

Think of the Children, or, The Dogged Adventurers' Elusive Hours

Cliff Watson, November 2018

As field-recorded in the hamlet of Widdlesburg in the jurisdiction of Warden Effrim, year 4018

The pipe and drum on the small corner stage sent a jaunty tune bouncing off the rafters of the *Bone 'n' Carrot*. The place was packed with locals, yet the desperate enthusiasm of the music did little to raise the level of conversation in the pub above a dark murmur, with most heads bowed low, quaffing flagon after flagon of Barney's Nuts, the dark local ale (I won't bore you with the story behind its name). Many members of the crew and passengers of the through-caravan to Flicker Vale were present as well, so almost every seat and bar stool in the place was filled, although the small dance floor in front of the stage was decidedly empty, and the caravan folk were bewildered at the somber mood.

Ordinarily, the caravan wouldn't still be here but for one of the wagons broke an axle and, of course, being in a small hamlet like Widdlesburg such things take a little longer to repair. That's ok, though. You'd been on the road with the caravan for 3 weeks already and, while the company was pleasant enough, you needed a bit of a break. You might have traveled to Flicker Vale on your own but traveling with the caravan provided convenient cooking services and saved a bit of money. Besides, with the recent rise in attacks by trolls and bandits in the woods, safety in numbers is often a good thing.

The pub door opened and an unsmiling man – perhaps a woodcutter by trade? – entered, followed by Sevrn Tanner, the village elder whom you had met the other day. They looked around the room, wandered over to the barkeep, then left in a hurry.

A short while later a large stein landed on your table.

"This one's on the house," said Jolly Molly, the barmaid. She smiled and winked.

"What's the occasion?" you said, while reaching for the sweet, yeasty brew.

"They say that the local elders are so happy with the jump in town business, and the revenues, *wink, wink*, that they want to encourage folks to stay a while and come back. But, of course, *I'm* just happy to see you, *wink, wink*." And with that she was gliding on to the next table.

You're going to miss Molly. And this ale is damn good.

Oh, my head. Where am I? Ouch. Ok, opening my eyes now. Uh, too bright. Ok, trying again... Huh, what the...

With your head hanging forward, you see that you are tied to a chair. Not that tying you to the chair is necessary since you can't seem to move or flex your arms or legs in the tiniest amount. But you understand redundancy. You try to make a sound, but nothing comes out, you can't even choke out a cough.

Looking up, you see that there are other folks you recognize as travelers with the caravan, also tied to chairs, and you are all arranged in a semi-circle in the middle of a small room, perhaps a one-room hut. They are also looking around now. Behind them you see several figures standing along the walls. In front of the chairs is a small empty area before a table loaded with herbs, containers, and a steaming pot. Sniffing, you can smell the boiling concoction. It makes you think of rabbits, or squirrels, and your mouth waters. Strange.

“If I may have your attention. Please look this way as you are able,” emits a reedy voice.

Flicking your eyes to the source you see Elder Sevrn standing at attention next to the table.

“First, I must apologize for the uncomfortable way in which you have been summoned to this meeting. It is not our preference at all, and I am sure that we shall pay for this wrong in unknown ways. So be it, for desperate times call for desperate measures, my friends. And I do consider you my friends and mean you no ill will. Allow me to explain.

“Three weeks ago, the children of the village started to disappear. Two the first day, three more later in the week, eight the following week. There is no greater sorrow that can befall a community, for the children of the village are the spark of life that feeds our simple souls. We were, and still are, heartbroken.”

Sevrn stops to gather himself, blinking a few times. A figure against the wall behind him places a reassuring hand upon his shoulder. Sevrn takes a deep breath and continues, his voice weaker than before.

“Search parties at first found no trace. A few did not return at all, may Ygg bless their souls. Finally, a break in the search came and we found some clues: a lost jacket, a lost shoe, deep in the forest along a game trail on the hillside above Crabtree Hollow. But that was no simple game trail, for talons like daggers had marked the earth, and splinters of wood and snags of wolf fur were found along its way. With the help of the Warden, we hired a troop of mercenaries, and armed with spears and shields and other such deadly weapons they set off up the trail to find our beautiful treasures.

“Alas, that was the last we heard from the mercenaries, save a lone survivor who stumbled into a nearby farmstead yesterday. Ashen, haunted, and babbling about monstrosities mundane and unimaginable, our Healer Canidaya was unable to bring him back to sound mind, and he withered away within hours of his return.”

You notice that a woman has stepped next to him behind the table. She has an exceptionally prominent jaw, fluorescing tattoos of herbs and leaves on her cheeks, and piercing eyes of green, visible even in the dim light. Wearing a rough burlap garment, knotted throughout with colorful scarves, and bearing jeweled wards about her neck and wrists, there is no doubt that this is the healer. Or, perhaps, something more.

“Enough,” she says, her voice lower and stronger than Elder Sevrn’s. “It is time to set them on the task at hand.”

“Yes, yes, it is time.” Looking each chair-bound individual in the face, Elder Sevrn intoned a set of instructions.

“Canidaya has infused you with the spirit of the hound, and as such you will be compelled to track the scent of our children to its source. There, you shall rescue them from whatever infernal prison binds them, be it guarded by man, monster, or magic, and return them here to us. We shall reward you, with the help of our Protector Warden, as best we are able, including whatever meager riches we possess and titles of protector of the lands and environs. No door shall be closed to you that we are able to open for your future.

“However, time is of the essence and, as such, I again apologize for the deceptions involved in your recruitment, for there was no time for debate. Healer Canidaya was able to determine from the withering mercenary that the children were in imminent danger of being eaten, by what she cannot say for sure. Legend does mention a wandering hut that houses a fearsome kitchen where no sane person would eat. The fact that a baker’s dozen of children, no more, no less, were taken is worrisome.”

Elder Sevrn pauses briefly, and glances at the healer.

“Additionally, I should let you know that, while we hold Healer Canidaya in very high regard, she could not quite perfect the stability of the hound spirit imbuement under such compressed and stressful conditions. When manifest, the spirit as it rises within you may not be completely stable. Therefore, I would urge you to return with the children with as much haste as possible in order that the enchantment may be reversed before it becomes... permanent. Consider your time in hours rather than days.

“May the watchful eye of Ygg reflect the clarity of your own hunt for the light of our souls, and yours as well. Go in peace, and go in strength.”

The villagers released you at the base of the Crabtree Hollow trail. Nose to the loam, you are making good progress through the forest...