

# THE WEAVERS

by  
Esther M. Friesner

The Moss Wife tracked the runaway's progress for some time before the girl was even marginally aware that she was being watched. In the gray-green quiet of the forest, the child's ragged, panting breath was a slash on the air, a harsh tearing of the veil so long, so dearly woven. With a sideways, shambling gait the Moss Wife moved from shadow to shadow, tree to tree, her wrinkled face wincing with each gasp that escaped the girl's lips. The young one sounded as if she were in pain. There were no wounds that the Moss Wife could see, but Fyuru knew to her cost how deep some wounds can run and leave no mark, never a surface mark.

*She is healthy, the Moss Wife thought, absently running her fingers through the long, silky tendrils of her hair. She will pass through here quickly. She will go away. She must go away. Her smell is too strong, too much like his, too much of a chain to bind me. The branches tear it from her as she passes, the curtains of moss hold it, weave the seeming of the face I once knew. I want her gone. For the sake of the silence, I want her gone.*

But the girl did not go. She ran more as one who seeks than as one who flies. She was driven, yes. She looked behind her

every several steps, paused in the forest's quiet to harken for any sign of a pursuer. Her small, slender limbs trembled, her hair came free of its braiding and floated about her until she was another moss-draped sapling in the twilight world. Fear clung to her, and the certainty of pursuit, and the wavering of a will once strong, strong enough to have urged her into this mad flight.

For all her fear, she did not use the endless minutes to add distance between herself and whoever followed. She hesitated, she paused, she lingered.

*I want you gone.* The thought pounded against the edges of the girl's mind, but did not enter. *Go! Go! Why do you tarry? What do you bring to my world? Let the leaves fall, and the past lie beneath them, undisturbed. Child, child, I want you gone.*

It was no good. The girl lurched away, deeper into the forest. Fyuru felt the very air bear the scarrings of her flight, and she shuddered. If the girl had fled, he would follow. He was not one to let a thing go, once his own.

Which would bring more pain? To bide and watch for his coming or to follow the girl and see where her blood would lead her? But that would be a path that would draw him too, eventually, inevitably. The silence shivered around her, a living entity that senses approaching pain and can anticipate its own suffering.

Fyuru drifted back into the half light. She would go after the girl. She was bought and bound to do so, a debt that now had come due. She had learned of prices while she walked beyond the forest, but she had never truly understood that all things carry payment. Bitterness was in her bones. So many lessons, all learned as one, too late.

She found the girl stretched full-length upon the softly yielding moss of the forest floor, exhausted. Her cheek was cradled roughly on her fist, her other arm flung up to cover her face. Her ribs heaved hard, her legs were drawn up close to her body. There was not a sign of a traveler's pack, or any supplies for a journey. In the count of seasons, Fyuru knew that she was scarcely fifteen. This knowledge surprised the Moss Wife, for she had thought it all forgotten when she had returned to the forest. The reckoning should be his, along with all the rest.

Strange, how much of memory will weave itself out of strands of the now and the present. As Fyuru gazed at the girl, another body rose from the forest floor, a weaving as seemingly tenuous, yet as strong as any moss-made tapestry of Fyuru's conjuring. The vision's hair was a darker, bolder gold than the girl's—itself colored like the ghost of a star—thicker, shorter, not half so fine. The body was larger, more powerful, a man's form, yet the strength of it drained away under the eyes of a younger Fyuru, that body's power seeping into the forest floor from a dozen bleeding cuts of the sword.

Memory's weave-work took her, gently parting the translucent layers of days and years that lay between *then* and *this*, forcing her to see. She was that younger Fyuru once more. She trembled, shaking with the remembrance of finding him in a silence that was no longer whole. The stillness screamed. His every groan of pain wrenched the woods around her until she thought she would die. To heal the silence, she must heal the man. Her whole being twisted inside in terror at the thought of touching him, and yet a coolness deep within her spirit calmed her, made her see the good reasons why she must help him, steadied her heart and her hands so that when he awoke in the vine-woven confines of her house, his wounds were already cleansed and bound.

And because she could not bear any further disturbance she had likewise woven and bound to herself an illusion of human appearance. Even she, the solitary, had learned from her sisters that humankind often found them hideous, frightening. Fear had done enough harm in the forest. Her belly was still sour with sharing this man's fear of betrayal and abandonment and death. She could stand no more. To his eye, she was a young woman of his own breed—no beauty, but fair and pleasing to see, with a wealth of hair that moved with its own unspoken poetry.

So she healed him, and when he was healed, he told her that his heart was still wounded. He would not let her go. He would not believe her when she said that she was happy as she was, where she was. The pain of his disappointment marred the peace. In peace was all her wholeness, and so to purchase it

again, she allowed him to love her. In this way, he was happy for a time, and she was content.

But he grew beyond the point where her love, placidly given, could satisfy him. He told her of the enemies who had driven him into the forest in the first place, driven him there to die. They held his lands, but he would have them again. He would win back all that was his, and no one would ever take it from him. She could feel the grasp of an invisible fist tightening as he spoke. She tried not to fall into a thousand shaking strands when the shrieking rasp of a sword drawn from its sheath filled her little home.

They had gone from the forest together. Another choice would have meant argument, and she was too weary for strife. It was easier to give in, to float on every passing breeze like the drapings of tree-limb moss, to give beneath the weight of a conqueror's foot and spring back again when he had passed, like the spongy carpet of the forest floor.

He was as good as his word. Ambition made him stronger, bolder, more ruthless than his enemies, though he told her it was love. He took back all that was his and laid it at the feet of his fair wife. He stood beside her bed and smiled down at the daughter she bore him, swearing that he would make the child a great lady. He wove grand dreams with his words, and all she gave him in return was a timid, peaceful smile. She thought it was enough.

Not for him. He was ambitious, the young man who once had told her that all he asked of life was to hold her love. Ambition glinted with the edges of a hundred swords. She felt the bartered calm of her home among humankind begin to fray as her man's ambitions made their myriad slashes. When he gazed at their child he saw a coin, a puppet, a trading counter. When he looked at her . . .

She ran away. In her own form, to her old home she ran. She wrapped the silence more tightly around her than the silken cascade of her own hair, closed her eyes into the perfect darkness, and rocked herself back and forth, back and forth until she was again one with the slow, ageless serenity of growing things, the endless peace of the forest.

Now this.

The ground shook. Fyuru felt his coming from the soles of her feet to her belly. He burst into the small open space where the girl lay, his eyes blood-blazing in the half light.

"So this is how you repay me!"

The girl gave a little cry and rolled into a ball of ice. Fyuru's teeth chattered with shared cold. Her arm shot through with the pain of his grip on the girl's arm, hauling her to her feet.

"Now you'll come home with me, and we'll hear no more of your foolishness. It's a good match. He's an honest man, and he'll do well by you. Not every father would find such a husband for his daughter—nor be able to, having a daughter like you! Your reputation . . ."

The girl grew bones, stood straight suddenly. Her chin came up, and her eyes thrilled with the green fire of sunlit woodland. "I have no cause to be ashamed of myself, and you have none to be ashamed of me."

"Don't I? With all your outspoken whinings of going off and earning your own way as a wanderer? Not content to stay at home like a wise woman, grateful for a solid roof over your head, but on the roads in all weathers. How will you find bread on the road, I'd like to know?"

The girl tossed her head. "You know how."

Her father spat. Fyuru passed her hand over her cheek, feeling an old stain. She had tried to speak to him once, to beg him to return with her to the forest. That had been his answer then, too.

"Singing nurse tales to the local brats was never any calling for a young woman of our house. If they praised you for your words and tunelets, do you think it was true?" His laughter raked the boles of the trees. "Flatter the daughter to curry favor with the father! That for your precious tales, my innocent! Take sweet words for your bread and you'll starve soon enough, if I'd let you."

Fyuru saw the girl's head droop under a weight of hair nearly as heavy as her own. Still, there was steel beneath that melodious, piping voice, tender with many dreams. "The first night out, I came to a house beyond your lands. No one knew me there. I was no one's daughter. I sang for my bread, and they gave it to me. That wasn't flattery." Her head rose sharply, and

she met her father's eyes. "It wasn't pity, either! Not in a house so poor."

The man made a disgusted sound in his throat. "Here I'd hoped that these few nights with no roof over your head would have given you some sense. Will you sell dreams, and live on them yourself besides? A fine road you've taken into this wild-wood if you're seeking a new life!"

The girl's head dipped again. "I am seeking the old."

Now there was worse than scorn in her father's eyes. "You believe every lie you hear, don't you? That's what's puffed your head full of air. Your mother's dead, I told you. She took a chill and died the year after you were born. If you're looking for phantoms to put in your songs, we've more than enough closer to home, and home's where you're going." His hand closed around her wrist. His feet dug deep gouges in the mossy ground as he hauled her away.

The Moss Wife stepped from the shadows.

"Let my daughter go."

Her voice was unchanged. She saw him stiffen and stand still. The girl gave a joyous cry and twisted from his grasp. Blindly she ran toward the sound, toward the voice that was only an infant's memory.

Then she saw the Moss Wife's face, and she fell to her knees. The strangled sound she made caused the man to wheel about suddenly, sword ready to slay whatever nightmare had so affrighted his child.

Fyuru threw up her hands automatically, pulling Power from the forest floor. Vines plunged from the overhanging branches, whipping around the man's sword arm, wrenching away the blade. He cursed her viciously, and with his free hand groped for his dagger, but more vines snaked out to bind his ankles, roping their way up his legs to lash him secure.

*What have I done?* Fyuru's head burned with the rending of the silence. She clapped her hands to her ears, but could not shut out the man's unholy ravings.

"Let him go!" the girl cried. There was much of the man's rage in her voice. "Let my father go, monster!"

"Monster?" Fyuru shook her head slowly. Disbelief was a numbing balm. She raised her hands to the crown of her head

and began to weave the filaments of illusion. Her body shimmered in a gray mist, grew taller, more slender, sweeter to the human eye. When the weaving was done, she stepped forward so that man and girl together might see and not mistake.

He called her by the name she had used then, in the long ago time of bartered peace. It was at once welcome and invocation and thanks for answered prayers. "You've come back." His bonds still held, but they were forgotten. "I dreamed you would come back. Look, girl! Your mother's come to us again! Now all will be—"

"No," said the girl, shaking her head. "That's not my mother. Father, you didn't see her—not as she is. This is—nothing human."

"Curse your stubbornness, can't you *see*?" The man strained against his bonds. "She is your mother! If I ever told you she was dead, it was only to cover my own shame for losing her. Tell her! Tell her who you are!"

Fyuru knelt beside the girl. She made no attempt to touch her, though her fingertips burned with remembrance of an infant's velvet cheek. Before her eyes she saw small, sleep-heavy lips where a blue-white drop of milk still clung, and the vision stayed until her own tears blurred it.

"Your father is right," said the Moss Wife. She saw mixed horror and denial in the girl's eyes. "And so are you. Your mother, and nothing . . . human. You came here seeking me. You must take what you find."

The man was shouting again: "Don't believe her, girl! Living here in these forsaken woods, she hasn't any notion what she's saying. Come home with us now! Come, and this time I will be the healer."

The Moss Wife raised her eyes. "Of what will you heal me? Of being what I am? It is incurable, and the same illness is already deep in our daughter's heart. Will you heal her too, with your threats and your shouts?"

She turned from him and gave the girl her hand. "Come. You have yet to find all that you seek." She led the awestruck child away, deeper into the forest.

When she came back, she was alone. "Where is she?" the

man demanded, struggling against the vines again. "What have you done with our daughter?"

"Shown her the path." Still in human guise, the Moss Wife sat opposite him, arms embracing updrawn knees.

"What path?"

"The path through the forest. The safest, swiftest path for one who wishes to go so far." He would have spoken then—hot, angry words—but her pale palm flashed in the half-light. "If you pursue her, I will set my snares in your way. If you persist, I will follow, and I will stand between you and her even as you have tried to stand between her and her dream all these lost years."

His voice was a muffled growl. "Lost years . . . a lost life, loving you."

"Then I will heal you of that." She cast away the human seeming.

For a time, the woods were silent. Then he cried out: "Liar! Cheat! The tales they tell of your people don't tell half enough. Shy and meek, they claim, when you're as ready to feed on a man's heart as any wolf."

"And on what do you feed, man of swords?"

"Our child was right," he growled. "You are nothing human."

She stood up slowly. "She said she was sorry for saying that, before we parted. She said that maybe that was why she was so sure of becoming a singer, because of the half-blood. Nothing human. She weaves vision to melody even as I weave vine to vine and you weave land to land. She is truly the daughter of two bloods, but not like me and not like you. Let her go."

"I can't let her go as easily as you once did! Do you expect me to tear her memory from my heart? You don't know anything of human feeling."

The Moss Wife did not seem to answer the accusation. All she said was, "She will not be gone forever."

A canny look came into the man's eye. "You can't keep me bound here forever. You know how long my memory can be, when I'm determined on a thing. Here's a bargain: Come home with me again—put on your human shape—and let us be as we were before. Your love for her freedom. I will swear by any oath you name not to harry her if you consent."



Fyuru bowed her head. One by one the vines binding the man dropped away. One hand floated up to brush back the fall of her hair. The man flinched. She saw his distaste as a flicker of movement in the shadows of the trees.

"No bargain," she said. "Follow her, if you must, but first you must fight past me here. I have learned that some things are not to be bought with compromise."

The man stared at the Moss Wife, then at his fallen sword. His hand darted out to seize the blade before another vine could spring its snare. Nothing in the forest moved. His eyes danced from tree to tree, daring her magic to take him unaware. All was stillness.

"You must fight me," the Moss Wife said. "I will not fight you with anything but my death. This time it is I who set the price."

"Then let it be paid!" He raised his blade. It hovered for several heartbeats in the misty air, then came gradually down to his side. Fyuru drank the sound of its sheathing as if it were purest springwater.

"I loved you." The man's words were bitter. "But what did your folk ever know of love?"

She lowered her eyes, and her voice was a murmuring wind in the branches. "What we know, we know in silence, and we prove in time."

When she looked up, she was alone.

In the years that fall with the falling leaves, they say that a great singer emerged from nowhere and wove tales that caught the hearts and twined the souls of men in a web of living dreams. In all the years and places of her wandering, she would never speak her lineage except to say, "I am the child of forest and sword, I am the wage of fighter and free." When they implored her to stay, she would smile wistfully and reply that moss sets down no roots. Her songs were her only hearth and home.

But when the last years came to her, they found her with harp in hand on the grave where a minor lord lies buried, and over mound and maiden was woven an evergreen coverlet of moss starred with the fairest flowers. No man's hand or blade shall ever part that weaving.