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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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Hard Time

by David Rubenstein

Over the moonlit moor the wail of bagpipes rose and fell with the gusting of the wind; disembodied notes, measures lost in space and time, moving like the patches of mist that floated between the barren hilltops. The shifting haziness of the nightscape spanned the border between reality and fantasy, for the years of imagination had clouded his ability to distinguish one from the other. He hummed along with the familiar tune, filling in the notes lost with the wind.

But the moor was a graveyard, and the wail was a psalm, and reality was grief. The old priest's lips were moving; MacCaig did not hear the words. The skirl, from some lonely hill beyond the clamor of the city, drowned them out.

From the yawning earth he turned, his spadeful of dirt still cascading down the sides of the simple metal box, and strode across the third, yet-empty family grave site, to the rusted gates which failed to either keep the city from the cemetery or death from the decaying city.

Walking without apparent direction, he passed down streets of burned-out, boarded-up, and run-down buildings where hollow eyes punctuated the black facades. Without remembering the trip, he found himself in front of his own tenement. How long he had stood there he did not know but, as he began the ascent to the sixth floor, he realized that a decision had been made somewhere inside himself. He would go. Where, remained to be seen. He would go. There was nothing left here to hold him.

He surveyed the apartment. Not much to show for thirty years. Shrugging, he pulled a worn suitcase from the hall closet, ignoring the items which fell. He collected his work clothes, his shaving gear, and various personal effects, and laid them carefully into the case. What to do with the rest? he wondered. Hell, why bother. A day after he'd left, it would be gone. But there were things... He walked about the four rooms, picking up a picture here, a keepsake there, placing them carefully into a cardboard box. These things were too important to leave to the vermin. When he was satisfied that everything of emotional value was secured, he called his boss. He was retiring, he told him. Send through the papers. He'd have to get back to him later, though, with the address for the pension checks. He just didn't know yet. The boss expressed sympathy for MacCaig's loss, but his voice

barely concealed annoyance over his own. MacCaig had been a hard and diligent worker, the mainstay of the dock crew. He would be very difficult to replace.

With the cardboard box full of memories, he left the apartment and walked across the street to an empty lot covered with the debris of a demolished building which lay where it had fallen. There a rusty barrel bore black marks from the licks of past flames. MacCaig gathered up an abandoned newspaper, crumpled it, and dropped it into the barrel. He ignited it and, when the flames rose to the top, he carefully laid his box inside. The mass suppressed the flames for a moment, but they came back, greedily consuming the memories. He watched the pyre until only smoke and ash remained, then turned and continued down the street.

Descending into the subterranean transit tunnel, he boarded a graffiti-bejeweled car and plunged into darkness. At the other end, where banks dared to conduct business, he closed his account; traveller's checks, and a statement showing a zero balance. Then a travel agent. First flight tomorrow. Back to the subway. Back to the apartment. Home. His body finally shook his mind into submission, and he surveyed the refrigerator. Nothing to eat. At least nothing that he could simply take out and eat. Mary could have assembled quite a respectable meal from those ingredients, he had no doubt. But then, Mary was in the ground and he wasn't that hungry, anyway. A can of beer, a pipefull, out on the balcony. That would do.

The early summer sun had just squatted on the Jersey shore, reducing Manhattan to silhouette, and the night life was beginning to crawl out into the alleys below. But quickly, even more quickly than usual, the Brooklyn night was replaced by the rolling moor and skirl of a distant bagpipe. The sounds and the smells wafted over him, and he closed his eyes and opened his mind.

Before the mugger's knife had cut short her life, Mary would have returned from her evening job at the library and come quietly to the balcony, kissed him gently on the back of his head, and begun to knead his aching shoulders.

"Hearin' the pipes tonight, Pop?" she'd have asked, although she knew the answer already. But tonight her voice had already jumped that ever-nar-

rowing gap between reality and imagination. Gone! A single tear represented his remaining sanity.

Like her mother, dead of her birth, she was taken from him. Well, maybe they were together. Free at last, free at last! He thought of joining them. Nothing here for him. Rundown apartment in a rundown building in a rundown city. Sure, Mary had tried to make it a home, but lately he'd seen the signs. She was ready to leave, start a life of her own. She was twenty-three, after all. High time to leave a foolish, broken-down old man to his flights of fantasy. That's what she called them, "flights of fantasy", when he'd sit on the balcony overlooking filthy alleys and black rooftops and see rolling countryside and hear the wail of bagpipes. But they were more.

He knew they were more than flights of fantasy. Since his childhood, longer than he could remember, an image, a scene, repeated in his imagination, in his dreams, flashing across a movie screen, across a television scene, across his mind's eye in the middle of a book, always the same clear precise vision. It was an image locked in his genes, some genetic program, as the river where a salmon goes to spawn is programed into its cells and guides it, like the inter-continental flights of migratory birds, and the trans-oceanic treks of sea creatures, like the coded instructions that take the monarch butterfly fluttering across a continent to a small patch of land in Mexico. It was locked in there, each cell contributing its single bit of information which was assembled in his brain like a hologram and played across his psyche in technicolor cinerama and he was there.

"In a previous life," his daughter told him one night just last week on the balcony, as she massaged his shoulders, aching from the day on the docks, "you were a great Scottish king." He'd considered that carefully, as she chatted on about her shift at the library. Reincarnation had never entered his thoughts before.

"Bring me a book on the subject," he'd told her. It was in her hands that night when... He packed it in his bag to take abroad. Even New York City wouldn't cross oceans to retrieve an over-due library book.

So now he would go. His wife had gone and his daughter had gone and no one else in this world gave a rat's ass if he lived or died. Nobody would even care enough to tell him that he was a damned fool. Thirty years on the docks, dying a little each day - that was being a damned fool. He had nothing to show for his decades, save the memory of two women who had suffered with him and gone before him. He would go.

He had come to realize in recent years, although he hadn't confided in Mary, who was worried

enough about his "flights of fantasy", that somewhere in the world there was a place like the image in his mind, a real place and a real time. And now, with no strings to bind him, he would seek it out.

The flight to London was uneventful by aviation standards, but for him it was a passage to another world. It was his first flight. The thought was humorous to him, and he chuckled to himself as he watched the cloud tops float beneath. It was his first surrender to his natural good humor since the night the man had come to the door with Mary's purse and the tight face. Him, a laborer all his miserable life, flying to Europe. Now certainly that was a bit rich!

But although the method of conveyance was new, the destination was not. The previous trip had been made in the hold of a troop ship as fodder for the D-Day cannons. Long ago, though. But even at that tender age the image had been with him. And when, on that first evening in the camp in southern England he'd heard the pipes playing in the Scottish encampment, he had not been at all surprised at how accurate his imagination had been. He'd spent every free evening during his stay there with the Scots, listening.

But now, some two score years later, he found London somewhat bewildering. The real world imposed itself on his blind quest, and doubt surfaced for the first time. What the hell am I doing, searching for a holy grail in the twentieth century?

His hazy plan was to catch a train to Scotland. He found his way from Heathrow to the train station, where he chose a Scottish city at random from the schedule. Dingwall. He read the name on the ticket, trying to conjure up his vision, but nothing came. Dingwall. Hell, why not? When you don't know where you're going, on place is as good as the next.

The train bore him Northward. The ride was long, with even longer layovers, but these did not dampen his spirits. Just riding or waiting in a station, he was absorbing the feel of the country, the lay of the land. And when he sat in a waiting room quiet with the night's emptiness, the image of the moor came on so strongly that he had to open his eyes to convince himself that he was not, in fact, in the dream. He smiled then with satisfaction. If the image got stronger as he neared his goal, it would be as a beacon for him. This might be easier than he had dared to imagine.

It had, after all, been what could charitably be called a long shot. Even for a loony like himself, he realized. Okay, given that he was convinced that there was a place on earth like the one in his mind. And, yes, bagpipes did suggest Scotland. But they were played in other parts of the globe. But his name was MacCaig. Still, he might spend the rest

of his days searching the Scottish highlands for a moor that lay across the water somewhere in Ireland.

Well, he'd find it. He lay back on the wooden bench in the station, folding his jacket for a pillow. The image was stronger here than ever. He was at least an ocean closer, of that he felt certain.

The train pulled into Dingwall with the sun, but his first sight of it did not elicit the recognition he had somehow come to expect. Still, it did fit his image of a Scottish town rather nicely and he left the rails for more circumspect travel.

First to set up a base. He certainly couldn't afford to stay in a hotel. But a brief discussion with the station master afforded him directions to a boarding house. He hoisted his bag and walked the several blocks, easily finding the building. Once his meagre possessions were there deposited, he hiked to the outskirts of town, where a small used-car lot offered up a reasonably well-kept Morris with only fifty thousand miles showing on the odometer. Nothing American. But, resigned to dealing with unfamiliar quantities, he parted with pounds and accepted the funny-looking car.

Thus feeling that he had the mobility required to begin his quest in earnest, he hummed happily as he drove into town, nearly colliding head-on with the first approaching motorist, who seemed somehow intolerant of his insistence for driving on the right side of the road.

In total, it took him nearly three days to become relatively settled, including opening a bank account, learning basic directions and customs, sending his address to his company's pension department, and sleeping off jet-lag. By the third night, when he could close his eyes without sleep seizing him immediately, he experienced his image. And it was stronger, more vivid than ever. It was a homing beacon; it was clearly telling him, like the salmon struggling up its ancestral river, that his destination, his destiny, was near.

But near or not, whatever revelations he had expected did not materialize. No bolts from the blue, no visions, no minor miracles. Frustrated after a week of wandering the town, he took to traveling the countryside, winding over high road, low road, and sheep path where no car had ventured before. He discovered Scotland, and found a thousand moors which fit his image to a tee. He found misty mountains where pipers' skirts floated across foggy, moonlit nights. But there was no more recognition here than there had been back on that balcony overlooking the Brooklyn alley.

After two months of expectation had passed in fruitless search of a phantom meadow, he found himself one night in the only pub in a village just south of Wirth. For the first time he faced his doubts

and began to wonder, over a pint of stout, if perhaps he ought not to return to the States, sadder but wiser, and think seriously of his declining years. He was a little old for this quest business. But, he thought as he stared into his mug, he was acquiring a taste for the panther piss that passes for beer over here, and besides, as long as he was here, maybe he ought to learn the pipes himself.

No sooner had the idea materialized in his sodden brain than he realized that it was a good one, and for the first time he took notice of the others in the pub. Someone there would surely know of a good pipe tutor. He sought out a friendly face to ask. But the personality did not match the face of the young man he approached, and the man's companions seemed equally as ill-tempered, and before he could excuse himself for the interruption, he found himself facing an ugly group with a yen to relieve some pent-up frustration on a stranger, and a Yankee at that.

The first man had poked him once in the chest with an index finger, casting aspersion on his dead mother, and he had almost responded to the provocation, in spite of the extremely negative prognosis for the outcome. He was after all, despite his age, a large and powerful man, and well-versed in the etiquette of the barroom brawl. But a voice boomed out from the back of the room, and the young toughs looked to the source like curs when the top dog growls. They returned muttering to their mugs. MacCaig turned to look for the source of the voice, and although there were several men at the back, he had no doubt that his benefactor was the man-mountain with the red beard and bushy eyebrows. Though he looked to be closer to sixty than fifty, there was still little doubt about the reason for the respect the young men had conferred on the older.

He walked back to the man's table and asked if he could buy him a drink. The man allowed as he could, and he sat.

"MacDonald's the name," the man growled, sticking out a huge hand. "What brings an American to these parts?" His voice came from deep inside, but behind the red beard and wild curly hair the eyes showed only friendliness, not the usual suspicion he'd met since his arrival. MacCaig felt at ease, curiously hopeful. He'd not made so much as a casual friend in this foreign land.

"Came to find my roots," he answered vaguely, adding by way of explanation, "MacCaig's my name."

At the mention of his name, the men who had returned to their glasses when the ruckus had subsided turned back to him with renewed interest.

"Haven't been many MacCaigs in these parts for a hundred years," the big man said, a note of sharp-

ness in his voice. But then he quickly dropped the subject and became cordial again. By the time MacCaig had bought him his third drink, the man had told him his background, and MacCaig had sketched in his, though not mentioning what he had come more and more to accept as a mental aberration, rather than the supernatural phenomenon he had so long considered it.

By the time the bartender called "time", MacCaig had proved that he could hold his ale with the best of them and MacDonald had promised to teach him the pipes. But he was far too drunk to find his way back to Dingwall over the dark and curious roads and MacDonald insisted that he sleep at his house.

His "house" turned out to be a manor, and his hospitality as big as the man, and together they killed several more bottles of ale before succumbing to sleep. MacCaig, not usually one to impose on the kindness of others, stayed seven months.

Seven months were enough, under MacDonald's patient tutelage, to become marginally proficient at the bagpipes, as well as Scottish living, although his was certainly a life style representative more of the well-to-do than the average Scot. But something, MacCaig couldn't begin to guess what, attracted the gentle giant to him, and he knew a friendship such as he'd lacked since his childhood at PS 41. He followed the man around like a puppy, working with him in his distillery, drinking with him in the pub each night while he held court to "his" townsfolk, tending and mending and bending to the jobs about the estate. In his infrequent time alone, he practiced his piping, and re-read the book on reincarnation which carried in a dark splotch on its cover the only physical link that remained with the young woman he had loved more than life. That he played the pipes, and listened to MacDonald play the pipes, and of a misty evening might easily hear several pipers from several directions, seemed to somehow minimize the intensity and frequency his image, though it would still come on strongly given half a chance.

One late evening when MacCaig, in his cups, had fallen asleep on the porch, MacDonald came upon him and picked up Mary's book on reincarnation which lay in his lap. Dog-eared, underlined, and annotated in the margins, it was clearly more than casual reading. MacDonald quietly replaced it and departed, but on the next occasion that he and MacCaig were alone he asked him about it. It was then that MacCaig told him of his vision, of its life-long repetition, and felt unburdened for the first time. This kind and generous Scot, whom he called his friend, was the first human being beside his family who had heard his story. If he thought him crazy for it, so be it; then he was crazy. And besides, it was about time he got on with his life.

MacDonald was silent for a moment, pulling at

his pipe. Then he spoke: "A hundred years ago, the MacCaig clan ran this county. They owned the mine, the store, even this distillery. They held all the important offices. Powerful and respected, they even had influence in the House of Lords. They had held sway here for as long as anyone knew, since before the beginning of recorded history. It was rumored that they were direct descendants of the Druid Priests."

"In fact, the core of the MacCaig clan had never fully weaned itself from its ancient beliefs, for such ideas as reincarnation, and communication with those on the other side, remained wide-spread among them. However, their openness in expressing those ancient beliefs over the centuries rose and fell in contrast with the power of the Church of England."

"In that time, two hundred years ago, Sean, elder MacCaig and chief of the clan, due either to senility, misjudgment of the local climate, or some other reasons which will never be known, espoused his pagan beliefs in contradiction to the teachings of the Church. After the bloody confrontation which followed, the MacCaigs left Scotland for the new world."

MacCaig, lost in wonder of the story, waited for its conclusion, but MacDonald had evidently said his piece.

"Why haven't you told me this before?" he asked, not with anger but curiosity.

"Saw no need to make you feel uncomfortable. Most folks hereabouts don't take kindly to the memory of the MacCaigs. Long time ago it was, but a feud's a feud, in the highlands. Some have gone on five hundred years. Not so much, anymore," he said, after reflection. "Still, saw no need to let on; 'till now, that is."

MacCaig sat quietly digesting this new twist. Clearly,

he was likely a direct descendant of one of the MacCaigs driven from this very county. His imagination whirled for a moment, then came to bear upon a question.

"Did every last MacCaig leave?"

"No, not every one. And a few, over the years, have drifted back. Most of 'em never even heard of the whole affair 'till they come here."

MacCaig rose from his chair and strode to the fireplace, excitement glistening in his eyes. "Any MacCaig from the old times, descended from one who stayed, live around here, that you know of? One who might know about... about the old beliefs?"

MacDonald might have been asleep, for he remained still, eyes closed, for several moments before he spoke.

"Is one might help," he said finally. "Queer sort.

A crofter, he is. Lives way out in the hills by himself. Every so often some stranger comes through seeking directions to his place. Seems to have a reputation outside these parts. Maybe he writes," he added after a thought.

"How do I get there?" MacCaig asked, nearly shaking with excitement.

"Never been there, myself. Heard, though." He stood, and walked to the map on the wall, where MacCaig joined him anxiously. His finger traced a road to the edge of the county, then vaguely circled around an area. "Bout there. Have to ask the locals when ye get there."

"Let's go," MacCaig said, gathering up his jacket.

MacDonald turned to him, a look in his eye which MacCaig had not seen before.

"Can't tonight," he answered, turning on his heel and walking from the room.

MacCaig wondered about his friend's reaction, but only as he was hurrying to his car. It was late afternoon, and even if he could drive straight to this place at maximum speed, it would be dark before he got there. As it was, the drive would be over unfamiliar roads, for the most part winding and unmarked, to an area defined by the lazy circle of a massive finger on a inch-equals-five-miles scale map. But wild goose chases are the name of this game, he thought to himself as he pushed the Morris over the crest of a blind hill, trusting the far side to chance. If he could find the area before dark, he might be able to get directions from someone locally, just as MacDonald had suggested. Otherwise, he could wander the moors till dawn and not find a soul. He'd already learned the hard way that driving on a dirt road in the dark was asking to end up in a field when the road, following some ancient cow path, turned aside for no apparent reason.

When he reached the crossroads which had marked the center of MacDonald's circling finger, the moon was rising full, promising at least, barring cloudy skies, favorable conditions for nocturnal navigation. And at the intersection was a pub and gas station. He pulled up to the pumps, scanning the dark windows of the building dubiously.

Nobody came out, so he went in. The door opened into a smallish pub, with no more than two or three patrons, a man behind the bar and a bar maid, likely the man's wife. MacCaig asked the bartender how one went about getting petrol and the man wiped his hands, removed his apron, retrieved a key from a hook behind the bar, and walked out into the dark. He unlocked the pump, and, without

speaking, began to fill the Morris.

"Could you give me some directions?" MacCaig asked. The man grunted ascent without turning his head from the pump. "How do I get to the home of MacCaig?" (Please let there be no more than one MacCaig around here). The man turned from the pump, noticing him for the first time.

"Wha' all y' foreigners want with that crazy old coot, anyhow?" MacCaig treated the question as rhetorical. "He don't see nobody," the man said, turning back to the tank. "Run ya off with a shotgun, he will. Did just that last summer when them nosy Krauts was here after him." He shook his head and spat, as though riding his mouth of a bad taste. MacCaig couldn't tell whether the man was protecting the old fellow or simply disliked strangers. Probably both, he guessed.

The man replaced the hose into its cradle, and the cap onto the gas tank, as he announced the tally. When MacCaig asked again, holding in his hand twice the cash required, the man gave begrudging directions, vague, with landmarks dubious enough by day, let alone in the moonlit darkness which had descended over the highlands. MacCaig did not press him for more details, but was content to be heading in the right direction.

He followed the road to the north-east as instructed, watching for the "fork with the barn in the cleft". The moon was higher now, full of itself, tracing silver shadows across the night. MacCaig slowed, drinking in the eerie beauty of it, and a shadow passed across his mind. If only he could have had Mary here with him to see this, she who had listened so raptly to his descriptions of just such a place in her younger years and so patiently in her later ones.

Blinking hard, he cleared his vision of its internally-generated mist, and gunned the car into the night.



moor.

He paused for a moment, as he was wont to do whenever he heard pipes now, to appraise the piper's style and competence, when he realized that the tune was terribly familiar. Unaccountably drawn, he got out of the car and walked up the hill toward the music. At the crest he paused, trying to pinpoint the direction from which the sound came. The hills undulated within his field of vision, and no buildings or lights were visible. Yet the haunting tune continued to unfold.

Over the moonlit moor the wail of bagpipes rose and fell with the gusting of the wind, disembodied notes, measures lost in space and time, moving like the patches of mist that floated between the barren hilltops. The shifting haziness of the nightscape spanned the border between reality and fantasy, for the years of imagination had clouded his ability to distinguish one from the other. He hummed along with the familiar tune, filling in the notes lost with the wind.

He walked forward into the mist as he always had in his imagination, the night sounds swallowing his thoughts. It wasn't until he'd walked for several minutes, as far as he'd ever gone in his visions, that he realized that this was it, the vision in his head had played this place and this moment for him for his entire life. And now he was here. He was not dreaming. He looked down at his hands, closing and opening the fists to get a point of reference in reality. Yes, his eyes could see his hands respond to messages from his brain. It certainly seemed real, but it was so... exact. So perfectly like his vision that he... He stopped, his heart finally responding. He had lived his entire life for this moment, he suddenly recognized. Now it was here. What was there to do but walk on, toward the pipes?

Walk on he did, through the mist and over the moor toward the music, which seemed ever distant, never closer. Finally a glen opened up in the moonlight, with the silhouette of a thatch-roofed stone cottage thrown up between its slopes. No light left the windows, but when MacCaig stepped into the yard, the pipes went still and a voice addressed him from the shadows.

"So ye've coom at last."

MacCaig stopped, squinting into the shadows. "I've come looking for -"

"MacCaig, yes, I know ye," the voice interrupted impatiently. "Hurry now, I've got so little time!"

Bewildered, MacCaig approached the darkened porch, finally seeing the old Scot sitting on a log bench, just putting aside his pipes.

"Coom inside," he ordered, and hurried into the doorway. MacCaig stepped cautiously to the door, but stopped, unable to see a thing in the blackness. A match was struck, illuminating the grossly

withered face of an old man who might have been MacCaig's brother, were he not so much older, his features were so similar. He lit a lantern, placed it on the rough wooden table, and turned to look at MacCaig for the first time.

He raised his eyebrows for a second at the sight of MacCaig's familiar face. "Sit down", he ordered. MacCaig looked around the spartan room for a seat, and drew up the only chair. The old man went to a curtained wall, and, drawing the cloth aside, revealed a bed, made haphazardly of heavy quilts. He sat upon it, struggled out of his heavy boots, and lay back, releasing a sigh that seemed to MacCaig like the relief of unspeakable burdens. He then began to speak, very quietly, to the ceiling. MacCaig had to lean forward and listen intently to make out his words.

"Hear me, MacCaig, for in a moment, when I am free, another soul will enter this God-forsaken planet, and in that distant time when he appears here to relieve you, you will say these words to him."

"I have been The Eyes these sixty-three years since I walked the path you trod tonight. Now my sentence is up, and yours is half to go. God knows we were guilty of some horrendous crime, that we should be sentenced to one hundred twenty-six years of hard time. When I return, I shall tread lightly for all eternity."

"The truth, MacCaig, is quite the opposite from what we convicts here on Earth delude ourselves into believing. Think of the incongruity of it! To believe that we'd spend eternity in reward or punishment for some pathetic number of years here. Who, of any compassion at all, would sentence a soul to a hundred billion years of hell for thirty years of substandard conduct? Certainly not The Merciful God. No, it's not that way at all. In fact, it is life on Earth which is the punishment for crimes committed by a heavenly soul. Earth is the Devil's Island of God's community, where only those guilty of the most unforgivable of offenses are sent. To this inhospitable planet which he has left to fend for itself. Oh, he has one keep watch, and report back to him. Was me. Now it's you.

"We are sent into this world with an intellect so low that we cannot even remember our immortal souls, though some, as they mature, may remember previous sentences served here. We cannot escape - to commit suicide is to have another ten years added to our sentence, and we are pushed out again screaming from the womb of another hapless convict. And you, MacCaig, are here for the longest of terms."

"From time to time others will come, knowing of your position, seeking appeals. You cannot help them. You cannot help anyone, even yourself. All you can do is watch. And grow old. And wait for

away.

"No, let me help. You're too short, your eyes are the wrong color, and it's your fault when it rains... You remember the time at the church picnic? We sat at a table right about where we're standing now, and all the wagons were tied up along the picket fence until John Thomson's kids tried to sneak up and unhitch their two mares -- "

"And the horses spooked and run off with the wagon. Yeah, I can still see poor John trying to decide which way to run, after the kids or after his wagon." Erin came very close to smiling, thought better of it and said, "So what?"

"So, I'm tired of this worthless-life-self-persecution nonsense. First you blamed yourself for falling ill with the fever, and for my fever after that, and ever since it's been this one sided sad list of - - "

"Stop being ridiculous."

"Stop being ridiculous."

"I needed more time," Erin said after a moment. "We both did." He watched a cloud pass in front of the moon. The night darkened, then the sky glowed again. He wanted to float off with the cloud, follow it where ever it might go. But it was never like that, never so simple, even now.

"Everybody always needs more time," Anna said softly. She was right beside him. She reached out, putting her hand on his arm. "Take me inside, won't you?"

Erin complied, walking her up the cracked grey weathered steps, through the arching wooden doors. They went straight up the aisle until they reached the rail at the altar.

"This is where we started," Anna said.

"I know. I know what day it is."

"So our anniversary is a bad memory, too."

"No. I remember standing here waiting for you, and waiting and waiting, and Bill Lancaster said you weren't gonna show -- some best man -- by God if I didn't start to wonder myself."

"Are you glad I finally did?"

"Of course I am."

"So then, we had our moments together. Both kinds."

They turned to face each other. Erin took his hat off, set it on the rail, then took both of his wife's hands and held them. "Maybe you haven't changed a bit."

"I make no defense."

"We missed out on a lot of things, though. Cars, and radio, and I don't know what else. Things some of our friends got to see."

"Cars, as I understand it, break down all the time, and you know you never were any good with your hands!" Anna began to giggle.

"You are awful," Erin said. A tear fell across his grin. Anna nodded smugly and looked away.

"The thought of spending eternity with you purely scares me to death, Anna Cole."

"Happy anniversary, Erin."

They went arm in arm out of the church, going up past the naked trees as the moon darkened again and passing clouds cast their shadows on the church below; they traveled off together, following them along into the night sky.

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one keep watch, and report back to him. Was me. Now it's you.

"We are sent into this world with an intellect so low that we cannot even remember our immortal souls, though some, as they mature, may remember previous sentences served here. We cannot escape - to commit suicide is to have another ten years added to our sentence, and we are pushed out again screaming from the womb of another hapless convict. And you, MacCaig, are here for the longest of terms."

"From time to time others will come, knowing of your position, seeking appeals. You cannot help them. You cannot help anyone, even yourself. All you can do is watch. And grow old. And wait for MacCaig."

With those words he closed his eyes and was released. MacCaig sat for an eternity in the hard wooded chair, his brain seeking to comprehend what it had heard and seen. Finally he rose, walked to the porch, picked up the pipes from the bench where the old man had left them, and filled the bag with air. Then he sat, fitting comfortably into the depression worn into the wooden seat, and blew his tune out across the misty moors.