

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 1 Episode 10: The Witch Queen Chapter III: Last Harbor

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 Land Unknown by Landon Blood]

I walk these hills, leave these dark valleys,

Where I can't stay in the land unknown

In these hills that I walk so often,

I can feel the wind now on your ghost...

The town of Last Harbor sat far to the south of the Kentucky mountains in the high hills of the border separating North Carolina and Tennessee. Founded by Portuguese sailors who had given up the sea and sought work and prosperity inland, the town was a close knit community that took care of its own and was wary of outsiders.

She'd reported to the town as she'd been instructed in a missive brought to her by the eldest of the Six Men, the blank eyed, half dead servants sent to her by the thing that pretended to be a black stag and lived deep in the woods. Another letter had been sent on to a young doctor who was trying to establish a practice in the community that a

young widow with midwife and nursing training would be moving to town soon and did he have a need for such a girl? Folks with medical training of any sort were in high demand in Last Harbor. Doctor Harold Gillespie wrote back that he would indeed be happy for the help. Within a few days of arriving and setting up in a local boarding house, our good daughter Dooley had herself a job caring for some elder folk who were clearly near the end of their time.

See, a sickness had passed through the territory a few weeks prior and most had recovered except for these poor August souls. Now, one thing you can say about daughter Dooley is that when given the chance, she didn't stay a stranger long. She was kind and she was good at what she did and before you knew it, these good folks trusted her completely and came to love her like a grandbaby. To them she looked barely 18, despite her actual 30 years at this point. They lamented that she'd become a widow so young and how unfair it was for her beauty and womb to be wasted and did she know Doc Gillespie was unmarried and so on and so forth and the like...

She treasured her time with the mamaws and papaws of Last Harbor, as they all treated her kindly, and she was there for the passing of each and every one of them. Watching the light slide from their eyes, their bodies finding stillness in an everlasting sleep. It made her heart swell with peace to know their suffering and sickness was over, but also reminded her that as far as she knew, she might never know such a rest.

About two weeks after Papaw Vester and Mamaw Myrtle passed – she called all the old folk Granpa and Papaw, Gramma and Mamaw and Grannie, it seemed to please them – she started noticing the changes. Now, they were subtle at first. Her skin felt smoother and seemed to glow. Her hair grew soft and lush. What few scars she had faded and were gone – outright vanished. She slept deep and woke more rested than she ever had. Her energy during the day was boundless. By the way of the bargain with the Black Stag, her body resisted harm and healed cuts and turned away fire and cold – but this was different. At first she tried to attribute her newfound vim and vigor to just being around people, to not living alone in the woods with 6 silent near-corpses for her only company.

On the 64th day in Last Harbor she realized her shoes didn't fit right – they were getting to be too... big. Her clothes seemed to fit looser than usual. I mean, she ate like a horse – in fact her appetite seemed unending. The end of each day leaving her ravenous and thirsting. When she took her meals at the town's only tavern, why the barkeep joked that she ate enough for three of her. She wasn't exactly losing weight... no bones poked through her baby-soft skin, no tell tale signs of malnutrition or sickness, but something strange was happening to her body.

On the 78th day in the town, which should have brought her monthly time with the moon to bear, nothing came – which wasn't that troubling, but unusual. On the 88th

day, it still had not come, but on that day, though, she worked with Doctor Gillespie on a man who'd come in hurt on the job. A carelessly loaded wagon resulted in his leg being trapped under the lion's share of an oak tree – it was broken pretty bad, but it shouldn't have been life threatening. The doctor reset the man's leg as best he could and left her to tend to him. While she was cleaning him up, as he slept after a bellyful of whatever the Doc gave him to kill the pain, she felt it. She felt the same peace she'd felt when she watched the old folks slip off into God's grace. She felt this man, Curtis Carter, start to die.

It wasn't violent, it wasn't no seizing affair of blood and gasping and drowning wheezes – as she held his hand, searching for a pulse, she felt his life slip right out of him. She felt herself start to sweat and she thought she was going to faint. She felt like she'd been filled up with a slow fire. Her sight dimmed, her legs wobbled. She called for the doctor and once he'd come, she excused herself to a privy where she hitched her dress and sat, fearing that her stomach was about to revolt on her in one way or another when she noticed her legs. They were smooth. The tiny rust-colored curls that had grown there since she had turned the corner of womanhood were gone. Her skin soft as a child's.

Further inspection later that night would reveal that her entire body was much the same, and stranger still, it seemed like she was a little bit shorter. Shelves that were easily in her reach suddenly – weren't. The next day, she tried to go about her business as usual, but her thoughts were clouded – she couldn't seem to clear her mind –

everything seemed to be too much, too big, too loud, everything about this town seemed like it was trying to crawl inside of her head so – so she just left.

Without a word to anyone she left town and took the road north for about an hour on foot, then stepped off the path and into the wood. She found a small stream. Off went her boots and her socks and into the cool of the water her feet went. She sunk her toes into the streambed and clutched handfuls of weeds and grass and just tried her best to find herself – and eventually, it came. The noises quieted and the fog lifted and there she sat in the heart of the green, soaking in the light of a late April afternoon.

Now she could see all of herself – and now she knew. Something was wrong. It had to have something to do with her arrangement with the Stag. The charm must've gone sideways or more like, he'd found some new way to shame her and keep her in his pocket. Her body was growing younger – reversing itself – but not in the way of the fairy stories where old women just get young and beautiful again – she was literally aging in reverse. What's worse, she thought she knew what was causing it. She also knew that it had to stop.

Her instructions had been to remain in Last Harbor for six months to keep watch and observe, the paper said. What she was watching for or observing was a mystery to her. She needed time away. And as far as anyone knew, she was a young widow. Young

widows can have all sorts unsettled business from their late husband's doing. She would need help to test her theory, so that night before bed she reached out with her mind and her gift and called for the Six Men. She called for the youngest – who she nicknamed Sixxy because, well, he was the sixth and smallest one. She also called for the next youngest who she'd nicknamed Eugene, 'cause she just always liked that name. She told them to come on foot, to travel by the roads carefully and only by night. They were to avoid interacting with any living soul if at all possible. They were not to touch or harm anyone or anything. They were to meet her in the wood by the stream where she'd gone to find her peace. She sent a picture of the place as hard as she could with her mind. After a few minutes she felt them hear her and felt their acknowledgment.

It would take them almost four days to get there. She would wait. She would not go to work the days she waited for them to come to her. She couldn't risk it. If she got any younger, she'd start to forget. She told Doctor Gillespie that she had to return to Southfork to settle something regarding her late husband's land. It was a Monday, she'd be back on Thursday. Doc wasn't happy about that.

“We got three pregnant girls in this town about ready to pop and I need you here!”

“I'll be back as soon as I can. They've held this long haven't they?”

“I need you back for the Elkins girl. That one is gonna be a mess – complicated family history, you *have* to be here for that one, I’ll need all hands.”

The next day she made the hour walk north of town and found the path into the wood and to the stream where she had gone to recover herself. She set up a small camp with her bedroll and a few supplies she’d brought. For the first time in months, she was alone. There were no other people around. She was back in the blessed silence and solitude that had been her life since her mamas died and she’d made her deal with the beast.

She thought it would be awful and lonely and too quiet, but instead it settled back over her like a well loved quilt in a warm bed. She breathed easy and free and her body sang to her in concert with the earth. She felt her gift swell within her – felt the earth and the water whisper her name – and she wept with joy and sang. She might have been miles and miles from the house that was both her sanctuary and her prison, but right now she was home. She was home here in the green.

After she pulled herself back together, she drew water from the stream and set it to boil over a small fire. She prepared salt and a few other things and smothered the fire down to smoking ember as she shed her clothes and followed the stream to a deeper pool that the land had told her would be there. She bathed herself – reaching out into the green –

trying to find a way to free herself of what was being done to her. She washed and performed rites and rituals of cleansing – called to her Mothers and to the mountain to take this curse away, a curse laid on her by a lying good-for-nothing horned head bastard of a haint.

At first, she thought she might've done it. The growing wellspring of energy felt lesser, her body actually ached and twinged – her blood even came in all its cramping glory. She lay exhausted and clean by the pool's edge she felt every one of her 30 years. Her body ached with what felt suspiciously like growing pains. She hoped so much she was wrong, but so far her theory was playing out.

She could feel the pact with the Stag was still intact. She hadn't been trying to break that – that would take magic bigger than her and wasn't likely to happen on her own. She'd been looking to push off whatever this new thing was – this new thing that set her body to reversing its course through time, this new thing that was undoing her womanhood, returning her to her girlhood, to childhood – clouding her mind, making her memories harder to call upon. If she lost her memories, she'd lose her Mamas. If she lost her Mamas, someone or something else would have to raise her all over again.

And there, she saw the plan. The Stag knew good and well she'd never fully bend to its will. Knew she was too strong to be its willing little puppet – but if it had been the one

to raise her in the first place, her and her gift – to shape her in his burning antlered image – well, she'd be a very different creature indeed. She could not let that happen.

She slept like the dead that first night and woke sore and aching. The long walk to this place and the changes in her body had taken their toll. Her clothes began to fit again, her feet to fill her shoes. She had not noticed the absence of some of the curves of her form, but even they were more well-pronounced now. Whatever had been turning back her clock seemed to have stopped, and time was catching back up. By the time Sixy and Eugene got to the clearing she was feeling much like her old self. Her back ached and her head buzzed. Her legs were crickly and her skin was an oily mess. Good lord, this had been bad enough the first time through, but here we were.

“Oy. You two, over here. Now.”

The two shambling figures made their way through the trees to where she stood. Sixy was a small, scrawny man – he'd been young when he'd been made into this. Maybe even in his 20's. A short patchy beard covered his thin face. He was dressed the way they all dressed. White dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows and brown tweed pants, black work boots. Empty eyes, slack jaws. And just like his brother, Sixy felt no pain, gave no expression of any sort – just did as he was bade, breaths shallow, barely there.

Eugene was his opposite. A hulking brute with a long matted beard, Eugene was the battering ram of the six. She'd seen him rip trees out of the ground and split tree stumps the way some men split light firewood. His arms were thick slabs of muscle and he was bald as he was tall. She honestly just needed Sixy for this test, but the last time she tried to call him somewhere on his own, he ended up in a fight with some local boys and got thrown in a lake. Took his brothers days to get him out. Eugene at least could offer him a bodyguard.

“Gene – you keep watch on the hill there, Sixy – you come here and stand.”

Eugene lumbered up the hill without question and took up a look out spot about 50 yards away. When the two men arrived, she'd felt their presence – she even felt somewhat reassured by their familiar creepiness. Beyond that – her back had stopped hurting. She felt the stiffness in her neck even out and fade. She looked at Sixy and stepped a little closer to him. All these years, she'd never touched any of them or even wanted to be close to them – but she had to know.

She reached out and grabbed Sixy's wrist – and the reaction was immediate. The creature spasmed and flailed for a moment then sank slowly to his knees and then to the ground. Dead. Her touch had drained what little life was left in him. She touched her

face and found her skin renewed and soft. She felt the familiar surge of energy and pep that had come to characterize this new part of her life... and despaired. Now she knew.

Her immortality came at the expense of others. On the ground Sixy made a rasping, gurgling sound, and his body convulsed for a moment before he rose and wandered several yards away and stood waiting for her command. See, the Six Men couldn't die. They were true, fully creatures of the Black Stag. And apparently her immortality, her sustaining life force was being siphoned from their presence, the pitiful unlife of them acting as a battery sustaining her youth and keeping her body young, but still a woman's body.

Dropping her in the middle of a thriving town – with so many people of all ages, and all levels of life and vitality – why, she was gorging herself on them. Her heart froze. The old folks. The injured. She was the reason they'd died. Craig Carter shouldn't have died from that leg, but there he'd been, hurt and leaking out the years he had left, and she'd just drunk them right up. Leaving Craig's widow Martha without a husband and his two girls without a daddy. The Mamaws and Papaws of the town didn't have much life left, but she'd drained them as sure as if she'd cut their throats.

Her sinking despair suddenly grew hooks and snagged into the meat of her heart as she realized the job she'd been sent here to do. The one she was trained for. The ones her mothers prepared her for: midwife.

She was brought here to bring new babies into the world and to handle and care for them and their mamas as they hung there in that moment of blood and water and light and dark, on the precipice of creation and oblivion.

Why, it was like Doc said: they had three women, set to pop in the next month and he'd warned her to stay available around that last week because Bonnie Maggard, Tess Sizemore, and Missy Elkins were all set to go. Missy Elkins would be a challenge, he'd told her. Complicated family history – she definitely needed to be there. He needed her. She'd thought it was just concern for the woman, but the more she thought about the pregnant girl, the surer she became that Missy had the gift whether she knew it or not.

Now, she had not met another witch since she had been here, but Missy Elkin's ma did brew the beer for the tavern and did keep a garden out back of the brewhaus. She knew her way around herbs and hops and such. She might be more than just a brewer, who knew? Her mind led her further down the path. Who had the letter gone to that set her up in this place? Who had literally been in communication with old Horned-Head? Who

had put her in contact with the old folks, the weakest of the sick and injured. Who had been fattening her up and turning her clock back this whole time?

Doc Gillespie had some explaining to do.

The trip back to town felt like an eternity, even with Eugene carrying her and running full sprint. It seems that nearly undead lumberjacks did have some use after all. Doc G and Missy Gillespie's baby greeted her at the town limits marker. A cart, fully loaded, sat behind them.

"Doc," said she, "What are you doin'?"

"Miss Dooley," said Doc, the baby fussing as he attempted to soothe her, "you need to come with me. Your sponsor has asked me to bring you home."

"Sponsor my arse," she spat. "Have you seen him Doc? Do you know what he is? Do you really know?"

"Oh Miss Dooley, I-I know exactly what he is. He is the keeper of the black word. The minder of the door of death. He is great and he is horrible," the man's voice rattled like

teeth in an empty skull as his zeal purged his words from him like vomit. “He is the pitch dark flame, the night seer, the lord of the day and the wood - oh, he is—”

“He’s a goddamn haint in a deerskin,” she cut in. “He’s liar and a cheat. He’s a babystealin’ ghoul. He’s a backstabbing, horned headed cyarny ass jack ass and he’s—”

“He’s right here...” rumbled a familiar and terrifying voice.

She had not seen the Stag in the flesh in many, many years. And yes, he was hard to forget, but sometimes things of such magnitude have a hard time sticking in your memory, so she was unprepared for his size. He was as tall and thick as a draft horse. Broad in chest and majestic in the rich darkness of his hide. His hooves were smeared with gore and offal. His eyes smoldered in the colors of blood clots and abscess and of course, upon his massive head was that crown of amber antlers, burning and smoldering with an unholy internal light. His mere presence sucked the light from the sky and all daughter Dooley could do was gawp.

[Animalistic breathing and snorts.]

The Black Stag, the beast whose name sounded like horn-ed head and hornet head and Abomination and Betrayer and Judas and Liar and Defiler – he was old, but not the oldest, but he might have been the cruelest and the most petty. Before she could speak he reared and one massive hoof smashed across her face and struck hard and all she knew was darkness.

She woke covered in blood. Not just blood but it was part of a mixture of burdock root, crawley root, and smooth pigweed – all things used to heal and soothe, but mixed with this tainted blood it was a corruption of the plants, a corruption of the greens’ healing... and it was all over her. She looked around, trying to get her bearings and realized she didn’t need to. She was home. She was lying in the yard of her own house in the valley where all of this began. She saw Sixy and Gene – both spattered in blood, which apparently came from Doc Gillespie – who lay dead a little ways behind them. Sixy’s hands were sticky with the plant medicine. They stared blankly at her.

The Stag’s Voice floated into her mind tasting like cold burned bread.

“I felt it was fitting that we came home to finish this.”

“If you’re gonna kill me just kill me you bloody cow.”

“Oh, sweet little witch – you are not dying today, quite the opposite. Had you minded your orders you would have stayed in that town until most of them were dead and you were nearly an infant. We’d have collected you and raised you properly.”

The Stag stood at the edge of the boundary where it had met her years ago, shown her her mas’ faces and tempted her into this bargain that had turned her into some sort of lifestealing monster.

“Your lines were so strong for one so young. Do you remember, little witch? You lowered your wards for me – let me right inside!” The Stag laughed and stepped across the original boundary, raising an eyebrow if that were possible, until they were breathing the same air. Somewhere close, a baby began to cry.

Eugene stepped into view carrying the Elkins baby and a large, sharp knife that looked older than the Christian God.

“You see, little witch – we wish to wipe clean your slate and start you over. The blood of the good doctor has opened you, the blood of this child will feed you. You will wake new, barely more than a babe and you will be—”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“What?”

“I-I said no. You are still the stupidest thing with hooves aren’t you?”

The Stag did not reply.

“I’ve done your bidding. Not always willingly, but always well. Have I not?”

The Stag pondered and inclined his head.

“So you would agree that I wield the powers you taught me well enough that you’d want more of me? You can sense how strong my gift is, can’t you beast? Hell, I bet you can smell it.”

“Witch... I—”

“No, no – you arrogant, petty little pony – you do not get to tell me anything after you give me my life back, then use that very life to kill the people who have been kind to me. You killed poor Missy and her mum probably and now you want to kill her baby too? So I’ll do more magic tricks for you, so I’ll hop to more quickly, so I’ll be a good little... thing... like you are. Is that what you think?”

“You got me all covered in the blood of a stupid man and you think...” her voice rose and the earth seemed to hear it, seemed to echo it like a second heartbeat. “*You* think I would let you harm that child? That I’d lay here bloody and helpless and watch Gene over there kill that baby?”

She stepped to the beast’s muzzle and locked eyes with him.

“If you think that any of that would happen – you’re a fool beast.” She leaned in close for the next thing. “And if you think you’ve actually crossed my wards – you’re a bigger fool still.” And with that, she smeared her hand across her bloody chest and pressed it to the cold earth of her yard. Something, somewhere thrummed and barriers of enormous power shot up around the Stag and Miss Dooley trapping them together in a square of crimson light barely 12 feet across. The Stag reared.

[Fearful animalistic breaths.]

“Blood wards, old boy. Your magic, not mine, but you were right when you said you could teach me things my Mas never could – oh, I learned plenty. I learned that you’re a shadow of something much worse. I learned that you can be cut off from that something if you do it right.” She watched the Stag’s eyes go wide as it reached for power that was not there. “Aha! I think I did.”

And they both turned and looked at Eugene and Sixy who plopped down criss cross applesauce – the two almost dead men sitting like puppets with their strings cut, the ancient knife dropped and forgotten – the Elkins baby landing safely in Gene’s lap.

“Ha! So let’s see what you can do without your ‘sponsors’ backing you up. Your power versus mine, beast. Winner takes home that baby. What say you?”

The Black Stag paused a moment, eyes screaming poisonous hate and charged as daughter Dooley laughed and leapt to meet him, eyes filling with green light and her grin fierce and full.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

*There is a curse upon my every waking breath,
And I cannot escape the darkness...*

Oh, family, I know you're probably cursing my name right now, but I told you. Season 1 would end in such a way that Season 2 has to happen. I know you needed to hear the story of Last Harbor more than you needed some other things. Trust me. We're not done. Season 2 is coming. We just gotta say goodbye to our little witch queen for now.

And family, our thank you list is long and lengthy. I want to thank all the folks in the Fellowship Hall and everyone on Patreon. The Patreon is absolutely absurd right now; if you want to tithe and get in on Build Momma a Coffin for \$10 dollars or more a month that's something you can do. Head on over to Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia We'll be happy to have you and happy to make sure you get hooked up with all your swag.

We want to thank some individuals: Leanne and Gary Witta, who are good friends of ours who have made some things possible which you may not have realized. Charlie Ferraro UTA who has opened a million doors for this podcast and helped us find some really cool opportunities. I want to thank Heather Hawkins who is our third wheel and person who handles a lot of our Patreon business and who's gonna be doing a lot more for us in the near future. You gotta have the support, y'all, you can't do it without it. Speaking of support, I wanna thank my cousin David DC Shell, the paladin himself, for the research help in West Virginia when we did our visit to Tourniquet, West Virginia.

And really I'm gonna start forgetting people because there's a ton of people who've supported us and I really, really, really appreciate you, all of our family in the podcast community on Twitter – holy crap I wish I could remember all of you but I don't want to make this super stiff and formal-sounding.

Please follow us on Facebook and Instagram at Old Gods of Appalachia and on Twitter @OldGodsPod. We have merch at the Threadless store [OldGodsOfAppalachia.Threadless.com](https://www.threadless.com/old-gods-of-appalachia) You can find all our information at [OldGodsOfAppalachia.com](https://www.olgods.com)

The live show is gonna be happening. Tickets go on sale February 1st on Partreon for Patreon patrons, and then the Fellowship Hall a week later, and then for the public not until March 1. Only 160 seats a night at that thing in Marion, North Carolina. We will be appearing at Days of the Dead – hanging out, not official guests. We will be official guests at Raven Con in Williamsburg, Virginia. Check out the Fellowship Hall for dates on that. I actually believe that's the weekend after the live show in North Carolina.

We have so much happening family, and it's all thanks to you. We love you, we can't wait to see you for Build Momma a Coffin, we can't wait to bring Season 2 home to you and show you where you're going next. 'Cause really you're gonna freak out because it's super spooky and super creepy.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. We'll see you soon, family.

And I cannot escape the darkness...