Without the young father-to-be's fears and trepidations to feed on, the thing that had been bound within the tiger's eye ring returned to its vessel, which Lester sealed away in the velvet box it had come in. When his work was complete, he turned to his son-in-law with a stern expression.

LESTER: I'd recommend you return this to your... *friend*... and explain to him what it is. Tell him to seal it away somewhere it can't get up to any more mischief.

Doc's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he gazed at the little velvet box that rested in his palm.

DOC: Oh, I plan to. I believe Mr. Fields and I need to have a conversation.

Lee Underwood took a few days to rest and recover — and set their house to rights — before he set off for downtown Kingston, West Virginia. He walked through the doors of a nondescript storefront, nodding politely to a clerk who sat at the front desk, poring over a thick ledger. Recognizing him, the clerk barely acknowledged him, raising a distracted hand in greeting. Doc walked through the door of the back office and closed it behind him. The man in the plain brown suit, who sat at a desk at the center of the room, glanced up in surprise.

JACK: Doc! I didn't expect to see you so soon, son. It's good to—

Lee Underwood tossed the green velvet box onto the desktop, where it popped open, the tiger's eye once again gleaming.

JACK: Whoa now! What's all this?

Jack lifted the ring from its box, examining it in the afternoon sunlight that poured through the window behind him. His face paled.

JACK: Where did you get this, Doc? This thing is—

DOC: We're done. No more. No more jobs, no more secrets, no more scamming folks out of their money or magic or whatever else you might need to take from them. We're done.

JACK: Calm down. You didn't put this on, did you? That thing would—

DOC: Kill me? Oh, I know. You listen to me and listen well, Jack. We're done. You don't call on me. I don't call on you. I got a family now, and they have to come first. Maybe you don't understand that because a thing like you ain't got no kin. But I do. We do.

JACK: That sounds like Goldie talking.

DOC: Oh no, this is me, one hundred percent. Good old Doc. If you ever loved me, if you've ever cared for me and mine at all, you'll stay away. If you don't, it won't be me you'll have to worry about. It *will* be her talking then, and you ain't gonna like what she has to say. Good-bye, Jack.

JACK: Doc, no. C'mon, son, let's talk about this—

But Lee Underwood had already turned and walked out of Jack's office, past the industrious clerk, and out onto the street. When Doc returned home and told his wife about the confrontation with his old friend, Marigold Underwood thought with relief that she had finally seen the back of the man who called himself J.T. Fields. Unfortunately, as it turned out, she was mistaken.

Lee and Marigold enjoyed many years of relative peace before Jack reentered their lives. They continued to build their farm, adding a barn and a workshed, a cow, couple of pigs, and many crops to the land they tended and nurtured. They became a fixture of their community, serving folks in West Virginia and beyond over the course of time. They raised their children to be strong and kind, and watched as those young'uns married and began bringing their own babies

into the world. Their hair grew gray and their joints a little creaky, and Lee and Goldie were just fine with that.

Her eyes may not have been as keen as they once were, but when the knock came at the door on a bright autumn afternoon in 1918, Marigold Underwood had no trouble recognizing the man who called himself J.T. Fields. She could see him standing on the porch through the window of the parlor they had rebuilt after a hateful creature destroyed it all those years ago. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips flattened into a grim line as she set her knitting aside. Her husband Lee glanced up over the top of the newspaper he was reading and frowned when he saw her expression.

DOC: Who is it, Goldie?

MARIGOLD: Jesus. It's Jack.

Doc's brow furrowed. In all the years since that fateful day in Kingston, Jack had honored his request to stay away from Oak Mountain. In fact, the man had packed up and left West Virginia altogether without a further word exchanged between them not long after. They had never specifically warded Oak Mountain against Jack. In spite of everything, Lee still considered him a friend — if not one who could be part of his life anymore — and in any case, the wards he and his wife had crafted and nurtured over the years would repel anyone who meant them harm, so clearly Jack had come with no ill intent. That was the trouble though, wasn't it? Jack never really intended to do them harm, but he did it all the same. Lee sighed, and went to open the door.

DOC: Jack. What brings you here after all this time?

The man who stood on the Underwoods' front porch looked much the same as he had when Lee had last seen him, some thirty-odd years ago. He still wore a plain brown suit, though just like his hair and beard, it had been cut to suit the current fashion. If the lines on his face had deepened, it was only fractionally, and his eyes were as bright and lively as ever, his smile just as brilliant.

If Jack was surprised by the changes he saw in Lee Underwood, for whom time had most assuredly marched on, he didn't show it.

JACK: Doc! It is good to see you, old friend.

Beaming, Jack extended his hand to shake. Doc didn't return the gesture. Instead he continued to meet the man's gaze — not staring him down, not even unfriendly, but merely waiting for his question to be answered. After a moment, Jack sighed and tucked his hand back into his coat pocket, seeming to deflate before Lee's eyes.

JACK: I guess that's fair. I know you told me to stay away — and I have for all this time! I've honored your wishes, Doc, you can't deny that. And I wouldn't have come now if it wasn't important.

Reluctant as he was to allow the man back into their lives again, Lee Underwood could hear the ring of truth in Jack's words. So he stepped aside, and gestured for his old friend to come into the parlor. Marigold had risen from her seat on the sofa, and stood eyeing the pair of them, her arms folded across her chest. Removing his hat politely, Jack nodded to her and smiled cautiously.

JACK: Afternoon, Goldie. It's nice to see you again.

MARIGOLD: It's *Miz Underwood* to you, and I'm afraid I can't say the same.

DOC: Now, honey—

Doc attempted to intercede, but his wife silenced him with a look.

MARIGOLD: I believe it's time to start getting supper on. Should take about an hour.

And with that, Marigold Underwood turned her back on the two men, walked out of the parlor, and closed the door firmly behind her. To Doc, the meaning was clear: he had one hour, after

which his guest would have to go. The two men made themselves comfortable, and Jack began to explain.

JACK: It's that damned ring. You know, the one you brought back to me after our last job?

DOC: Oh, I remember it. You were supposed to lock that thing away where it couldn't do any more harm.

JACK: I know, and I did. I swear to you, Doc, I've kept the thing under lock and key, but an artifact like that? It's got a mind of its own. It wants to get out, to run loose in the world, wreaking as much havoc as it can. There's only so much a body can do, before sooner or later—

DOC: Uh huh. And just how, exactly, did this inanimate object walk itself out your door?

Jack was silent for a moment. His gaze dropped to his hands, which currently occupied themselves with spinning his brown fedora round and round between his knees. Doc couldn't help but enjoy his obvious discomfort, just a little, and so he waited. Finally, Jack cleared his throat.

JACK: I, uh... well. I'm not quite sure how it happened, but there seems to have been a breach of security at my—

DOC: You mean to say you got robbed. You — the original cat burglar. Somebody done waltzed into *your* house and...

JACK: It's not funny.

DOC: The hell it ain't!

JACK: This is no laughing matter, Doc Underwood!

DOC: All right. All right, you win. This is, obviously, a serious problem... but you have to admit it's a little funny.

Jack eyed him sourly, declining to admit anything of the sort, and continued.

JACK: Anyway, that damn ring's not the only thing that was took, maybe not even the worst of the lot. I need you to help me get it all back.

Doc raised a skeptical eyebrow and gestured down at himself.

DOC: You need *my* help? Seriously? Jack, look at me. I'm an old man now.

JACK: That may be, but you're still the right man for this job. And probably the *only* man I can trust. Any other fool might try to keep some of these... items... for himself. You know how folks are when it comes to things like this — hell, power in general. You of all people understand what's at stake here.

Lee Underwood could not argue that point. He had seen far too many bright young lights snuffed out too soon by the douter of their own hubris. He had made that mistake himself once, and nearly paid for it with his life.

DOC: All right. I'm in. Do you happen to know who has these artifacts now?

Jack's expression darkened.

JACK: Oh, I know. That's another reason I need you.

The two men spent the remainder of the time Marigold had allotted them outlining a basic plan, which they would begin to flesh out on the road when Jack returned to pick Doc up the next day. By the time his wife stepped back into the parlor to announce that supper was ready — to which she pointedly did not extend an invitation to Jack — Doc was already making a mental list of the supplies he would need to pack up from the house, as well as others he would need to purchase on his way.

With an unnerving sense of déjà vu, Doc lay next to his wife that night, in the bed they had shared for decades now, discussing what would well and truly be the last job he undertook with J.T. Fields.

MARIGOLD: I can't believe you going off with that man again., Lee. You promised me.

DOC: I know, baby, and I've kept my word to you all these years. But this... this is different.

MARIGOLD: Oh, really? Because this feels awful familiar to me.

DOC: It is. This ain't for the money, Goldie, or for any other prize. That... thing... is back out in the world, and sooner or later, somebody's gonna get hurt. I can't let that happen.

MARIGOLD: It's not your responsibility. It's Jack's. Let him clean up his own mess.

DOC: Honey, that just ain't true. I know how you feel about Jack, and how much you love me, but the fact is, I was right there with him. If folks get hurt because of any of them things we stole — *I* stole — I've got just as much blood on my hands as Jack.

There was nothing Marigold could say to argue with that. She crossed her arms over her chest and turned her face away from him, but Doc could see the gleam of tears in the corner of her eye. He turned over to face her, cupped her face in his hand, and kissed her cheek.

DOC: Trust me, baby. I'mma take care of this one thing, and I'll be home before you know it. Everything's gonna be just fine. I promise.

Doc Underwood's final promise to his wife turned out to be the one he could not keep. The man Jack returned to her five days later was a broken one, delirious and raving, his health shattered. When Marigold responded to the pounding on her door, Jack all but fell inside, her husband carried awkwardly in his arms. He stumbled over to the sofa in the parlor and laid Lee down as gently as he could.

Marigold's heart raced, her terror tempered only by the rage that kindled in her heart. She pushed Jack aside and sank down next to Lee. He was feverish and shaking, his trembling voice muttering on and on, too fast and low for her to make any sense of what he said. Marigold glared up at the man who had brought so much suffering into their lives.

MARIGOLD: What happened to him!? What did you do?

JACK: It wasn't me! It wasn't me! Goldie, I did all I could for him. I—

Beads of sweat formed on Jack's brow as he felt the temperature of the room rising in the face of Marigold Underwood's fury. She stared daggers through him from her position on the couch, where she cradled her husband's head in her lap. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes, but her voice was hard and clear as crystal when she spoke.

MARIGOLD: Get out! Oak Mountain is closed to you from here on, Jack, you who calls himself J.T. Fields. You are not welcome here, nor ever will be again. Begone!

Jack felt the Underwoods' wards stir at words, the layers of magic the couple had imbued their land with over the course of more than thirty years rising to enforce her will. His own eyes stung as he looked for the last time on his old friend.

JACK: I'm so sorry, Doc. I'm sorry.

And then he turned and walked out of the Underwoods' home for the last time.

In the vast chamber where the Rock held its tribunal, the assembled witnesses and onlookers sat still and silent as Marigold Underwood raised a spotless white handkerchief to dab at her eyes. Grief was written clear on her face, had carved deep lines into her soft skin over the course of many years, but her spine was straight, and her voice did not shake as she continued.

MARIGOLD: After a few days, Lee's fever broke, and he found his right mind again, thank Jesus. But he was never the same. I tried every way I knew to heal him — he couldn't heal himself, nor anyone else, after what happened to him. Nothing worked. He was dead within a year.

The room fell silent again, all those in attendance taking a moment to absorb the impact of her words. Even Skint Tom's borrowed face wore a solemn expression. Hiram Cook startled as the representative of the dark nudged him, breaking the spell Granny Underwood's words had cast. He glanced down at his notes and cleared his throat.

HIRAM: So it is your testimony, Miz Underwood, that it was the defendant — this man, Jack — who in fact inflicted these grievous injuries on your husband, resulting in his eventual demise?

Marigold Underwood shot the man an irritated look.

MARIGOLD: Is that what I said, Hiram Cook? I think you need to clean out your ears, boy. No, it wasn't Jack who attacked Doc. It was whoever — or *whatever* — they went to steal those cursed things back from. I never got the full story. Lee's memory of those days was... fuzzy, and it upset him to talk about it, so I let it be.

HIRAM: Ma'am, I'm confused. When you began your testimony, you stated that Jack killed your husband. Could you possibly clarify that statement for us?

Marigold Underwood let out a weary sigh. Her eyes swept the room, taking in the whole of the assembled tribunal — the witnesses and onlookers, the exhausted-looking bailiff, the council members with the Harbinger at their center, and finally Jack himself, sitting at the table reserved for the accused with the youngest Walker girl at his side. When she was certain she had everyone's attention, she continued.

MARIGOLD: I did say that, yes. For more than twenty years, I have held that man responsible for my husband Doc's death. But all this week, I have sat in this room and listened to y'all tell your stories, and it seems to me that a whole lotta folks blame Jack for a whole lotta things. And I realized something. Jack didn't kill my husband, no more than he killed Miz Walker's people,

or those poor fools out in the Clutch. Jack Fields may have sold y'all rope, but he didn't make you hang yourselves with it.

The chamber erupted in chaos. Everyone seemed to have something to say about Granny Underwood's words, and all of them started talking — in some cases, yelling — at once. The creature that called itself Mr. Po lashed its many tails furiously, spittle flying from its jaws as it shouted in protest. Bettie Jo Meaders had to be led, shrieking and crying, from the room by her daughter. The bailiff pounded her staff on the floor furiously.

BAILIFF: Order! We will have order here!

Once the gallery had settled back into uneasy whispers, the bailiff nodded to Hiram Cook that he could continue. He cleared his throat again and turned a gentle smile on the woman in the witness chair.

HIRAM: Now, Miz Underwood... ma'am. You know you can't speak to the veracity of other folks' claims. And while it's very kind of you to give the man the benefit of the doubt, I think we can all agree that—

MARIGOLD: Don't you patronize me, Hiram Cook. Save it for that little girl you got locked up in your basement.

The chamber erupted in laughter. Hiram Cook's face turned scarlet as he sputtered,

HIRAM: Now, see here, Marigold! I don't—

MARIGOLD: Oh, don't bother denying it, Hiram. Everybody knows. As for the benefit of the doubt? I ain't giving that man over there the benefit of *nothing*. We ain't never gonna be friends, but I'm done blaming him for my husband's death. The truth is, my Lee made his own choices, just like the rest of y'all and the folks you lost. In his case, Doc died doing what he thought was right. I think maybe it's time I start honoring that instead of being angry at ol' Jack about it. The rest of y'all oughta think real careful about whether you want to be part of this kangaroo court they're running here.

Hiram Cook sputtered angrily, attempting to regain some control of his witness, but Marigold Underwood had said her piece. As she rose from the witness chair and prepared to leave, at the opposite table, Jack shot to his feet. At his side, D.L. Walker put a warning hand on his elbow, but he waved her off.

JACK: Goldie, wait!

Marigold didn't answer him, but she paused, her ear cocked in his direction, clearly listening.

JACK: I loved Doc, loved him like he was my own nephew. I know it probably don't matter much to you, but... I *am* sorry. So damn sorry.

Marigold Underwood nodded and turned to meet his eyes for a moment.

MARIGOLD: I know. Good luck, Jack.

And with that, she proceeded into the gallery, where she was met by her daughter Nina, and the two women walked out of the chamber.

The momentary quiet achieved by the bailiff's call for order disintegrated as the doors closed with an echoing thud. Voices — human, beast and otherwise — rose in a tumult. It was hard to know what to make of what had just happened. Granny Underwood's words carried weight with those who walked in the light of the green, and even some aligned with the dark. Some folks were forced to reflect on what they'd come here to do and why they'd come to do it. Others howled in protest. They'd come here for the blood of an immortal, and they didn't plan to leave without it.

The Black Stag rose and glared up at the Harbinger, red eyes smoldering rather than burning, his amber crown pulsing with a low, sickly light. The Keeper of the Black Word strained against the prohibition of gifts, his fury evident even in this diminished form. His daughters joined him, their eyes locked on their youngest sister, who appeared ready to fly across the courtroom and attack Jack with a fountain pen if she had to. Tension filled the air. The impotent thrum of so

many gifts unnaturally suppressed in one space was almost palpable. Angry words flew and voices grew louder, the whole assembly on the verge of rioting.

The ground trembled like the hind leg of an anxious hound dog as the Harbinger rose and, in one fluid motion, flung the stout table at which she and her company sat towards the balcony, where it nearly decapitated a family of witches before exploding into kindling against one of the thick beams that supported the roof of the chamber. The beam itself groaned, and a crack split through its center, neatly cleaving a series of sigils that ringed its surface in two. A flicker of energy passed through the room, like a tiny kiss of summer lightning, as the enchantments that powered the room's enhanced acoustics — as well as suppressing the gifts of those who came to observe and bear witness — disintegrated.

Old Green Eyes shivered, and his hazy black form grew a bit denser. Beside him, Skint Tom's new face settled seamlessly over his bones, and lit up with a grin.

The Harbinger had not yet finished. She roared with an unholy furor, her voice filling the chamber until nearly everyone present was forced to cover their ears to muffle the onslaught.

The council member seated next to her began to speak, nervously, as if calming a spooked horse. The Harbinger whirled around, grabbed the woman by the throat, and twisted until, with a sound of cracking bone and ripping flesh, the head tore free of her neck. Blood gushed from the stump in a fountain as her body fell to the floor. The hooded woman tossed the severed head like a skipping stone into the lower gallery, where it socked a young witch in the stomach and rolled into her lap. The girl screamed — the first of many — as those about her scrambled to get away. The Harbinger snatched up another of her adjudicators and ripped the poor woman in half from collarbone to hip, the gore staining her white robe scarlet. Then, fairly vibrating with rage, she turned upon the fleeing onlookers and spoke.

HARBINGER: We have come too far to turn back now. We have him. After all this time, we have him. You will not take the word of a shriveled old crone and turn your back on the work I brought you here to do. We will find this creature guilty of his crimes, or I will bring this mountain down and seal you all beneath an ocean of stone and darkness, as we should have done from the beginning. Do you hear me, you worthless scraps of meat!? My will be done. Do you

hear me? My will be done! You have told your wheeling, pathetic tales and bared your own foolishness. Are these falsehoods? Have you lied to this court, you wretched vermin? Have you broken our compact with falsity, or do you stand by your testimony so that we might finally have our justice?

The Harbinger extended a claw-like hand toward the remaining wooden beams that carried the bailiff's proclamations and the banging of her infernal staff, as well as allowing the entire gallery to hear clearly. Voices began to emanate from the carefully etched oak. All the testimony given against the man called Jack, or J.T. Fields — or whatever name his accusers called him — poured forth once more, overlapping in a cacophony of what sounded much like the tales that had been passed down through generations about the old trickster and his deeds. The runes carved into the wood began to glow with a dark fire as they replayed the host of charges against the man. The damaged column sparked as its failing magic was called upon and then began to smoke and burn, a fire that spread to the other beams. The recorded voices faltered and died with the flames.

Jack smiled.

JACK: Well! Seems like the one in violation of their word here is you, Harbinger. That was a pretty impressive display of power, after all the fuss you made about this chamber being secured against the use of gifts. People may have overlooked your little silencing trick as a necessity of the court, but uh... I think you might have crossed the line with flexing superhuman strength there. And, of course, murdering your own people in front of a full-blown audience is never a good look.

Skint Tom stirred in his seat.

TOM: Actually, I'd disagree—

JACK: Not now, Tom.

TOM: Yessir. Sorry, Jack.

Jack rose to his feet, raising his arms high overhead and arching his back into a long, luxuriant stretch. He rolled his neck a few times, shrugged his shoulders, and let out a satisfied sigh.

JACK: Oh, yeah. That feels better. Ya know, I was feeling right poorly when this little dog and pony show got started, but sitting here these last few days, listening to y'all spinning your tales of ol' Jack has done me a *world* of good. I'm feeling downright sprightly. I don't think that's what the Harbinger had planned, but it seems she forgot what really gives me the small but respectable amount of power I've maintained over the years. I *am* the Jack of Tales, after all.

The bailiff banged her staff on the ground.

BAILIFF: The accused will remain silent!

The rhythmic drumbeat of her staff, now near frantic, was nowhere near as loud now that the magically enhanced acoustics of the chamber had been compromised. Jack shot the woman an irritated glance.

JACK: I think we've all had enough of you and that little stick, ma'am.

A sharp crack echoed off the stone walls, and the bailiff's staff fell to the floor in three jagged pieces.

BAILIFF: You dare—

D.L. Walker rose smoothly to her feet at Jack's side, raising her voice over the bailiff's outraged stammering.

D.L. WALKER: Correction, madam bailiff. In a court of law, the accused has the *right* to remain silent. It's not a requirement. Mr. Fields here also has every right to speak in his own defense.

Dougie Walker smiled brightly at the bailiff, then nodded to her client to continue.

JACK: Thank you, Miz Walker.

Jack surveyed the nervous gathering of witnesses and onlookers, folks with an ax to grind and the sort of general busybodies who simply enjoy any drama that doesn't involve them. Most were on their feet, caught in the process of making their way out the doors to the rear of the chamber in the wake of the Harbinger's tantrum. They hesitated now, curiosity settling its hooks into them like a well-baited fishing line. Jack smiled.

JACK: I should thank you folks for helping me get back on my feet. As I said, hearing all your stories has been mighty restorative. You know who else has a story about ol' Jack?

Jack spun dramatically on his heel to level a finger at the hooded figure in the center of the dais.

JACK: That one right there. Calls itself the Harbinger. That's right, you heard me. Its got its own little story about me, one it don't want y'all to hear. But I think y'all have the right to hear it, given that it's the real reason for... what did Goldie call it? This kangaroo court. I think you'll find it enlightening. Once upon a time, a *long* time ago — back when folks like you, Mr. Cook, were still hiding in caves, hoping not to get eaten — these mountains we call home looked very different — taller, and much more menacing than these gentle, rolling hills. To an outside observer, they looked like the perfect place to imprison something dangerous, beings of fathomless darkness and madness — your forebears, Miss Gray, older even than the one you call father.

HIRAM COOK: Mr. Fields, we all *know* this story.

Hiram Cook interrupted him, looking both bored and irritated.

HIRAM COOK: Every green-touched child hears the stories about how the dark came to be part of our world at their Papaw's or Mamaw's knee. Now if you don't have anything—

JACK: I'm sure that's true, Hiram. Did you ever wonder who put them there?

Hiram Cook had no answer for that, nor apparently did anyone else. A low murmur swept through the assembled onlookers, and Jack continued.

JACK: Ya see, in order for something to be locked up, somebody's gotta be the jailer. That's what its people left it here to do. And yes, I do mean *it*. The Harbinger would like y'all to think that title is just an elected position within the community here at the Rock. It's not. That poor woman sacrificed her life to be a vessel for this thing, a body it can use here in our little world. But it's got an unfortunate tendency of using them up though, don'tchee? Every few years, some other poor soul gets "promoted" to the position. Nasty business, if you ask me. Not that ol' Harbie ever did. But it did ask me for *something*, though. See, it was one of the party that came here to entomb that darkness in our world. It didn't expect that they'd trap it here in a big rock and leave it behind. It was betrayed, and it was angry, and it wanted to get back to... well, wherever it came from. So it tried to make me take its place. Can you imagine? Not being a fool, I of course said no. I've never been much of the law and order type, as y'all well know. So there it sat, simmering in its own juices, stuck inside a rock with nowhere to go. After a while, it started reaching out to others like it. To those nobody else wanted, those that the green and the dark left behind. Built itself a whole little kingdom out of those folks. I ran across its people from time to time, but it never ended well for me. Every time I got close, I got knocked on the head and left out somewhere without the slightest notion of how to get back. I guess it was having its revenge by excluding me from its little paradise. Eventually I just left it alone. To be honest, I'd all but forgot about it, but I guess it never stopped thinking about me. I mean shoot, if I was stuck inside a mountain and all I ever heard was stories about how clever and good-looking the one feller who could have gotten me out was, I suppose I'd build up a grudge too.

From her position at the front of the dais, the hooded woman seethed, her breath heaving, muscles taut with hatred. She glared at Jack from beneath her hood, but made no move to stop him.

JACK: I bet y'all are wondering why ol' Harbie here ain't brought the mountain down on all our heads yet like it threatened to. My guess is that it can't. Over the years I've learned a little about the Rock and its people. Never been sure what's true and what's bunk, but this much I can confirm. Like I said, that poor woman whose body it's wearing like a cheap suit? She might have been bred and raised for possession by something from some other world, but that's still just a human body — and an ungifted one at that. It wasn't built to handle all this supernatural heavy lifting. As I understand it, the Harbinger usually just sits around delivering prophecies and

using its power to make the land prosperous for its people, which don't take much energy but still wears them bodies out every decade or so. But all the time we've been here for this so-called trial, it's been channeling enough power to light up half the Cumberland Valley and then some. A human body ain't meant to endure all that. I figure it ain't got too long before it has to leave that body and return to the Rock or wherever it keeps itself until a new host is prepared.

Jack turned to address the folks assembled in the gallery — witches and root doctors, h'aunts and boogers, children of the green and spawn of the dark and those who owed no fealty to either. He gestured to the panting figure of the Harbinger behind him.

JACK: Keepers of the green, look upon one of those who brought the dark to your world. The kin you lost in the struggle against them? You can lay those deaths at that thing's feet. Servants of the inner dark, behold the hands that caged your masters and would see you purged from the universe like dishwater down a drain. The ones you serve never asked to be here, nor would they stay here if they had their druthers. The way I see it, y'all got a choice. You can keep doing this thing's dirty work and move on me where I stand, or you can walk away. The wheel keeps on turning, and we all live to see another day.

The chamber was quiet for a long moment, as the denizens of the green and the dark stared around at each other, tense and uncertain. And then the silence was broken by a meaty *thud* as the vessel that had contained the being calling itself the Harbinger slumped to the floor. The bespectacled woman who had stood at the front of the dais throughout the course of these proceedings let out a soft cry and rushed to her side. After a moment, the remaining two members of the Council of the Rock, still looking stunned, joined her. As the three women hovered over the Harbinger's still form, a soft buzz of conversation rose in the gallery.

TOM: Hot damn, Greenie! This is the best damn show I've seen in years. I wish somebody'd thought to bring popcorn.

Old Green Eyes nodded at Tom in agreement.

OLD GREEN EYES: Indeed. Most entertaining.

The Black Stag rose with a disgusted snort.

BLACK STAG: Disappointing. Come, daughters. We've wasted enough of our time on this farce.

A swirling void opened beneath the hooves of the creature whose name sounded like Hornèd Head, but was not. The stag and the three women who attended him sank into it, and were gone. The stag's exit seemed to be the cue that many were waiting for, as others began to take their leave, either by means of similar portals or slowly milling toward the doors at the back of the chamber.

Finally, the bailiff rose to her feet. Jack grinned as he saw her reach for a staff that was no longer at her side. Without the benefit of either the room's enhanced acoustics or her cherished walking stick, she was forced to raise her voice above the chatter.

BAILIFF: Ladies and gentlemen, Things and Workers, the Rock thanks you for your testimony! I'm afraid the Harbinger is unable to continue. The remaining members of the council have determined that insufficient evidence has been presented to warrant proceeding further. This tribunal is dismissed!

She shouted at the backs of the already retreating crowd. Turning to the table where Jack still stood, she nodded to D.L. Walker with a sour expression and pronounced stiffly,

BAILIFF: Miss Walker, your client is free to go. Someone will escort him to his cell to retrieve any belongings he may have left there.

The attorney looked up at Jack.

D.L. WALKER: Is there anything you need from your cell?

JACK: Hell, no.

Dougie turned back to the bailiff with the trademark sunny smile that she wielded so effectively to needle her opponents.

D.L. WALKER: Thank you, bailiff, but I think we'll just see ourselves out.

Marcie Walker, who had sat behind them in the gallery throughout the whole ordeal, joined them at their table as her sister gathered her things, neatly tucking her notes and pens into a soft-sided leather bag. Jack smiled.

JACK: Well, Miss Marcie, it seems I find myself in your debt again. I appreciate your help.

He turned to Dougie Walker, and reached out to shake her hand.

JACK: Thank you for your assistance, Miss Walker.

MARCIE: Yes, thanks for coming, Dougie. I know how you feel about... these matters, and—

Dougie waved her off.

D.L. WALKER: Nothing offends me so much as the sort of miscarriage of justice I've witnessed here. I'm glad I was able to offer *some* help, although I have a feeling Mr. Fields here had things well in hand.

There was a twinkle in her eye as the corner of her mouth quirked up in a mischievous grin.

JACK: Why, Miss Walker, you give me far too much credit. I have no idea what you mean,

Jack said with a wink. Then D.L. Walker hoisted her bag onto her shoulder, and the three of them began making their way toward the door behind the rest of the crowd.

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

STEVE: Well, hey there, family. And so we come to the end of the final episode of Season Four of Old Gods of Appalachia, Root & Branch. And that is truly a deluxe episode, checking in at well over an hour. Seems like that's kinda become our tradition here at Old Gods of Appalachia,

to give you that big, meaty chonker boy right there at the end of the season. Now I am joined here in the post roll today by my co-creator, your beloved Hedge Witch, Miss Cam Collins. How you doing over there, family?

CAM: I'm doing great. Happy to finally reach the end of season four. It's been real, it's been fun, but it's time to put this baby to bed and turn our attention to other things.

STEVE: Now, family, you know we can never tell you everything about what's going on behind the scenes here at Old Gods of Appalachia, but we can tell you about a few things. First up is the 2024 national tour, Unhallowed Grounds, coming to a venue near you this summer. Cam, tell them where we're going.

CAM: We'll be kicking off the tour on June 13th in Durham, North Carolina. Durham, y'all were so good to us last year. We can't wait to see you again. Next up will be Athens, Georgia — my old stomping grounds, Go Dawgs — Knoxville, Tennessee, and Greenville, South Carolina. Then we'll be heading down to New Orleans and Texas in the latter part of the month — and that's just June, family.

STEVE: We're traveling all over the country from June through September, family, so come on out and see us. Tickets available at oldgodsofappalachia.com/tour. But that's not all. For those of you who've tithed your souls to us over on Patreon for the low cost of \$10 a month, we'll be rolling out a very special treat this summer. Back in 2022 — which seems like both yesterday and a lifetime ago, because time is a flat circle and also a lie — we did a very limited run of just three live shows that we called Unknown Roads. Lots of y'all came out to see us — some of you even crossed the Atlantic to be with us — but we know that many, many more of you wanted to see those shows but tickets sold out super fast.

CAM: Many of you asked us if those shows would be recorded, and as always, the answer was no, but that we may release studio versions of those stories one day, at some indeterminate time in the future. For our Patreon family, that time is nigh.

STEVE: That's right! This summer we will be releasing our main story from Unknown Roads, entitled "The Ties That Bind," exclusively on Patreon. This standalone tale features some of

your favorite characters and actors, including Brandon Sartain as Indiana Boggs, the Hedge Witch herself as Deeley Hubbard, and the amazing Yuri Lowenthal as the Railroad Man. But that's not all, family. Returning to reprise his very first role with us, we have Mr. Cecil Baldwin — you might know him from a little show called Welcome to Night Vale — as Rupert Morris. So if you haven't tossed your offering in the collection plate just yet, now is the perfect time to join us over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. And there's a lot more to listen to in the meantime. Is there anything else we can tell them about now, Cam?

CAM: Well, we could answer one of the most common questions we receive whenever a season ends. NO, the show is not over. YES, we will be back. As if we weren't already busy enough, in between touring this summer, we'll be putting our evil little heads together to map out Season Five, which will kick off on our fifth anniversary — Halloween — October 31st, 2024. Will you join us, family?

STEVE: I think they will. So this is your every dang episode reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media and is distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood, and our outro music, "Atonement," is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. The voice of Doc Underwood is D.J. Rogers. The voice of Marigold Underwood is Stephanie Hickling Beckman, and the voice of D.L. Walker is Cam Collins. Introducing Dasan Ahanu as the voice of Lester Graves. We'll talk to you soon, family.

CAM: Talk to you real soon.

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