

AND SHE CRIED FILTHY TEARS

Scene 230

1563 4D

She had no hands. No mouth. No eyes, no feet. Marra, she said, and the darkness sucked the sound away. I'm Marra, she said, I'm where?

The warmth cradled her words and said *You're home now. Sleep.* And the muck sang to her and she forgot everything again.

Marra. She contracted in surprise. Time — time! She knew now. Marra. From the warmth, her name came to her. She tried to reach out; a limb clothed her reaching: an arm, a hand, fingers.

That's better, the words said into her.

She stretched herself out, pushed against the warm ooze, found channels and barriers, invaded the embracing darkness; darkness drew back from her advance. Yes, yes, push, come out to me. Eyes waited ahead of her, she knew; skin expected her arrival, and she strained out to fill all of it with herself as something turned, retreated beneath her advance, saying to her, *Yes, Marra, do you remember?*

In ecstasy she said, *Yes*, and pain filled her with joy and fear. She entered fingers and face and skin, not wanting to open these eyes. Dirt filled her hands, crusted her skin and her mouth, crowned her head, caked her joints and folds, pressed her down. She spat mud into mud, her eyes cemented; soil clutched her everywhere.

She fought and clawed, unbreathing, until she rose, and heat pressed her face. She shook damp dirt from her head, rubbing away a few final clumps, sucking air into her lungs; the heat drove through her eyelids, her tears rose: the sun. She opened one eye and looked down a late afternoon hillside furrowed and mounded. Low dark bushes and their nut grafts. *The farm. But I'm dead. But this is the farm. But I'm dead.*

She tore at the grasping soil and struggled free. Her nails bled; she looked at them, and at the smoothness of her fingers. She spat muck and drew air in deep. "But I'm alive," she said in a croaking rasp. She looked at herself, naked and covered in streaks of umber soil, and saw the lines of a young woman. Astonishment.

The voice came to her from below her brain. *Yes, you are alive. Do you remember?*

“Yes,” she said, “Yes! I remember. Aoriver. Did you bring me back?”

You see yourself, Marra.

“But whose is this body?”

Yours. I didn’t bother aging it. I’m tired now.

Marra looked at herself in the sun, stroked her skin and massaged her legs and arms, poked at her firm young belly and breasts brown and warm. “It’s been so long since I was like this. But the hair—” She patted the bare skin of her head. Her whole body was hairless.

That takes time, just the way aging does.

“I don’t know. I never did this before.” Marra stood, swaying uncertainly, her toes rooting in the soft soil. A thin slab of stone stood near her with the words MARRA SERNEA NINE ARANTOW FANDARINN cut freshly on it. She glanced down at her upper arm. There, matching the stone words, lay her old Fandarinn Coll inscription, present but thinned and faded as if someone had sanded it down.

Another stone jutted from a second long mound of soil parallel to her own. Before she could try a first step, a hand forced its way up through the surface of the mound. “Deen?” The hand stopped moving. Marra stumbled uncertainly to it and bent down to take it. Cold. As she held it, trying to decide what to do, it fluttered like the wing of a wounded bird.

Oortonel is in trouble. Dig them out. Quickly. Marra dug in, ripped at the newly-piled dirt, threw clods aside, and dragged a young woman’s body up out of a cloth wrap. Marra recognized Deen, a Deen she remembered from long ago. This Deen lay limp, unbreathing, her brown skin ashen, her bald head lolling back on Marra’s arm. “What do I do? What do I do for her?” Marra asked, panting from the effort.

I must reach Oortonel. Put your mouths together.

“What about Deen?”

Deen is Oortonel’s to help. Hurry. Marra drew Deen’s shivering face to her own, and kissed her, open-mouthed. Aoriver surged powerfully up through her near-gagging throat and reached into Deen’s caked mouth. Marra cradled Deen in her arms as she held her jaws open for Aoriver, held them open until they began to ache and cramp with fatigue. The sun settled toward the horizon, throwing the shadows of the new-grafted bushes over Marra’s body. The chill of evening crept

over her, the chill of Deen's inert body drew warmth from her. Still the firm shaft of Aoriver's outreach extended into Deen's mouth from Marra's.

Just as Marra gathered herself once again to fight off the pain in her jaws and the rising exhaustion, Aoriver slowly withdrew into her again. The words surfaced slowly, lazily: ***They will make it. I must sleep now. You must find us someone now, or we will all die.*** Silence. The sun went down. Deen's body felt no cooler, and no warmer.

Marra looked around. The air cooled quickly in the evenings up here in the mountains. Laying Deen gently on the earth, she dug until she found the cloth wrap. It had been Joyann's warmer for the early parts of the day. She wrapped Deen again in it.

She dragged up the wrap the workers had used for her, and bundled it around her own shivering body. She looked past the ruins of their farm to the empty road. Then, for a few minutes as darkness gathered, she stretched out beside her dearest friend, holding her close, and she cried filthy tears.