

The White Brock

*“Should a badger cross the path
Which thou hast taken, then
Good luck is thine, so it be said
Beyond the luck of men.”*

- Old English nursery rhyme

Aldwyn of High Alders licked his wounds and wondered whether either he or his companion, the elder and druid Canwulf, would live to see another sunrise. These were dangerous times to be a brock¹ in the great wood and they needed to find shelter soon. A storm was brewing.

They had travelled far that day from their home, which lay some leagues south of Seladon, the forest that all brocks called the great wood, and the journey had clearly taken its toll on Canwulf in particular. The druid brock was several winters older than Aldwyn, who was still a young boar yet to reach his prime, and the fur of his facial markings had as much grey in it as black. He had been a great brock once, however, and such was evident from his frame, large and powerful still, and his gait, which remained firm and purposeful. But age had slowed Canwulf, and his breathing had become ever more laboured as the day had worn on. Never a religious brock himself, Aldwyn nevertheless said a silent prayer to the Ancestors that Canwulf at least would make it through the day. He said no prayers on his own behalf, however, for he would gladly accept the release that death would give him from his memories of what had happened at High Alders.

“We should rest.” Aldwyn said.

Canwulf shook his head, defiance clear from the set of his jaws.

“No lad, we’ll not both die because I’m old and useless. Leave me here and go on to Oakenheart by yourself – one is enough to carry a message, and better that you survive than me. I’ve lived through enough winters.”

Aldwyn sighed. Canwulf’s response had been much the same each time that he had suggested a stop for food or rest. They had pressed onwards again and again at a pace that even he, a warden brock trained for hunting and fighting, had found difficult to maintain when they should have stopped. Canwulf was not one to complain or ask for respite, however, even if his very life depended on it. So far Aldwyn had complied with his wishes but he had no doubt that if he continued to do so the old druid would die from thirst or starvation before he took the rest that his heaving sides and ragged breath showed that he so desperately needed.

“It’s my wounds,” said Aldwyn, deciding to dissemble, and pointing a claw at the scratches in his side, “they need dressing before I can go any further.”

In truth Aldwyn’s wounds were minor and a strong young brock such as he might easily have gone on without having them treated. This became clear even to Canwulf’s rheumy old eyes as soon as he came close enough to Aldwyn to take a look at the younger brock’s injuries. However, he knew to play along for he recognised that Aldwyn was giving him the chance to retain his dignity, as well as to finally make himself useful. There had been few enough opportunities for him to do that since their flight from High Alders.

¹ *Brock* – Old English word for a badger

“Yes, a rest would do you good,” said the older brock to the younger and they shared a brief look that hid a wealth of meaning. There was relief on Aldwyn’s part that now, perhaps, Canwulf would find the strength of body to accompany the strength of spirit to carry him through this dark day. There was also relief for Canwulf in taking without shame a respite that had been offered freely and without any sense of obligation. Also there was a deep compassion and respect on the part of both brocks for each other, for all they knew they were the last survivors of their set and perhaps of their entire clan. And beyond all other emotions there was hope – hope that they would both see the other survive and if not that then hope that one of them at least would live to reach Oakenheart and bring word of the coming darkness to their brothers and sisters there.

The shadows lengthened into early evening as, for the first time since they left High Alders, it was Canwulf that led Aldwyn to a place of shade and shelter. The old brock’s pawsteps were surprisingly sure as they wound their way through a stand of pines growing thickly alongside the brockpath that they had been following through the great wood. Despite the relative security that the encircling pines offered, Aldwyn might have preferred to go further from the path (and anybeast that might have been following after them) had it not been for the heaviness in the air that carried the promise of a coming storm. Brocks were not creatures that loved water and he feared what might happen if either of them, Canwulf especially, caught a chill so far from the warmth and safety of a set.

When they found a suitable spot nestled among the trees Canwulf (with such gentleness and care that any brock that might have seen them would have assumed that it was he, Aldwyn, that was the elder and Canwulf his protector) settled Aldwyn down and commenced his ministrations. He tore several twigs from the lowest hanging branches of the nearby pines and proceeded to strip the leaves from them. This done, he chewed the leaves then spat them out, mashing them together in his paws and then solidifying them with mud. Aldwyn dimly remembered hearing once about the healing properties of pine leaves but he nevertheless eyed Canwulf’s concoction, which had now become as much mud and brock-spit as pine leaf, dubiously. Noticing his misgivings, Canwulf’s only response was a knowing smile.

“Don’t worry lad, this is for your haunches, not for eating.”

Aldwyn nodded, trying, whatever he thought, not to let his doubts show on his face. The old brock needed to know that he still had a contribution to make and that he was not simply a passenger on this trip. Canwulf’s strong will was all that was keeping his frail body together and Aldwyn feared the consequences if anything happened to damage this.

“You’re a lucky young brock,” said Canwulf as he patted the pine ointment onto Aldwyn’s haunch with one paw, inspecting the wound as he did so, “the man-hounds might have hurt you far worse.”

Aldwyn shuddered at the memories that Canwulf’s words evoked, both of the violence that had been done to him and that he had been forced to mete out to enable their escape. Like most brocks he abhorred violence, for he and his kind were peaceful creatures. The Litany, the oral legacy of their Ancestors, taught that the claws of a brock were for digging, catching grubs and, last and only in defence of their own lives or those of their young, for fighting honourably. Unfortunately, not all creatures lived by the same honourable code – the hounds that had attacked High Alders certainly had not. It was no comfort to Aldwyn, however, that he had not broken the Litany by doing harm to others, non-brocks, who did not follow their way.

He did not hate the hounds for what they had done, after all, they had only been carrying out the orders of their masters, the men from beyond the great wood.

Aldwyn was neither a druid nor a brock of learning and had never understood why men hated and killed his kind. Canwulf had told him that the world of men was large, far larger than any brock could ever conceive, for even the great wood of Seladon paled in comparison beside their world. Unlike Aldwyn, Canwulf was wise and learned, and so he never gainsaid anything that he heard from the older brock about men and their ways. Privately, however, Aldwyn found it hard to believe that the world of men was so vast given that they relentlessly destroyed the forests of brockdom to make room for themselves. Surely no creature that had so much already could possibly want even more and, worse, be willing to harm others and destroy their homes in order to do this?

He had put this question to Canwulf in the past and been disturbed by the answer he had given.

“The destruction and damage wrought by men is not entirely wanton, young one, although it might seem that way to our kind,” Canwulf had said to a much younger Aldwyn, who had been barely more than a cub at the time, “for there is a darker purpose to the seemingly random cruelty that they have inflicted on brocks and our forests.”

“What is that?” Aldwyn had said, his voice a breathless whisper since, as he recalled, he had dreaded Canwulf’s answer.

“The cairns, Aldwyn, they desire the power of the cairns.”

Aldwyn had been horrified at the time and a shudder went through him even now as he remembered the truth as Canwulf had revealed it to him then. It was a truth that adult brocks tried to shield their cubs from for as long as possible and it was a measure of the trust that Canwulf placed in Aldwyn, even then, that he had revealed so much of it to him so young. It was also, although Aldwyn was not to know this, recognition of the promise that Canwulf identified in him at an early age, the promise of a brock that might one day have an important part to play in the story of brockdom.

The cairns were the great secret and strength of the brocks, Canwulf had revealed. In the oldest legends, brocks were said to be born of the balefire, which was the bloodstream of the earth itself. Tied to the very fabric of creation, brocks had always been drawn irresistibly to the cairns, focuses of mystical energy where the balefire was at its strongest. The balefire ran through the earth along a network of ley lines, and cairns, the most important and holy places in all of nature, were located where many ley lines crossed. It was the sacred duty of the brocks to protect the cairns and their mystic energies, Canwulf had said, though he accepted that it was not an easy task, nor one that the druid brocks had been able to carry out with any success since the rise of men.

Men were unlike other beasts, said Canwulf, in that they desired power above all things. Cairns were therefore a valued prize indeed, since they were locations of great power. No druid brock knew how men had discovered the existence of cairns and their mystical properties but none doubted that this was the purpose of the renewed and ferocious assault on all brockdom that was now being perpetrated by men and their faithful hound slaves. Druids told that they could no longer sense cairns that had fallen to men and that they could only conclude that this was because the very life of these places had somehow been sucked away. More than that they could not say, for no lost cairn had ever been taken back so that the truth could be discovered. All that brocks could now do was defend what remained to them and Canwulf had no doubt

that this was ultimately a fruitless task – brockdom was simply fighting what amounted to a long defeat.

Aldwyn set his jaws as he recalled this talk of a ‘long defeat’. He was determined that High Alders, location of the latest cairn to be attacked, would not suffer the fate of so many others and fall into the clutches of evil men. High Alders had been – and was still – his home, the place where his set and the sets of all of his brethren were located, and he refused to abandon it to his fate.

He had been to the cairn at High Alders a few times in his life and, although he was not a devout brock, or even one that was particularly spiritual, he had felt a deep sense of awe and wellbeing there. The cairn was located in a secluded glade within High Alders’ woodlands and was one of the quietest and most peaceful places that Aldwyn had ever known. The sounds of the forest were distant here; even the song of the birds was muted around the cairn, as if they too felt something of the reverence that brocks had for the place. On entering a cairn a brock left something of the outside world, and of himself, behind. Aldwyn had no memory of the first occasion on which he had entered the cairn, as a newborn cub in the paws of his parents as they presented him to the elders to be baptised before the Ancestors, but he remembered his other visits there vividly. He came alone and seeking peace and quiet rather than for prayer and, on looking up at the tall trees that surrounded him, their branches reaching forever for the heavens, he had found that whatever petty concerns had weighed upon him at the time had simply faded away, becoming one with the infinite.

Bitter was the memory, therefore, of the last occasion on which he had been in the cairn, when that sense of wellbeing had evaporated in the face of impending disaster. It had been a council of war, attended by all of the elders of the High Alders clan, which had been summoned hastily in response to a sudden attack on their borders by a force of hounds. The initial attack had been beaten back (at great cost in brock lives and destroyed sets) but none had doubted that they would return in greater strength, possibly with men in tow. The mood had been one of gloom, since there was no doubt in anybrock’s mind that they would not be able to repel a second attack, but out of this desperation a plan had taken shape. It had been Canwulf who had suggested that they send word to Oakenheart, the cairn on the other side of Seladon, that High Alders was besieged in the hope that help would arrive.

Canwulf’s plan had not met with instant approval – some doubted that the brocks of Oakenheart would want to get involved in another clan’s troubles, and that, even if they did, this would make no difference. After all, what could mere brocks do against the brutality and infernal ingenuity of men? Also, there were those who lacked faith in Canwulf, admittedly a great druid in his time but that was long past and there were doubts that he, the only brock in all of High Alders who had been to Oakenheart previously, would be able to find his way back there. He was a brock of failing health after all, they muttered, and would likely keel over or be brought down by hounds long before he reached his destination. Still others whispered that Oakenheart no longer existed and that this was why there had been no contact between the two brock clans of the great wood for almost a generation. Perhaps the Oakenheart cairn had been destroyed by men and hounds, or else simply deserted by brocks who scented the onset of dark times for all of their kind on the wind. Desertion, these brocks said, might indeed be a better option than seeking help from a place that no longer existed.

In the face of this scepticism Canwulf’s snout had fallen and, seeing the old brock downcast, Aldwyn had, to his everlasting surprise, spoken up at that point.

“I trust Canwulf and, if nobrock else will go with him to Oakenheart, then I will go.”