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Cave of Wood

by Sue Hitchcock

For a long time I did not move from the dark, wood panelled room. My eyes did not grow accustomed to the sudden darkness and I dared not move in the strange echoing cave. Surely it was a cave. It bore no resemblance to the forest where my tribe live. I had gone out foraging alone to find some seeds or roots to add to the watery potage I had left cooking. When the rain started to drive between the leaves and gush in streamlets into the gullies where we walked, I looked for shelter. A tall growth of ivy promised a hideout, but when I dipped under, I could see nothing. The darkness was complete, whereas ivy scrambling up and over a tree would have permitted staves of light to shoot down to reveal the space.

Stones beneath my feet were smooth under water, like a pool. I stood and listened. No wind or rain disturbed the silence, but maybe there were whispers of fur or feathers. I drew my knife, which was a gift from my ancestors, not to be unsheathed without drawing blood, but this place was a mystery. I trembled with fear.

As my eyes opened to the faint light, the details of my surroundings quelled none of my terror. What creatures might hide in this gloom? But this was not a cave. How could trees have grown so close and dark? There was wood to every side, though it was shiny, as if sap had oozed all over it. I had to know. Though it was forbidden to cut trees, I held my knife up and begged forgiveness as I thrust it into the tree. There was no shriek, so it must be dead.

Quietly I cut out a sliver and sniffed it. Sweet smelling despite its age, but not from our forest, I puzzled how it had got here. Reaching up, the top was out of reach but ridges criss-crossed unlike anything that grew. Then there was a knobbly section but it was not a burr where a branch had broken off. A sunbeam found its way in and the shapes my hands were sliding over, appeared, startling me. There were figures, not alive, not ever alive I think, but how were they made. Who made them?

I looked at my knife, preparing to draw some of my own blood before sheathing it again, and wondered how such a beautiful shining object could have been made, we had no metal now. I would pray to my ancestors for answers. Tell me how things were! Did we have stone caves like this? Did we cut trees for our own pleasure. Would we be destroyed by the gods if we copied their example?

The swooping of a bird, - was it a crow? - brought me back to myself. I flinched but it was a frog it had spotted in the slimy pool at my feet. Tomorrow I would bring my man to consider my discovery, but I should leave now. How long had I been here?

Outside had changed, brighter, fresher. All that remained to do was to draw blood. I held the knife up to the sky and offered it the palm of my left hand, then slowly slid the blade across till the line of red offered a few drops of blood to give back to the earth.