

The Lonely Rowan Tree

Come with me back through the swirling mists of time, to when the memory of Ice could still be tasted across the land, Scotland was a bleak and barren place. This – hollow- steep sided Glen was grey. Banks of moraine, the sifted loose rock from the glaciers, covered the floor of the glen and skirted up the hills on either side. Look closer at the rocks though and you'll see, even here in this moonscape – life. Lichen coats everything, fungi breaking down and digesting minerals, algal cells soaking up the so welcome sunlight. Their actions allow moss to begin spreading.

High on an outcrop of rock near the head of the glen something else is stirring. A bird, a waxwing, landed here a little while ago and left its mark. Now oh so delicate green leaves are beginning to unfurl. They look almost like feathers themselves as they open stretching for the sky.

And now here she is. The first tree in the glen. A rowan tree. The tree of life, bearer of wisdom, courage, and protection. From her vantage point she can see the river winding its way through the moraine below, down, down toward the shining sea. Yes she thinks. This is a good place for my children to grow. And grow they do. Oh in those first few decades everything is hard. There is very little soil, and there is much to be done breaking down rocks, drawing up minerals, adding compost every year. But soon the valley is filled with her children and the children of all the other trees and plants who have joined them.

The air hums with the noise of insects, busily moving from tree to tree, flower to flower, birds sing, fish glide through the cool waters, and animals wander, or jump, or scurry, or run from place to place. Yes thinks the rowan tree. This is a good place for my children. Her berries are eaten by many birds who spread them to new lands, new glens, and she is content.

Bands of wandering humans enter the glen, and gather from its riches and thanking the land for such abundance. They recognise the rowan and call her Brid, mother of all. She is pleased and offers them protection. The seasons come and go, there are gifts for all the plants, people and other animals. People soon start to settle, they build dwellings, and till the land. They learn from the trees how to coppice and plant, they learn how to watch the browsing animals to find medicines, food, and shelter. They fit with the seasons of life and thrive here. To offer thanks and ask for protection every new home has a rowan tree planted in front. Life is good.

Over time people have their wars and woes. New people arrive and marvel at the good rich soil in the glen. They clear more room for fields, over time they forget the old ways. Their sisters and brothers the trees and animals. They forget their relationship with all things. The soil without trees becomes unstable. It has no compost added, the minerals cannot be drawn up and used to fertilise the land. Crops begin to fail. Sheep are brought in to graze on the tough grasses, although they much prefer the tender shoots of saplings and soft woodland flowers, devouring them whenever one is found. The deer wander lost and confused in a now stark landscape. People leave. There is nothing left here for them. A lonely rowan tree high in the crags safe from browsing animals looks down and wonders how it came to this.

Many years past, decades, centuries. The rowan trees in front of old houses died, were cut down or failed through old age. People began to believe their own eyes, and tell the stories of hardship, famine. That it had always been like this. That this landscape was not productive, that it could not have trees. That you could not grow anything in a place like this. All you could do was eek out a living for the few along with the lost deer in the harsh, stark, empty, but beautiful valley. And a lonely rowan tree high on the crags wept red berries.

Of course she wasn't completely alone. Occasional birds visited her, a few insects still came. She saw her children germinate and while they were bitten down before they could grow, there was still hope. There is always hope, and always change. People began to notice that she was still there. A tree? In a place where trees did not grow, could not grow? Perhaps they could? If they had a chance?

The browsing animals were removed. Trees were planted. Her delicate seedlings were allowed to grow. Soon the valley floor was covered in saplings, reaching for the sky. Birds landed on their branches and sang in the bright sunlight. The woodland plants, bluebell, foxglove and campion began to flower once more and the lonely rowan tree felt lonely no more. There she stood as a symbol of hope, wisdom, fertility and courage. Offering protection to all those who would accept her gifts.