

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 58: Opportunity Knocks

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

In the cavernous room far beneath the mountains of West Virginia, Jade Louise Benton sipped at a glass of water while the man questioning her looked over his notes and the folks in the gallery milled about, chatting quietly. It had been a long day, and with everyone clearly growing tired and peckish, the Harbinger had signaled the bailiff for a brief recess. Refreshments had been provided for the witnesses and for the representatives of the Green and the Dark — ham sandwiches, coffee, and water. The assembled lookie-loos were on their own, apparently, and it appeared that some had come prepared with snacks, while others were just out of luck. The man facing trial had been afforded no such accommodation — at least not until the smartly dressed woman seated beside him had made a fuss on his behalf.

The five women who comprised the Rock's council filed back into the chamber, and the folks in the gallery returned to their seats. The bailiff struck her staff ceremonially against the stone floor, each thrust reverberating through the space in a way that hurt Jade's sensitive ears. She grimaced and quickly polished off the last of her glass of water, which was whisked away by one of the white-sashed attendants who moved about the room.

Hiram Cook rose from the table where he had sat conferring with the representative of the Dark, Miss Gray, and approached the front of the room.

HIRAM: Are you ready to continue, Miss Benton?

Jade nodded, and Hiram regarded her with a serious expression.

HIRAM: It has been your testimony — and that of Miss Meaders before you — that this man, Erebus Cain, kidnapped the three of you.

JADE: Yessir. So he did.

Hiram nodded thoughtfully.

HIRAM: Well, Miss Benton, it seems curious to me — and I'm sure others assembled here —

Hiram's arm swept around in a gesture encompassing the council, the assorted witnesses and onlookers, and presumably the mountain itself.

HIRAM: — that this man could manage to hold hostage three such capable young folk as yourselves. Werewolves, I'm told, are mighty strong. You yourself have in fact testified to your cousin Anthony's colossal strength. The three of you, together? Against one man?

Hiram chuckled, shaking his head.

HIRAM: I don't mind saying, Miss Benton, it just don't seem likely.

Jade felt a flush creep up her chest, staining her neck and cheeks a bright pink. They hadn't wanted any part of this — they didn't know this J.T. Fields from Adam! They'd only agreed because Mr. Cook had promised them he could help Anthony find his wolf. And now the man had the gaul to stand here and call her a liar?

JADE: I just told you! It wasn't "just one man,"

Jade snapped.

JADE: Mr. Cain had a mess of folks working for him. If you broke the rules, he'd send one of his three lackeys to have a little talk with you. If you were lucky, it was just Granny Cloud. Hell, even the Goliath weren't too bad. Maybe he'd give you a black eye, somethin' like that, but he never did no permanent harm. After all, you wouldn't want to damage the "talent." But if you weren't lucky, he'd send the Eater 'round to your bunk.

Jade shuddered.

JADE: Ain't nobody wanted that.

HIRAM: So Erebus Cain used this... Eater... as a sort of enforcer to keep folks in line? And you're telling me that you three were so afraid of this feller that you didn't try to escape?

At that, Jade laughed out loud.

JADE: Well, of course we escaped. We wouldn't be here if we hadn't, now would we? We got away. It just... took some time. Because yes, we *were* afraid of him... of *it*. The Eater ain't some *feller*. I don't know *what* it is, but I'm telling you there's some things in this world a lot scarier than wolves, Mr. Cook.

["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 thing Jade Louise Benton did not tell Hiram Cook and the denizens of the Green and the Inner Dark gathered at the Rock was that being with the Traveling Marvels hadn't been all bad. That part was more complicated to explain, family. The fact was, Erebus Cain didn't treat the members of the Bone Pickin' String Band too badly. They became his star attraction, after all. To Erebus Cain, the three young wolves were valuable assets. It was in his best interest to keep them pacified so that he never had to send his muscle to have a talk with them.

When Cain returned to the warehouse as promised the next day, he came bearing both honeyed words and paper sacks loaded with breakfast. As the rolling door rattled open on its chain, he

peered in at the spot the three of them had camped out for the night, settled on a couple of old mattresses and piles of blankets they'd salvaged from the depths of the storage building. They watched him warily, uncertain how Erebus would react when he discovered Anthony had escaped his shackles, but he had merely chuckled.

CAIN: Got them off him, did you? Clever girl.

He spoke to Clover in the fond tones of a benevolent uncle, as the Goliath — ever at his side — passed out the bags of food along with a thermos of piping hot coffee they would have to share.

CAIN: My sincerest apologies for the... rough accommodations... my young friends. You've caught us rather at loose ends as our last run was cut unexpectedly short. But I believe our luck is about to change — not just mine, but yours as well.

As Jade, Anthony and Clover tore into bacon and eggs and sausage and biscuits — more fitting fare for three young wolves than the previous night's canned beans — Erebus Cain had spoken in nigh poetic tones of how he'd heard their playing from his office above the warehouse the night before and been moved near to tears by their talents. He said he would love to offer them a permanent place with the sideshow as its new headline attraction — with all the pay and benefits commensurate with that lofty position.

CAIN: Room and board are included, of course — three hot meals a day, and all the popcorn you can stomach! You'll see the whole of this great country alongside the finest troupe of entertainers you'll ever have the privilege to meet. We're like a little family here at the Traveling Marvels. I'm sure you'll fit right in.

Jade had wanted to go home — she was sure their parents were worried — but Anthony was still convinced he would not be welcomed back after his attack on his daddy, and she would not abandon him. Besides that? Truth to tell, it was easy to get caught up in Erebus Cain's enthusiasm. The man was, after all, a veteran of the stage and a seasoned promoter. The confidence he professed for their nascent musical career was flattering. And if his stage was not quite the sort whose boards were once tread by their grandfather, it was one that could perhaps provide a showcase for their more unique gifts.

As for Clover, while she was more than a little skeptical of the showman's promises — and more than a little resentful of the treatment she had received thus far — she had to admit that, before Cain had learned her secret, she had enjoyed the time she spent on the road with the sideshow. Hell, she'd considered asking the man if he needed any spare hands. Clover had spent most of her young life being shuttled between one place and the next. She was used to life on the road and found it agreed with her. If one town didn't suit her fancy, there was always the potential for something better just around the next bend. But it was a lonesome sort of existence, and she had appreciated the camaraderie Erebus' crew seemed to share. The Traveling Marvels was indeed a place where outcasts were embraced and accepted — that was one of very few things, as it would turn out, that Erebus Cain did not lie about.

The young musicians were allowed to keep the instruments they had discovered the night before, and Cain set them to work practicing. They spent the better part of a month learning songs and getting to know the sideshow's other attractions. There was a set of conjoined twins, Lucy and Lola, and the bearded lady, Miss Josephine, who functioned as a sort of house mother for the dancers of the burlesque troupe, providing choreography, costume design, and a shoulder to cry on in what seemed to be equal measure. There was Manfred the Contortionist, a skinny man whose pale skin was completely hairless, who told jokes so corny Jade thought even her dad would be ashamed.

The sideshow, of course, did not operate with performers alone. It was also home to a number of other folks who worked behind the scenes to make the whole show possible. There were ticket sellers and cooks and ride operators and a few hard-looking men who kept the crowds from putting hands on the dancers or otherwise harassing the talent. Anthony's favorite of these was the sideshow's engineer, a short, wiry little feller with a scruffy ginger beard and thinning hair he perpetually kept hidden under a flat cap known as the Marvelous Mechanic. Mike O'Connell was his name, and he had been with the sideshow since he was around Anthony's age. Mike was a mechanical genius and a sly wit, a convivial cut-up who was absolutely essential to keeping the whole operation running.

Then of course, there were the Three.

That was how everyone referred to Erebus Cain's closest associates — privately, if they knew what was good for them. The Goliath was one of them, along with the sideshow's fortune teller, Granny Cloud, an austere woman who kept mostly to herself, and of course, there was the Eater. Nobody talked about the Eater, and nobody used its name. It was spoken of only in whispers, and referred to then only as *it*, or *him*, depending on who was doing the whispering. At first, the young wolves couldn't quite understand what everybody seemed to find so scary about the geek. But they would learn.

They spent about a month in the little compound where the sideshow made camp in between gigs before Erebus announced that he had struck a deal with a carnival based out of Florida, and they would be traveling south to meet up with it on the outskirts of Mobile as it made its way north. Cain had scrounged up a battered old camper from a salvage yard up near Harlan to serve as mobile accommodations for the Bone Pickin' String Band. When he towed it into the fenced-in lot surrounding the warehouse, all busted-up from some wreck or another, folks immediately began debating just how much money had been lost on what was clearly a bad investment. But somehow Mike O'Connell, the Marvelous Mechanic himself, had managed to work one of his miracles on the old junker, and within a week she was running like a top. He hitched it to one of the trucks not currently towing anything else, and soon they were on their way.

The early performances of the Dog-Faced Boy and the Bone Pickin' String Band did not quite pan out as Erebus Cain had hoped. Audiences were too focused on Anthony's appearance to pay much attention to the music, and when the band simply ignored their shouted questions and taunts, they tended to get a little rowdy, a situation only exacerbated by the beers they were allowed to sell anytime they traveled through a wet county. It wasn't until their third performance was derailed when security was forced to remove a dozen men from their tent that Anthony had seized upon the solution to their problem. Remembering that first night they'd spent at the warehouse, joking around in haphazardly assembled costumes, he sought out the ladies of the burlesque troupe for a wardrobe consultation.

The next evening, when the Bone Pickin' String Band took the stage, the sight that greeted the audience was one that would become their calling card: two women — one on fiddle and the other with a guitar — dressed in severe black collared dresses buttoned up to the neck and

wide-brimmed black hats, alongside a tall, lanky figure draped in a voluminous black veil and holding the most beautiful banjo the crowd had ever seen. For a moment, the house fell silent, not quite knowing what to expect. In the back of the room, Anthony's eyes found Miss Josephine, who nodded encouragingly. Next to them, he spotted Erebus Cain, his brows lowered into an ugly scowl, clearly not pleased with this new look.

Then the band launched into an eerie rendition of "In the Shadow of the Pines," Clover and Jade's voices rising in plaintive harmony, and he had no more thoughts to spare for whatever Cain might think of his outfit. He was transported by the song, just as surely as the folks gathered around the stage listening in rapt attention. When they played the final note, the tent erupted with applause. Clover shot Jade a brief grin before they launched into the next song. And the next. And the next. By their final number, an upbeat crowd-pleaser, the audience was stomping their feet, hooting and hollering in a fashion far different from the reception they'd received at their first few gigs. As the piece reached its crescendo, Anthony whipped off the veil, and all three members of the band threw their heads back and howled.

The crowd exploded, cheering and clapping and calling for an encore, which they were happy to provide. There was no more heckling, no ugly slurs or beer cans hurled at the stage, only thunderous applause. And perhaps the loudest was that of Erebus Cain, who was now grinning from ear to ear.

After that, things were alright for a time, if not so glorious as they had been led to believe. Cain had neglected to mention, on that fateful morning when he released them from the warehouse, that the room and board he'd promised would be deducted from their wages — little of which they had actually seen. While others were paid promptly every Friday morning, either at a flat rate or a portion of ticket sales distributed by Granny Cloud, the three young wolves received a few dollars' "allowance" alongside a balance sheet which showed the compensation they were owed, minus room and board and this weekly allotment. When they questioned the practice, they were told the bulk of their pay was being held "in trust," owing to the fact that they were not yet of legal age.

CAIN: Wouldn't want you to spend it all in one place, now would we? We have to think about your future! Is your weekly stipend not enough? Do you find yourselves wanting?

Cain asked, and upon reflection, the honest answer was no. The amount doled out to them each week by Granny Cloud had been enough to cover what few expenses they had — toiletries and other necessities picked up in town when needed, the occasional paperback book or candy bar or some other treat. Clover, however, was having none of it.

CLOVER: That ain't the point,

she told him flatly.

CLOVER: You owe us. It's right there on the balance sheet, and it's growing every week.

CAIN: My dear, that is entirely *my* point,

Cain told her in a patronizing tone.

CAIN: I am looking out for your best interests. If you find yourselves in need of something *specific*, by all means come to me and we'll discuss it.

He would entertain no further argument, and the Goliath showed them politely but firmly out of the management tent.

Pecuniary discontent aside, the Bone Pickin' String Band was seeing the whole, wide country. They roamed the deep south during the winter months, spending time on the beach in Florida and the Gulf Coast and wandering the streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras — a time when folks didn't glance twice at Anthony as they weaved between throngs of tourists, assuming his furry face was part of a costume donned for the festivities. In the summer, they headed north to the midwest, the sideshow opening its tents beneath starry skies that stretched all the way to the horizon, as if the vast maw of space might swallow them up at any moment. They saw the Great Lakes and the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore and Mount Hood, and far stranger things all across the wide expanse of North America.

And eventually, they saw the Eater.

By this time, of course, they had technically seen the Eater's *show*, the performance he put on for the curious and crass who wandered through the flaps of his tent every evening. Sooner or later, you saw everybody run through their routine in a sideshow. It was unsettling, no doubt about that. It was understandable why the threat of a visit from the Eater persuaded the ragtag assortment of outsiders and oddities that formed the Traveling Marvels to mind their p's and q's. But the three wolves weren't really afraid. Surely, they thought, Mr. Cain wouldn't actually send the Eater after a member of his own troupe — they were, after all, valuable commodities, talented performers and hard-working crew members. Everyone played their part, and everybody was needed. But Erebus Cain was not a man to forgive insubordination. If sending the Eater to pay a visit to someone was tantamount to cutting off his nose to spite his face? Then by god, he'd just do without a nose.

The dog days of summer were upon them, and the sideshow was winding its way through Missouri, heading back east for a brief stop at their base of operations, when it happened. They had set up camp on the banks of the Missouri River just outside of Kansas City and were hastily erecting tents and stages and booths when a stranger wandered into their midst. He was young — somewhere in his twenties, probably — and incongruously dressed for the occasion in a plain gray suit and tie. He moved among them, looking around but not speaking to anyone, until the fortune teller Granny Cloud spotted him outside her tent and signaled to the Goliath.

GRANNY CLOUD: Excuse me, young man!

She called out to him.

STRANGER: M.. ma'am? Me?

GRANNY CLOUD: Yes, you. The Traveling Marvels is not yet open for business, dear. I'm afraid it can be... hazardous... for patrons to be on site while we're making preparations. I'm going to have to ask you to come back this evening.

The young man was not in fact a potential customer. His name was Sean O'Connell, and he was looking for his older brother, Michael. As it turned out, Kansas City was the Marvelous

Mechanic's hometown. His brother had heard the sideshow was in town and come to find him because their mother was gravely ill. He had written letters, Sean explained, but it seemed none of them had found their way to the traveling show.

"No they didn't," Mike had said with a measuring glance in the direction of Erebus Cain's tent. It was a curious thing, as Erebus employed a courier to see to it that important mail found its way into their hands, no matter where in the country they might happen to be. Then Mike had smiled, clapped his younger brother on the shoulder, and marched over to the management tent to inform the boss that he would need to be absent from work for a matter of days, perhaps a week.

Erebus Cain forbid it. How could they possibly function without their mechanic to assist with assembly of stages, rides, and other attractions every night? No no no, it was quite impossible. He was terribly sorry to hear about Mike's mother. He would make sure to have flowers sent to her hospital room that very afternoon.

Mike nodded grimly, and got back to work. The show opened right on time, just as the sun set. It was a profitable night all around, particularly for the Bone Pickin' String Band. Kansas City was a town that loved its music, and folks were excited to come out and witness their unique brand of pickin'. When the crowds dispersed and the gates closed, however, Mike O'Connell was nowhere to be found. Cain did not comment publicly on his disappearance, but to the wolves' sensitive ears, his displeasure was evident. They heard cursing coming from his tent late into the night, long past when everybody else had gone to bed.

Four days later, on the morning of their final day in Kansas City, Mike returned bright and early, his cheeks sunken and eyes hollow, though he still greeted everyone with a half-hearted smile. His mother had passed, he explained, after a six month battle with cancer. He had spent the week tied up with funeral arrangements and helping his family see to the disposition of what few worldly goods she had possessed. He was welcomed back by his compatriots in the troupe with hugs and condolences — and more than a few furtive glances in Mr. Cain's direction — before everybody got to work preparing to open for the evening.

Erebus Cain said nothing of the incident, and everything seemed fine. The sideshow packed itself up after the gates closed, preparing to move on to St. Louis the following morning. Once everyone had more or less settled in for the night, Anthony had left their cozy little camper to seek out his friend. He thought perhaps Mike might welcome some company, perhaps a round of poker or two to take his mind off his grief. The mechanic usually bedded down in a simple tent at the edge of the camp. With the big tents surrounding the various stages packed away, Anthony had a clear line of sight to the tent, lit from within by an old kerosene lamp, about a hundred yards across the flat field where they had set up shop. He was halfway there when the screaming started.

The walls of the tent began to shake, and something red splashed against its interior. Anthony broke into a run, instinctively raising his voice in a howl to alert his packmates that something was wrong. Anthony was fast, but by the time he'd crossed the fifty yards remaining between him and the place where Mike camped, the screaming had stopped. Jade and Clover caught up to him as he slowed, approaching the tent — now glowing red in the lamplight as if dyed — cautiously.

CLOVER: Mike?

Clover called out in a tense voice. No one answered, though the tent was far from silent. From within its canvas walls, they could hear wet, tearing sounds, interspersed with popping and grinding. The sticky smacking was perhaps the worst. The three of them stood frozen, too afraid to reach for the tent flap, as the horrible noises continued. When the small shelter finally fell silent and still and they found the courage to peek inside, there was nothing left but canvas and grass soaked in blood, a few fragments of bone and gristle, and a solitary pinky finger, familiar by the crooked middle knuckle and fingernail permanently blackened with grease. Only later would it occur to them that no one else responded to the screams, or Anthony's howls. They knew — had perhaps known from the moment Mike left camp — what was coming. The Eater had come for the Marvelous Mechanic.

It was then the Bone Pickin' String Band knew they had to get out, and get far away from Erebus Cain. They just didn't know how. There was, first and foremost, the Eater to consider. Secondly, there was the itinerant nature of the sideshow itself — even if they managed to escape and make

their way back home to Esau County, the Traveling Marvels roamed all across the country, and in particular the south, since that was their base of operations. There was no guarantee that Erebus Cain wouldn't find them eventually, perhaps by sheer coincidence. They pondered the question for the better part of a week, though they tried to keep it amongst themselves. The mood around the sideshow had grown notably less familial, everyone cagy and suspicious, afraid of being reported to Mr. Cain for even the slightest breach of his rules. If someone as vital to day to day operations as the show's mechanic could be sacrificed, then no one was indispensable.

Late one night, after they'd shared a gloomy meal in the mess tent before it was packed away in advance of their departure for the next town, they happened upon Granny Cloud, enjoying a cigarette outside the velvety folds of her embroidered tent. They nodded at her respectfully, preparing to move on to their camper, but she smiled and waved them over, and to their surprise, invited them inside.

GRANNY CLOUD: Good evening, my talented young friends. Would you care to join me for a cup of tea?

The three of them followed her into the warm confines of the tent and scrunched together on the padded bench near the door as she fetched four dainty cups edged in gold and a copper tea kettle from a camp stove near the back. She set cream and sugar in the center of the ornately carved round table between them, and invited them to help themselves. Anthony loaded his cup with sugar, while Jade stirred in a bit of both. Clover took hers black, as did Granny Cloud, who nodded at her approvingly.

They sipped their tea in silence, not quite knowing what to say, as they thus far enjoyed little interaction with the beautiful older woman with her white hair and piercing eyes. Granny Cloud rarely socialized with the rest of the performers, preferring to keep to her own devices. She didn't seem to mind the lack of conversation, as she relaxed into the plush armchair across from them. As they finished their tea, however, she reached out for each of their cups, which she placed on table in front of her, setting her own aside and gazing pensively at the dregs of leaves scattered in the bottom.

GRANNY CLOUD: There is a change in the air for y'all — all three of you,

She pronounced. Her eyes narrowed, and she nodded thoughtfully.

GRANNY CLOUD: Opportunity is blowing on the wind. But you must be quick to seize it. Quick and clever, lest the hour grow too late.

The three of them exchanged a glance. It was Clover who found the nerve to speak.

CLOVER: Ma'am, you'll pardon me saying but... just what the hell is that supposed to mean?

Granny Cloud merely shrugged, and fixed her with a thin, feline smile.

GRANNY CLOUD: I suppose you'll find out. I'm afraid my vision is no clearer than that. It appears those blessed with the wolf are challenging to read.

She lifted the kettle and poured another round of tea, unasked. As she settled back into her chair, she steered the conversation in a less confusing direction.

GRANNY CLOUD: I understand we're headed for Louisville next. Lovely city! One of my favorites. Mr. Cain's as well. Did you know it's home to the Kentucky Derby? Mr. Cain enjoys horse racing. As I understand it, there's a race our first night in town. Mr. Cain will likely be off grounds for the entire evening.

Granny Cloud fixed them with a canny look.

GRANNY CLOUD: You lot should steer clear of horses. They're afraid of wolves, you know.

When they had finished their second cups of tea, Granny Cloud sent the three of them on their way, citing the late hour and the early morning awaiting them. As they walked back to their cozy tin lizzie, however, Clover glanced back over her shoulder. At her nudge, Jade and Anthony looked back as well, just in time to see the hulking form of the Goliath ducking his head to follow the fortune teller into the folds of her tent.

The following week found them just outside of Louisville, where they set up camp in a wide field on the edge of a small horse farm. They were greeted by a tall, athletic woman of Amazonian proportions, with lush dark hair and a bright smile. She was introduced as their host and owner of the farm — one of Erebus Cain's oldest friends, Maria Rivas. Erebus swept her a courtly bow and kissed her hand. Apparently she would also be his companion at the races. The two of them bantered back and forth for a moment about which of them would take the other's money that night, before Cain led her into his tent, and everybody else began the long day's work of preparing the grounds for the show. The Bone Pickin' String Band worked together to quickly assemble their stage and the tent they performed in, as tonight's full moon meant they would need to play early, just after the gates opened and before that silvery orb climbed over the horizon.

They played their latest set to an appreciative if sparse audience — folks didn't much like being seen patronizing a sideshow, so the crowds tended to be heavier at night — and then headed back to the camper, where they began hastily stuffing changes of clothing, some snacks, and canteens filled with fresh water into a pair of small knapsacks they had found in the warehouse the last time they had made a stop at the sideshow's compound. The guitar, fiddle, and banjo cases went into a huge duffle bag they had sewn together out of grain sacks and fashioned with straps so that Anthony could carry them on his back. Tonight, they reasoned, must be the opportunity Granny Cloud had foreseen. There would be no better chance to flee than when Erebus Cain was in the city, preoccupied with gambling and his pretty companion.

When the moon rose high overhead, Jade and Clover reached for their wolf shapes and began the brief but painful transition to four legs. The girls lay panting for a time, recovering and drinking water from a small bowl Anthony set down for them. Then the wolf-boy carefully looped two of the packs around their necks and tied them onto their backs, slung the sack of instruments over his own shoulders, and the three of them slipped quietly out the rear door of the camper, relying on the darkness and the roar of the crowds packing the carnival grounds for cover as they crept around the back side of the camp, angling for the woods on the edge of the field.

They encountered no one lurking around the scattering of tents and campers that made up the troupe's personal quarters. No one called out. No one seemed to notice their passing at all, as

they carefully slipped past the gates and headed toward the welcome shadows of the woods' green embrace. They had just made it to the presumed safety of the trees when there was a footfall behind them, the snapping of a branch, and a voice rang out.

CAIN: Now just where do you children think you're going?

The wolves froze, slowly turning to face Erebus Cain. The man had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, not twenty feet behind them, the Goliath at his side. He held a pistol in his hand, the hammer cocked, aimed with a steady hand at Anthony's chest.

CAIN: Tsk tsk tsk. Naughty puppies! And here I find myself without a rolled-up newspaper.

Anthony tensed and Clover growled as Cain advanced on them, shaking his head in mock sadness. He gestured with this gun.

CAIN: Come. Now. Back to camp.

He glanced toward the Goliath.

CAIN: It seems you were right, old friend. We never should have trusted these mutts.

Erebus Cain was interrupted by another voice, echoing cold and imperious through the shadows.

GRANNY CLOUD: Put the weapon down, Herb. Now.

With a rustle of leaves as her long skirts swept through the underbrush, Granny Cloud stepped from the darkness behind Erebus Cain. Gliding along under its dirty sheet, the Eater of Bones followed.

Erebus Cain turned to one side, the pistol swinging between the wolves on one side and the fortune teller on the other.

CAIN: So you're helping them, Annie? Really? You must be going soft in your old age,

He spat, glaring at Granny Cloud.

CAIN: Goliath! Get the wolves. Eater — introduce Mrs. Cloud to the fate met by those who show such disloyalty.

The Eater didn't move, merely floating silently at Granny's side. The Goliath, on the other hand, took two long steps to one side, coming to stand at Granny Cloud's opposite shoulder.

CAIN: What is this?

Granny Cloud's lips curved into a feral grin.

GRANNY CLOUD: Why, it's a coup Herbert, what does it look like? I'm afraid the sideshow is under new management, and your position has been eliminated.

She glanced briefly over at the three young wolves, all but forgotten by Erebus Cain — or Herbert Guthrie, depending on your position — her eyes shining bright in the moonlight, teeth flashing in a wicked smile.

GRANNY CLOUD: I told you to be quick, young ones. Best you *run*.

Then she turned back to Erebus Cain, and the trio began to advance on the oily huckster who had been their employer and taskmaster and albatross for far too long. Erebus raised his pistol and fired, but the Three kept on coming.

Anthony, Jade and Clover turned and fled into the night.

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. Thank you for joining us once again, this time to find out how the Bone Pickin' String Band escaped the clutches of one Erebus Cain and his Traveling Marvels. How

will this reflect on our man Jack once all is said and done? Is old Hiram Cook ready to be in the bad books of three young and hungry werewolves if he keeps pushing his luck? Hm. I guess you'll have to come back next time, find out what comes next in the trial of Mr. J.T. Fields of Paradise.

Now if you want to keep up with all the latest news out of Esau County, Bakers Gap, Boggs Holler, even all the way back up in Barrow, Pennsylvania, and all points of interest within the shadow of these the darkest mountains in the world, then you want to head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and follow us on the twisting and shadowy social media paths of your choosing. If you'd like access to exclusive storylines and special content, then we invite you to make your pledge and bind your fate to ours over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, where hours of tales like *Build Mama A Coffin*, *Black Mouthed Dog* and our brand new animal companion focused series *Familiar and Beloved*, are just waiting for you to deepen your knowledge of the lore of this, our Appalachia.

Now this is your “prayer meetings are still on wednesday night and where y'all been?” reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's episode was written by the one and only Cam Collins. Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood, and our outro music, “Atonement,” is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. The voice of Erebus Cain was Darren Marshall. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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