

Cara

It was still dark when Mother and Grandmother and I went to the market. We always went early on Mother's insistence, because that was when they could get the best produce. That was fine with me. I love the dew-damp chill of early morning. But I think it was hard on Grandmother. Sometimes her foot seemed to bother her when she first woke up, and she'd limp a little. Though she never said anything, I had the sense that she would rather have gone later, after the stiffness had eased.

I hardly noticed the chat between the women on the way to the square or the first bird chirping to wake the others. And the cicadas that sang day and night most of the year were just background noise to me. It was the music that my ears always strained for.

The vendors hawked their produce with singsong voices, and played, high and whiny, on exotic instruments. Others would join in on booming drums, and some just made music with whatever was at hand. My stomach would flutter when we heard those first notes. And, as the sound built slowly with the pace of our gait and I could feel the drum beats in the soles of my feet, I invariably began to jump with excitement. By the time we finally arrived at the stalls and the music was a dizzying, complex din I would erupt in hopping circles around the women, my feet just itching to take off. How I loved those ditties and chants!

I loved the colors, too. People were dressed in kaleidoscopic garb, vendors and customers alike. Some wore turbans and flowing robes streaked with blood. They had great curling knives in their belts and chanted through long dark beards. I knew these were the butchers who slaughtered the game, but they were swarthy and thrillingly dangerous to me. I never got too close to them. Servant children carrying bundles of produce, raced between the stalls, their brightly colored tunics a-blur above their bare brown legs and feet. I'd call out their names and sometimes chase after them though they seldom had time to play. But to me the women were the most interesting of all. They were the ones who most displayed their religions and origins in their dress.

Some were billows of cloth from head to toe, and they glided as if they didn't have legs. Their faces and hands were tinted yellow with henna, and they wore stout silver chains around their veils that drooped over their foreheads and jingled with fringes of beads.

There were pale ones in beautifully embroidered gowns, their braided yellow hair wrapped high around their heads. Some of them wore spiral tattoos on their cheeks and hawk and falcon feathers on leather thongs around their waists. They moved with quiet dignity and were treated with a mixture of reverence and fear, for they were the priestesses of Frigg.

There were brown ones with dresses made of great pleats of cloth. Sometimes, caught up in the music, they'd whirl and clap their hands over their heads, and their dresses would ruffle around their ankles as their bare feet stamped the dust up from the ground. I loved that, and sometimes I'd clap and dance too. That always made them laugh.

But my favorites were the lovely black bare breasted ones who wore close fitting skirts that tied at the waist and skimmed down to their ankles. Necklaces made of coins hung ponderously against their skin, and their heads were wrapped in tribe-colored cloth. They carried huge bulging bundles on their heads and often a baby slung under their

breasts. They gossiped among themselves in a quick rhythmical tongue that I could not understand. Their voices were low and sweetened with mirth, and I admired their strength.

Even before the crowds of shoppers arrived, the market was a bustling place. It was noisy and vivid and smelly and fun. I loved it. So did Mother. And I think Grandmother did as well. But there was also a quiet beauty to the place. With the sun just peeking over the horizon, the sky was finger painted pink and scarlet and sometimes even yellow. And the colors of the sky seemed to dye the whole earth with brilliant party pigments. I'd run through tall pink grass and between rosy briars. I'd skip through the crimson wild thyme, crushing its leaves so that its aroma followed me for long minutes. When I was little I used to watch the birds fly through the sunrise colors and wonder why they didn't come out all purple and pink.

Oh, how I envied the birds back then. All my life I've been fascinated with flight. Flying was my first real desire. As a child I had dreams of flying, and once, when I was about seven, I even tried to take off. I climbed on top of the garden wall, flapped my arms, and leapt. But, of course, instead of soaring I dropped into a pile of servants who had thrown themselves into a heap to break my fall.

But at night when I was dreaming I would find that I was weightless, floating just above the floor in my narrow sleeping chamber. I'd sweep over my small bed, as graceful as a dove, and whoosh through the window into cold upper air, looking down at the rooftops and the broad domes of trees. I'd circle and swoop around the city wall and laugh out loud, because no one could hear me. In flying dreams I was absolutely free. I could fly so high that stars would sprinkle into my hair or I could just stay close to home. The choice was entirely mine. And I thought how sweet it must be to be a bird! What joy it must be to puncture the sunrise each day above the gaudy and boisterous market!

Mother and Grandmother poked along that morning, as they always did, lingering at this stall or that, bargaining with vendors and admiring the fruit. I found all that tedious and, as usual, ran on ahead to find an adventure of my own. What I loved about the market was that, while they were busy, I could disappear into the crowd and race to the grove without anyone hovering over me, without anyone trying to save me from every scrape or bump. Whereas at home I was limited to the courtyard and the space within the garden wall, at market there was a whole wide world in which to run and occasionally even servant children who had time to play.

But as much as I loved the chaos of the market, I loved the grove even more.

About a hundred meters from the edge of the market, it was a wonderment of ancient olive trees. It had long been neglected and was weedy with thistles and briars, but I loved scrambling up the trunks of the trees and wrapping my legs around a high perch where I'd hang on for dear life. Sometimes I'd swing from the lower limbs, my arms stretched over my head, my legs dangling beneath me, my breath coming in quick, giddy gulps.

Sometimes I'd wrap my legs over a branch and, pushing my dress out of my eyes, I'd look at the world upside down. I'd whoop and yell and laugh myself silly, and no one could hear me over the market noise. I loved peering from the treetops. I could hide in the foliage and make believe no one could see me, yet I could view my entire world, seeing everything at once, just like a bird.

Sometimes, when Mother or Grandmother would call me I'd pretend I was an Empress and blow royal kisses from my regal leafy bastion. I'd yell something like, "I

bless you, my subjects. I bless you all." And I'd kiss my hands and throw my arms wide so my love could shower over everyone.

That's what I was doing that morning when Mother dragged Grandmother to the clothing stall and pulled out a bolt of blue fabric to try. I couldn't hear what they were saying, of course, but I could tell that the cloth was intended for Grandmother, and it looked like she was thrilled to pieces over it.

I hadn't really thought about it until then, but Grandmother nearly never bought anything for herself. She loved to buy and make presents for us and for the servants. And she was always giving trinkets to neighbors and friends. But she didn't seem interested in new things for herself. I was glad to see her fussing over the cloth. It was pretty. I thought it would look nice on her.

There were other fun things that I did in the trees. When they were in bloom I'd break off slender branches and braid coronets all starred with white flowers. These were my royal crowns, and I'd wear them until the blossoms dropped. I'd cut scepters, too, using sturdier branches whose leaves and flowers I'd pinched off, and I'd hold royal court up there in my chamber. But I was always a benevolent queen. I never sentenced anyone to die.

And later I'd watch as the fruit formed in the trees, tiny buds at first, then round and green and shiny with morning dew. And when the olives ripened, I'd stuff myself with them until I was so full that I knew I'd just pop. Those were the days when I couldn't eat lunch and Dora, our cook, would scold me for ruining my appetite.

Once, when I was straddling a branch, scooting along it to see how far out I could go, I got the most delicious sensation deep inside. My whole body got warm and my lower body throbbed. I got wet between my legs and afterwards I felt all cozy and relaxed. I loved that feeling, and so I did it often. I did it that morning, too, and, as usual, the wetness came and so did the warmth and the throbbing and the glowing feeling after. But there was something else. The wetness wasn't cool as it normally was. It was very warm. And it felt sticky instead of slippery. I didn't understand. And so I stuck my hands up my dress and stared at my red fingertips.

At first I was afraid that I'd hurt myself. Mother and the servants were always warning me that I'd get hurt if I did anything that I enjoyed. But then I remembered the other thing they'd told me, the story about how, when a girl becomes a woman, she bleeds without injury from her womb. They called it wisdom blood. And each time they told the story I would bunch up my dress to see if mine had shown up yet. Each time I had been disappointed. But there in the tree, my red hand proving that I'd made the transition, I was so excited I could barely breathe. I wanted everyone to know.

Mother called to me. I couldn't hear what she said, but I knew the message anyhow. She wanted me to come down. Mother always wanted me to come down. In truth, I had been about to scramble to the ground. I wanted to run and tell them my wonderful news. But I couldn't wait. Still perched on my branch, I blew woman kisses to them and yelled that I'd shown my first wisdom blood. Of course, they couldn't hear me. At least my mother couldn't.

But Grandmother answered. While Mother was admiring the cloth, Grandmother told me to come down from the tree and to stand beneath it. Oh, she didn't bother with words. No one could yell over the din of the market. No, she simply whispered with her mind that it was time to go on my Woman Journey and that she'd go with me as far as she

could. All this she said without uttering a sound, yet I heard it as clearly as if she had spoken directly into my ear. The music of the market went dumb, and the rush and hubbub seemed to go still. The only sound I was aware of was my Grandmother's voice. And so I slid down the tree and stood before it.

I felt so serene as I stood in the silence, my hands open and ready to receive my Woman Gift. I felt like I was sinking into a dream. I didn't understand why Mother was so distraught. I told her not to worry. With my mind I told her that I was going on my Woman Journey, that I was happy to go, that I would meet her in the temple of Vesta when I returned. I said all this as clearly as I could, but her face was distorted with fear.

With her arms stretched toward me, she ran and stumbled and struggled and swore. She kicked aside animals and servant children. I'd never seen her like that before. She lost her combs and her hair went wild. Her dress caught on a bramble, and she yanked it free, tearing the cloth and tripping over it. But even before she hit the ground she scrambled to her feet and continued to run. I wanted to comfort her. Even as I felt myself being drawn into the tree, even as I saw her grow unfocused and pale, I wanted to say something that would soothe her heart. So I told her with my mind that I felt safe, and I smiled and blessed her as I dissolved into the tree.

The wood wrapped around my body; its pulp became my flesh. Its sap pulsed up through my feet, its life force merging with mine. Leaves sprouted, green and moist from the tips of my fingers, and olives grew from my nails. Then the olives were gone. The leaves faded slowly and the sap was just my blood pounding through my veins. The tree was the tree and I was a child-woman ready to find an adventure.

And then a portal slowly formed. Dark on dark, it hinted at itself, swirling and retreating and coming again in whorls like the smoke from the temple fire until it had shaped itself into a door that was tall and wide and perfectly oval. It was a shadowy door fringed with gray-green moss. I was sure it would vanish if I blew on it. But when I touched it I found that it was solid and thick.

Grandmother opened it for me. Her smile was proud and maybe a little sad, and she held her hands out to me. Holding both my hands, she pulled me close and kissed me first on one cheek then on the other. It was a greeting I'd often seen her give her women friends. It felt strange that she greeted me so instead of crushing my body to hers and smooching me noisily all over my face in a way that always made me giggle. Twice she pulled me close, and twice she kissed my cheeks one at a time in a formal woman's greeting. And then she let my left hand go.

Walking beside me, she held my other hand as we rustled over the leaves of the forest floor. She didn't speak while we stepped over and around the undergrowth. She just held my hand in a way that let me know that no harm would come to me as long as she was there.

I don't know how long we walked in the mottled light or how many woodland kilometers we crossed. I did notice that she wasn't limping, and I was glad for that. Nonetheless, I kept my pace slow so I wouldn't overtax her. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but she told me I'd find the answers for myself.

When we came to the gate she stopped and pulled me close. Was that fear I smelled wafting from her breasts? She took both my hands in hers and searched my eyes for a few long moments. She opened her mouth as if to speak and closed it again. She cradled my cheeks and kissed my forehead. I had a sense of foreboding. I shook it off. She

brushed my wayward hair from my face. Once again she moved to speak. Her voice was thick and soft. "This is where I must leave you, Cara, for this is a journey you must make on your own. Go, now, Granddaughter, and know that you're the light of my life and your mother's heart. Go now and find your treasure."

Abruptly she turned, but she stood stark still, as if there were something more she wanted to say. I looked at the gate and back at her. I longed to see what lay on the other side. I ached to cling to my Grandmother. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed my cheek to her back. I wanted to promise that I would not go, that I would stay a child for the rest of my life. But my feet actually itched to explore. I took a breath to speak. "No Cara." She was resolute. Her spine was stiff, her head high. She looked straight ahead, away from me. "You go now." Then, in a trembling voice that I could barely hear, "You go now." And she was gone.

I didn't even feel her slip from my arms. One moment I was holding her and the next I wasn't. For the first time in my life, I was alone, and for the first time in my life I was afraid.

With Grandmother gone the woods had gone dark. Great tenebrous shapes hulked all around me with wide hunched shoulders and small angry heads. They loomed high above me and skittered under my feet, as if some would trip me so the others could pounce. They threatened from every side. They closed in on me like giants and gnomes. I stood dead still in my bright white dress, hoping that if I didn't move I would confuse them into believing that I was one with them. Moving only my eyes I looked for a friendly face, but there was no one to protect me, nobody to hover.

I thought I heard my mother sing and nearly lost my nerve. I wanted the comfort of Grandmother's lap, the melody of my mother's voice. I wanted their stories and laughter and songs, their fingers fondling my willful hair. I wanted sunshine on Grandmother's roses, and I wanted Dora's apple cakes. I wanted my puppy's dirty paws. I wanted the safety of the garden wall where life was predictable, shielded and secure.

I taunted myself. "Is this what it's like to become a woman, to be scared of the shadows and weeping for home?" But even as I dared myself, I searched through pointy-fingered shades to find the way back. There was none, for when Grandmother left she had taken the footpath with her.

I had not realized how quiet the forest had been until she'd gone. Not even a cricket chirped. My heartbeat clamored in my ears. My breath roared like a storm. I squared my shoulders. I even hummed a little martial song that I had heard a few times at the market. "If you don't feel brave," Dora always said, "pretend until you do." I pretended as hard as I could.

When my eyes adjusted themselves to the dark and the phantoms became just the shadows of the trees I tried the gate. It was locked. Somehow I'd known it would be. I stepped back and sat down to assess the situation.

The buckle of a gray stone wall that spread deep into the forest fog, the gate was huge, much taller than anything I'd seen back home. Silver and stout and made of graceful scrollwork except for occasional cross bars, its uprights, which were more like vines, were too close for me to squeeze through. Nonetheless, I thought that if I could just reach over my head and grasp a bar and prop my foot on one of the scrolls I could probably boost myself up and over the thing. I was satisfied. I had a plan.

I got up and dusted dried leaves from my dress and clapped debris from my hands. I hiked up my clothing so my legs would be free and tested a scroll with my foot. It held. I stepped back, took a running leap, and reached as far up as my arms would go, pulling myself up a little off the ground. But when I hung by my arms trying to find a foothold the gate went limp as if it had decided to melt. Still kicking, I sagged with it to the ground. For the briefest of moments I counted myself lucky. I saw myself simply stepping over the flaccid bars. And then the bars moved.

They slithered across the ground, poking up against my feet, their silvery bodies curling and coiling amongst themselves. Little forked tongues darted in and out. I understood. My breath knotted in my chest. My stomach lurched, and I went cold with fear. I had a primal urge to run. My whole body screamed to run. But I could not move my feet. Snakes curled around my ankles and tasted my heels. They slithered, cool and dry, over my insteps and toes. I shivered in horror. I struggled to scream, but I had no voice. I was paralyzed, utterly immobilized with fear.

One of the snakes climbed up my leg, curling himself around my ankle, flicking his tongue against my shin, gliding slowly, sinuously to my knee and briefly pausing, his tail brushing my foot as his tongue tested the flavor of my thigh.

"No!" I boomed. The fierceness of my voice startled me. I had never demanded anything before. I had a thrilling sense of authority. "Absolutely not!" I glared at the snake.

He backed down a little then began to climb again.

"By the blood of Vesta, I said no!" I hissed between clenched teeth. I grabbed the snake and, ignoring the others, held him at arm's length. Snake had only to bite me and I'd have been killed. I had only to snap Snake and he would have died. We stared at each other, eye to eye, engaged in a test of wills.

Snake's eyes were small and black and blank.

"Send the others away," I commanded.

Snake did not.

I glowered at the others still tangled at my feet. "I command you to go." My voice was low, both in tone and in volume. It resonated with more power than I felt.

They stayed where they were. I turned back to Snake, still captured in my hand. He writhed and wriggled, trying to get free. "I'll free you after the others have gone, but not a moment sooner."

Snake smiled sadly. "But you misunderstand, Cara," Snake purred, slowly, sensuously nodding his head. "We are not here to harm you. We're here to help." I could not see behind Snake's eyes, but his voice was sweet with a touch of hurt. It was deep and smooth like the rich brown molasses that Dora baked into her holiday cakes. "We could have stayed rigid and made you climb. But instead we brought down the gate for you. We did you a favor, Cara, and look at how you treat us." Snake's voice was all disappointment; he hung his head in sorrow.

I felt like an ungrateful lout and bent to place him back on the ground.

"Don't!" a high voice cried in alarm. "Don't you trust a word they say!" Rabbit raced to the edge of the serpentine snarl. Some of the snakes hissed. She stepped back, twitching her nose. Her eyes went livid with anger or fear. I couldn't tell which. "They talk so sweet. They seem so kind." Her chin quivered and her little voice broke. She wrung her paws so piteously that I wanted to hug her. "That's how they get you to let

down your guard. And then they eat your babes." She keened the accusation and pointed her paw directly at Master Snake. "Oh, my babes! My babes!" She crumpled to the ground, rocking and hugging herself. Lost in her terrible grief, she moaned her babies' names over and over.

He watched her, his face turned from me, and then he looked back, slowly, smoothly. And then he smiled at me. He spoke not a word of comfort or denial. His coldness confused me. He cocked his head. "Well, what do you expect?" he reasoned. "A snake has to eat."

He had a point. On both sides there was an issue of survival. I looked at Snake then looked at Rabbit, trying to decide. I made my choice. As if we'd prearranged it, I leapt into Rabbit's body and, before I knew it, I was hopping away at a speed I'd never known before.

Oh, it was sweet, being inside her. I loved the feel of her fur on my back. It was warm and soft and it smelled so good, all green and brown like the forest floor. And with those long ears I could hear sounds that I didn't know existed. Why, even over the crunching we made I could hear the insects breathe. And I could feel Rabbit's nose twitching as we escaped, scenting the air for danger, smelling only the rot of leaves beneath our paws and the fragrance of mushrooms growing in the underbrush. I could hear green shoots opening the soil and smell the faint aroma of lettuce growing at the forest's edge. And the speed! Oh, how I loved the speed as we leapt over twigs and rotting limbs, over spider webs and chipmunk holes. It was amazing, this ability to catapult myself through the air without the slightest difficulty. I wasn't even out of breath.

But when we stopped at Rabbit's warren I was filled with sensations that I did not understand. It seemed that there were babies growing inside my womb. I could feel them tumbling all over themselves, each in her own little sac. I was giddy with excitement as their little feet kicked, romping in the safety of their watery field. I patted my belly and hummed a lullaby that Grandmother had taught me over the years.

And then my water broke, and I groaned on waves of searing pain. I gasped and panted when the pain let up and clasped my jaw tight when it came again. And, as the waves came closer together, as they became one great wave of terrible pain, as I pushed and rested and pushed again, as my babies emerged from me one by one, I heaved and strained and prayed and knew that I would not live through this awful ordeal.

But when it was over and I saw the little ones, all bloody and new, when I tasted the placenta as I cleaned and nuzzled them, I fell instantly, besottedly in love with each one. I filled myself full of their baby scent as they struggled blindly to find their first meal. The thrill that I experienced when they found my teats and I felt the milk flow from my body to theirs was deeply, maternally sexual. Each time their little mouths clamped greedily around my nipples sucking and sucking as if they'd never be filled I felt my womb pull up, deliciously, urgently, just as it had when I'd scooted along the olive branch. I wept as they fell asleep curled into my body, a jumble of beautiful, perfect little rabbits, their hungry mews finally hushed. I dozed in a cloud of bliss, smelling their sweet milky scent, warming myself on their breath, lulled on the rhythm of their strong little hearts. I could feel all this, and I knew my heart would break with joy. And I thought, so this is what it is to be a mother.

But this was also the place where she had lost them. The smell of their fear was cloying and sharp, and every inhalation brought such pain that I didn't believe I could draw another breath. Their terrified voices cried out for help, those piteous piercing screams. I could feel myself racing, just as Mother had raced, careening over the forest floor to get to my babes. I was blinded with terror for them. I panted and gasped, sucked in dry acrid panic as I vaulted over obstacles that I couldn't even see. My arms ached for them. My belly ached for them. I needed to shove them back into my womb where they would be safe, so safe.

I was entombed in Rabbit's pain. Oh, that bottomless pain. It closed in from all sides. It crushed me from above and sucked me in from below. My vision went black and my mind went numb. I felt as if someone had ripped open my belly and robbed from me all that would keep me alive and then filled me up with broken glass. And for a moment I thought I heard my mother's cry.

"I'm so very sorry," I begged for atonement as I climbed out of Rabbit's body, stood on my own, and finally sat down in front of her. I wanted to writhe, to shake my head, to run and run. I wanted to do something, anything, to rid myself of the sadness that threatened to swallow me whole. "I cannot live inside your grief. I don't see how you endure it." I hugged her to my breast, stroking her fine fur. "How do you stay alive?" Rabbit shook her head, not trusting her voice. She snuggled into my lap as I tucked my legs under myself. I stroked her head and let her weep. And when she had wept all she could I struggled to find something soothing to say. But we both knew there were no words.

"Would you come with me, good Rabbit, while I find my treasure? There might be a gift for you as well." I was embarrassed the moment the words left my lips. What gift could possibly make up for her loss?

She wiped her eyes and shook her head. "No, Cara. I must stay here. We've given each other all that we can for now." She smiled weakly, her chin still trembling. "Go now. Find your gift. But remember. Remember." And she disappeared into her hole.

It broke my heart to leave her there. I lingered trying to find something, anything, that I could say or do that would bring her comfort. But I found nothing. I had never felt inadequate before. I hated the feeling.

I wandered aimlessly for a while, limp with mourning, feeling useless because I could not help her or even myself. Then I saw a red leaf. There was only one, a scarlet oval standing out against the green. I stared at that leaf and saw it become a flame. It burned, yellow and orange and red on the end of the limb. And then it was just a leaf again. My heart leapt. "Vesta!" I shouted to the leaf. "Of course! Vesta!"

I raced back to the warren, running for all I was worth until finally, doubled over with a stitch in my side, I waited at Rabbit's door until I could breathe again. I called. She poked her head up. Her eyes were still red from weeping, and her fur was matted with tears. Her left ear was bent in two as if she'd simply stopped caring to hear. "Did you have a chance to say good-bye to your babes?" I asked, knowing that she hadn't. She shook her head, wiping her eyes again. "I think we should have a ritual for them." My mind was racing. I remembered some of my Grandmother's religion, could recite some of the myths she'd told me. But there were other songs and tales that I'd heard at the market. The traditions were confused in my mind.

"What's a ritual?"

I think I took her so by surprise that she was shocked from her weeping. Her voice was too hopeful. I immediately regretted having made the suggestion. I didn't want her to expect too much.

"It's just a ceremony, a way to say farewell, a way to make peace with your loss." I sat down cross-legged and looked her in the eye. "I've never done anything like this before," I confessed. Then I remembered a little funeral that I'd done for a dead bird that I'd found once in the garden. "Well, yes I have, now that I think of it." I took her paw in my hand. I had to dampen the hope in her eyes. "But please don't expect a miracle. It's just a chance to say good-bye. Do you have anything that belonged to your babies? Toys? Blankets?"

"The warren was their toy," Rabbit gestured to the hole, as if it were a poor substitute for what I had suggested. I thought she'd break into tears again. "They found play in everything they saw. And I was their blanket. They snuggled up to me for warmth and comfort."

For a moment I could see the babies giddy with the sheer bliss of life, and I was touched by the simple truth of what she'd said. I had to gather myself. Knowing that movement always helped me think, I got up and paced a bit. I looked around, hoping for inspiration. "What can we use? What can we use?" I scratched my arm absently. Something had bitten me, and I had a small bump. I muttered and paced, thinking, thinking. Then I saw it. Right there at my feet I saw a fallen bit of branch that, in the dappled forest light, looked just like a rabbit. "I have it!" I brandished it in front of her face. "Look!" But the light had changed when I'd moved the wood. What I held in my hand was just a shapeless lump. Rabbit didn't understand. "We can carve their images from bits of wood. We can take our time and make them as real as you can bear. And the dolls we make can represent them!"

Rabbit still looked lost, but she set to work anyway, searching out bits of wood with me, testing to be sure that they weren't too hard to whittle or too soft with rot. And, when we'd found four perfect pieces, she began to gnaw.

Her sharp teeth shaped the lumps, first into rough figures and at last into finely hewn rabbit dolls. Grandmother always said that art is anything you do with love. Rabbit made art that day, chewing all the love that she had for her babes into pieces of wood that the trees had thrown away. I gasped when I saw them. They were just as I remembered, tiny hairless things with eyes still closed, tender and vulnerable, such easy prey.

I found four large leaves. "Do you have a candle?" Rabbit disappeared inside her hole and in a blink was back with a small white taper. I rubbed two sticks together and recited the prayer that Dora always chanted when she lit the morning cooking fire. "Blessed by air, blessed by fire, blessed by water, blessed by earth. Bless us with a Vestal fire to illuminate our hearts." The fire took. I lit the candle and handed Rabbit the little burning twig. I melted wax onto each leaf. "This is her shroud", I explained as I tied a bit of vine around the first cerecloth. I wrapped each doll in a waxen leaf and each I tied with a bit of vine. I laid them side-by-side. I cleared a bit of forest floor and arranged a small stone circle. Then I made a burning bed. I gathered what I found at hand, not really noticing what I took. "Bed of twiglets, bed of leaves helps this mother as she grieves." Lost inside my own heart, I did not watch Rabbit as I went on about the ritual. I laid each rabbit doll on the bed, naming each, singing to each the lullaby that Grandmother had sung to me. "Sleep my heart's love, sleep my glee. In your dreams be

strong and free. Rise on Vesta's golden flame until you wake to me again." Then I set fire to the bed.

The fire rose, tall and broad, and inside I saw a rainbow colored orb. The ball took the form of a gull in flight. Then it changed. The wings became rabbit ears, flapping in the sky. Bits of flame sparkled like an orange fountain and sputtered from the pyre. I was afraid. The fire was too big. It was burning out of control. I feared it would engulf the woods. I feared that Rabbit and I would burst into flame along with the woodland and everything that lived there. Rabbit was the first to see what happened next. She cried out, and it was all I could do to stop her from launching herself into the flames. Then I saw.

The dolls were not burning! They had broken free of their shrouds and were cuddled together inside the fire! They were mewling for their mother, their little heads turning to and fro searching for a way out, struggling to come home. I didn't know what to do. This was not what I'd expected. This was to be a rite to symbolize the flight of their souls on Vesta's fire. It was a purification ritual, a way to make peace with the fact that they were gone. But there they were, terrified and crying, clinging to each other for comfort and strength. I released Rabbit's arms, and in a breath she grabbed two, placed them on the ground and grabbed the other two. And the moment the last of the babes was released the fire shrank in on itself and sighed. And the circle that I had made was ashen and charred and smelling of sweet grass and thistle. The fire was gone. And the mewling, crying babies were safe.

I was stunned. My mouth hung open. I could not close it. My heart raced. I could not slow it. I slumped back on the ground, not knowing what to do with the confusion and awe.

Rabbit and her little ones tumbled over each other crunching leaves and snapping twigs, laughing and crying all at once. She kissed their heads, their feet, their ears. She held each up to me to see, and I nodded, I think, too full of emotion to truly respond.

And then she kissed each one again. She examined their wispy fur. "They're perfect!" she cried. And then she tumbled over them again. Finally they settled down, the babies curled in Rabbit's arms as she cooed them to sleep. "They're perfect," she whispered, and I let the tears trickle down my face.

"We can't let anything like this happen again." I ripped a piece of cloth from my dress and fashioned a sling for her. "Here. Put this on. Tie it around your neck and your waist." Wrapping the babies inside the sling, I tied it for her. "Then, when you have to go foraging you can carry your babies with you." But she couldn't hop with them at her belly. I scratched my head.

"Maybe on my back?" she suggested. And it worked. Rabbit could move freely, even with the extra weight. She hopped in little circles, testing the sling. It held. And she covered me with kisses, thanking me again and again.

When she fell asleep with her babies cuddled to her I stole away. One day, I thought, I'd understand what I had done. But for the moment it was enough that I had done it. I went deeper into the woods, fairly floating over the forest floor. Idly I wondered if Mother was all right and goose bumps raced over my arms. But, before I had a chance to wonder if that should worry me, Butterfly bumped into my forehead.

"Oops! Sorry!" she called over her wing. "By the blood of Vesta, this is wonderful!" she whooped. "Oh my, oh my, I can do back flips and everything!" And to

prove it she did, one back flip after another. She was so excited with the tricks she could do that I broke into giggles watching her. She dove to just a hair away from a leaf and then soared again. Around and around again she flew, forming great orange circles in the forest. "Look at me!" she demanded. "Watch this!" And she did another black flip.

"Let me guess. You just came out of your cocoon." I grinned trying to follow her erratic flight.

"Oh, yes. Just now. Oh, what joy to fly! I love this! I'm as free as smoke!" And with that she flew off, yelling and hooting, a little speck of orange doing loop de loops through the woods. Oh, I envied her. I could only imagine what it felt like for her to break out of a cocoon and find wings on her back. I followed the speck with my eyes until she dwindled out of sight.

"So, you would fly, my Lady?"

Who was that? The voice was silvery, high and sweet. I looked around for the source of the sound, but all I saw was a little stream. I leaned down and let the water dance over my fingers, cold and clear and bubbly. I splashed some onto my face, and goose bumps rippled down my back. Stream hummed to herself for a while and glistened in the dappled light. I could see straight through to the little squirming fish and the smooth round rocks of her bed. And so could the dragonflies that hovered at her surface.

"I've seen flight," she commented as if we'd had an ongoing conversation.

"Everything that flies stops here to drink and to rest. And, from what I have seen, all you need do is drink from me, rest a bit, and you can fly again."

"That works for creatures who were born to fly," I complained. "But I'm not one of them."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense." Stream hopped over a stone more roughly than was needed. She apparently had no patience for whining. "You can do whatever you want. All you need is desire and hope. Look at what you did for Rabbit."

I was shocked. How could she know about that?

"Oh, it's a small forest."

I thought she winked at me.

"Word gets around. Now, do you want to fly or don't you?" She knew I did. She knew that I had dreamed of flying all my life. "Well, if you don't do it while you're young you never will. So do what I say and don't ask questions." Clearly she was not a stream to argue with. I took a deep breath and motioned for her to go on.

"Take from me two thimbles of water. Drink one and save the other. Then find a rainbow colored feather. When you find the feather dip it into the water and say, 'Feather, feather lets me fly through the forest, through the sky.' Place the feather into your mouth and empty the rest of the water over your head. Then spread your arms and flap like crazy. Its' not all that difficult, really."

I thanked Lady Stream for her help, but my heart sank. Even in the forest a rainbow colored feather would be hard to find. But a thimble, let alone two? Impossible. I sank to the ground, absently watching an ant as he carried a beetle three times his size over the jagged leaves to his hole.

I had seen ants carry impossible loads before and never thought much about it, but suddenly I was furious for him. What kind of game was this? Why do ants have to carry such heavy burdens? I took me a moment to realize that my anger was for myself. I got

up and stomped away, scraping my arms on saplings and branches. "Maybe I should look for a thimble tree," I grumbled under my breath

I had no sooner said the words than a tree appeared laden with thimbles of every color, every size. Some were of crockery while others were brass. Some were fancy and others were plain. There were tiny ones that would fit Rabbit's little toe and others big enough to cover a giant's thumb. I shook my head and it was gone.

"Why did you let it go?"

Who was that? I searched for the voice. There was nothing around me but trees and lichen and mushrooms and winks of clear blue sky.

"Flying is your dream! All you had to do was hold that tree and climb it, for Vesta's sake! And now it's gone!"

I kept hunting not really concentrating on words but hoping the voice would keep talking until I found it.

"And on top of that you're not even looking at me. Look down, Cara."

I did. All I saw was a boulder. It was about as tall as my shin and about as long as it was tall. It was gray with subtle dun striations. There was nothing remarkable about it. I could have walked by it without noticing it or, had I been tired, sat on it to rest. "There, that's better," rock said without movement.

"I always prefer to talk eye to eye, so to speak."

I knelt beside her, finally letting her words sink in. "You mean I could have held the tree in my mind and climbed it?"

"Sure. Why not? You were looking for thimbles, and you found them. Do you think that was an accident?"

"Can I do it again, conjure up that tree? Can I find it again and hold it?"

"I don't know." Did Boulder shrug? "But I do know this: If you try and succeed you've learned something. If you try but it doesn't work you've learned something else. But either way you've learned, and learning is success. Seems to me the only way to fail is not to try."

I sat on the soft, mossy forest floor and tried to remember. What had I done to create that tree? What had I been thinking when it appeared? I thought of that tree as hard as I could, but nothing happened. I closed my eyes and tried to see. I worked so hard that my eyes began to ache. And still no tree appeared. Mentally I retraced my steps back to Lady Stream, tried to remember exactly what she looked like, what she'd said, what her voice had sounded like. I struggled so hard to remember it all, but I could not recreate the scene.

"You're working too hard, Cara. Relax. Instead of trying to make the tree, rest your mind on it. It's inside you. Just lay your mind on it as you'd lay your hand on a dog in a dark room."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I took another deep breath. I saw only black. I concentrated on my breath, in and out, slowly, deeply, listening to the air as it filled my lungs and then drifted back out from my body. The black shifted. I saw swirls of gray and black and dirty white, but nothing congealed to a form that I could name. I kept breathing. I thought the word beautiful over and over, though I didn't know why.

I thought I saw something! It was a dog! He was a mongrel that I'd seen at the market. He was black and gray and tan and white, and he lay curled up next to a table. I always liked that dog. I fed him scraps when I had some. But he wasn't my tree. Dog

looked up at me, lifting his head and opening one eye. Then he lay back down. And then the dog was gone. "Beautiful, beautiful," I repeated to myself. But the black and gray swirls would not form a shape.

I placed both my hands on the rock, hoping to draw strength from her, and repeated my mantra, "Beautiful. Beautiful." And each time I saw something I rejoiced. I saw a rose in black and gray, and the rose opened its petals and became a butterfly. Butterfly changed to a little girl and girl changed into a cup. But everything was black, gray, and white and nothing changed into a tree. And, just when I was convinced that I would never find the tree, there it was!

It *was* beautiful, gnarled and dark as an olive tree, its ancient limbs twisting this way and that, its leaves green and shiny as if after a rain, its branches laden with thimbles. It was thick with them, all sizes and shapes, all colors and textures! I grabbed that tree and held it tight, determined not to let it go again. I shinnied up the trunk as easily as I had the trees by the market and hoisted myself to a lower branch. There were plenty of thimbles to choose from, but I enjoyed the climb so much that I went higher. I climbed and climbed, just for the pleasure of it. My muscles ached. I trembled with the effort. But it felt so good to climb! I reached hand over hand, securing my feet on the branches below, and climbed higher and higher until I looked out over the forest canopy. As far as I could see there was nothing but the green of the forest roof and the blue of the sky. I had only to reach out and I could have touched a cloud. I shivered with excitement. The breeze jingled the thimbles and I remembered my goal. I picked two small ones that would fit my middle finger, a simple garnet one and a brass one carved with vines. I didn't examine them closely. I didn't pick them for any particular reason other than that they were handy. I stuffed them into my belt and reluctantly climbed down. By the time I hit the ground the tree was gone. For a moment I doubted. I patted my belt. Two reassuring lumps remained. I stuck in my hand and pulled them out.

The red one was simple, just a little cup with a flared beveled edge, but I was struck by the simple grace of the piece. I held it to the light. It glowed, red and brown, like the embers of a fire. And it was as warm to the touch as Vesta's breath. I showed Rock, but she had apparently gone to sleep. She neither looked nor commented on my find. Then I examined the brass one.

It was much fancier than the other one, with vines swirling in relief all over the cup and grapes in bunches among the leaves. There were curlicues and tendrils and coils and twirls, and I thought I saw a serpent wrapped in amongst the fruit. The art drew me in, as if I could enter and be part of it. I shook my head and blinked. I shoved the thimbles back into my pocket.

But I still needed a rainbow colored feather. I looked around, not knowing which way to go. Deciding to let Vesta choose for me, I closed my eyes and spun around. When I stopped I followed my nose.

My nose led me to a steep bluff. It was only about four times my height, but it was a sheer drop. Standing was impossible going down that ridge. The only way down was to sit and hang on to branches and saplings, hand over hand, using my heels as a brake. I ruined my dress in the process. I lost a shoe as well. But I was unscathed. At the bottom I saw a family of deer. Lady Doe and two fawns were grazing in a small clearing, the picture of serenity. Not wanting to interrupt, I crept around them, making as little noise as I could.

"Hello, Cara." Madame Doe glanced up from her meal and instructed her fawns to introduce themselves. "Mind your manners, now," she reminded them as they stepped forward and nodded at me.

"Hello, Cara," the smaller one said. "My name is Gerji." She knelt, bowed her head and rose in one fluid motion.

"And I'm Forfu," the other chimed in. He bowed, too, but less gracefully. "What are you doing in our woods?" he blurted before his mother could hush him. She apologized. I laughed and shook my head.

"No need," I held up my hand, my grin not yet faded. I was instantly charmed. I knelt to speak to him eye to eye. "Forfu, I'm here on my Woman Journey, and I'm looking for a rainbow colored feather. Do you know where I can find one?"

His dark eyes lit up, and his little chest puffed with pride. "Oh, sure! I saw one just this morning." His voice was all swagger. "It's over there." He nodded westward. "Near the hemlock where Gray Owl likes to sleep."

"Forfu?" From the way Madame Doe said her little one's name I guessed he had a penchant for telling tall tales.

"Could you show me?" I tried, figuring that he'd change his story if it weren't true. He glanced at his mother, checking for permission. She nodded and the four of us trooped through the forest, a little parade, a strutting fawn who had not yet outgrown his spots in the lead.

But when we got there Forfu couldn't find the feather. Neither could any of the rest of us. We searched among the crinkly leaves and hefted fallen limbs. We poked aside rocks and peered under ferns. We searched and searched, but there was no feather of any color.

"Forfu," Madame Doe said again in that same tall tale detecting voice.

"No, really, Mama!" Forfu cried. "I promise it was here. Ask Gray Owl." But Gray Owl wasn't there either. In fact, no one seemed to be around.

"Who's that disturbing my nap." Puma roared from an upper tree limb. Her paws were draped over the branch, her tail languidly waving in the breeze. She yawned, splitting her face in half, but did not move. My heart stopped. I expected the Deer family to bolt and race for safety. I certainly wanted to. I was confused when no one moved. Puma looked down at me with one eye, as if opening the other would have caused her too much work. "So you're Cara. Yes, I heard you were here." She yawned again showing her broad pink tongue and huge yellow canines. "Well, it's all right. I won't hurt you. First of all, I'm not hungry, and I never kill except to eat. And secondly, we don't have a contract." She licked her paw and wiped it behind her ear.

"Contract?" I frowned and looked askance. I did not understand.

"Sure. You don't think killing is random, do you?" She shifted her position a little, and my legs twitched to flee. She waited for me to respond. When I didn't she spoke more slowly, as if tutoring a very dense pupil. "When I'm hungry I call upon the soul of my prey. If that soul isn't ready to go to the Spirit World there is no contract. But if the time is right, the soul gives me permission, and we have a pact. I promise to kill as swiftly as possible and prey promises to feed me. It's all very civilized, actually." She stopped cleaning her ear and began to work on her bib, washing part of the tree limb as well.

I looked at Madame Doe. She nodded, but the twins sidled closer to her. "It's true," she said. "Animals don't fear death. It's the act of dying that we're afraid of. It's not always fast, and it's nearly always painful."

"Now, I understand that there's something about a feather?" Puma asked without interest.

"Wait," I was confused. "Why would anyone voluntarily go to the, what did you say? Spirit World?" Puma was losing patience. She leaned against an adjoining branch.

"Because animals remember. Some children do too. So does the occasional human adult." I must have looked as lost as I felt. "The Spirit World is bliss, Cara."

"Then what about Rabbit's babies?"

Puma shrugged. "I had nothing to do with that." She was getting fidgety. She began to tap her tail against the trunk of the tree. "Sometimes there's a misunderstanding. Sometimes Vesta allows spirits to come back if there was a miscommunication."

I wasn't sure I believed her, though Doe was nodding solemnly. "Well, if it's so blissful why would anyone want to come back?" Hah! I had her.

"I have no idea." She yawned again, her tail swishing more vigorously. But I had a sense that she knew much more than she was willing to tell.

Taking advantage of the silence that Puma had created, Forfu spoke up. "Did you see the feather, the one that was here this morning?" He was begging for vindication. "You know, the rainbow colored one?"

Puma scratched her chin. Then she licked her paw again. I thought she would go into full bath mode before she answered, but she just yawned again, shifted her weight, and took on a distant look. She kept us waiting for some time, as if she'd forgotten that we were there. And then she glanced carelessly in my direction. "Eagle has it. She wanted it for her nest." She motioned to the top of a nearby ash. "But I wouldn't take it if I were you. She's in a foul mood today." Puma's face spread to a self-satisfied grin, but it took me a moment to catch the pun.

I ignored it. I looked at the nest that Puma pointed out. It was in the tallest tree I had ever seen. And there were no low branches. It would be a challenge to get to the top. And I'd have to time my climbing right. I didn't want to tangle with Eagle.

I thanked her and was about to ask if she would fetch the feather for me. But then I thought better of it. She didn't look like the kind of creature who would put herself out for others.

Our little troop went to the base of the tree. The height of the thing was even more daunting when we stood directly beneath it.

"Maybe if we shook the tree the feather would fall down?" Gerji suggested.

There was no way to shake this tree. It was as tall as a moonbeam, as thick as a horse.

"More likely the eaglets would fall, Honey." Doe licked her daughter's head. She had a good heart. She wanted to help. "But I could give you a boost," Doe proposed, turning in my direction. "If you could get up on my back I could get you started." She knelt on the ground and, though I had my doubts, I climbed up onto her back. I wobbled there for a few moments trying to regain my balance. When she stood up and I nearly fell, fear flashed through my stomach like a warning omen.

The climb was as formidable as I had expected. I hugged my legs tight around the trunk, digging in with my heels, and clawed into the bark, slowly, painfully shinnying up

the tree. It took everything I had to reach the lowest branch. I sat on it to catch my breath and waved, grinning with more confidence than I felt. I looked upward. It seemed that the tree was kilometers tall. But at least there were limbs the rest of the way. I grabbed one just above my head and boosted myself up with my feet. I climbed and climbed, slipping several times, praying to my arms to stay strong enough to hold me. It would have been a long drop.

When I go to the top, I looked around. Eagle wasn't there. I peeked over the edge of the nest. The eaglets were asleep. But I didn't see a rainbow colored feather. I wanted to cry! Why had I believed a braggart of a fawn and a self-absorbed cat that was too lazy to be civil? My muscles were screaming, and I still had to get down, and I'd have to return without my prize.

Then an eaglet snuggled closer to another, and I saw a drab feather that was longer than the rest. I don't know why I took it. It didn't look anything like what I'd expected. Yet I worried it out of the weave of the aerie and shoved it into my mouth. I began my long descent. Halfway down I felt safe enough to rest on a branch and examine it.

The feather was striped dark gray and light, and it was about as long as my forearm, as wide as two fingers pressed together. It was downy at the nib and snowy white. But at the upper end there was a silvery strip. The strip was about as wide as my thumbnail and it shone, clean and bright, even in the shadow of the tree. I pushed a branch aside so I could see it in the light. My breath caught. In the sunlight the silver glowed iridescent with all the colors of the rainbow swirled together. I let out a yelp. Then, realizing that I'd just alerted Eagle, I scrambled down the tree as fast as I could, scraping my arms and inner thighs in the process.

When I tumbled to the ground I was laughing, in spite of the blood that oozed from my wounds. I threw my arms around Forfu's neck. And then I hugged Doe. Then, because she stood to the side looking sad and left out, I gave Gerji a big hug too. "Oh, thank you! Thank you all for this!" I hugged them each again and kissed them all. "Do you know what this means?" I didn't wait for an answer. "It means that now I can fly! All my life I have dreamed of flying, and now I can do it! Oh, thank you, thank you!"

"Don't forget Puma," Gerji reminded.

Indeed, I had almost forgotten the cat. We went back to her tree, but she was gone. So I thanked the tree. What else could I do?

Sending little rocks skittering to the bottom, we scabbled up the ridge, Gerji, Doe, Forfu and I, laughing as we stumbled over broken stubs and rocks. Rabbit, her babies in their sling, came out of the underbrush to see what the celebration was about. We explained it to her on the run. She and her babies tagged along. Soon Bear came by, and we told her too. Then Beaver and Chipmunk and Wolf and Raccoon. Before I knew it there was an entourage of animals, each chattering about the prospect that I would really fly.

The moment I heard the water flowing, before I could even see the stream sparkling in the sun splotches that made it through the trees, I yelled, "I found them! I have the thimbles and the feather! I'm going to fly!"

Stream burbled and chortled. "Good, good," she chuckled as she skipped over her rocky bed. "But you've hurt yourself. Come to me, Daughter. Come and bathe those wounds."

I did. I waded gingerly into the icy water, letting the goose bumps shiver up my body, letting my feet, my ankles, and my shins go numb as I lowered my body into her flow. And, as the water lapped against my thighs and numbness replaced the sting, I saw the wounds close up and heal. I waded back to the water's edge and nudged aside the rags of my dress. My thighs were clean and pink, without a sign of scab or scar. With my fingertips I traced where the wounds had been. My flesh was entirely, perfectly whole with no trace of tenderness to the touch. Stream didn't show any sign of surprise, but I was amazed. I stood dumfounded for a moment, touching the places where I had been hurt.

Stream brought me back. "Do you remember the spell?"

"Oh, yes," I assured her. I collected water in the two thimbles, just as she'd instructed, and I drank one. The water was crisp and almost tart, almost as if there were some lemon in it. And I had an odd sensation in my chest as the water splashed coldly into my belly. It was as if there were butterflies in my heart, all fluttery and anxious to break free. I dipped the feather into the second thimble. I thought the feather hummed as if something inside it had begun to vibrate. Then I poured the rest of the water over my head. "Feather, feather lets me fly through the forest, through the sky," I intoned as solemnly as I could. My whole body tingled. I stuck the feather into my mouth and flapped my arms. Nothing happened. I flapped harder. I hovered just above the ground. Doe took a deep breath and blew. Taking their cue from her, the others did the same. They blew and blew, and before I knew it I was floating between the trees, dodging branches and skirting the undergrowth. I flapped harder and rose.

I soared over the trees, the wind rushing past my face, tearing at my hair and stinging my skin. But I didn't mind the wind. I loved it. The cheering animals were mere specks on the ground as I sailed and did loop de loops just as Butterfly had. I took the feather from my mouth and clutched it in my hand. I whooped and hollered and laughed and soared. I thought my heart would burst as I dove through a cloud and came out the other side. "Look! I'm flying!" I yelled at Crow who was coasting an air current near a sour gum.

"Cara! Cara!" Crow called back.

But I thought I heard my mother's voice. *Come down now, Cara. You'll hurt yourself.*

"Oh, Crow, I'm so happy!" I bellowed. I want to fly and fly and fly. I want to fly forever!"

"Cara! Cara!" Crow responded. And she flew away.

I flapped until I found Crow's air current, and then I glided to give my arms a rest. I let the air carry me over the trees, over Eagle's nest, over the place where Puma had rested. I flew over Rabbit's warren and back around the stream. I was so light, so free, so entirely happy. I thought I would never touch the earth again. And then I dropped the feather.

I don't know how I could have been so careless. I was flying and dipping and looping and swooping and describing great circles in the sky when I bumped my hand on the top of a tree and knocked the feather from my fist.

Down I plummeted, passing the feather as it floated on the wind this way and that. I could hear the animals gasp. Gerji screamed. Doe stood in front of her fawns so they

wouldn't see. It was all slow motion as I plunged through the air. My legs kicked uselessly; my arms worked for all they were worth. But there was nothing I could do.

I don't remember hitting the ground. I was told that I landed on my rear end and rolled, but that's all a blank to me. The first thing I recall is being held in the stream and feeling cold water flow over my body, feeling the pain seep away as Madame Stream washed me clean of blood and leaves and mud. And I remember Gerji's desolate face peering down into mine. "Why did you let go of your dream?" she demanded, as if I'd somehow failed her. "Why didn't you cling to it? Why didn't you fly to the moon and back?" I had no answer. But she was right.

Bear helped me out of the water. "Never mind," Bear consoled. She wrapped her furry arms around me, for, having come to the stream bank, I was shivering. "You did it once. You'll do it again. You still have the thimbles. Just find the feather again." Easy for her to say. I glanced at Stream.

"She's right you know, just as right as rain." She bubbled around a steppingstone.

"I know!" chimed Gerji. "We can split up and look for it. Then when one of us finds it we can yell like crazy and meet back here." She was excited again, pleased with her plan and thrilled that both of us would get a second chance. I clutched her to my heart, whispering that I knew she'd be the one to find it.

We all agreed to the plan. Rabbit and her babies were off like a shot. Doe and her twins went in another direction. Bear lumbered away, and the others scattered, each one excited with the scavenger hunt.

I was alone again. I had no faith in the effort to find the feather, but I wanted, even so, to believe. For a long time I followed Lady Stream, poking at the undergrowth and shaking branches in case the feather had lodged in one. Entirely focused on the search for the thing, I nearly bumped into a shoe dangling at eye level. I stopped short. My hand flew to my heart. I think I let out a little gasp.

Its owner hopped down, and I found myself staring at the most beautiful face I had ever seen. I could not tell the person's gender. The cheeks were as soft and round as a woman's, and I saw no sign of a beard. The eyes were as green as the forest, and the shoulder length hair was brown and wavy and lush. The nose was straight and regally long, and the chin had a cleft in it. The person smiled, showing small white teeth and just the tip of a tongue. The shoulders were broad, and I saw no breasts, but the rose colored tunic was too loose to tell. It hung to the knees without a girdle to cinch it. The sleeves were also softly made, puckered at the shoulder and billowy and gathered at the wrists. The hands were small, the fingers long and slender. The person wore no brooch, no ring, no identifying pendant around the neck. Below the tunic was a pair of gray pants fitted tightly over well-muscled legs. I realized that I was staring, that I was being rude. "I'm sorry." I stumbled. "You startled me."

The person smiled again. This time more broadly. "Quite understandable." The voice was sweet and rich. But, pitched in mid-range, it told me nothing about gender. "I did kind of sneak up on you." With the blink long lashes gracefully brushed the cheek then green eyes held me, drew me in. "I'm Dancer", the person said, but I could barely hear the voice. The eyes were murmuring to something deep inside me. I felt my womb leap.

"I'm Cara," I held out my hand, hoping that the trembling wouldn't show. The hand that clasped it was soft and smooth, free of scars and calluses. It was hairless as well and

as pale as the face. It was a hand to be cherished. I don't know why, but I drew it to my lips and kissed it, chastely, shyly. Dancer bent and kissed my hand, licked my fingernail, sucked my fingertip into that delectable mouth. I lifted Dancer's face to mine. I kissed that luscious mouth, sucking the lower lip, biting it gently, feeling the teeth, so white and small beneath my lips.

The little pink tongue slipped between my lips, touched my tongue, tasted my teeth, and I melted. My knees went weak and I clung to my lover, knowing that I would sink to the ground if I did not. I felt the wetness trickling between my thighs, cool and slippery, and I ached, oh how I ached.

Dancer supported me and gently laid me down on the mossy forest floor. Swiftly, with one graceful motion, those delicate hands removed my stained and tattered dress so that I lay naked to the cool woodsy breeze and to my lover's touch. My skin thrummed, so sensitive to pleasure. The slightest caress sent shivers through me while simultaneously igniting the fire between my legs. I could not catch my breath. My eyes could not get enough of that beautiful face. I lay, passively allowing Dancer to stroke me, to kiss my eyelids and shoulders, my neck and little breasts, to play me like an instrument. My body sang in response.

I no longer cared about Dancer's gender. Man or woman, it no longer mattered. I was learning to love in a whole new way. It was the union of spirits, the delight of the body and the mingling of the two that I was discovering, and none of that had anything to do with gender. Thought, worry, wondering, all were impossible. I was a pleasure receptor. All I could do was feel.

That delicious mouth closed tight around my nipples, sucking, biting with small white teeth so that fire ran down my body from nipples to groin. I ached luxuriously. My hips began to rock on their own. I needed to be filled. I begged to be filled. I lay, my back arched, my head pulled back, my mouth open with pleading, and I felt it.

Something touched the tender lips between my legs, the soft, wet swollen tissue that so longed to be touched. It played on the outside, tracing the oval of my sex, slipping over the wetness, slicking down my new curly hair. I could not keep my eyes open for the pleasure of it. I felt something flicker inside my body and then retreat. I gasped. Again it flickered and retreated. And again my breath caught. The third time it entered it was slow, reverent, full of awe. My breath went ragged and shallow. "Beautiful, beautiful," that honey colored voice hummed.

I felt my womb cramp. But it was such a pleasant cramp, such a delightful cramp. Finally Dancer filled me full, probing to the very roof of my sacred place. My hips rocked with the rhythm of the dance, and my womb pulled up tight inside me. And then it burst.

Oh, how it burst with a throbbing, an aching, a pulsing so much bigger, so much deeper than I had felt in my tree. I lost myself in it, allowed myself to ride it as if I were floating on a torrent. And then it was done, and I lay, warm and glowing, on the forest floor. Dancer beamed down on me.

Through the haze of afterglow I watched as that beautiful face grew thinner, longer. The hair receded and the eyes darkened and spread from one another. The nose, that wonderful regal nose, curled inward, and the lovely sensuous mouth grew thin. The change was slow, almost imperceptible, but as I watched, my Dancer's soft lovely skin turned to scales and those strong arms, those delicate hands melted into my lover's body.

Clothing fell away, and, to my horror, Snake coiled next to me, his narrow head resting atop the slender pillar of his body. He leaned forward to rest his head on my breast. I scrambled back, clutching my ragged robe for protection. Snake looked hurt. "You loved me well enough when you found me beautiful. Can you not see my beauty now?"

I tried. His head was covered with iridescent scales so that his color changed depending on the light. His eyes were shiny and black and small, and a butterfly of scales spread its wings over his nose. There were three large scales on top of his head that roughly resembled diamonds. And along his sinuous body there were diamond shaped scales that were smooth and lustrous and haloed in white. His flickering tongue, so perfectly forked, was charming to me, sweet and vulnerable. And his movements were slow, sensuous and lithe. He curled and uncurled his body with such grace that I knew why he'd chosen his name. Tentatively I coaxed my hand forward and touched the top of his head. Cool. Dry. Soft. Yes, I could see the outer beauty of the creature.

But more than that, I saw the beauty of his soul. He was tender and loving, a soul of gentle kindness. He was generous of spirit and patient and wise. Perhaps I had misjudged him, had accepted too much of the gossip of the market.

Wallowing in contentment, I rolled over and let my fingers loll in the water, luxuriating in the trickle of the bubbles over my skin. Snake curled up next to me, gathering my warmth.

Something shiny caught my eye. I leaned over to peer into the flow and heard my mother's voice again. "Cara! Cara!" The water rippled with the sound and then it smoothed, flat as a mirror. And in the stream I saw my mother's face. Her forehead was puckered to a frown. Her mouth was drawn down at the corners. She was a mask of strain and sorrow. She looked utterly worn, as if she struggled to carry a burden that was too great to bear. She reminded me of Ant, working soul crushingly hard to keep home and family together.

"Mother." The word choked me like a sob.

"Cara!" she sighed when she saw me, and her face relaxed. Her smile spread to her eyes. I thought she said something more, but before I could catch it she was gone.

"I have to go home," I announced as I grabbed the shredded dress and searched for my remaining shoe. "Mother needs me. I must go!" I scrambled to my feet. "Oh, where's that stupid shoe?" I swore, kicking the moss and leaves aside with my bare foot in search of the thing. "Lady Stream, will you tell the others?" I struggled with my dress, but it was no good. It was torn too badly to be of any use. And the shoe was nowhere to be found. I grabbed my thimbles and, naked, thrust myself through the woods, calling over my shoulder in sharply clipped words. "Please tell them how sorry I am. But my mother needs me." I didn't wait for an answer.

"Wait!" cried Snake. "Please wait."

But I could not. I had been away too long.

"Wait", came another voice similar to Snake's but younger. And to my right, hidden behind the lower branches a small snake coiled among the leaves. From the hook of her body hung something supple and red. Almost translucent, it rustled like October leaves in the gentle summery breeze.

I went over to touch. It rippled over my fingers like liquid.

"Put it on, Cara," Little Snake lisped. "It's for you." Extending her body, she held it out for me.

I let it slip over my head. The cool of it brought shivers as it slithered over my body and came to rest lightly on my shoulders. It was a lovely robe. Sleeveless and floor length, the neckline plunging to show the buds of my breasts, it was loose and soft and light and free. And it smelled of the forest and of flying and of sex. It smelled of roses, too, the large red roses that Grandmother grew just outside her bedroom door. I spun to see the fabric swirl.

"There's more," the Little Snake bragged. She held forth a girdle, broad and long. It, too, was red, but it was stitched with gold. There were lovely gold roses caught at the moment of perfection embroidered over its entire length.

I thanked Little Snake and put it on, wrapping it around myself three times and pinning it closed with a golden brooch.

Little Snake sighed. "You're beautiful!" she exclaimed in her small serpent voice. "But your hair."

"Oh, my hair!" I reached to touch it. All curls and tangles, just as it always was. "Don't fret about my hair. Not even Mother can do anything with it." My mother! I had to get back! "I really don't want to be rude. I'm so grateful for this magnificent dress and the glorious girdle, but I really must leave."

But Snake would not have it. "You have time, Cara," Snake assured. "I am the master of transformation. I changed you into a woman, didn't I?"

"Excuse me? We had sex! And I loved it! But there's more to womanhood than that!"

He was fussing with something red. There were combs in his mouth and clips scattered around the crook of the tree.

"And I can change your hair into the hair of a matron, high and elegant, in the beat of a butterfly's wing."

Had he not heard me?

"Yes, Cara, I heard." Exasperation seeped around the combs in his mouth. He had been chastened. I had made my point. He showed me a mirror with a new respect.

My hair was wonderful! It was black and shiny and smooth. My tumbling curls were gathered like ropes high atop my head. Caught in combs and crimson ribbons, they cascaded elegantly around my ears where tiny tendrils coiled. My brow was free, for the first time in my life, smooth and white against my heart shaped hairline. I kissed him on the slit of his mouth and kissed Little Snake too.

I turned and hurried a little way. Then I looked back. I wanted to thank them again, but they were gone. Holding my gown above my ankles to keep it clean, I ran toward the gate that had finally winked into view. It was closed. But when I came to within arm's length of it the gate opened slowly. I turned for one last look.

The forest was quiet, dark, and tranquil. Not a leaf rustled. Not a cricket chirped. It looked like a mural in somebody's home with no more life than a plaster wall. It would have been easy to doubt all that had happened. But I remembered. I remembered.

The moment I passed to the other side the gate slammed shut with a loud metallic clang.

The bars were tall and sturdy and stout. But I still had my thimbles. I still had my dreams. And I knew that the locked gate didn't mean a thing.