

ONE LITTLE REINDEER A COUNTING PLAYBOOK

Earlier, the dirty-sheet clouds had been wrung dry. Now, the trees that overhung the house had finally stopped dripping on the cedar shingled roof. The night was so still that Agnes could hear the sea softly breaking upon the shore more than half a mile away. When Agnes and Paul returned from a honeymoon in Carmel, they discovered that Edom had finally cleared out Jacob's apartment. He donated his twin's extensive files and books to a university library that was building a collection to satisfy a growing professorial and student interest in apocalyptic studies and paranoid philosophy. By Thursday, the eruption passed from him. Because he'd had the self-control not to claw his face or hands, he was presentable enough to venture out into the city; although if people in the streets could have seen the weeping scabs and inflamed scratches that tattooed his body and limbs, they would have fled with the grim certainty that the black. A dry laugh escaped the detective, but it had none of the warmth of most people's laughter. "You're not bad, Enoch. You're just not as good as you think you are." holding hands as they watched John Wayne in *The Searchers*, David Niven in *Around the World in 80 Days*. They were so young then, sure they would live forever, and they were still young now, but for one of them, forever had arrived. "Oh, that's me, all right. I'm on the FBI's most-wanted list for criminal pie jostling." "That wasn't gossip," Grace insisted. "I was just telling you that Paul got the swing repaired and rehung." would allow herself to feel the loss, the misery against which she was now armored. Phemie deserved dignity in this final. For Junior, 1968--the Chinese Year of the Monkey--would be the Year of the Plastic Surgeon. He would require extensive dermabrasion to restore the smoothness and tone to his skin, to be as irresistibly kissable as he had been before. While at it, he would need surgery to make subtle changes in his features. Tricky. He didn't want to trade perfection for anonymity. He must take care to ensure that his postsurgery look, when he let his hair grow in and perhaps dyed it, would be as devastating to women as his previous appearance. Tom himself had decided to build a new life here, as well, assisting Agnes with her ever-expanding work. He was not yet sure whether this would include the rededication to his vows and a return to the Roman collar, or whether he would spend the rest of his days in civvies. He was delaying that decision until the Cain case was resolved. Nolly sighed. "Well, I guess if you were going to just plug him, you could've done that already, soon as you got to town." use it. The cop was no threat to the English army, as Joan had been, but as far as Junior was concerned, the creep most definitely deserved to be burned at the stake. Therefore, after the nasty shooting, as the Bartholomew hunt continued, so did the good life. He pressed his right ear to the door, held his breath, heard nothing, and addressed the top lock first. Quietly, he slid the thin pick of the lock-release gun into the key channel, under the pin tumblers. "Let's roll 'em out," Paul said, and he returned to the station wagon to ride shotgun beside Agnes. What he learned working with his father and uncle in the shipyard he could use, at least; and he was becoming a good craftsman, even his father would admit that. Even without the dangling cigarette and without the cynical sneer, Nolly had an air of toughness worthy of Sam Spade, largely because the face that nature had given him was a splendid disguise for the sentimental sweetie who lived behind it. With his bull neck, with his strong hands, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to expose his lovely hairy forearms, he made a properly intimidating impression: as if Humphrey Bogart, Sydney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre had been put in a blender and then poured into one suit. Unable to continue Tehanu's story (because it hadn't happened yet) and foolishly assuming that the story of Ged and Tenar had reached its happily-ever-after, I gave the book a subtitle: "The Last Book of Earthsea." This time he didn't flip the quarter straight into the air. He tipped his hand, and with his thumb, he shot the coin toward Agnes. Shortly past nine o'clock, an hour after Edom and Jacob had gone, Barty came downstairs, book in hand. "The twisties are back." In those days they had no fixed names for the various kinds and arts of magic, nor were the connections among those arts clear. There was--as the wise men of Roke would say later--no science in what they knew. But Hound knew pretty surely that his prisoner was concealing his talents. Before Junior had become a physical therapist, he had considered studying to be a dentist. A low tolerance for the stench of halitosis born of gum disease had decided him against dentistry, but he still could appreciate a set of teeth as exceptional as these. Edom observed, amazed, as Agnes chatted up their host, going from Mr. Sepharad to Obadiah, from the doorstep to the living room, the pie delivered and accepted, coffee offered and served, the two of them pleased and easy with each other, all in the time that it would have taken Edom himself to get up the nerve to cross the threshold and to think of something interesting to say about the Galveston hurricane of 1900, in which six thousand had died. Vanadium sat in the chair, watching. With the perfect control of a sleight-of-hand artist, he turned a quarter end-over-end across the knuckles of his right hand, palmed it with his thumb, caused it to reappear at his little finger, and rolled it across his knuckles again, ceaselessly. Busily, earnestly, with great satisfaction, Junior redirected his anger at Celestina and at the man with her. These two were, after all, guardians of the true Bartholomew, and therefore Junior's enemies. A pathologically suspicious cop, aware of Junior's acute; emesis following Naomi's death, might imagine a connection between this epic bout of diarrhea and Victoria's murder, and Vanadium's disappearance. Here was an avenue of speculation that he did not want to encourage. "You sounded as though you were in a lot of distress. You were frightened of this Bartholomew." Only one member of the distant funeral party did not disperse toward the line of cars on the service road. A man in a dark suit headed downhill, between the headstones and the monuments, directly toward Naomi's grave. His mother, gently pushing Tom to the prime view point at the head of the stairs, seemed unconcerned about her child's venture into the storm. A sudden cold breeze blew down out of the moon, bearing a faint alien scent, and the black boughs of the trees billowed and rustled like witches' skirts. In her features, the girl entirely resembled her mother. She was nothing whatsoever like Junior. Only the light brown shade of her skin provided evidence that she hadn't been derived from Seraphim by parthenogenesis. In the motel office, Junior paid for another

night in advance. His preference in lodgings didn't run to greasy carpeting, cigarette-scarred furniture, and the whispery scuttling of cockroaches in the dark, but though feeling better, he was too tired and shaky to drive. Ever the romantic, he wanted to surprise her. Voila! Flowers, wine, and moi. Since their electrifying connection in the hospital, she had been yearning for him; but she wouldn't expect a visit for a few weeks yet. He was eager to see her face brighten with delight. "Not so bad, two thousand," Tom heard himself say idiotically. "I mean, compared to nearly four million." PUDDLED ON THE pan-flat face, the port-wine birthmark. In the center of the stain, the closed eye, concealed by a purple lid, as smooth and round as a grape. Earlier in the week, Junior had looked up Thomas Vanadium in the telephone directory. He expected the number to be unlisted, but it was published. What he wanted more than a number was an address, and he found that as well. "Crafty men" is what they called wizards in those days. She lay beside her boy in the darkness, gazing at the covered window, where the faint glow of the moon pressed through the blind, suggesting another world thriving with strange life just beyond a thin membrane of light. He also concluded arrangements to open an account for Gammoner in a Grand Cayman Island bank and one for Pinchbeck in Switzerland. Celestina threw down the weapon even before she turned, and as two cops entered the room, she cried, "He's getting away!" Seraphim's child had been alive as long as Naomi had been dead, almost fifteen months. In fifteen months, Junior should have located the little bastard and eliminated him. Dr. Chan's manner remained professional, providing the strength that Agnes required, but his pain was evident when his gentle voice softened further: "These tumors are so advanced, we won't know until surgery if the malignancy has spread. We may already be too late. And if we aren't too late, we'll have only a small window of opportunity. A small window. Eight days would entail too much risk." No time for horror, disgust. Every second mattered now, and every minute might cost another life. "He's a wonderful boy, so very bright, so very full of life. Blindness will be hard, but it won't be the end. He'll cope without the light. It'll be so difficult at first, but this boy ... eventually he'll thrive." Junior blinked and dared not speak, because he didn't know any Bartholomew, and now he was certain the cop was weaving an elaborate web of deceit, setting a trap. Why would he have spoken a name that meant nothing to him? If she'd connected with his left side, as she intended, she might have broken his arm or cracked a few ribs. But he saw the chair coming, and as agile as a base runner dodging a shortstop's tag, he turned away from her, taking the blow across his back. Animal instinct told Junior that the business with the quarter in the diner and now these quarters in his living room were related to his failure to find Bartholomew, Seraphim White's bastard child. He couldn't logically explain the connection; but as Zedd teaches, animal instinct is the only unalloyed truth we will ever know. Madness or a brilliant deductive insight: Naomi, the hateful bitch, she poisoned me! Because she'd enjoyed some limited use of her right arm, it was less wasted than her left, although not normal. Paul pulled down that sleeve of her pajamas. OF THE SEVEN NEWBORNS, none was fussing, too fresh to the world to realize how much was here to fear. Angel, however, focused on a point in the air above the table. Faint furrows marked her brow for a moment, but then the frown gave way to a smile. Junior was tempted to experiment with the controls. Maybe other messages were recorded on the machine. Listening to them would be delicious—even if every one of them turned out to be as meaningless to him as Max's—a little like browsing through a stranger's diary. Not cheerful, life-loving, high-spirited, churchgoing Naomi. She saw every day through a golden haze that came from the sun in her heart. For eight months following that night, until late September of 1965, Vanadium had been in a coma, and his doctors had not expected him to regain consciousness. A passing motorist had found him lying along the highway near the lake, soaked and mucky. When, after his long sleep, he awakened in the hospital, withered and weak, he'd had no memory of anything after walking into Victoria's kitchen—except a vague, dreamlike recollection of swimming up from a sinking car. Tom received a fierce hug, too, and a sisterly kiss, and he was grateful for them. He had been a loner for too long, as a hunter of men pretty much had to be when on a long hard road of recuperation and then on a mission of vengeance, even if he called it a mission of justice. During the few days he'd spent guarding Celestina and Grace and Angel in the city, and subsequently during the week with Wally, Tom had felt that he was part of a family, even if it was just a family of friends, and he had been surprised to realize how much he needed that feeling. Dr. Lipscomb brought his hands to his face, covering his nose and mouth as earlier they had been covered with a surgical mask, as though he were in danger of drawing in, with his breath, an idea that would forever change him. Carrying him to the window, gazing up at the stars, the moon, she said, "I'll always read to you, Barty." "Mr. Magusson, you once told me that if Detective Vanadium ever bothered me again, you'd have his choke chain yanked. Well, I think you need to talk to someone about that." Looking down at Barty, Agnes saw the ghost of Joey in the baby's face, and although she half believed that her husband would be alive now if he had never tempted fate by putting such a high price on his life, she couldn't find any anger in her heart for him. She must accept this final generosity with grace—if also without enthusiasm. Agnes could almost visualize the three-dimensional geometric model that her little prodigy had created in his mind, which he now relied upon to reach the upper floor without a serious stumble. Pride, wonder, and sorrow pulled her heart in different directions. "Mom always says that pigs will surely fly one day if ever Daddy chooses to convince them that they've got wings." He was glad that he'd taken the double dose of antiemetics. In spite of this provocation, his stomach felt as solid and secure as a bank vault. Avoiding the graveled driveway, on which he was more likely to scuff his freshly polished loafers, he approached the house across the lawn, beneath the moon-sifting branches of a great pine that made itself useless for Christmas by spreading as majestically as an oak. Through fog-shrouded hills forested with oaks, maples, madrones, and pepperwoods, through magnificent stands of redwoods that towered three hundred feet, he arrived in Weott on the evening of January 3, 1968, where he stayed the night. If Paul had any northernmost goal for this trip, it was the city of Eureka, almost fifty miles farther—and for no reason, other than to eat Humboldt Bay crabs at their origin, because that was one of his and Perri's favorite foods. Losen, a sea-pirate who called himself

King of the Inmost Sea, was then the chief warlord in the city and all the east and south of Havnor. Exacting tribute from that rich domain, he spent it to increase his soldiery and the fleets he sent out to take slaves and plunder from other lands. As Otters uncle said, he kept the shipwrights busy. They were grateful to have work in a time when men seeking work found only beggary, and rats ran in the courts of Maharion. They did an honest job, Otter's father said, and what the work was used for was none of their concern.. "Poker." Keeping his hands high, like a penitent confessing sin at a revival meeting and asking God to wash him clean, Obadiah said, "My specialty was close-up magic. Oh, I pulled a rabbit out of a hat more than once, silk scarves from thin air, doves from silk scarves. But close was my love. Coins, but mostly ... cards." Though they had expected the cause of the explosion, both Paul and Harrison were halted by shock at the sight of all this ruination. They had expected to find the car jammed into the wall of the house, never this far inside. The speed required to penetrate this distance into the structure beggared Paul's skills of calculation and made him wonder if even recklessness and alcohol were sufficient to produce, such a catastrophe.. White's paintings, which Junior found naive, dull, and insipid in the extreme. She imbued her work with all the qualities that real artists disdained: realistic detail, storytelling, beauty, optimism, and even charm.. "I'm interested in one of the smaller Griskins," said Junior, managing to appear calm, although his mouth was dry with fear and his mind spun with crazy images of the maniac cop, dead and rotting but nevertheless lurching around San Francisco.. Rena laughed. "Oh, but true! And not just a garden. I'm a field of flowers!" She let go of her skirt, which shimmered like cascades of falling petals. "So tonight will be a famous night, Celestina." Seeing her, Joey leaped up front his armchair again. He managed to hold on to his book this time, but he stumbled into the footstool and nearly lost his balance.. Without the pillow, she wouldn't have been able to lift her head to look toward the back of the ambulance.. At the end of his fourth month, instead of in his seventh, he said "Mama," and clearly knew what it meant. He repeated it when he wanted to get her attention.. Instead of answering the question, meaning to imply that he believed Junior already knew the facts, Thomas Vanadium said, "I was able to get a warrant to search your house." Junior thought this must be a trick. No hard evidence existed to indicate that Naomi had died at the hands of another rather than by accident.. As shaken as she had been at Phimie's side, she couldn't trust her memory. Perhaps she hadn't seen what she thought she'd seen.. "Miss White was admitted to St. Mary's late January fifth," said Nolly, "with dangerous hypertension, a complication of pregnancy." "That's just ... an old joke," she heard herself saying, as from a distance. "You didn't really walk between the drops?" Leaving the engine running and the heater on, he got out of the car, leaned back inside, said, "Better lock up while I'm gone," and then closed his door.. "I know how to build boats, how to sail boats." As mentally demanding and stressful as it was to maintain this borrowed sight, the harder thing was looking once more upon her face, after all these years of blindness, only to see her gaunt, so pale. The vital, lovely woman whose image he had guarded so vigilantly in memory would be nudged aside hereafter by this withered version.. He moved the shaker across the tablecloth, rocking it back and forth to convey that he was strolling without a care in the world.. under the spoon to catch drips, she conveyed the shimmering sliver to Agnes's mouth.. Shortly after nine-thirty in the morning, they landed in Eugene, and the cab driver who conveyed Junior to the town's largest shopping center spent more time staring at his afflicted passenger in the rearview mirror than he did watching the road. Junior got out of the taxi and paid through the driver's open window. The cabbie didn't even wait for his fiery-faced fare to turn completely away before he crossed himself.. "If he gets back within the next hour, better ring me at his place so I can scoot." He wanted an explanation, but no one could give him the one that he needed, because nobody but he himself knew the significance and symbolism of the quarter.. It occurred to her that the knave had come, as foretold by the cards on that night long ago. She had expected the knave to be a man with sharp eyes and a wicked heart, but the curse was cancer and not a man at all.. With remarkably little splash, the sedan eased into the water. Briefly it floated, bobbling near shore, tipped forward by the weight of the engine. As the lake flooded in through the floor vents, the vehicle settled steadily-then sank rapidly when water reached the two partially open windows.. She looked down at her clutched hands. Made for work, these hands, and always ready to take on any task. Strong, nimble, reliable hands, but useless to her now, unable to perform the one miracle she needed. "Barty's birthday is in eight days. I was hoping. . ." The Worry Bear carries worries in his pockets. Under his Panama hat and in two gold lockets. Carries worries on his back and under his arms. Nevertheless, dear old Worry Bear has his charms.. "Well, we have earthquakes here," Jolene said, "but back east they have all those hurricanes." Junior glimpsed Vanadium first in profile-and then, as the cop rode down and away, only the back of his head. He hadn't seen this man in almost three years, yet he was instantly certain that this was no coincidental look-alike. Here went the filthy-scabby-monkey spirit itself.. Shortly before three o'clock, Thursday afternoon, in a state of agitation, Barty raced into the kitchen, where Agnes was baking buttermilk-raisin pies. Holding Red Planet open to pages 104 and 105, he complained urgently that the library copy was defective. "There's twisty spots in the print, twisty-funny letters, so you can't just exactly read all the words. Can we buy our own copy, go out and buy one right now?" He looked at the two cards following the four of clubs in the stack. Neither of these was a jack of spades, either, and both were what he anticipated.. MONDAY EVENING, January 15, Paul Damascus arrived at the hotel in San Francisco with Grace White. He had kept watch over her in Spruce Hills for more than two days, sleeping on the floor in the hall outside her room both nights, remaining close by her side when she was in public. They stayed with friends of hers until Harrison's funeral this morning, then flew south for a reunion of mother and daughter.. "You can learn em." Two high-quality deadbolt locks. Sufficient protection against the average intruder, but inadequate to keep out a self-improved man with channeled anger.. The wink startled and baffled Edom. Oddly, he thought of the mysterious, disembodied, and eternally unwinking eye in the floating pinnacle of the pyramid that was on the back of any one-dollar bill.. Briefly, Junior felt humiliated. He wanted to drag the detective out of the car and stomp on his smug, dead face.. If

he had been any other three-year-old, she would have told a compassionate lie. He was her miracle child, however, her prodigy, and he would know a lie for what it was..He rode up to the third of five floors in the service elevator, which other tenants were permitted to use only when moving in or moving out, or when taking delivery of large items of furniture. Another elevator, at the front of the building, was too public to suit his purposes..I also wanted information on various things that had happened back then, before Ged and Tenar were born. A good deal about Earthsea, about wizards, about Roke Island, about dragons, had begun to puzzle me. In order to understand current events, I needed to do some historical research, to spend some time in the Archives of the Archipelago..Of all the kindnesses that we can do for one another, the most precious of all gifts-time-is not ours to give. Bearing this in mind, Agnes did her best to guide her extended family through its grieving for Harrison and for Jacob, into happier days. Respect must be paid, precious memories nurtured, but life also must go on..Prepared for any contingency, Junior listened to the house until he was certain that he needed the knife for no one else.

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