

## IN THE LAND OF THE GLITTERING WOOD MOSS

I have always known that scots pine is good for building houses and ships, but that's all I thought they were good for.

Then I had a profound encounter with an ancient scots pine, the old man of the pinewoods, 'Boddach nam Guithas', and after that I needed to find out *all* that I could about pine trees and pinewoods.

I learnt from my granny of the medicinal uses, and cultural associations we have with Scots Pine, and then learnt of some of the ecological associations that are part of the living, breathing Pinewood. I began to realize that there is indeed more to Pine trees and Pinewoods than just timber.

And then this happened . . .

"On the day of the winter solstice, whilst walking in Glen Guisachen, I tripped over an outstretched tree root, dislodged the catch on the amulet that I wore around my neck, and some of the pine pollen that I carried within it flew up into the air, tickled my nostrils and I sneezed an almighty sneeze. The next thing I knew things began to feel a little dreamy, and I could hear the deep resonating voice of the gnarled old pine, 'Boddach nam Guithas.'

"It is to the future that we must look, and it is in the future that we must put our trust", he said, "But to see the needs of the future, we must first understand our past. And so, in this spirit, and before we speak some more, I need for you to . . ."

And then I could swear that the old tree gently swung one of its low-slung branches in my direction. It knocked me off my feet, dislodged more pine pollen from my amulet, I sneezed an almighty sneeze, and then . . . things began to feel a little dreamy

Something very strange was going on, and I was neither sure where or when I was. As I gazed out over the vast expanse of woodland that stretched out before me, I wondered how far it all went and what it would be like to move through these ancient woods and see all the beauty and wonder that would surely be there.

A pair of golden eagles had been circling overhead, and just as that thought went through my mind, they swooped down towards me, swept me off my feet and I was flying. Down close by the canopy one minute, soaring high above it the next. We flew for miles and miles and miles and miles. We saw both coasts and many a hill and glen betwixt and between. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

It was so vast and looked so incredibly diverse that I was sure that there were plants and animals here that no longer existed in our time. And then I saw some of them. Down by the river I saw Brown Bear fishing for salmon; high on the hill I saw Lynx hunting deer just below the crags; then, as we flew back towards the clearing, I saw a pack of wolves in Glen Guisachen, resting from their day's activities and a lone wolf further up the hill howled at the moon.

We landed, and as we landed I stumbled, tripped over an old tree root, dislodged a little more of the pollen that was held within my amulet, sneezed, and again I was carried off. The Eagles took me out for three trips, each of them over the same route, but each of them at a different point in time.

The first trip, when the woodland was at its most extensive, was the most fantastic.

The second trip showed a change in the extent of wooded land, but there were still large areas of intact woodland and flying over it was still wonderful.

By the time of the third trip, however, things were very different. The wooded land was barely a tiny fraction of what it had been during the first flight, and the woods were fragmented, disconnected from each other, and degraded.

When we landed for the last time, I heard the deep voice of the Grand Auld Man of Guisachen, 'Boddach nam Guithas',

"As you have seen, the landscape has changed dramatically these past few thousand years, and now what is left of the original forest, beautiful though it is, is vulnerable to further change."

"Things will continue to change of course but how things change, in part, will depend on you and all those who come after you.'

There was a moment's silence, broken by the thunderous sound of a Capercaillie leaving its sleeping tree to fly. "Now, cherish that moment" he implored me, "for that is a sight you don't see every day".

Then he showed me rare plants like Twinflower, with its delicate pair of pale pink and white bell-like flowers. He told me to cherish them, as we should also cherish the little Crested Tit, who excavates nests in standing dead Pine trees and lines them with Glittering Wood Moss. He urged me to protect the Scottish Crossbill, whose crossed bills allow them to pry open the tight scales of the pine cones to eat the seed contained within them, and who live only in the Pine woods of Scotland.

'Boddach nam Guithas', then showed me many mosses and lichens, that each had their own unique shapes colours and textures, and smiled when he showed me a moss that looked like a golden feather, and that only grew in old, old woods.

After that Winter Solstice night, everything was different. Everything was, of course, just as it was before that night, but everything was different. I understood that the old Pine's story was *his* story, but it was also *my* story, for our lives are now, as they have always been, intimately connected. His story, my story, is indeed *our* and *your* story.

How precious, yet how fragile is life in these remnants of the Caledonian Forest. Surely, they must be given a chance to persist; to evolve and to expand; and woods that have been degraded must surely be restored.

So, I pass on the story of 'Boddach nam Guithas', to *you*, for you to pass on, and trust that between us we will find a way to ensure that his story, *our* story continues."