



“The Forest of Forgetting”

Guy Hand

When I first set eyes on the Highlands of Scotland only the sky seemed alive, animated by the brooding advance of storms. Through the mist I could find nothing else to focus on, not a house or a fence or a tree—just the rise and fall of vacant land. Rain collected in rivulets. It tumbled like tears from bare stone. At that moment I would have sworn it was the saddest place on earth.

I hadn't realized I'd stumbled into a kind of Highland fable, into a treeless land with a forest story. I could feel it in the wind as it blew over the thin, rock-strewn soil; smell it in the smoke of coal fires; and hear it in the wail of Highland pipes. Yet I couldn't make sense of the meaning until I saw it as a look in my Scottish wife's eyes.

For Mairi the Highlands are home. Her black hair, soft brogue, and dark eyes betray a long ancestry there, of the Picts, the ancient people who stopped the Roman armies' northern advance at Hadrian's Wall. Mairi still carries that fight in her eyes, and a fierce love for that land. We met there, and fell in love. She helped me to see her homeland through a native's eyes and when she gave that homeland up for mine, I had hoped to do the same. But then, there were the trees.

The instant we climbed out of Idaho sagebrush and into a dense stand of pine, in the Sawtooth Wilderness Area, I knew something was wrong. Mairi fell silent. Her pace slowed. I glanced over my shoulder to find the distance between us filled with shadow and half-light. She had hunched her shoulders and dropped her head. She moved with the wary posture of stalked prey. As she passed through a saber of light I could clearly see the fear in her eyes. I waited for her, but she walked passed, pointed to a clearing, and by way of explanation, whispered “too many trees.” Neither of us had known, until that moment, that Mairi held a secret dread of wooded land.

I felt as if I'd failed her, unable to convey the closed-in sense of sanctuary I'd always felt in that forest, the way, even as a child, the thick mat of

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