

Chapter One

“Oh, good, Inga, you’re back. You were gone a long time.” Babcia’s grin was maternal when she welcomed me home. Pixie small and candle straight, her white hair loose to her waist, she flicked her wrist when I shrugged to explain my days-long absence. “No, I said to take your time. I knew where you were. I wasn’t worried. Have you made your decision?”

I nodded.

“Good, good. Now have some vegetable soup.” Sitting at her table, I accepted the soup and told her about my adventure. She didn’t eat. Instead she sat on the edge of her chair and, leaning on her elbows, tilted toward me. Her peridot eyes changed to rapturous blue, anticipating a long and complex story.

Three days before, I had gone to explore the forest I would mother if I stayed. Pretending to feel safe, I’d hummed a cheerful little ditty while treading only on the sunny spots. But every rustle, every crunch, every snap of a twig had hauled my heart to my throat, had stopped me short. Arms extended, my fingers defensively splayed, muscles clenched into panicky knots, I couldn’t move my head but, working on their own, my eyes had scuttled to the menacing shadows.

Finding nothing, or at best a scampering squirrel, I’d gone on, fiercely working to trust September’s warmth. Ever watchful for snakes or the signs of a bear, though I didn’t know what those signs could be, I placed one foot in front of me, sniffed the air like a hare, hummed a note, and eased the other foot forward. In a month all the leaves would be gone from the trees, and the woods would be more light than shade. The snakes and bears would be safely tucked away in hibernation. In a month I would be much less endangered. In a month, I told myself, I could walk through the trees and smile at my soul-squeezing fear. But on that September day I dared not let my guard slip, for I could not see what lurked behind the curtain of leaves or what prowled among the whispering gloom.

“What are you doing?” I demanded of myself.

The afternoon breeze puffed my hair into my face

“You don’t have to do this. It’s not your job to save the woods. Just say no and go back to your life.”

My life wasn’t so bad if I squinted just right and ignored the dismal fact of Mama’s death. I could tell Babcia that I had decided not to stay. I’d go home and make peace with my father. I’d quit school, find a job. And when I had some time off, I’d visit the old woman, maybe bring her a gift. She’d understand and forgive. I turned around to go back, but I could no longer see her house.

Which way had I walked? All the trees looked the same. All the shading held the same pernicious secrets. Heart thudding, I studied the ominous dark. Not a stone or a twig looked familiar. I plopped down on a rock and swore at myself. If I had stayed and refused the old woman’s request, I’d be safe by her hearth. I’d have a bed and a meal. She’d guide me home in the morning. I would live. Or, better, if I hadn’t ever come to the woods, I’d be home with my father, not entirely safe, but at least not a lunch for some bear. Tears stinging my eyes, I berated myself. “Don’t you dare give in to tears! Keep your head, Inga! Think!”

When I'd entered the woods, a slim golden path had led me to the old woman's house. Intrigued, I had followed and knocked at her door having no plans to stay overnight. But her tale so intrigued me that I couldn't walk away until she had finished the telling. And maybe that was a mistake. This time there was no path. While I knew the way home to be generally west, I couldn't see the sun, nor could I see in the dark which way the jumbled shadows were pointing. "Someone help me," I pleaded to the afternoon breeze. But the foliage swallowed up my prayer.

Working without thought, my fingers fondled a fern while I fretted over what to do. A tickling snatched at my attention and, shuddering with horror, I shook an ant that had crawled onto my hand. "Ants are the housekeepers of the woods. Respect the work they do to keep the forest clean." Where had that thought come from? I didn't remember Babcia ever saying such a thing. I watched the ant, or one like it, skitter over the leaves. How many times had I thoughtlessly stepped on an ant or reflexively killed another insect? "We are all made of star stuff and kitten breath," Babcia had repeated in her story. "Every living thing has a spark of the divine." Did that include the common ant? And was I like that little being, as fragile looking as a breath but Goddess strong? Bending so low I nearly touched it with my nose, I breathed an apology. Unimpressed, the little insect disappeared beneath a leaf, but I was sure that I had learned something important.

"Well, all that's nice, but it doesn't get me closer to home. And it won't put anything into my belly." Once again I scrutinized the sun-splotched foliage of the woods and begged it for a clue of where to go. The woods were still. They offered nothing. Even the breeze had decided to take a nap. I huffed a sigh. I didn't see anything to do but to walk and hope I'd find the forest's edge.

Getting up, I dusted imaginary dirt from the seat of my jeans then looked around. I took a step. A crow cawed. Was that a warning I was wrong? Or was the cry just the sound of an indifferent bird taking care of its own agenda? I waited. The crow was silent. I took another careful step. Again it cawed. I didn't know what to do. "Oh does it matter?" I chided. "Whichever way I choose, if I go in a straight line, I'll find a town." But in a few short steps, I discovered that the trees prohibited walking a straight line. "Well, okay then. I'll just walk." But I couldn't move my feet.

A twig cracked. I twirled around, expecting to see Babcia. My smile twisted to a grimace when a wolf stepped from the trees. I looked at him and at a tree. I had no time to climb to safety. Slowly backing away, my heart battering my ribs, my muscles ready to spring into flight, I pushed the air as if shoving the wolf back to the woods, but undaunted, the creature loped toward me. He sniffed my arm. I jerked it back. He whined and tilted his head. I took another step back and pressed my spine into a trunk. Seven wolves came from the right. Five more approached me from the left, a group of pups cavorting noisily among them.

In a circle of wolves, each questioning me with tilted head or nudging nose, I bit my lip to keep from screaming, forced my tense legs not to flee. Compelling my lungs to take in air, I stared at golden eyed beasts while they memorized my scent.

The lead wolf ambled away then looked back over his shoulder. The others followed but before I could savor my reprieve, they stopped and turned around to eye me again. The patriarch uttered a low rumbling growl, returned to me, and grasped my wrist in his mouth. Though his grip and tug were gentle, I was keenly aware that his pincer jaws

could tear my hand away. I meekly followed where he led, the other wolves surrounding me, yet, knowing they could rip me up as if I were a doll, I plotted my escape with every step.

The blue sky rags that were scattered in between the leaves had darkened to dingy dishcloth gray. Twilight had come and soon the night would overtake me. I had to break from the wolves before the darkness blinded me. And yet the beast's unyielding teeth held me firm. I had to find something to eat and somehow make a place to sleep, having given up on finding home or Babcia. Plying patient insistence, the pack led me through the woods, the alpha male padding backwards, my wrist locked between his teeth. I could barely piece together the plants' silhouettes when the pack and I entered the garden. Suddenly starving but unable to see, I fell to my knees to keep from tripping over vines.

Groping in the night, my hand found a small cabbage. I ate it as if it were an apple. Then fumbling for more, I discovered a zucchini and shoved it greedily into my mouth. I found broccoli and green beans and tomatoes and peas, and I ate as if I'd never eat again. However, I didn't waste much time on the peas. They were too hard to shell in the dark. I hadn't noticed that the wolf had relinquished my wrist until, my hunger satisfied, I wiped my mouth.

The pack howled three times as if to brag about their feat and then they nosed me to my feet again. Once again the alpha wolf grasped my wrist in his mouth and led me with the others to a cave. Trusting them because they had provided me food, I lay down in their den with them, warming myself in the chill September night in a pile of lupine body heat. Smiling to myself at my moment of fear that a bear might be sharing our lair, I tumbled into a blank sleep, waking to their canine kisses when the mauve and pink of dawn peeked through the trees.

Saplings stretched toward the small scraps of early morning light like a child pulling up to her fullest height so her parents can pencil her growth on a wall. Crows scolded each other, and a troupe of rowdy squirrels chased each other in a game of tag. Spreading my arms, I gave a silent prayer of thanks for the gift of the autumn-crisped day. And then I hugged each of the wolves for their protection through the night. But I still had no idea where to go.

Nearly obliterated in the shade, a family of deer—a buck and three does—placidly munched the undergrowth. A female poked her head up above a scrappy clump of green, looked at me, and then went back to her meal. The lead wolf nudged me toward the group, and I understood the deer had something important to teach me. Carefully treading so I wouldn't make noise but crunching the dead foliage anyway, I approached them, softly shushing so I wouldn't frighten them. There was no need. They calmly watched me between nibbles. When I reached the male, he lowered his head, and reflexively I bowed too. Then I turned to the does and bowed to each of them. They nodded and pawed the ground.

They lay down. I did the same. And together we just waited. I don't know how long we rested before I saw the white halo glowing from the crowns of the trees. As Babcia had in her tale, I followed the glimmer from their limbs, down their trunks, and through their roots. I looked away and found the same gleam in every vine and fern. Every plant within my view was radiant. The deer were too. And I felt more than heard the happy song of welcome the forest spirits hummed.

I touched a fingertip to a violet leaf, recalling that Babcia had drunk violet tea to quiet the pain of a sprained ankle. The plant pulsed against my skin, its magic seeping through my pores, infusing me with peace and love. Would I still be in the forest to gather its first blooms in the spring to make my wishes come true?

“What do you think?” I turned to question the deer. But, unnoticed, they had left while I’d been wrapped in my reflection. “Wait a minute!” I called. “Where can I get some food?” A warbler fluttered to the air but did not sing. Hungry and alone, I walked without direction. Studying the forest floor with each step, I discovered some burdock and tore off some leaves, thanking the plants and expressing regret that I didn’t have a knife to cut them cleanly. Moving on, I found some borage in a tatter of sun and later a colony of mint. I’d need more, but I didn’t know the forest well enough to determine which plants were safe to eat. Sitting down on a rock, I used my foot to worry a weed whose name I didn’t know. I needed a plan, but my thoughts were hunger-muddled.

A group of squirrels chased each other in the branches overhead, and I smiled to myself at their antics. I looked up then jumped away when a shower of walnuts pelted my head and my shoulders. When the squirrels leapt to a maple, I gathered up the nuts and, using the rock I had sat on as a table, I pounded the shells with a stone. Sorting out the meat, I feasted on the nuts then brushed the shells to the forest floor. My hunger assuaged, I thanked the squirrels and the tree and, giggling, wandered on.

A woodpecker hammered at a distant trunk, and hugging myself with a sudden surge of glee, I laughed out loud, unable to name the cause for my joy at simply being alive. I threw my arms above my head and did a happy little jig. Eyes closed, I twirled again and continued my walk in the direction I was facing when I’d stopped. I heard the stream before I saw it and rustled toward the sound as if I were rushing to a lover.

The sun-spangled flow tripped on boulders in its way, and I thought Babcia’s words were like the rainbow colored bubbles tumbling over the rocks and giving up their roundness to flow into a saga of wisdom. Could I do what she had done? And if I didn’t try, would I choke on my regret in my old age? Kneeling down on the moss, I sieved the water with my fingers. What prospects would I miss if I stayed? I leaned over the stream to observe my reflection, but the current’s ripples got in the way. If I went back to the city would I spend my old age alone in some nursing home room? Or would I dote on grandchildren over boisterous family dinners at a table as long as a barn? Were these even the right questions? I just didn’t know.

Waddling from the water and ignoring me, two beavers had a snack of aspen bark. I was surprised at their size, having never seen one other than in a book. Tail to nose each was more than a meter long. Why did everything have to be so big! I sidled slowly away on hands and knees, hiding downwind behind a tree. I watched them working together to strip off the bark and share an afternoon meal. Somewhere I thought I’d read that beavers mate for life.

I’d always dreamed of a marriage that lasted for life and a houseful of children underfoot. I’d always wanted to live in a generous house, toy-cluttered and noisy with play. Could I relinquish that dream and be Matka Lasu, the spiritual mother of the woods? Would I have to? I could surely have a family too. Babcia’s teacher had lived a long life with her lover. Or maybe he had been her husband. But she hadn’t had children, and as near as I could tell, Babcia hadn’t had any either. I rubbed my belly and decided again to go home. My dream was simply too precious to lose.

Tree shadows had erased the sun's glitter from the flow, showing me I'd have to cross the stream to head west. I shivered at the thought and, chafing my arms, walked upstream to find a narrower place. Picking my way over stones and undergrowth, pushing aside low growing limbs, I followed the water as well as I could, but the channel seemed to widen as I went. At first I didn't notice, so absorbed was I in beating back the obstacles. But when I stopped to catch my breath, the other bank looked much farther, and the water had become deep and still. I wondered if this was the place where Babcia bathed before she had done her rituals. I pictured her and her teacher stripping naked on the bank and slowly lowering themselves into the chill. My teeth chattered. Yet I sat and pulled off my shoes. I rolled my socks from my feet then wriggled out of my jeans. I unbuttoned my shirt and made a tote bag of it, balling up my jeans and shoes inside. In only bra and panties, I held my pack above my head, dipped my toe into the cold, and yanked it out. "Are you mad? What are you doing?" I complained to myself. But I could not deny the need to cross the stream and to do it in the place where she had been.

Assuring myself that it wouldn't be so bad, I gritted my teeth and briskly strode into the flow. The cold punched the air from my lungs. My legs went instantly numb. I willed my feet to take a step and then another and another until the stream's floor disappeared. Fully submerged, I flailed my arms to stay afloat. My clothing drowned and I almost did too. Sputtering, I forced my cold-stiffened muscles to perform an almost adequate breast stroke. My clothing gone, when I pulled myself to the other bank, every organ in my body quivered as if the water from the stream coursed through my veins. I was chilled from within, and the nippy autumn breeze stroked my skin and my hair with ruthless fingers. I sat down on a sun-splattered bit of moss and wept. I had to go back into the merciless cold and search the muddy bottom for my clothes.

Too distraught to heed the crackling, I had missed the bear's approach until he threw his arms around me from behind. I squeezed out a little squeak, but creature's hug was warm and his grunting smoothed my icy spikes of fear. *Trust, honor, protect*, I felt September's breeze sigh, almost as if it were a mantra. He lay down on his back and laced his legs around my shins so that I was enveloped in his fur. His breath was as soothing as the zephyr of July. I was home. I was warm and whole and safe.

I no longer regretted that my mother was gone. I knew I'd find her in a candle flame or fire. I knew she'd come to me in dreams or maybe in the magic bowl. I knew she'd follow me the rest of my life. And I knew that I would not return to my father's rage at being left alone at forty-three. I knew I'd find my Jarilo, my lover of the soul. And, Goddess willing, I would have that house of children. In the arms of that great bear, I'd found my reason for being, and I was ready to commit to the woods. I'd go back to Babcia's house and tell her I was staying just as soon as I could find my clothes. "I've lost my clothing," I grumbled to my ursine comforter. "It's somewhere in the bottom of the stream." Grunting, he released his grip on me, lumbered to his feet, padded over the moss, and slid into the mirror of a stream.

The trembling started the moment he opened his arms. I tried curling like a kitten to conserve my body heat but the shivers just became more violent. I got up and jumped around as the bear came up for air, but every time I saw his wet hair I got colder. I gathered stones and made a circle and scooped some dried leaves into it. I'd read somewhere that rubbing sticks together would create a spark. I grabbed two twigs and rubbed my heart out but no sign of life appeared. To take a break I gathered kindling,

picturing a fire, promising myself I would be warm. The bear came up to breathe again, but he was further downstream. My body shuddered as I rubbed the sticks again. "Oh come on!" I demanded. "I'm about to die of cold! Give me a break!" And one twig broke in two. In a flash I understood that I had just cast a spell. I tried another. "Okay, give me a fire." A tender flame grew from the sticks, and I laughed at the idea that I had the power to make a fire.

The bashful flame shrank from my laughter, crouching back into the stick. I tried again, staying focused, and the little flame returned. I quickly held it to the leaves and slender bits of wood. Softly blowing, I waited while the dried up foliage curled, turned black around the edges, and finally burned. Whooping for joy, I threw some other twigs on top, nearly smothering the fragile little fire. Again I blew and a blaze leapt like laughter from the fuel. Bending toward it, I stretched my arms on either side and then vigorously chafed my hands. I glanced around for the bear but couldn't see anything. Shrugging, I added more sticks to the bed then piled on three handy thicker lengths. Smugly smiling to imaginary cheers from the trees, I scooted closer to the flames and spread my legs. In short order my panties were dry in the front, but they were still sopping wet in the back. I turned around and squatted to dry my rear end, warming my back as well. But I needed more logs. The fire almost burned out by the time I got up to find some more.

Shivering, I collected armfuls of fallen branches that the wind had broken into hunks. I broke a few more skinny switches and added two more, thicker ones and, cuddling as close to the warmth as I could, settled in to wait for my clothes. Twilight dyed the sky pink and coral and rose, and still the bear failed to appear. Straining the rhyme I made up a song to call him and to comfort myself.

Hello friendly bear! I'm so glad that you're back
Thank you for finding the clothing I lack.
Come sit by the fire and dry.

Protect me, sweet bear. 'Cause I'm so very scared.
It's getting so dark. I want to sleep in your lair.
Please come before I start to cry.

I sang, or more honestly, shouted the tune while the sky slowly darkened to gray. When I could no longer see anything but the flames, I heard the crunching of heavy steps. Muscles taut, I reeled around, a flaming twig in my hand and laughed when my light shone on the bear. But he did not have my clothes. Instead, he carried two fish the size of my forearm and silver. I could have wept for disappointment that he hadn't found my outfit and for joy at the thought of a hot meal.

He gave me one fish and ate the other, as if showing me how to do it. I shuddered but, without any tools to clean mine, I poked a spit through the thing and cooked it whole. In short order I had a meal of roasted fish, complete with scales and head and guts. I took a bite and, laying the rest on a rock, I spat the chunk into my hand so I could eat around the scales. Only then did I realize how hungry I'd become. I ate the rest of the fish, scales and all.

Our meal finished, we set about the business of sleep. The bear gathered more wood for an overnight fire, and we lay down on the cushion of moss. Curled like a comma in his flame-dried fur, I sighed contentment and gazed at the stars. We didn't see stars at home. The street lights blotted them out, and I thought that was a terrible waste. Sure that their gleaming had had a lesson to teach, I fell asleep wishing I had learned the constellations' names.

I awoke in the night to an almost dead fire and, gingerly slipping from the bear's sleep embrace, I added more wood to the coals. Flames shot up, blue and yellow, from the newly added logs, and I sat a long moment to watch. I felt primeval sitting naked before an open blaze with no shelter except for the stars, and to honor my tribesmen of eons past and the ancient mothers of my soul, I softly hummed a wordless chant I'd never heard before, swaying to the rhythm of the tune.

Insistently thrumming so I could not ignore it, a monotonous drumbeat crept from the blackened woods. Drumming from the distance of untold millennia, its tone was low and muffled, sometimes difficult to catch, and yet I sat rock still and silently listened. The steady thumping approached, and I caught human voices, some male and some female, underneath its constant beat. In unison they droned the chant I'd thought I had made up, and I hummed along with them for a while. But my voice dried in my throat when I saw low shadow lumps throbbing at the edges of my little fire's light.

I had a primal urge to flee, but my fear-frozen legs refused to let me rise and take a step. I urgently needed to escape the weird woods where nothing seemed to follow any rules. I needed be home where north was north and south was south; where streets were paved and water did not steal my clothes; where friends and neighbors, not creatures, stepped in to help each other; where my logic would fit into the world.

Swaying shoulder to shoulder, the shades took on human form then, like cumulus clouds, they adopted beastly shapes. A shadow stood and, returning to the contour of a woman, hovered, then floated to me. I cringed and scooted away.

"*Błogosławiony*," she whispered and then uttered other words I couldn't hear. She took a fur cloak from her shoulders and draped it over mine and then she showed me a glimpse of her face. Her matted white hair stood away from her head. Her sky blue eyes were scarred with deeply carved wrinkles. Her smile showed missing teeth, and her nose, having been broken, had healed at a subtle leftward angle.

"*Dziękuję*," I thanked her, once I'd swallowed my fear. I pulled the warmth of the pelt around my arms. And then the woman was gone, and so was her tribe, but a phantom willow stood where she had been.

I woke up when a sparrow chirped the other birds awake and the sun yawned and stretched at the horizon. Questions tumbled like puppies in the early morning light. Was the memory a dream? Or had I conjured up the wraiths with the chant I had thought I'd made up? Had they appeared to show me that Babcia spent her life preserving their ancient ways? Why did the woman turn herself into a willow? And what was the word she had whispered in my ear as she wrapped her furry cloak around my shoulders. *Błogo* something. I scoured my mind for the word, but I couldn't find the other syllables.

The fire was still fresh, but the pelt was gone, and the willow had vanished with the dawn. Whether real or not, I knew that the encounter had something important to teach me.

"*Błogosławiony!*" I shouted when the word came seamlessly back to me.

The bear grunted awake. The birds fluttered their escape.

I shrugged an apology. “*Błogosławiony*. What does that mean?” I asked the bear who had been my source of comfort through the night. He yawned and stretched and shook his head. “You know what? I’m going back. I can’t leave now when there are so many questions.”

The beast nodded as if we had come to an agreement but made no move to take me back across the stream. “Could you help me to get to the other side?” I gestured toward the eastern bank. He nodded and grunted but lumbered away, disappearing into the woods. I ran to follow but stopped when the soft moss gave way to the twigs of the forest floor.

Defeated, I returned to the clothes-stealing stream and plunked myself down by the fire. I needed something to eat, but the water’s chilliness convinced me that I would not make a meal of roasted fish. There would be no berries, either, since the canes by the bank had been stripped of any sign of fruit. Remembering the squirrels, I looked for nuts in the trees, but, although there were birches and sycamores and ample array of evergreens, nothing I saw offered any easy food.

A branch rustled, and I smiled, imagining a squirrel playing among the leaves. My smile changed to a gasp when a lynx poked her head from the foliage and looked right at me. She licked her mouth, and I wrenched my legs to my chest in a vain attempt to be invisible.

Head first, the cat scrambled halfway down the tree then leapt. The fire stood between her and me. Grasping a twig, I shoved it into the flames then brandished it like a burning sword. Unimpressed, the animal tilted her head, made a little rumbling sound, and washed her face. She yawned and meandered to the stream, lackadaisically hunched down, and lapped. Though my mind ran away, my feet tiptoed to the beast, and, against all common sense, I knelt beside her. She dipped her paw in the water then pulled it out, creating ripples in the looking glass pool. Inexplicably enthralled, I watched the ripples dissipate then jerked my hand to my chest when the woman from my dream gazed at me from inside the stream. Her hand flew to her chest in synchronicity with mine. Her eyes wide, her mouth agape, she was a perfect reflection of the astonishment jolting through my mind. *Sie werden gesegnet*, she thought in German to my mind. And then she vanished and my face looked back at me.

“I am blessed? How so? Please come back!” But she was gone. “What does she mean I am blessed?”

The cat stared into my eyes and, hypnotized, I could not force myself to look away. The gold of her eyes became the rising sun in the forest just before the equinox.

A few paces ahead, back to me, arms raised, my husband stands in silhouette. My heart clogged with adoration for the greeter of the sun, the tribe’s priest who is as honored as I, I follow his chant for the dawn of a new day as he will follow mine for the moon. Gold and silver we are, priest and priestess, healers both, the wise ones, the oldest of our clan. I am blessed, and so is he for our mutual love and for the knowledge that we are one with everything that is divine. He is sun. I am moon. We are the trees of the woods. We are the beasts and the insects and the soil. For lifetime after lifetime we shall know this sacred truth, as will all the members of our tribe.

An eagle cried, and I was back eye-to-eye with the lynx. She yawned again and padded into the woods. Without thinking I thanked her and waved goodbye then, though I couldn't see the bird, I nodded to the sky to greet the one who'd be my next teacher.

A flash of an idea scintillated in my mind. Babcia had become an eagle once. She had also been a wolf, but I couldn't remember if she had said she had become a bear. She'd never mentioned a lynx, but she hadn't yet had a chance to tell me about all her adventures. Her main aide had been a spider, and I made up my mind that if Spider came to guide me, my helpers were all Babcia in her various shape-shifting forms.

But I knew without doubt that I was the woman who had come in the dream from a lifetime I had lived many millennia before. I didn't know how my soul could be two places at once, but I was sure that she and I were one. And if that was the case, I had no choice but to stay. I needed to continue her work.

Swooping, the eagle dropped a dead rabbit then landed on a rock near the fire, but when I bent to pick it up she flew back to the prey and skinned it with her talons and beak. She let it fall again, and I punched a spit through it, added wood to the fire, and roasted it. The sizzling fat crackled as it dripped to the flames, and I sucked the saliva from my lips. The scent of meat curled around me, and the smoke burned my eyes, but I didn't give a care about the tears.

When the rabbit was cooked, I gave thanks to the bird then, remembering, thanked the rabbit too. Then I thanked the fish for my evening's nourishment and the bear for having given it to me. Finally, I thanked the woman from my past for giving me the wisdom to move on. And then I ate, biting large chunks of meat from the spit and shoving them into my mouth. I swiped the grease from my mouth, but still feeling like glue, I washed my face and my hands in the cold stream. Sitting back on my heels, I patted my belly and surveyed the woods that I would mother.

The place was timeless yet dynamic, the plants and the beasts ever dying, ever bringing forth new life. Every leaf, every ant was an object of wonder, each offering a necessary service to the whole, each benefiting from the other's work. Remove one species, and the total culture would suffer, and so each took what it needed and no more. Even in death every entity gave life.

It wasn't so in the city. People grabbed what they could take, cheating and lying to each other. In an effort to attain a form of immortality, we killed trees, paved the ground to make ever bigger buildings, cathedrals to avarice and ego. Pretending that our monuments could actually last, we killed all that was real and created for ourselves a graveyard of concrete and glass. Humans, though part of the natural flow, decimated everything organic. The forest had to be saved. How else would people learn the art of living gracefully with death? Being Matka Lasu would be a challenging job, sometimes maybe even more than I could do. But it had to be done, and I promised myself that I would justify the woman's faith in me.

All I needed was a clue about how to get back. Having forgotten the eagle, I twitched a startled spasm when I noticed her again on the rock. "Can you show me the way back to Babcia's house?"

The bird simply blinked and preened her wing.

"I know I have to cross the stream. Is there a narrower place or maybe one that isn't so deep?"

Again she ignored me, having shifted her attention to grooming the feathers at her breast. She tilted her head then looked over her shoulder at something I had not heard. But in moments the rhythmic crunching of leaves alerted me that someone was approaching.

Nudging aside a low growing limb, two wild boars snorted and approached the dying fire. I stepped backward and nodded a perfidious smile but winced when the eagle flew away. Distracted for a moment, I glanced at the bird and when I looked back, the boars had passed the fire bed. Carefully squelching a compulsion to flee, I backed up to the stream. The creatures matched me step for step. Knowing the cold water would hamper my speed, I rejected the idea of swimming. Besides, the glowing wood was still gasping for life. I couldn't willingly leave a bed of smoldering coals in a forest I'd just vowed to protect. The beasts came to me and sniffed. My muscles tense enough to snap, I stood stone rigid while they nosed wet patches on my legs and hips.

One of them remaining to act as my guard, the other glided into the stream. In moments he was back and with a purposeful gait, returned and shook the water to the coals. The seething wood hissed. He repeated the procedure until the fire bed was merely mud. Once again the male eased himself into the cold stream, his mate grunting and nudging my legs. I didn't understand what she wanted me to do until by luck I had straddled her back. She slid into the water and grabbing fistfuls of her hair, my legs clamped around her torso, the water numbing my feet, I rode her to the other side. Only then did I accept that these two, like the others, were my friends and they were there to help. "Which way do I go to get to Babcia's house?"

The boars snuffled to each other and then sniffed at the moss.

"Can you tell me how to get there?" I tried again.

Ignoring me, they swam back across the stream.

"Well, thank you," I accused. "At least they kept me safe and dry," I reminded myself and then thanked them again, this time with honest gratitude. "So what now?" I looked around for my next beastly escort, but I didn't seem to interest anyone.

Sitting cross-legged on the bank, I grumbled over my plight. "I've been gone for two days and just look where I am! Right back where I was when I got lost. Great progress! Oh wait! It's even worse than that. I was downstream where the flow is shallower." At last I had some direction. I'd follow the stream, though I knew when I got there, I might be even further from the old woman's little house.

Treading only on the moss, I followed the stream, swearing and stopping every meter or two to untangle myself from the vines and undergrowth. I tripped on a root and shoved my toes into the flow, the cold water raising goose bumps up my body to my scalp. The cruel breeze mocked me while a merciless gaggle of clouds temporarily blunted the sun's warmth.

I heard the rushing of the water over boulders and rocks before I saw the bubbling waterfall. Catching up with the sound, I watched the water's effervescence and sourly considered my plight. Again I searched the woods for help, but unless some friendly fish launched itself from the stream, I was alone. Then I noticed some flowers tucked away between the roots and, gauging the pain that each pine needle and stone would inflict upon my unprotected feet and demanding to know why I was hurting myself just to see a small cluster of flowers, I went over to examine them.

Kneeling, I caressed a clump of periwinkle. Though a city girl, I knew they shouldn't blossom in the fall. "You're out of season," I smiled then gave the cluster more thought. "Thank you for your beauty, but what do you mean?" Had the woman ever mentioned periwinkle's magic power? I poked chunks of her story for a memory scrap but I simply could not find anything. "Well, you're a treat anyway. I'll see you in spring." I bounced to my feet and looked around.

A chilly gust prodded branches and a baton of light shimmered on a white streak seven meters away. Certain that the stripe hadn't been there before I got up and, planning every step before I took it, went over to discover one of my socks lying among the leaves. Laughing with relief, I sat and brushed off my foot and tugged the sock up over my scrapes. As warm as if I'd just been wearing it, the cotton comforted my scratches and cuts. Foolishly admiring the simple white thing, I stroked it and thanked it for being. "But how did you get here? And where is your mate?" And then I swiped at the air and shook my head. "The old woman! She's unquestionably guiding me back!" I combed the woods for something more but all I could see were pine needles, leaves and tree roots and shadows. "Maybe not," I slumped. "Well, at least I have you." I patted the sock, got up, and looked around again. "A hint would be nice," I scolded the trees.

So smooth, so sweet, so silvery is thy voice . . ."

Automatically shielding my breasts with my arms, I jerked around to find the man who had spoken.

"As could they hear, the damned would make no noise . . ."

"Where are you? Who are you?" I reeled around but saw no one in the lacy forest shade.

"But listen to thee (walking in thy chamber) melting melodious words, to lutes of amber."

"Pan Dąb?" Who else but he, Babcia's friendly ancient oak, would quote a poem in the middle of the woods?

"At your service, kind lady."

I rummaged through the trees and discovered an old oak that almost had a human look. As tall as a building, he wore scrappy brown clothes, his collar open, his sleeves rolled to the elbows. His jaunty green cap was tilted over his ear, and his sardonic smile took shape as I watched. The tree-man bowed and then winced as he righted himself.

"At your service," he repeated, "And at the service of the author, the gone but not forgotten Robert Herrick. He wrote that, you know, in 1648. I wasn't yet an acorn at the time."

Tiptoeing on my right foot to protect my precious sock, I limped through the trees and shadows to him. His whiskers and nose filtered into view when I finally stood in front of him. Last of all, his eyes appeared. As brown and as wrinkled as the rest of his face, they glistened with the mischief of youth. I liked him right away and completely understood why Babcia adored him so.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'd shake your, um, hand, but, as you see, I don't have any clothes."

"You'll find your clothes over there." He nodded to my left. "But be sure to shake them out before you put them on. Ants, you know." He winked. "And other small things."

Reflexively I took a step in that direction then stopped short so I wouldn't seem rude.

“It’s all right. Go ahead. You’re our Matka Lasu now, or you will be in six weeks or so. You’ll be back. And you’re cold. Go now. Find your clothes. We’ll have years and years of visits to enjoy.”

I bowed my head and, admitting that I hadn’t thought about the small creatures camping out in my clothes, I thanked him and promised I would come to see him soon. I turned to go then changed my mind and threw my arms around his trunk. “You’re everything the old woman said and much more. I’m going to treasure your friendship.”

“And I shall treasure yours.” Placing a limb on each of my shoulders, he prodded me in the right direction.

I continued my lopsided tiptoeing gait until my black shoe showed up on a rock. Sitting down, I remembered to shake it for ants then hugged it as if it were a friend. Transferring my sock from my right foot to the left, I eased the shoe on and tied up the laces. I took a moment to admire the skinny black bow, made a circle with my toes, and grinned. “Thank you Babcia!” I laughed to the fluttering leaves, to the eruption of squirrels and to the flocks of fleeing birds. “Thanks so much, but now I need the other shoe.” I scanned the ground in all directions but saw nothing out of place. And then I noticed a white flag in an ash. “A sense of humor?” I accused as I walked on my left foot and tread softly on the toes of my right.

Draped across the mid point of one of the low limbs, my other sock was just a little higher than my reach. I uselessly jumped to try to grab the thing, but it remained just beyond my grasp. Having never climbed a tree, I sat down and scratched my head. “Could somebody help?” I suggested to the squirrels.

They ignored me, having gotten accustomed to my complaints.

“Well, it can’t be rocket science,” I promised myself.

Spitting on my hands because it seemed the thing to do, I wrapped my arms around the trunk and pressed my soles against the bark. But I didn’t know what to do next. Changing my tactic, I straddled the tree and raised my arms to push my palms against its trunk. But when I tried to shinny up, I promptly lost my grip and fell back to the ground with a crunch. “This is stupid!” I examined the scrapes on my thighs. “Children grow up everywhere climbing trees!” I tried again and again, finally pulling myself up so I could hug the offending limb.

“Don’t look down,” I warned myself as my eyes strayed to the ground. Every muscle in my body clenched in fear. What if I fell and broke an arm or a leg. Would anybody know I was hurt? Flexing my abdominals as hard as I could, I swung my legs up around the limb. Upside down, arms and legs clamped around the chafing bough, I scraped the backs of my knees and forearms on the bark until I’d scooted over to the sock. Performing a sit-up, I bit the cotton toe and tossed my head three times to pull it free. Then I looked at the trunk and at the leafy ground and, swearing at the sock and at myself for my refusal to leave it resting in the tree, I gauged the difficulty of returning as I’d come and the pain of dropping from the limb. I decided to drop.

Letting go with my legs, I swung a bit by my arms then, sock in teeth, I allowed myself to fall. I landed on my bum, unhurt but annoyed. “Is this a test?” I asked the trees, suddenly aware that that’s exactly what it was. Was I passing or failing? Was I supposed to do the work necessary to reclaim my things? Or was I expected to let my clothing go and, naked, find my own way to her house? “Well I don’t care,” I challenged the old woman or the air. “I want my stuff.” I slapped my thigh to emphasize my point

then turned the sock inside out and inspected it for ants, turned it right side out again, and pulled it on. “Besides,” I crossed my fingers, “my clothes are nothing to the woods other than a form of pollution.”

Springing to my feet, I examined the rocks, the undergrowth, and the trees for my shoe. Nothing seemed out of place. Nothing black caught my eye. And so I didn’t know which way to go. Sulking to the ground, noticed a flat stone. The size of my hand and just about as thick, it was rounded at one end, roughly pointed at the other. “Are you a sign?” I convinced myself that it was, thanked it, and followed its suggestion.

Treading my uneven tiptoeing gait, I walked as straight a path as the trees would allow, shoving aside low limbs that blocked my view, searing every rock with my gaze. No shoe appeared any place that I could see. I leaned against a tree to catch my breath. A rabbit caught my eye, and I stood in utter silence, refusing to breathe lest I scare it. Simply lying in a jagged edged tatter of sun, it sniffed the air, looked up at me, and fled. I swore at myself for disturbing its peace until I saw it had been lying on my shoe. “Oh thank you!” I laughed to the hare’s rustling hops, though I could no longer see it for the foliage. Still grinning, I shook a spider from the thing, sat down, and yanked it onto my right foot. I patted the bow I had made of the laces and, giggling, did a clumsy little dance.

I stopped in mid jig, my foot poised in the air. Was that Babcia’s spider I had just shaken from my shoe? If it was, she could show me the way back to the house. I futilely crawled across the forest floor, picking up leaf after rotting leaf in search for the fingernail size thing. I spoke softly to the creature, crooning her name and asking her to show herself. But Babcia’s story had taught me that Spider didn’t always come just because somebody had called her. Giving up, I took a tentative step then changed my mind and headed in another direction. I had turned myself around with the silly little dance and the unsuccessful hunt for the spider. “Okay, I need a hint,” I admitted to the trees, feeling like an absolute failure.

A blue and purple butterfly landed on my arm, folded its wings as if it were in prayer then formed a perfect spiral as it flew to my right as if waiting for me to follow. Shrugging, I accepted the insect’s instruction and scabbled through brush to keep its color in sight. I knew I had been right when I saw a blotch of red draped over a sapling just ahead. Recognizing my shirt, I plucked it from its perch and, remembering to shake it, pulled it on. I’d left the sleeves rolled up when I’d taken it off. I shoved them down and buttoned the cuffs. I rubbed my arms. The soft cotton was as warm as summer’s breath.

A cloud of butterflies fluttered around my head. Splaying my fingers, I held out my hands, and some settled like bellflower petals on my nails. As immobile as a statue so they wouldn’t fly away, I thought how much like a butterfly I was. Having entered the woods a city girl and unaware, I had come to know and love the wild world. Soon I would become the Mother of the Woods for no reason but that I’d heard a woman’s tale. And I wondered what wonderful changes could occur if people would just stop and listen.

The butterflies flew off, and I needed to follow, no longer in a quest but just to see them. Fully shod, my arms protected in my long sleeve shirt, I trotted through the trees, past the saplings and ferns, losing sight of the insects from time to time but glimpsing their blue each time I’d thought they’d disappeared. My legs ached from stepping over roots, rocks, and vines and from climbing and descending hills. Short of breath, I gave

up and let the butterflies go, plopping down on the ground and massaging aching muscles. Closing my eyes, I leaned against a tree and listened to the music of the woods.

I didn't hear the spirit song that Babcia had described. Instead the scraping of crickets and the popping of acorns falling to the forest floor, the occasional chirp of a distant bird, and the rustle of squirrels as they tagged one another came together to compose a forest symphony more complex than any human could assemble.

A beetle stamped its feet from my ankle to my shin, and I thoughtlessly brushed it away. Then opening my eyes, I found it lying on its back in a panic-stricken struggle to roll over. Groaning my regret, I flicked it upright with my nail, and it scampered to the safety of a leaf tent. And then I saw the blue heap in a broad scrap of light.

Grinning and shaking my head in disbelief, I scurried to my jeans on hands and knees. I grabbed them and, snapping them twice against a tree, I tossed them over my shoulder, sat, and yanked off my shoes. Wriggling back into my jeans, I leaned against the tree and tied the oxfords on again. Having found my clothes dry and strewn all over the woods kilometers from where I had left them, I marveled again at the old woman's power to right what I'd done wrong and to guide me.

Her house had to be near, though I wasn't quite sure what direction or how far I'd have to go. Tucking in my shirt, I considered my options and decided to trust my intuition. Nonetheless, before I took a single step to my left, I looked around for an accommodating sign. There was none. I bit my lip and headed to my right, turned around, and stood immobile for a moment. "Oh, what's the worst that can happen?" I derided myself. "I could get hopelessly lost," I retorted. I stamped my foot. "Well I could squabble with myself for days, but what would that get me in the end? Hoarse and hungry," I decided. "And angry because I didn't trust my sense of direction." Ignoring the fact that I'd always guessed wrong when I'd had to choose which way to go, I shoved determination's rod down my spine and took a step. Every tree looked familiar, every rock was an old friend though I'm sure I hadn't noticed them before. My confidence growing as I thrashed my way forward, it was a muscle bound hulk by the time I saw the roof. I could have wept, I was so proud of myself.

"Oh good, Inga. You're back," the old woman had said as if I had been gone for an hour. She'd offered me soup and had heard my story out as if she didn't know it already. Only once or twice did a smile curve her lips as I described my adventures in the woods. And then, leaning toward me, elbows resting on the table, she nodded as if shaking off a trance.

"So you've decided to become the next Matka Lasu." Her voice was flat, as if my choice didn't matter.

Disappointed, I nodded. I'd expected something more—a hint of joy or maybe even affection.

"Good," she smiled to her hands. "I had a feeling you would stay. But I never like to take these things for granted. Free will and all that." She shrugged and sipped her hyssop tea. "Now let's go to bed and get some rest."

For the first time the old woman had invited me to sleep in her bed instead of in a chair. I'd accepted, expecting to sleep like a cat, but I lay awake for hours reliving my adventures and worrying about what I'd agreed to.

Giving up, I laid the quilt back and, padding to the hearth, I threw another log onto the fire. She was old and getting frail. She was running out of life. What if she died

before I'd learned how to succeed her? Her transition had been easy. She'd been raised in the woods. She'd been groomed for the job since she was seven. I didn't know anything. How could I mother the forest? I didn't even know what Goddesses to call on. Pacing, I counted the names I could remember, but I wasn't sure I had them right.

I listened to her sleep. She didn't rustle once. She didn't snore. I wasn't sure she even breathed. What if she had died? Whatever would I do? Arms extended, I tiptoed through the shadows from the hearth until I faced the blank dark of her room. I went down on all fours. It seemed the safer thing to do until I bumped my head on her bed. Feeling my way, I climbed in next to her and gently laid my fingers to her wrist. She had a pulse. I could have wept. She rolled over to her back. I lay on my back as well.

A shapeless silver light shimmered in the ceiling's corner. I blinked. The light stretched into a pole. Fascinated, I watched as it curved into a bird and then a wolf and then a deer and then a woman. Approaching as she changed from one shape into another, she stopped an arm's length from my face. Recognizing the woman I had seen in my dream, the woman who'd returned in the stream, I reached out to touch. She was instantly gone, but for the first time she spoke boldly to me. "*Sie werden gesegnet.*" Her soprano voice crackled from millennia of disuse.

I repeated the phrase, "You are blessed. You are blessed," as if it were a mantra for good luck.

I could call on myself in the form of the old woman! She'd already come to me three times. I didn't have to remember the chant I had made up. I didn't have to go back to the stream. I didn't even need to know the names of all the Goddesses. All I needed to do was rely on myself in the form of the ancient crone. With her there was nothing beyond my reach. With her I could do anything!

I fell asleep repeating, "I am blessed; I am blessed." And I dreamed about finding a treasure. Though I couldn't remember the details of the dream, I knew that my good fortune was a lifetime of guidance from the woman I had been and from the tribe I had lived with several millennia before.

I said nothing to Babcia about my worries in the night or of the visit from the woman in the ceiling. I simply helped her prepare a breakfast of oatmeal and chatted over peppermint tea. When the dishes were done, we settled in the wingback chairs in front of a homey fire. She propped her feet up on the footstool and, gazing into the flames, continued with her own amazing tale.