

## YAK ON TRACK

The subtle distortions in his vision, which caused lines of type to twist, didn't appear to trouble Barty much otherwise. He moved as quickly and as surely as ever, with his special grace. The apartment above Elena's Fashions could be reached by a set of exterior stairs at the back of the building. The climb had never before taxed Agnes in the least, but now it took away her breath and left her legs trembling by the time she reached the top landing. The study was the size of a bathroom. The cramped space barely allowed for a battered pine desk, a chair, and one filing cabinet. The bitch was getting tired, but Junior still didn't like his odds in a hand-to-hand confrontation. Her hair was disarranged. Her eyes flashed with such wildness that he was half convinced he saw elliptical pupils like those of a jungle cat. Her lips were skinned back from her teeth in a snarl. As Junior blew his nose and blotted his eyes, Vanadium said, "I believe YOU actually loved her in some strange way." Therefore, after the nasty shooting, as the Bartholomew hunt continued, so did the good life. The stress that he currently felt wasn't the same that he so often relieved with women. This was an energizing tension, a not-unpleasant tightening of the nerves, a delicious anticipation that he wanted to experience to its fullest-until the gallery reception for Celestina, on the evening that her show opened, January 12. This tension could not be released by intercourse, but only by the killing of Bartholomew, and when that long-sought moment arrived, Junior expected the relief he experienced would far exceed mere orgasm. Beyond the window, behind veils of rain and fog, the metropolis appeared to be more enigmatic than Stonehenge, as unknowable as any city in our dreams. He knew that the only movement in those staring, sightless eyes was the restless reflection of the flashlight beam as he probed the trash with it. He knew he was being irrational, but nevertheless he was reluctant to turn his back on the corpse. Repeatedly in the midst of searching, he snapped his head up, whipping his attention to Neddy, certain that from the corner of his eye, he had seen the dead gaze following him. On a positive note, the apartment was heated by a gas furnace. A leak, a spark, an explosion, and he would never have to see poor Agnes in her misery. Bent like an ape, he humped the musician north along the alley. The original cobblestone pavement had been coated with blacktop, but in places the modern material had cracked and worn away, providing a treacherously uneven surface made even more treacherous by a skin of moisture shed by the fog. He stumbled and slipped repeatedly, but he used his anger to keep his balance and be a winner, until he found a distant enough dumpster. "May 14, 1845, in Canton, China, a theater fire killed sixteen hundred seventy. On December 8, 1863, a fire in the Church of La Compana, in Santiago, Chile, left two thousand five hundred and one dead. One hundred fifty perished in a fire at a Paris charity bazaar: May 4, 1897. June 30, 1900, a dock fire in Hoboken, New Jersey, killed three hundred twenty-six. . .". She held his face in both hands and kissed each of his beautiful jewel eyes. "You ready?". of color had to search for mentoring, especially in 1922, when twenty year-old Obadiah dreamed of being the next Houdini. Against the backdrop of granite monuments, Kaitlin hulked like a moldering presence from Beyond, risen out of a rotting box to take vengeance on the living. Cold, wind-driven rain slashed through the missing windows, and voices rose in the street as people ran toward the Pontiac-thunder in the distance-and on the air was the ozone scent of the storm and the more subtle and more terrible odor of blood, but none of these hard details could make the moment seem real to Agnes, who, in her deepest nightmares, had never felt more like a dreamer than she felt now. Waking from a starry night in the Old West into electric light, gazing up into a blur of faces sans cowboy hats, Agnes felt someone moving a piece of ice in slow circles over her bare abdomen. Shivering as the cold water trickled down her sides, she tried to ask them why they were applying ice when she was already chilled to the bone, but she couldn't find her voice. "Oh? Do they rent their house out to pirates with little pirate children, clowns with little clown children?". Junior wanted to kill her. Kill him. Whatever. But he sensed that Renee knew more than a little about dirty fighting and that the outcome of a violent confrontation would not be easy to predict. His silent tears accomplished what his words could not: Nork, Knacker, and Hisscus retreated, urging him to speak to his attorney, promising to return, once more expressing their deepest condolences, perhaps as abashed as attorneys and political appointees could get, but certainly confused and unsure how to proceed when dealing with a man so untouched by greed, so free of anger, so forgiving as the widower Cain. Tuesday, January 9, having cashed out a number of investments during the past ten days, Junior made a wire transfer of one and a half million dollars to the Gammoner account in the Grand Cayman bank. Whereas the lone heart at the center of the rectangular white field inspired amazement and delight in her brothers and in Maria, Agnes reacted to it with dread. She strove to mask her true feelings with a smile as thin as the edge of a playing card. "Yes, you did, and it's exactly what experience has no doubt taught you to think. But I'm forty-seven and you're twenty-". Both the red and the white wines were too cheap for Junior's taste' so he drank Dos Equis beer and got two kinds of high by inhaling enough secondhand pot smoke to cure the state of Virginia's entire annual production of hams. Among the two or three hundred partyers, some were tripping on some exhibited the particular excitability and talkativeness typical of cokeheads, but Junior succumbed to none of these temptations. Self-improvement and self control mattered to him; he didn't approve of this degree of self indulgence. Lipscomb turned to Celestina. "Before lapsing into semicoherence again, your sister said, 'Beezil and Feezil are safe with her,' which may sound less than coherent to you, but not to me." A smoldering cigarette, usually dangling aslant from one corner of a hard mouth set in a cynical sneer, was standard issue for tough-guy gumshoes, but Nolly didn't smoke. His failure to develop this bad habit resulted in a less satisfyingly murky atmosphere than the clients of a private dick might expect. Barty whispered: "The North Pole Society of Not Evil Adventurers is now in session." Of course, Seraphim's child would not have a telephone. He was just a baby, dangerous to Junior in a way that was not clear, but a baby nonetheless. Undeterred, the girl said, "Not magic. But maybe I can't learn to do that one, ever." With a paper towel, Junior wiped the

revolver. He dropped it on the floor beside the riddled nurse. Junior kept a file on each man, nevertheless, in case instinct later told him that one of them was, in fact, his mortal enemy. He could have killed all of them, just to be safe, but a multitude of dead Bartholomews, even spread over several jurisdictions, would sooner or later attract too much police attention. Smiling in the fearless dark, she listened to the rhythmic breathing of a sleeping boy. Or perhaps the sorrow was less sadness than yearning. He had to move on, but he was loath to begin this strange journey without her. For just one hour, which was not too taxing, he walked in the idea of a world where he had healthy eyes, and shared the vision of other Barty's in other places, so he would be able to see his bride as she walked down the aisle and as, beside him, she took their vows with him, and as she held out her hand to receive the ring. Three minutes by car, maybe two without stop signs. He could just about run it as fast as drive it. He had a bit of a gut on him. He wasn't the man he used to be. Ironically, however, after the coma and the rehab, he wasn't as heavy as he had been before Cain sunk him in Quarry Lake. "I get frustrated," he admitted. "Trying to learn how to do things in the dark ... I get peed off, as they say." 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. Then it would stop. The torment would stop. Surely. His sense of drift, of sliding aimlessly through the days, would lift from him, and he would find purpose once more in determined self-improvement. He would definitely learn French and German. He would take cooking classes and become a culinary master. Karate, too. More good American music. The Supremes were Negroes, sure, but Junior was not a bigot. Indeed, he had once made passionate love to a Negro girl. Junior picked up his pace, pushing through the crowd, repeatedly glancing back, and although he caught only quick squints of the dead cop's face, he could tell that something was terribly wrong with it. Never a candidate for matinee-idol status, Vanadium looked markedly worse than before. The port-wine birthmark still pooled around his right eye. His features were not merely pan-flat and plain, as they had been before, but were ... distorted. 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. Leaning forward from his armchair, white hair as radiant as the wings of cherubim, Obadiah waved one misshapen hand over the deck, never closer than ten inches to the cards. "Now please spread them out in a fan on the table, facedown." Maybe the bright side was that the musician hadn't either wet his pants or taken a dump while in his death throes. Sometimes, during a comparatively slow death like strangulation, the victim lost control of all bodily functions. He'd read it in a novel, something from the Book-of-the-Month Club and therefore both life-enriching and reliable. Probably not Eudora Welty. Maybe Norman Mailer. Anyway, the men's room didn't smell as fresh as a flower shop, but it didn't reek, either. 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." Filled with the songs of swallows that evidently preferred these precincts to the more famous address of San Juan Capistrano, this mild March morning was perfect for pie deliveries. Agnes and Grace had produced a bakery's worth of glorious vanilla-almond pies and coffee toffee pies. As the paramedic shoved the gurney across the step-notched bumper, its collapsible legs scissored down. Agnes was rolled headfirst into the ambulance. Foreword. Eventually, when he had gone through the entire directory, if he'd had no success, he would phone each red-checked listing and ask for Bartholomew. A few hundred calls, no doubt. Some would involve long-distance charges, but he could afford the toll. As usual, Vanadium had spoken in a monotone, putting no special emphasis on those two words. Yet Junior sensed that the detective harbored doubts about the explanation of the girl's death. "That would be wrong. A diary's private." He supposed that to a detective nothing was sacred, but he was nonetheless a little shocked that Vanadium needed to ask that question. There was an otter in our brook. She snatched the handset away from Angel, told Bellini, "He's here," threw the phone on the bed, told Angel, "Stay close to me," ran to the windows, and jerked the drapes out of the way. Phimie's speech had been slurred later, as well, immediately following the birth of the baby, when she had struggled to convey her desire to name her daughter Angel. Surprisingly, he received a lot of gratification from voicing this insult, even though Vanadium was too dead to hear it. They wanted to go up to Barty's room, but she refused them, because there was nothing more they could do for the boy than they had done for her. "He wants to finish reading Starman Jones, and I'm not letting anything interfere with that. We're leaving for Newport Beach at seven in the morning, and you can see him then." As he raced into the future, the past caught up with him in the form of intestinal spasms, and by the time that he had driven only three miles, whimpering like a sick dog, he made an emergency stop at a service station to use the rest room. Junior didn't slow as he passed the house, but circled the block and drove by the place again. Wally switched off the engine and killed the headlights. "Home, where the heart is." Once he had toured the exhibition, managing not to shudder openly, he tried to hang out within hearing distance of Celestina White, but without appearing to be listening with special intensity. Each booth was at a large window, and each window provided a view of the street. Vanadium wasn't out there, watching from the sidewalk, either: no glimpse of his pan-flat face shining in the December sun. This momentous day, he thought, and he shook with sudden terror at the inevitability of new beginnings. "Those were Rowena's affectionate names for the boys when they were babies. Her private nonsense names for them, because she said they were like two beautiful little elves and ought to have elfin names." Continuing to avert his eyes from the battered face and the two tone eyelids, Junior found the keys in an exterior pocket of the sports jacket. The credentials were tucked in an interior pocket: a single-fold leather holder containing the shiny badge and a photo ID. Struggling to keep a grip on consciousness, Junior told himself to focus on the

future, to live in the future, free of the useless past and the difficult present, but he could not get into the future far enough to be in a time when the pain was no longer with him..Lifted from his despair by this exhilarating wrath, Junior turned away from the mirror, looking for the bright side once more. Perhaps it was the bathroom window..In the years since I began to write about Earthsea I've changed, of course, and so have the people who read the books. All times are changing times, but ours is one of massive, rapid moral and mental transformation. Archetypes turn into millstones, large simplicities get complicated, chaos becomes elegant, and what everybody knows is true turns out to be what some people used to think..Drawn one after the other, two knaves of spades didn't signify two deadly enemies, but meant that the enemy already predicted by the first would be unusually powerful, exceptionally dangerous..Considering his battered and stitched face, considering also his tragic and colorful history, Vanadium spoke with remarkably little drama. His voice was calm, nearly flat, rising and falling so little that he almost talked in a monotone..FOR AMERICANS OF Chinese descent-and San Francisco has a large Chinese population-1965 was the Year of the Snake. For Junior Cain, it was the Year of the Gun, though it didn't start out that way.. "Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone..In either case, printing the name in blood was a ritualistic act, and ritualism of this nature was an unmistakable symptom of a seriously unbalanced mind. Evidently, the wife killer would be easier to crack than expected, because his shell was already badly fractured..Of firm but pliable rubber, custom-formed to his disfigured foot, a shoe insert filled the void left by his missing toe. This simple aid ensured that virtually all footwear was comfortable, and by November, Junior walked with no discernible limp..Bill wasn't impressed. "They build houses out of mud in China. No wonder everything falls down."..In the present, long after the execution of Josef Krepp, half a block ahead, lay the Lipscomb house. Beyond it, the Lampion place..Clutching the red rose in his left hand, the brightly wrapped gift box half crushed in his right, Thomas Vanadium lay at Junior's mercy, with no tricks to perform, no quarter to set dancing across his knuckles..He was too sensitive a soul to be able to take either a handsaw or a power saw to a corpse..As the last of the flan was served and Maria's girls took their seats once more, Barty blinked at the candles and said, "Gone now," even though the tiny spectrums still shimmered in the cut crystal. He turned his full attention to the flan with such enthusiasm that his mother soon stopped puzzling over rainbows..Babies of unwed mothers-especially of dead unwed mothers, and especially of dead unwed mothers whose fathers were ministers unable to endure public mortification-were routinely put up for adoption. Since Seraphim had given birth here, the baby would be-no doubt already had been-adopted by a San Francisco-area family..Wally's help, not just with the apartment, but with his time and love, had made an incalculable difference..After the detective returned the box to the nightstand, the coin began to turn again..Hesitantly, the ivory tickler shook hands. "I'm ... uh ... I'm Ned Gnathic. Everyone calls me Neddy."..Ministering to Perri, Joshua had pulled back her blankets. The fabric of the pale yellow pajama pants couldn't disguise how terribly withered her legs were: two sticks..He stopped for lunch at a restaurant with a spectacular view of the Pacific, framed by massive pines..On a shelf above one of the clothes rods stood a single piece of Mark Cross luggage, an elegant and expensive two-suiter. The rest of the high shelf was empty-enough space for as many as three more bags..When his search of the desk drawers was only half completed, the telephone rang-not the usual strident bell, but a modulated electronic brrrrr. He had no intention of answering it..Fed up with them and with this exhibition, Junior half wished that he would again be stricken by violent nervous emesis. Even in his suffering, he would enjoy spraying these insistently appealing canvases with the reeking ejecta of his gut: criticism of the most pungent nature..Edom and Jacob came to the house, asking what Dr. Chan had said, and Agnes lied to them. "There are some test results we won't have until Monday, but he thinks Barty is going to be all right."..The kiss was lovely, long and easy, full of restrained passion that boded well for nights to come in the marriage bed..For a moment, none of them spoke. The silence was as flawless as the preternatural hush reputed to precede the biggest quakes..They came to her, picked up the luggage that she had put down, and Edom said, "I'll drive."..When at last the caller spoke again, her voice sounded a kingdom away: "Will you tell Bartholomew ... ?"..He didn't wonder about his sanity, either, as a less self-improved man might have done. No madman strives to enhance his vocabulary or to deepen his appreciation for culture..Koko changed directions with a fantastic pivot turn and bounded after the girl..From the far end of the table, Agnes said, "For starters, Tom, we all want to hear about the rhinoceros and the other you."..Along Junior's hairline, on his cheeks, his chin, and his upper lip, a double score of hard little knots had risen, angry red and hot to the touch. Having previously experienced a particularly vicious case of the hives, Junior realized this was something new-and worse. To the pilot, he replied, "Allergic reaction."..Happiness could grow out of unspeakable tragedy with such vigor that it produced dazzling blooms and lush green bracts. This insight served, for Celestina, as a primary inspiration for her painting and as proof of the grace granted in this world that we might perceive and be sustained by the promise of an ultimate joy to come..I believe the universe is sort of like an unimaginably vast musical with an infinite number of strings."..He intended to mash the sole of Victoria's right shoe in the pat of butter and leave a long smear on the floor, as though she slipped on it and fell toward the ovens..The cop weighed too much to be carried any distance, the blanket proved effective, the decision to drag him was wise, and the whole process was value neutral..Junior found the acclaim gratifying, but the widespread use of his photograph was a high price to pay even for the recognition of his contribution to art. Fortunately, with his bald head and pocked face, he no longer resembled the Enoch Cain for whom the authorities were searching. And they believed that the bandages on his face, at the church, had been merely an exotic disguise. One psychologist even speculated that the bandages had been an expression of the guilt and shame he felt on a subconscious level. Yeah, right..Apparently, he didn't lean back far enough, because amazingly he landed on his feet in the winter-faded grass. The shock buckled him, and he dropped to his knees. Still cradling Grace, he lowered her to the ground as gently as he'd ever lowered fragile Perri onto her bed-quite as if he had

planned it this way..Junior intended to pack only a single bag, leaving most of his clothes behind. He could afford a fine new wardrobe..Harrison and Grace had welcomed him in spite of the fact that a friend and parishioner had died on Thursday, leaving them both bereft and with church obligations..She was astonished and moved. "I'm a hopeless throwback to the nineteenth century. How could you realize what's been on my mind?".Extracting documents from his valise, Vinnie said, "Well, I've no right to talk. Food is my obsession. Look at me, so fat you'd think I'd been raised from birth for sacrifice..Beyond the windows, the winter night sifted sootily down through the twinkling city, as he sat in his living room with a glass of Dry Sack in one hand and the picture of Celestina White in the other..Junior descended the escalator two steps at a time, not content to let it carry him along at its own pace. When he reached the second floor, however, he found that Vanadium's ghost had done what ghosts do best: faded away. Abandoning his search for the perfect tie chain but determined to remain calm, Junior decided to have lunch at the St. Francis Hotel..Once satiated, what she desired was a reason to deceive herself into believing that she was not a slut, that she was a victim. She didn't really want to tell anyone what he had done to her. Instead, she was asking him, indirectly but indisputably, to provide her with an excuse to keep their passionate encounter secret, an excuse that would also allow her to continue to pretend that she had not begged for everything he'd done to her..Still pretending sleep, Junior delighted in the realization that the detective himself had dragged a red herring across the trail and was now busily following this distracting scent..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..Swift and yellow, Angel flew to her mother, grabbing at one of the bunched drapes as if she might hide behind it..Grace, Celestina, and Paul expressed amusement and amazement at Angel's critical judgment..When she discovered she was pregnant, Phimie dealt with this new trauma as other naive fifteen-year-olds had done before her: She sought to avoid the scorn and the reproach that she imagined would be heaped upon her for having failed to reveal the rape at the time it occurred. With no serious thought to long-term consequences, focused solely on the looming moment, in a state of denial, she made plans to conceal her condition as long as possible..On the short return trip to the ophthalmologist, Agnes crazily considered driving past Chan's office building, cruising onward--ever onward-into the sparkling December night, not just back to Bright Beach, where the bad news would simply come by phone, but to places so far away that the diagnosis could never catch up to them, where the disease would remain unnamed and therefore would have no power over Barty..After she flushed, Angel stood on a stepstool and washed her hands at the sink..Barty rode with his mother in her green Chevrolet station wagon. Because the cakes, pies, and gifts were too numerous to be contained in one vehicle, Edom followed them in his flashier yellow-and-white '54 Ford Country Squire..The round table seated six, but they required only three chairs, because the two brainless friends were a pair of Angel's dolls..Further preparation-the purchase of gold coins and diamonds, the establishment of false identities-had to be delayed due to the hives. An hour short of dawn, Junior was awakened by a fierce itching not limited to his phantom toe. His entire body, over every plane and into every crevice, prickled and tingled and burned as with fever-and itched..No longer pinned to the bed by an intravenous feed of fluids and medications, provided with pajamas and a thin cotton robe to replace his backless gown, Junior was encouraged to test his legs and get some..Not a door opened in the narrow street. Nobody looked out to see what the noise was. Not till long after the men were gone did some neighbors creep out to comfort Otter's people as best they could. "Oh, it's a curse, a curse, this wizardry!" they said..surreptitiously with Junior. He was accustomed to being an object of desire. This night, however, the only lady he cared about was San Francisco herself, and he wanted to be alone with her..Onward he came, past the left front fender, gleefully hopping up and down, as if on a pogo stick, still waving..Nicholas Deed was not the knave. He had already brought all the ruin into their lives that he was going to bring..When Celestina first entered his ICU cubicle, the sight of his face scared her in spite of the surgeon's assurances. Gray, he was, and sunken-cheeked-as though this were the eighteenth century and so many medicinal leeches had been applied to him that too much of his essential substance had been sucked out..And the mills of capitalism provide them. Supply meets demand. Fantasy becomes a commodity, an industry..He wanted, all right, but -intuition warned him that he ought to continue to be discreet for a while longer..trees also revealed Barty, and no radiance from another world shone spectrally through him, as it had shone through Joey-dead-and-risen..Sunday evening, here he was, cracking open four new decks, as if fresh cards might enable the magic to repeat..Maria Elena Gonzalez--such an imposing figure in spite of her diminutive stature that even three names seemed insufficient to identify her-was still present. Although the crisis had passed, she wasn't ready to trust that nurses and doctors, by themselves, could provide Agnes with adequate care..AGNES ALWAYS ENJOYED Christmas Eve dinner with Edom and Jacob, because even they tempered their pessimism on this night of nights. Whether the season touched their hearts or they wanted even more than usual to please their sister, she didn't know. If gentle Edom spoke of killer tornadoes or if dear Jacob was reminded of massive explosions, each dwelt not on horrible death, as usual, but on feats of courage in the midst of dire catastrophe, recounting astonishing rescues and miraculous escapes.."It isn't just the rotten railing," Junior said, still paging through the report, his outrage growing. "The stairs are unsafe..".The next thing he knew, he was at the kitchen sink, turning off the water, which he couldn't remember having turned on. He appeared to have washed the bloody candlestick-it was clean-but he had no recollection of this bit of housekeeping..Celestina was hardly more than a child herself, pretending to have the strong shoulders and the breadth of experience to bear this burden. She felt half crushed..Phimie must be honored now with laughter instead of with tears, because her life had left Celestina with so many memories of joy and with joy personified in Angel. To fend off tears, she said, "Listen, Clark Kent, we women need our little secrets, our private thoughts. If you can really read my heart this easily, I guess I'm going to have to start wearing lead

brassieres." he wasn't wholly without feeling, of course. A poignant current of sadness eddied in his heart, a sadness at the thought of the love and the happiness that he and the nurse might have known together. But it was her choice, after all, to play the tease and to deal with him so cruelly..Edom, who had never made it big, medium, or little, watched his sister blur before him. He strove to contain the shimmering hotness in his eyes. His love was not for magic, and his pride was not in any skill he possessed, for he possessed none worth noting. His love was for his good sister; she was his pride, too, and he felt that his small life had precious meaning as long as he was able to drive her on days like this, carry her pies, and occasionally make her smile..He'd been invited to a Christmas Eve celebration with a satanic theme, but he hadn't intended to go. The party was not being thrown by real Satanists, which might have been interesting, but by a group of young artists, all nonbelievers, who shared a wry sense of humor..The time had come for him to think more seriously about his situation and his future. Self-improvement remained a laudable goal, but his efforts needed to be more focused..Junior didn't want an apology. The offer of a free lunch-or an entire week of lunches-didn't charm a smile from him. He had no interest in taking home a free apple pie..Junior worried, however, that they had noticed him after he pulled to the curb twice behind them, that they were keeping an eye on him, ready to bolt if he got out of the car, in which case they might all make it inside before he could cut them down..The detective was driven by this string theory of his, and maybe he also saw visions or even heard voices, like Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc with out beauty or grace, Joan of Arc with a service revolver and the authority to."No. The information I gave you came from the coroner's office, which issued the death certificate. But even if I got into St. Mary's records, there wouldn't be a hint of where Catholic Family Services placed this baby."

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