

THE MOURNING TREES

by

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Moya's husband pulled the strap from its hiding place in the thatch above the door.

"Lazy," he whispered and turned to face her, feet scuffing the dirt and rushes.

Moya clenched her teeth. He always beat her worse when she fought him. She raised her little fists.

"Lazy," he said again, but got no further for that was when they heard the screaming.

As one, they pushed through the wattle door into autumn sunshine. Women poured out of houses where they had been weaving to surround the bawling little girl.

"What happened?" asked the Headwife, "where are the other children?"

"A tree!" she wailed, "flowers..."

Moya did not understand, but many of the others turned pale. She felt a cold lump settle in her belly. Owen, whose birth had almost shattered her thin frame, beautiful Owen, was nowhere to be seen.

The bawling girl led the villagers towards the spot where the children had been sent to stack turf while men ran in from the fields to join them with worried questions. A little way onto the bog, the first cries carried to them. Moya broke into a run along with the rest.

"Please, gods," she begged, "please let Owen be all right.. The gods had never listened to her before, "Please, oh gods, please, please!"

A strong smell of honey filled the air of the bog and a tree rose over the last hill that separated the villagers from the cries of their children.

Moya, at the back of the group heard Kwiveen the Headman's voice raised above the screams, "Back, sink you. Stay back you all or I brain you myself!"

They flowed around him to where the tree stood, tall and graceful, with red, tear-shaped blossoms hanging towards the ground. A group of children huddled together around the lowest flowers, clutching them and writhing. Other little ones, also in obvious pain held onto their fellows in a chain of suffering.

Owen was last in line, furthest from the tree. He held his friend Enya by the sleeve and both of them screamed with voices already becoming hoarse.

Moya ran to pull her son away, but a blow from Kwiveen's staff knocked her to the ground.

"I told ye!" yelled Kwiveen, his voice shaking, "I warned ye. We can't help them now. Any as touches them, joins them. Nothing we can do: this here's a Mourning Tree!"

A great wail rose among the parents.

Moya tried to scramble towards Owen again, but her husband caught her up in his arms and head-butted her twice until she fell. He threw her over his shoulders and carried her off towards the village.

"What about Owen?" she asked, or maybe just thought she did. A fog seemed to fall over her eyes.

A Mourning Tree. She remembered the story now, about the last days of the War between the University of great Rosaveel and the jealous Hospitallers of Kinvarra. A sob escaped as she realized, that if they couldn't find a way to save her son, his suffering had barely started.

Her husband forgot to beat her when they got home. He tied her up as he used to do when he had first bought her. He had not done that since Owen's birth.

This time, the old brute had been sloppy with his knots, and as he tossed in his sleep she slipped easily out of the rope that bound her wrists. She gathered some barley loaves together in a cloth and stepped outside.

In the moonlight, she came face to face with the Headwife who was leaving her own hut. The Headwife had openly hated Moya in the past, but now, as she looked down at the wrapped bread, she spoke only as one mother to another.

"They cannot take food on a Mourning Tree, or so the tales say."

"Then why have you come?" asked Moya.

"I will not let my Niamh die without my arms around her."

"Then you will die too."

"Yes," said the Headwife, "Are you coming?"

"I am going to live," said Moya, "and Owen is going to live with me. I have heard there is a great reservoir of magic in the city. They store it under the University in a ball of yellow glass. Somebody there will know how to save my boy."

The Headwife sneered. "Run away then, little slave. The Magicians couldn't save their own people when the Trees came to them during the war. You think on that as you chase your ball of glass. Your son will die in agony and you far from him."

The Headwife turned her back and strode off into the night. Moya, resolve shaken, almost went with her. But then she turned the other way, towards the coast and the city of Rossaveel. The Headwife's words ran around and around in her skull along with the image of poor Owen, last in a line of children.

He would live longest of them all. From the stories she remembered, the tree would enfold the closest children in its branches and slowly digest them while their screaming friends would be drawn nearer to the centre.

She would only have a few days in which to save him.

The next day, Moya saw the sea for the first time since she had been stolen from her parents. Wind scattered the wave tips as it tossed her black hair and scented the air with salt and kelp. To the East she spied sails. "Pirates!" she thought, frightened, remembering the night she had been stolen. But the ships ignored her and ploughed onwards to the dot on the horizon that could only be Rossaveel.

It grew in size and magnificence as she approached. Copper domes glittered in the thin sunshine and deep red sails fluttered in the breeze like so many moths about a candle. The track she walked upon became a crowded road.

"Surely," thought Moya, "there will be power enough here to save my boy."

A wall surrounded parts of the city. Houses had sprung up outside it in astonishing numbers, but they could not hide the cracks and burns inflicted during the war with the Hospital of Kinvarra.

A river of people dragged Moya through the same gates where Mourning Trees were said to have first appeared in the last days of the conflict. Raindrops started to fall among them, glistening on the skins of apples, dripping through baskets of potatoes and turf.

"Where's the University?" she asked a woman next to her in the crowd. The woman failed to reply and Moya thought she might simply be deaf until the next three or four people ignored her too. Finally, in anger, she grabbed

a boy who was hurrying past with an armload of cabbages. "Where's the University?" she shouted full in his face.

"Ten score steps East," he said, "but don't think they'll let the likes of you in!"

"Why?" she demanded, but the boy had already wriggled himself clear and run off.

Moya wandered the city, past brand new temples, incense floating through the rain, past thousands of peasants and craftsmen constructing and expanding mansions, tearing down the shacks in their way.

The University, when finally she saw it, dwarfed all these other constructions. From a base of no more than a hundred paces, it rose gracefully into the sky, widening the further it got from the ground, windows of red glass bright against the rain.

A wall surrounded it at the base and everywhere, young men in blue robes jostled each other under the downpour, rushing for the safety of large houses where music spilled through open doorways and painted women beckoned.

Burly men guarded the ornate metal entrance to the University. They threw her into the street when she tried to saunter past them. She landed in a freezing puddle.

"Please," she said, "I need to speak to a magician.. She explained about Owen in great detail, but none of them seemed to so much as notice her or the dozen other supplicants hanging around the gates.

"I've been here a week," said a woman to Moya, "My food is gone."

She coughed blood into a patch of cloth already stiff with it. She wouldn't last much longer. Nor would Owen before the Tree killed him.

An hour passed, then two. The rain stopped, but Moya and the others shivered in the breeze that sprang up to replace it. Most of her companions were ill or missing limbs. So much suffering! But she could not help herself, let alone them. When hunger came she turned her body away and ate her loaves.

Then, with no warning, the guards ran forward and pushed everybody back. A carriage emerged, pulled by five white ponies.

"Now!" thought Moya. She ducked between a pair of soldiers and shoved herself into the animals' path, waving her arms and shouting so that they reared in fright and tried to back away.

Something pricked Moya between the shoulder blades.

"Wait!" called a voice from within the carriage, "don't kill her!. The sharp point pulled away.

Her body broke out in a sweat despite the wind.

"Approach," said the voice.

A thin face poked out from behind curtains in the carriage window.

"Are you a magician?" she asked.

"A straightforward wench," he said. "I am the Gardener."

The coughing woman behind Moya gasped, but she herself said nothing. The Gardener looked disappointed. "You haven't heard of me? You came looking for a magician and you have found the best. So, speak, my pretty, speak!"

"Can you save my son?"

"If he lives and," he looked Moya up and down, "and if it pleases me to do so."

"He lives, sir. He is caught on a Mourning Tree"

"Ah!" He frowned, but then his face lit up again. "Come back with me to my house, pretty one. I swear to you, an hour in my arms and you will forget you ever bore him. It is the least I can do to console you for your loss!"

Moya bit down hard on her lip to stop herself from flying at him in rage. "Please save my son, great one, Gardener sir."

The head pulled back into the carriage. "Move on," she heard him call, "she will think better of my offer when her wretch is dead."

The guards threw Moya aside and the ponies resumed their journey.

An hour later, Moya found herself wandering through a huge market. There would be other magicians in this city so famous for them. There had to be.

"Impossible tricks!" shouted one man above the noise of fishmongers to either side, "Impossible tricks for your coppers!. He wore blue robes but they were faded and torn. Moya wondered why he didn't perform a few of those tricks on himself. She moved on.

"Excuse me, miss. Excuse me?"

She jumped at the hand that touched her shoulder. It was a huge, hulking man in students robes. He was hunched over, as if ashamed of his height. Balanced on his nose was a pair of the new seeing lenses that aided those of weak sight. In spite of his size she thought he could be no older than her own eighteen years of age.

"I thought, miss, we might have a bowl of stew at -"

Moya punched him on the nose. Doing her husband's farm work had made her strong in spite of a slight frame. She turned away from her victim and moved deeper into the din of the market.



"Miracles!" screamed a fat woman. "Miracles! Silver buys you a night with the one you love. Gold makes them your slave! Miracles!"

"My son is stuck on a Mourning Tree," said Moya when she caught the woman's eye.

"Have you silver?" Moya nodded, not trusting her tongue with the lie.

"I can sell you a potion to get you with child again," said the woman, "even if your husband gets himself as drunk as the god o' screams!"

"I don't want another child," said Moya, "my son is still on the Tree--"

"Miracles!" shouted the woman, "Miracles!. She ignored any further attempts by Moya to speak to her.

"Please, miss!"

The hulking student she had hit earlier stood beside her again. His nose was bleeding and someone must have stood on one of the lenses before he could pick them up.

"My name is Owen, miss," she had raised her hand to strike him again, but the sound of her son's name stopped her from completing the motion. Big Owen kept talking, blood drying on his lips and on one sleeve of a dirty blue robe. "I didn't mean anything improper, miss. I frighten people sometimes with my bigness, I know I do. I'm sorry."

.  
She was crying now. He seemed to think it was his fault, unaware of the coincidence of names.

"Please, miss. I need to talk to you. That's all. If you could... Even, in a tavern. You'd be safe in a tavern, wouldn't you. We could sit right out where people could see us and you could talk to me, right?"

Moya allowed big Owen to lead her across the square to a public house crowded with students and women. The pot slave brought mugs of beer, barley loaves and baked trout. Moya could think only of her son and the Tree that might, even now, be ending his life.

"No," she thought, "I still have a few days."

But, really, she had no idea how long a tree would take to digest one meal before moving onto the next and for all she knew, he was already dead.

In the tavern, the student took a parchment and began sketching on it with colored chalks. Every now and then, he'd squint down at her and go back to his drawing.

"What are you doing?" she asked, dully.

"Sorry. It's ehm... It's a detailed description of your aura, you see?"

She did not.

"Well, miss, I'm doing a study on auras. On a special type of... of... Oh, Lug help us! Look:" he reached out timidly towards her.

She let him take her hand in his. It was soft, and dry. He squeezed his eyes shut, and with his free hand, picked up a quill and drove it into his forearm. His eyes positively bulged with the pain, but he kept his mouth shut and allowed the blood to flow down his arm onto her hand. She gasped. His body glowed from head to foot with leaping colors. Her own skin glowed too, her legs, the tip of her nose. It was-

He broke contact. "Sorry... I get weak, you know?"

He wiped the blood away with a corner of his filthy robe. "But you see what I do, don't you. Those lights. That's what I'm after. Auras. Particularly auras of despair. Easy to find in the city, but yours, ah! Never

have I seen such an urgency to go with it. Priceless. I could find a cure, someday. I could be rich, and then maybe..."

"Can you save my child from a Mourning Tree?"

"Ah! A Tree!" he seemed fascinated.

"Can you save him?" she asked again.

"Nobody can do that, miss."

"What about the University. What about the reservoir of magic all say is under the bottom of it?"

"I have never seen the reservoir, miss. The lower levels are not for students. Besides, some of our greatest magicians lived at the time of the War. And they couldn't help those of our people who were caught on the Trees. We couldn't even kill the poor flicks, let alone save them. I heard Old Magnor had the guards pepper the victims with arrows, but they just screamed worse and wouldn't die. Bad magic, that."

"Why would anybody make such a thing?" asked Moya.

Big Owen rubbed condensation away from his remaining lens. "Those Hospitallers must have known they were going to lose the war. The Trees were their last chance to scare us into surrender. So they made the suffering of the victims as bad and as obvious as they could. Didn't work, though. In the end, Magnor had some men spray the trees and the people they'd snagged with pitch. He ordered the whole lot burnt."

Owen didn't stop sketching for a minute. "Just made the situation worse. We have these parchments in the College that describe the thing. The burning trees started humming and humming. It got really high, and then, suddenly they exploded and all these bright colored points shot off into the sky. People at the time thought it was beautiful.

They thought it was the souls of their loved ones, or something. But it was just seeds, miss. Mourning Tree seeds. And they spread everywhere."

Moya shivered. She refused to believe the College had learned nothing new since the war, but nobody in this city of magic cared enough about her son to save him. She wished now she had listened to the Headwife and had gone to comfort Owen with her own death.

Then she thought of something.

"Where do you live?" she asked big Owen.

He blinked, "I have rooms in the University, of course."

Moya bit her lip to stop smiling. "I will go now. Thank you for the bread."

"But- but your aura!" He jumped to his feet, spilling beer over the calf-skin he had been sketching on. "I need more time!"

"I'm off home in the morning," she said, "if you wish to make a picture of me, it will have to be tonight. I will stay with you in the University."

He paled, "But the rules..."

"If you want to study me further, you will take me. I only need shelter for one night, then I will go to my village. If you draw or not, I don't care."

Rules or no rules, big Owen wasn't the only student to leave the public house with a woman. They followed a few others to a postern gate where a guard looked the other way for a silver coin. Suddenly the racket of the city died down and they were on a path surrounded by trees and lined with rows of flowers drinking in the thin drizzle that had sprung up. Men of all ages hurried past them in both directions, many dressed just like Owen and carrying

scrolls and ink pouches under their robes. This then, was the University to which she and all other petitioners were denied entry.

"That fellow," big Owen was saying, "is using magic just to stay awake long enough to finish a project. I can tell, miss. It's one of the things I've learned from my studies. And that one... No, over there.... Moya continued to look straight ahead, "well, that's Adal. The red light I can see about his fingers is the heat magic he's been using in the prison to try and keep the Mourning Tree alive there. And the gentleman in the hat - Miss! What's wrong?"

"Why.... she almost strangled on the words, "why a... a Mourning Tree in the prison?"

"Miss, I thought everybody knew. But then, by your accent, I suppose you haven't been in the city too long and-"

"WHY?"

"Go easy, miss. It's how things are done these days. With the prisoners. Throw them to the Tree like they deserve. That's how it's done. They confess quicker if they're promised a drowning instead. That's all. Please, go easy. It gives us a chance to study them. Someday, we might find a way to kill them without hurting the victims. Like your son, miss."

"It will be too late," she said. "I will save him, or no one will!"

In his private cell, she sat quietly in the corner while he made what he called an aura map with chalk and parchment. Light entered through a small window. Some students, he said, were not so lucky to have even that much, for a great part of the building was below ground.

She hunched her shoulders in the draft, listening to the scrape of chalk and the patter of rain. She began to fear he would finish his drawing too early and send her out of the University.

"Owen?"

He squinted up at her, a red chalk stick held aloft.

"What does my despair look like?"

He put the stick down carefully.

"It's a thing all of purple, miss. With flashes of red inside, like when wood has burned low on the fire.. His face screwed up as he peered at her. "For some reason, your despair is not as strong here as it was at the inn."

"Do you think I could see it?"

"I tried to show you already when we were back in the tavern. Remember. But you saw how the quill hurts. And the loss of blood... Well, as I said, I get weak."

"Then, use a knife!" she said impatiently. "If it was sharp enough you wouldn't feel it!"

"That's the point," he said, sadly, "it's not the blood like people think. It's the pain. When I qualify, I'll be able to use the University's reservoir of magic, I won't have to hurt myself ever again, but until then I would be expelled if I even tried."

Moya heard the tremor of fear in his voice and tried not to feel sorry for him. Tonight, she intended to find a way to use that reservoir to save her son. Whether or not she succeeded, she would bring disaster down on her poor host.

Later, she promised him that she would not leave the room and even insisted he tie her up for the night so that his own sleep might feel secure. He didn't want to accept,

but it must have reassured him because he slept like a man after a feast. She escaped easily.

The corridor floors were cold on her bare feet but it was quieter that way. Sometimes students passed, or masters, but the clump of their boots gave warning long before they arrived, and there was always time for Moya to pull into the shadow of a doorway. At first, she worried that her aura would give her away, but she remembered the concentration in Owen's eyes as he had studied her, and she realized with relief that it was something that must be searched for with deliberation.

Downwards, she moved downwards in search of the deepest levels of the College where Legend said the magical reservoir was kept. Her only weapon was a meat knife she had taken from Owen's cell and used to cut free of his shoddy knots. She passed dozens of closed doors, and walls covered with furs or tapestries. She ignored all, seeking out instead stairs and ladders. The corridors began to change the lower she went. She found herself shivering in the colder air and instead of stone, her feet walked on packed earth, coming away damp.

Sounds echoed all around her, distant moans, strange cries of pain.

"It's just my imagination," she said to herself.

She had been afraid all her life: of her father; her husband; of giving birth; of not being a good mother for little Owen... She had never run away from any of these, but sought to fight them at every turn.

"And always got a good hiding, too," she thought. But that had never stopped her. It never would.

Finally, there were no more stairs and no more rooms. Her last descent brought her to a large cavern whose walls

glowed and glistened. Spikes of rock that dwarfed Moya covered floor and ceiling.

"Looking for something, my pretty?" The voice seemed to come out of nowhere, "My spike is even bigger, I think you'll find."

She spun in a panic, bringing up the meat knife. The Gardener stood there, his thin face orange in the glow from the cavern walls. He grinned.

"You are so determined to save your brat, I really don't think I should stand in your way."

Moya raised her knife. "Don't try and stop me!"

He grinned at that. "I already said I would not. On the contrary. It is always the Gardener's job to help such as you get what they deserve.. He looked her up and down, "Although in your case it seems like such a waste." A shrug. "What you seek, is behind me, sweetling. Go on. I promise you will find no guards."

He stepped aside to reveal a narrow break in the cavern wall. More light glowed from within. Red this time.

She climbed through into another, larger cavern. Rocks and small stones carpeted the floor. And bones too, and the skulls of men and beasts. Moya could discern a flash of glass somewhere at the back of the cave. As the Gardener had promised, there were no guards here whatsoever.

Instead, the space between her and the glass was filled with dozens upon dozens of Mourning Trees, each pushing up against the next, filling the air with the delicious smells of honey and cinnamon. Her limbs shook with fear. Her eyes strained for a way through. But everywhere, leaves and roots and branches, drooping red blossoms, blocked the route.



She flopped down among the bones and wept in frustration. To come so far for this!

Then she noticed something. Very few of the branches reached down as far as the earth. Most were at waist level, stretching in vain towards the mottled light given off by the cavern walls. Moya was small, very small. If she were careful, if she did not breathe out at the wrong moment, she might be able to crawl in between the tightly packed trunks to reach the other side.

She tore two strips of cloth from the hem of her smock, and used them to bind the loose folds of her clothing more snugly against her body - the last thing she wanted was to have it snag against a branch. She tied more cloth onto her elbows, and then, with her belly and breasts so close to the ground they trailed against it, she began crawling carefully between the trunks and roots of the mourning trees.

Broken bones and skull fragments cut gashes in her skin as she moved. She thought the trees sensed her blood, and were dipping lower in response. Moya struggled on, a hair's breadth beneath them. Was it worth it? she wondered. Surely she was bound to touch one of the branches sooner or later, and her death then, would take many, many days.

But her doubts had come too late. Already she had reached half-way, scrape by painful scrape, and the way back was just as fraught with danger as any progress she might make.

Or so she thought.

Several times Moya came up against a branch barely a hand's span off the ground and she was forced to pass carefully over it without rising so high as to touch the

ones above. Her muscles shook with the effort. Her sweat dripped onto the bones of those who'd failed before her.

Often, blossoms dangled right beside her face, almost touching her, filling the air with their sweet scents. Her mouth watered with it, her belly now a constant rumble.

And finally, shaking with nervous exhaustion, Moya was almost close enough to touch the thick yellow glass of the magic reservoir. There seemed to be shapes inside it, swimming, or floating, she could not be sure. Thousands of shapes. Birds perhaps, or jelly fish. She knew she had to break the glass to get at the magic inside. She had an idea that she could drink it, like goat's milk, perhaps. And when she did, she believed she would know what to do with it. It was magic, after all.

Unfortunately, the branches clustered even more thickly around the glass than anywhere else. It took her another twenty minutes of crawling before she could find a place where she might bring a rock to bear against it. It wouldn't be easy. To gain access to the target area she would have to place her feet carefully under some low lying blossoms, and strike with the rock just so...

Her first blow left little more than a scratch. She tried again, harder this time, and was rewarded with a few tiny splinters. However, before her eyes, the glass started to repair itself.

Moya began to pound at the reservoir, but she could not get proper leverage to hit the glass hard and it was healing more quickly than she could damage it.

Every muscle shook with exhaustion. She stopped to rest for no more than a minute and watched in despair as the glass returned to a pristine condition.

She knew then, she would never save Owen from the tree, and knew she was unlikely to have the strength to crawl back the way she had come without being caught by one herself.

Some of the shapes inside swam close to where she had been hitting. Little faces peered at her through the glass. They seemed familiar, but could not distract her from her fear and despair.

She decided to at least try and escape. She pulled herself around carefully until she was facing the entrance.

She took one last look towards the glass and froze. The faces were still watching her, and suddenly she knew who they were. The children of the village. Or rather, their spirit forms. The faces were blurred. They shifted slightly with whatever currents were in the jar, but they were quite recognizable: Enya, Ultan's youngest, Berry, the Headwife... Angle from the far end of the village, and of course, Owen, little Owen, dead already, hands pressed against the glass, mouth working soundlessly.

Her vision blurred and she choked back a sob. "My little boy, oh my boy. I should be in there with you."

Did he even know who she was. Did any of them? Of course, they did. Why else had these few spirits come to stare at her and none of the others. Suddenly, the Headwife's lips parted wide in what could only have been a scream. Her tattered spirit was jerked away from her companions as if on a rope. She flew up towards the top of the giant jar and disappeared.

Moya felt a chill run through her. Somewhere, somebody had cast a spell, and the reservoir had provided the energy for it. Big Owen had said it wasn't blood, but pain that powered magic. No wonder criminals were always executed on

the Trees nowadays. No wonder the University of Rossaveel had won the war against their rivals so soon after the appearance of the first Trees had devastated the city. The plants had never been a creation of the enemy, but of the University's own professors.

She looked through the glass at the ghost of her son. The decision was agonizing. In the end, Moya, though terrified, knew what had to be done. She may have failed to save her Owen's life, but it was not yet too late for his soul.

She would need better leverage to smash the glass and there was only one way to get that.

She grabbed another rock, and before she could regret it, she surged to her feet and was immediately caught on a tree.

"My bones!" she cried. That was all she could feel at first. They had declared war on her flesh, cutting and gouging and sawing at it. But beneath that pain, her blood had already begun to warm. It became hotter and hotter, until the bones were forgotten altogether in a searing fire that gushed through her heart and boiled through every vein in her body. Hairs bored through her scalp like drills; ribs pressed in against her lungs to rob them of air; fingernails rebelled, tearing inwards.

Moya thrashed like a hooked fish in the greatest agony she had ever known. In the midst of it all, while her tongue tried to burrow its way down her throat, while her skin felt like it was ripping away, a small corner of her mind remembered a rock, and the hand that convulsively gripped it.

"Smash!" she thought. "Smash!"

She swayed with each wave of pain, ending it with a scream and a sharp blow to the reservoir beside her. Splinters came away, shards flew and cracks appeared. Finally, there was a small hole, and the spirits poked at it, trying to find a way through.

Then, a final blow and it split open completely. Spirits flooded into the room in an enormous wave. They swarmed over the Trees in their thousands, clinging to the branches like flames, biting and sucking at the blossoms.

The trees withered under the assault. Great cracks filled the air as trunks shattered and sap sprayed.

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Moya woke on a bed of withered leaves and branches. A child nestled in her arms.

He grew lighter and lighter in her grasp until all she held were a few old sticks. She did not feel sad, however. When she had broken the reservoir the agony of thousands had washed over her and through her. Her body glowed with power.

"My trees!" The Gardener's voice echoed around the cavern. "You!"

Moya raised her head to watch him approach. He too held sticks in his hands and some pods that might have been seeds. She thought he might try to kill her, but eyes that had once lingered over her body, now cared only for her aura.

"Who are you really?" he asked.

Her stare met his.

"Oh," was all he said. He dropped the sticks and ran for the entrance, feet plunging among the bones. Halfway,

he began wailing, as first one foot and then the other, caught in something on the ground. He reached with both hands to free himself, cursing all the while.

By the time Moya passed him, his legs had turned to wood from the knees down. His toes sank deep into the earth. "Don't leave me like this," he begged. "I'll die!"

"You won't die," said Moya. "Not if somebody loves you enough to water you every day."

The Gardener's pleas followed her up flights of stairs into the chill night beyond the building.

Everywhere, men in blue robes were running around in a panic. Moya knew what they had lost and she intended to give it back to them. Every little bit of it.

She raised her little fists and set the power free.

[The End.]