

In the hollow the Ouloud had dug into the lake shore's hardened mud, damp dripped slowly from fine root hairs feathering the irregular ceiling, droplets crawling down the roots, clinging for a last moment to the blunt tips, dropping finally into the emptiness below with sometimes sharp tings if they fell into the deepening puddle, sometimes hard rattles as they hit the dead husk of the hibernating Ouloud. The tap-slap-ting continued uninterrupted as the pool around the husk rose higher and higher until at last the drops no longer fell on husk or mud, fell only on water. A sharp crack jarred through the plinks. A line of blue-white light shimmered in the muddy water. The husk moved, lay still, moved again in short sharp jerks, lay still again, again jolted about as the crack widened. The cold light strengthened in the hollow, winking back from silicate crystals in the dirt and shining through the agitated water onto the pale roots. Her back and buttocks out, the Ouloud rested again, then with one convulsive heave, she kicked free of the husk and straightened her cramped limbs. Her eyes were sealed shut, dark smudges behind translucent lids. Her head was studded with hundreds of small nodules, the tight-coiled threads inside writhing and pressing against skin still too soft and thick for them to burst through. Skeleton and pulsing organs and the Daughter Within were dim shadows in fleshlike milk glass lit by her self-generated radiance.

Like a great worm she wriggled up the slippery mud to the highest point of the hollow and began scratching blindly at the plug of packed earth that sealed her in. At first her hands scrabbled over the cold soil without effect, then her fingers broadened and grew harder until they were deep gouges that bit into the plug and tore away great gouts of earth.

When she burst from the hollow, she crouched on the steep slope of the lake shore, blind head turning slowly from side to side, shape-shifting hands groping clumsily at the night air until she lost the sense of where she was and tumbled in an awkward sprawl into the water.

Passively she accepted the embrace of the snowmelt, sinking until she floated a dozen feet below the surface; she let the currents nudge her where they would until she came to rest against a rocky islet near the lake's outlet where a creek tumbled downslope over a spray of boulders.

The sky began to gray, a red line spread along the eastern horizon.

The slow process of waking went on; the Ouloud's skin hardening and thinning, her metabolism speeding up.

When sunlight touched her face, she stirred, opened her eyes, her ice-gray irids darkening to the color of wetted stone. Webs spread between lengthening fingers. Gills opened on neck and chest. She breathed her first breath and began swimming, aimlessly at first, then she became aware of hunger. She snatched a fish, tore it into small bits, held them in her toothless mouth while her digestive juices liquefied them.

The day continued to brighten. She stopped swimming and floated upright in the center of the lake, her head a dozen feet below the surface, waiting with plantlike patience for the moment of ripeness.

When the sun was directly overhead, shimmering down to her through the clear cold water, her cilia burst from their nodules, springing out from her

head like dandelion fluff.

The tendrils tasted the lake water, fluttered wildly.

Change. Danger. She tasted again. Poisons. Yes. Metals. Yes. Burning her cilia, oozing into her body. Other substances. Unhealthy. Disorienting. She raged about the ragged oval, trilling her fury, her outrage. Her lake and its contiguous land especially, but also every inch of the Island, from the peak of her Mountain to the seashore, this was her Place, an extension of herself. Its violation was a knife in her flesh, but rage alone was futile, there was no healing in anger, so she calmed herself and let the water settle around her. Hanging motionless again, she searched into the layer upon layer of memory passed from Ouloud to Ouloud since the first of their line ripened into awareness, searched for croons that she could weave together to exorcise the poisons and destroy the poisoners and give her back her peace. Shadows crept across the water as she considered and discarded. When she found what she sought, she abandoned memory for the moment and kicked toward the surface, her body altering as her head broke water, gill slits closing, air sacs thickening into lungs. NOISE. Shrieks of hurting metal, thumpings and roarings, rattles and squeals, SOUNDS that hammered at her, louder than storms, terrible, punishing SOUNDS. With their echoes bouncing back at her from her loved Mountain, they were all around her, everywhere, she couldn't tell where they were coming from. She shuddered and cowered in the water unable to think or move, battered almost shapeless by the NOISE. Slowly, painfully, her cilia coiled tight against her head, she reduced her hearing, circumscribed it until the pummeling was bearable and she could string thought to thought once more. Eyes refocused for longsight, she turned in the water and scanned the Lakeshore, beginning at the outlet and the creek, turning slowly, seeing only trees and a few birds, turning to face her Mountain. Oo-loo! There was a hole in the mountainside, with debris piled carelessly around it. Coming out of the hole there were two lines of metal set on heavy baulks of wood half buried in gravel. A wooden flume ran beside them, filled with water from a spring higher on the Mountain-she knew that as clearly as if that flume carried fluids from her body. A line of carts with metal wheels came worming out the hole, pulled by a team of ponies, a Talking Beast riding the first cart with a long whip in his hand that he flicked now and then at the ponies' tails. The carts went clacking along the rails until they vanished into the trees. She turned through another quarter arc, saw smoke rising, saw the ridgepole and the upper part of a shingled roof, the rest of the THING invisible behind more trees. The wind 'was blowing snatches of that smoke toward the Lake. She could smell the poisons in it. Rage seized her again, shook her until her head ached and the Daughter Within stirred dangerously.

A new fear chilled her. No. This is not the time. Not yet. She wrapped her arms about her body and sang a quieting croon at the dark worm inside her. One day the Daughter Within would truly wake and eat herself free and a new Ouloud would swim these waters, walk this land. But not now. No.

She frowned at the smoke, considering the order of her acts. The Lake first. The lake MUST be cleansed. That would be hard. It would mean waiting and resting before she undertook the second act. No matter. The Lake first. Then the THING that poisoned the Lake. Then the Beasts who built the THING. When the Island was clean again, she could rest and consider the Daughter and what the stirring meant.

She drew power into herself and began singing the new-made croon that shaped and ordered it.

Waterspouts like spinning tops grew from the surface of the Lake, sucking up the tainted water and spitting it out purified in a light continual rain,

the muck that poisoned it left isolated in thickening collars near the rim. The watercones swayed and twisted on their tiny bases as the pollutants continued to accumulate, wobbling more and more wildly as the Ouloud strained to hold them up, her cilia whipping in a white cloud above her head. Her croon grew more intense, louder, until the sound filled the lake valley and came murmuring back to her, weaving in and out of the Thing-sounds.

When the burning in her cilia was gone, she wove a new trill into the croon, a trill that hooked into a high wind and drew it down across the spouts. Another trill. The stain-collars turned to dust and the wind snatched them away, taking the poisons out over the ocean, away and away from HER Land.

Her throat raw, her eyes burning, the Ouloud loosed the spouts and drifted into sleep, letting the lake currents take her until she lodged against the rocky islet, her body cradled by the cold water, her sleep so deep she knew nothing for many hours, missing completely the excited shouts from the smelter workers and their haphazard search of the lake and lakeshore.

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As if she hit at Toja and Moriawha and the rest of the Whaka-ekinriks infesting House and Island-and Issian and Tarag and Cunnothat and every muc that shamed the name Huanin with the way they sucked up to the conquerors-Tassin knelt on a piece of sacking and stabbed the trowel again and again into the dark, crumbly soil, loosening the earth about the bubble roses with a controlled ferocity that sent the tight pink buds swaying on their curved stems. If Old Moriawha found her out here working the earth like a farm girl, the hag would yell her into the House and scold her until a beating would be a welcome change, but if she stayed inside another minute with the rest of Toja's whores, she'd be clawing the walls or killing someone, probably Issian, that fluttering bitch. Fitha Spog, you'd think she'd have a proper value for herself, lovely as she is. Like Mama said, lovely is as lovely does. And that being so, I'm a hag as well. She straightened her spine, grunting with the effort, scraped the back of her hand across her forehead, ignoring the crumbs of dirt that dropped from the trowel onto her bulging middle. Ah-weh ah-weh, who am I to call them names for doing what they have to. It's their pride in it I spit on. Me. Toja's whore. She stuck the trowel into the earth beside her knee and began tweaking out chinchea weedlings whose small trefoils dyed her fingers green and raised a minty smell that bit sharply through the sweeter scent of the bubble buds. The odors brought back the times when she was free and young and exploding with the springtime. Before. She wrenched a trefoil loose and flung it away. Before. It was an ugly word. Ugly and filled with pain. Before. Yes. Before the Whaka-ekinriks came in their hideous metal steamboats. Before the Rik Taua Apekoura came with his Ka-eera and took the Island away from Clan Huanin. Before his son-heir Toja Apekojira caught her carrying water from the spring and carried her off instead. Before she was heavy with his cursed brat. She'd shed it even now, given half a chance, and take her licks from the Mother's Wrathrod for disdaining Life.

Half a chance? No chance. Old Moriawha, she did the divination and swore it was a boy. The only one he'd got with all his whores and his kinrik wife Namiwi, a knife-blade bitch that one was, addicted to lacha and barren in the bargain.

Moriawha. Fitha Spog, I loathe that one. Old witch, kinrik witch, doting on her fosterling boy, wanting what he wanted and ready to do anything to see he got it. But she was right, curse the hag with boils and itches. A woman of the Huanin knew what her child was as soon as the child knew.

He'd think she was trying to rid herself of her burden if he caught her

out here now, so close to the herb garden. Fool man, there was nothing there that would do the job, she'd thought of that ages ago and given it up. The evil creature would beat her on the feet, ah yes he would, and it would be a week at least before she could hobble about without weeping at the pain. And she'd bite her lip till it bled before she'd weep in front of Issian or any of that pack.

She moved across to the tubers, began pinching back shoots and clearing away the weeds. A pair of warbler day-moths fluttered past overhead, looping and fluting through a vigorous, noisy courting. The chimer in the corner thrust its puzzle crown above the outwall and trapped late-afternoon sunrays in yellow-green crystals that sang loudly enough to cut through the noise of the shearing sheds down past the Ubend where the creek met the river. The sun was hot on her back and neck, a pleasant heat, the moist dark earth was cool and accepting under her. She forgot her servitude, forgot her resentments, forgot the dangers of lingering out here, forgot the boredom waiting inside the house, felt once again a part of earth and everything.... A SOUND came down the mountain, an eerie rising and falling that stood the hairs up along her spine. Tassin shivered. The Ouloud was awake at last and SHE was raging. The smelter. Anyone with a grain of sense would know SHE'd hate it. The last Ahraddin to Speak the Ouloud died thirty years before, during the Invasion, but the Awashin Sagolar took her role and told the Rik not to build the smelter up there. If you have a need for water, build your contrivance on the River, he said. SHE doesn't go there often, he said. You'll taint HER lake, he said. SHE'll wake and destroy us all in her anger, he said. And that was true, true it was. And true, too, that Toja would not hear him. Tassin got heavily to her feet, shook out her skirt, hid the trowel behind the loose brick beside the kitchen door. Toja never listens to what he doesn't want to hear. The Awashin tried and all he got for it was his tongue ripped out. Poor man, ah the poor man. That won't work with HER, you bastard son of a bastard line. HER you'll hear, oh yes. She looked at her hands. They were stained with earth and green ooze. Ah-weh ah-weh, I'd better get inside. Moriawha caught her going up the back stairs. "And where have you been?" Though it gave her gas to do it, Tassin bowed her head and bent her knees in a sketch of a curtsy. "In the garden, listening to the songs of the Mountain, Tikan Moriawha."

"You should be resting."

"Respectfully, Tikan Moriawha, it is you keeping me from my bath and bed." The old woman scowled at her, Tassin could see her wrinkled hands itching to slap. "When the boy is born, we'll see, we'll see."

"A ra, Tikan Moriawha," Tassin said politely and brushed past her. The bath she'd ordered was waiting, the water tepid, the scent gone stale a bit, but she sank neck deep into the infusion and lay there floating, feeling the warmth creep into her and erode away a moiety of her fears.

She sniffed at her hands before she washed them, smelling the earth again, drawing a bit of strength from it, clearing the dither from her mind. Ah-weh ah-weh, well I know what I should do, but how I'll do it, that's another thing altogether.

She was afraid again and cold, more than the cooling of the water could be blamed for. She turned the tap and let the hot water come splashing in. Give them this, the Whaka-ek-inriks were good for something. Running water hot and cold and lamps that didn't smoke and choke you and inside toilets and steam irons that didn't burn you and what you were pressing and mirrors you could actually see your face in and books, oh the grand books that Toja had, books she never saw him open except once, late at night when she couldn't sleep and wanted something to pass the hours until dawn.

Except for the books, that was an evil evil room; she hated it. Like his father before him, Toja kept his trophies there, rounds of skin cut off the chests of the Huanin men he'd killed in battle and in chase, the part where the totem signs and the name cartouches were tattooed. She'd made the mistake once of telling him how gloriously her lover had pleased her and how much he disgusted her. That was the night he showed her the round from Tonn's chest, smooth and supple, a long time tanned. He watched her vomit and scream and pull out chunks of hair. He sat there holding the round of skin and watched her cry until she'd wrung all the tears from her body. He sat there silent, without moving all the time of her grief. Then he walked away and left her. She never saw that skin again; it wasn't with the others when she looked.

Issian kicked at the door. "You asleep in there, you long-faced ewe? Have some consideration, will you?" She kept on yammering and punctuating her yammer with more kicks and a bang or two.

"Shut up, gastí," Tassin yelled back. Groaning at the effort, she caught hold of the towel rail and lifted her clumsy body from the water. She hobbled to the door, banged her fist on it. "You don't stop your blathering, I'll set my fist to your blue blue eye and you won't be seeing a thing but black for the next seven days." In the ensuing silence Tassin toweled herself as dry as she could. Having wrapped a quilted robe about herself and tied the belt, she lifted the latch, straight-armed the door open, and marched out; her belly going before her, Toja's get that Issian wouldn't have the nerve to lay a hand on. An hour after midnight, a workbag hanging on her shoulder, Tassin slipped from her room. She listened a moment, grinned as she heard Moriawha snoring, stretched out on the pallet dragged across the door. Bad dreams and bellyaches and knowing that your bones are sore for nothing, hag, I'm using the headwife's exit. Keeping close to the wall, she ghosted to Namiwi's door, took a butter knife out of the bag, and pushed back the tongue of the lock. When she had the door open, she dug out the wad of bread that she'd stuck in there to keep the tongue from going all the way in when Namiwi turned the key, tossed the bread aside and walked into the sitting room. She listened a moment at the bedroom door, heard what she expected to hear. All the livelong day Namiwi had been acid as a just-budded grape, temperish from need. Now she was muttering and giggling, making the bed creak as she thrashed about. Chewing lacha and not about to care if the world went red and turned to dust. Tassin crossed to the door into the hall and swung up the bar, eased the door open a crack, and looked along the hallway. There was no guard out there. She reevaluated the sounds in Namiwi's bedroom and grinned again. The gander's getting sauced tonight and all the luck in the world to the cook. She still thought Namiwi was a bitch on wheels, but there was a touch of fellow feeling in her as she slipped through the dark, silent halls and crept into the kitchen. By smell and by feel she found bread and cheese and stuffed them into the workbag, then fumbled her way to the door that led from the kitchen into the stables. She groped across the stable, unbarred and pushed open the door to the outside, and let the light of the full moon come flooding in. There wasn't much likelihood she'd be interrupted. Taseachan, the stableman, was snoring in the loft and fumes of sourflon came dropping down to mix with hay and horse.

Nose twitching, rubbing sneezes back, she saddled and bridled one of the gentler geldings, hauled herself into the saddle, and clattered out to find the smelter road. It was a long road and a hard one and she had hours before her to regret this, but all the regrets in the world wouldn't change what had to be.

It was early morning when the Ouloud woke, a crisp clear morning with a vigorous breeze that ruffled the surface of the lake and set glitters dancing through the water. She looped and tumbled about the lake in a dance of celebration that woke echoes in the liquids of her body until they fizzed through her in joyous effervescence. Hungry, she caught three fish and ate them in her slow way, continuing to announce her contentment with bits of wordless song between dissolving bites.

Then she put her joy away. Time to prepare the second act.

She floated upright in the middle of the lake and thought.

It was a strong THING. Stone and mortar, black iron and iron's tougher cousin. Unmasking it would take a very strong croon and a long one-and drain away her strength.

She searched memory once more, a croon for metal things, some way to erase that monster roaring in her Valley. A croon for building, yes, it could be twisted thus and thus and turned toward unbuilding. A croon for shielding, yes ah yes, turn it thus and thus and thread it in the other. Yes. Undo the THING, undo the disease that made the THING, the Talking Beasts, the Toolmakers. Clean the island of them all. Let them rot and feed the beasts and the plants, instead of feeding on them. YES!

She thought some more. Yes. Let them feed ME. She had to be strong and fish wouldn't do it. She needed blood.

The Ouloud sat beneath the flume and watched poison gush into the lake, watched the gush die to a trickle, then a few drops. Subduing her fury, she fluted a summoning croon, calling one of the Beast workers swarming at the THING, called him to come to her, come, come.

He came from the trees, fighting her with every step, trying to escape the iron hold of the croon and to scream for aid from others of his kind. She blocked that easily. They were tougher than the other beasts, but they had no croons to protect them, no skill at Shaping except with their hands and that was weak, so weak.

He was afraid; the sharpness of that fear gave a dark pungency to the rich meaty smell that rolled off him.

She leaned forward eagerly, tongue altering to hollow needle. Humming with pleasure, she pressed her lips against his neck, pierced the blood channel beneath the tough resilient skin, and drank. As the link between them intensified, she pulsed to the beat of his heart. She drained him, rested a moment with her lips against his cooling skin, then withdrew her tongue and let the husk fall away.

"Ouloud."

The Ouloud looked lazily at the female Beast who'd come without being summoned. She was sated for the moment; she didn't want nor need more blood. Then she stiffened. There was something about this one, like a perfume remembered from long ago. Something . . . "Ou-loo," she cooed. She held up a hand, the fingers changing to claws, dark and hard as horn, one forefinger left pale and straight; she pointed at the ground, waggled her finger impatiently. There was time now while the blood worked in her, readied her for the Unmasking. Time to taste for that perfume, to summon that memory.

Tassin. The Rik Toja Apekojira looked down at the rumpled bed and the pile of needlework dumped in the middle of it; the early sun slanted in through the small window and touched to life a half-finished warbler moth. He reached down, touched it; the threads were silky soft. Tassin. The word was a wound in him.

Namiwi stood with her head thrown back, temper in the arch of her nostrils, the line of her mouth; her eyes were red from the lacha weed and her hands trembled. "The door was locked," she said. "I was asleep. The whore slithered out some other way. Your kurekure, she was snoring so loud, a herd could walk over her."

"Find her." Tassin. He bled inside. He would not let her see it.

Moriawha bent over the basin, chanted at the oil-filmed water.

The film shivered, swirled, then smoothed out and a pale image formed. Tassin rode up a red-dirt road on a weary gray gelding, weary herself. On one side of her, the creeks, on the other, the twin rails of that tram that brought ingots down from the smelter to the steel mill he'd built on the coast.

"Who is she going to?" Tassin. "Show him to me."

Moriawha blew across the basin, chanted again.

When the film cleared, Toja cursed. It wasn't a man but a Thing. Tassin.

Taseachan lay on his face in the dust and straw.

The Rik Toja Apekojira took the shotgun and shotbag from the Kapen. Tassin. "He was careless and tried to cover himself." He broke the shotgun, plugged in two shells. "Kill him and bring me the roan. Kapen Atoatan, I want four from the Ka-eera following me. Five minutes." He ignored the sounds of the strangling Huanin, swung into the saddle, and sent the roan clattering out of the stable. Tassin.

Tassin kicked her feet from the stirrups, clutched at the saddle horn, and let herself tilt sideways until she fell off, wrenching her hands from the leather but not before she broke the worst of the fall. The croon touched her again, cool, impersonal. It wasn't calling her, it was just there. She used it like a guide rope and walked along the lakeshore until she saw the flume and the Ouloud sitting under it. Shimmering in a sunlit halo of drips from the flume, the Ouloud's body was slender and delicate. Long white cilia fine as spun glass quivered about her thin, high-cheeked face. Stone-colored eyes stared at her. "I came to tell you ..."

"Ou-looo." The Ouloud pressed her fingers across her lips, then pointed at the ground again. "Fitha Spog." Tassin lowered herself awkwardly to her knees, eased her legs around, and got herself seated. "Ouloud." The Ouloud's crinkled round mouth pursed tighter, she began to hum. "No!" Tassin held up a hand, palm out. "No. I came to tell you, it isn't us. It isn't the Huanin who did this. Leave us alone." The Ouloud looked from the body crumpled by her

feet to Tassin. She shrugged as if to say it's all the same. Tassin clenched her fists, her temper up. "The Huanin belong to the land as much as you, Ouloud cun-na. You can kill me for saying it, but then you'll kill me tomorrow if not today and what's a day more or less?"

"Oo-lou," the Ouloud sang. "Greet you, Talking Beast. Come here, give me blood." Tassin gasped. "Ah-weh ah-weh, I will not," she said forcefully. "Walk to my own funeral, you're saying? It's kicking and yelling I plan to go, not meek as a mewling ewe lamb. I could be lying in a warm bed now, with whores fetching my tea and an ugly big man kissing my toes. Instead I wore my tailbone down till my neck sits on my rump, coming up here to argue my life from you."

"Ou-lou," the Ouloud sang. "Come here, Beast, give me blood."

"Beast I am not. I am Huanin. I am Tassin. Give me my name."

"Ou-Lou," the Ouloud cooed. She stretched out her hands. "Come here, Tas-sin. Give me blood, Ahradda, take healing from me," She trilled her laughter. "For your tailbone."

Tassin stared at her, astonished. Ahradda. SHE names me Ahradda. Ah-weh ah-weh, that's for thinking about another day. "So it's a trade you're offering. That's a different thing altogether." She squared her shoulders, brushed her hands together, and took a short step toward the Ouloud. Still reluctant, but driven by a combination of curiosity and desperation, she rested her palms on the Ouloud's waiting hands.

Warm flesh touched cool, exciting Tassin to her heart's core, stirring her in ways no lover ever had, not even Tonn at the height of her passion for him.

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Cool flesh touched warm, exciting the Ouloud in ways she had forgot as the years slid past since the last Ahradda had come to her; the hunger grew in her for the sharing, and she forgot the THING roaring and banging up the slope from her.

She touched Tassin's hair; the soft strands clung to her fingers, curled about them. She shivered with pleasure. She slid questing fingers along Tassin's neck, the flesh so soft, so firm, so warm and full of life. She gentled the nervous Ahradda with a low and unintrusive croon, kept the soft touch moving until she felt Tassin sag against her.

She bent closer, touched her lips to the neck. Her tongue changed, hardened, curling over to make the hollow needle that channeled the blood into her throat.

The Ahradda murmured drowsily as the Ouloud pierced the artery at the side of the neck. Her eager delight passed through the link, waking an answering pleasure in Tassin which returned along the link with the rich red alien blood, the feedback lifting them both into a spiraling climb toward a shared explosion of joy.

Reluctantly the Ouloud pulled her head away. "Oooo-louuu Ahhhraaadda," she sang. "Now you, now you."

Tassin blinked, still half dazed. "What?"

"Drink of me." The Ouloud lifted a hand filled with opalescent gel drawn from glands in her wrist. "Oo-lou," she sang. Tassin bent until her lips touched the gel. She began licking it up, her tongue moving faster and faster, caressing the Ouloud's cool flesh. When the gel was gone, Tassin lifted her head, smiled lazily, then stretched and groaned with pleasure. She got to her feet, marveling at how easily she lifted her bulky body, at how thoroughly her exhaustion had been banished. "A wonder and a joy, you are you are, a blessing, Cun-nah." She smiled, a broad three-corner thing that warmed the Ouloud head to foot. Then she winced as another chain of cars came down from the mine, squealing and knocking together, rumbling as they off-loaded their rock into the crushers. The Ouloud got to her feet, took the Ahradda's hand, drew Tassin tight against her. "Ooo-lou," she sang. "Sing with me, Ahradda, it is time ..." She began a high whining croon that tore from her throat and made her cilia jerk and shudder. Behind her the water came roaring against the rocks, great waves twice her height racing in successive lines across the lake. Air whirled about them in a vortex that whipped violently through the trees and lifted sand and debris in a rising tide that blanked out everything around them. The air in the whorl's eye hummed and thickened. The stone shifted under their feet, alive and unstable. With a last howl torn from her straining throat, the Ouloud loosed the Unmasking she had shaped. And the mine and the miners in it were not. And the iron cars were not. And the rails and ties were not. And the crusher shuddered and screamed and was not. And the smelter cracked and broke into dust and even the dust was not. The air hung motionless. The trees stood motionless. Branches arched, leaves caught in mid-flutter. The lake water was frozen in serried peaks. The earth waited.... The Ouloud felt the moment burst within her, darkness splintering into light, the light shrinking to a vibrating dot. The trees shivered and groaned, the lake fell in on itself and came finally to its usual soft lap-lapping, the earth rumbled and shifted as it settled back to its heavy sleep.

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Toja rode from under the trees, the roan lathered and stumbling. He pulled him up, sat there staring at the Ouloud and Tassin.

Tassin blinked from her daze. For a moment she was both Huanin and Ouloud and didn't understand who or what he was. Then she knew he was Toja come for her. He shifted. Come for her with a shotgun in his hands.

She pulled free from the Ouloud. "Go," she cried, "get away. He'll kill you."

"Ah-raaa-ou-lou?"

She started to push the Ouloud into the water, but she was too late.

The shotgun coughed; the Ouloud's head came apart.

Tassin screamed and fainted, falling across Ouloud's body, crushing it to a smear on the stone.

8

She woke in her own bed with Moriawha glowering down at her. "What did

you think you were doing, kow?"

Tassin turned her head away. She remembered the Ouloud and felt a great emptiness, a grief that nothing would assuage.

Moriawha slapped her, leaving a red print on her face. "You don't turn away from me, whore. And you're not getting out of this bed alone until the boy is born. You hear me?"

Tassin looked past her and said nothing.

Moriawha lifted her hand, then shrugged. "You don't matter," she said. "Nothing you do matters anymore. You're for the strangler's noose when you've done your job. The Tuakais alone know how you'd contrive to corrupt the boy if you were allowed to live and give him suck. Even your milk would poison him. "There's a guard outside the door," Moriawha went on. "He'll stop you if you try to leave. There's a chamber pot under the bed; use it when you need to. We'll feed you well and treat you tenderly, no fear, it's the boy we're tending. Well?" Tassin looked past her and said nothing. Moriawha scowled, shook her head, and left. One day passed, then another. Late in the third night, when the full moon shone silvergilt through her window, painting an image of the new iron grating across the coverlet on her bed, Tassin felt a croon grow within her, a song without words, tiny, silent, vibrating inside her bones. At first she didn't understand. She listened. Then she knew. It was the Daughter Within. Forced prematurely from the Ouloud, it had crept inside her body, nestled against Toja's son. It was growing in her, feeding on Toja's son, taking his place. She smiled into the dark, content. Toja aimed for the Ouloud and killed his son instead. She lay quiet awhile, savoring the irony, listening to the Song of the Daughter Within. Then she began planning her escape.

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About Jo Clayton and "Change"

This story contains one of the most fascinating aliens I've ever encountered. I found the Ouloud, in Jo's story, quite different from any of the other imaginary beasties whose line stretches from the Medea in the pre-Iliad Greek sagas, though these are really science fiction in the tradition of A. E. Van Vogt's Voyage of the Space Beagle.

Jo herself is a friendly and forthright lady whose work is intriguing and always just a little subtler than you expect; this was her first story for the magazine, and it took second place in the Cauldron vote. Her story "Arakney's Web," in issue 18, proved so popular that while I'm in general not much of a one for series, I'm holding one or two more Arakney stories.

At least, being a thoroughgoing professional, Jo went about it the right way, selling me the first one as an independent story, and when I liked it, producing a sequel. All the series I've ever printed started like that; but I've lost track of the amateurs who write me hard-sell letters about their unwritten series. They ought to save their time and postage, and try it the way Jo did ... sell me one good story first. But they so seldom do.