



12 *I am Gaia II*

When the path came to an end, Elizabeth stopped with her mouth opened. There before her was something from her dreams. The woods opened out into the shape of a perfect circle. The grass inside the circle was

like a soft lawn. There was a ring of trembling aspens marking the perimeter and in the center was a large rock. Around the rock were concentric rings of small yellow buttercups and fragrant blue violets.

“A fairy ring!” Elizabeth whispered. She was awestruck. Her mother used to tell her stories of fairy rings in the woods. These were the places, her mother had said, that wood fairies and elves would hold their moonlight meetings. It captured her imagination as a small child and, even though she was now ten and too old to believe in fairies, she still had a secret wish to see a fairy ring.

And here it was. Gaia scampered ahead and climbed up on the rock. “Come and sit and we will talk. I know you have questions and I will allow you to ask three. Then we will get on with our business.”

Elizabeth walked across the lawn and settled cross-legged in the second ring of violets. She looked about trying to get a glimpse of the hilltops in order to get her bearings and know where she was. “Where is this?” she finally asked. “Is it on our farm?”

“I made this place just for you and just for today.”

“How?”

“Are you sure you want that to be your second question?”

Elizabeth hadn't thought of it as her second question. So she picked a violet and twirled it between her thumb and forefinger while she thought of a better question.

“Did I make the ground at school knock over Dell Danner?”

“Yes.”

Elizabeth kept looking up, but was disappointed when Gaia didn't elaborate. She looked back down at the violet in her hand.

“Are there other people that can hear you too?”

“Yes. And that is an excellent question to begin with. Get comfortable, I am going to explain again who I am and what I am asking you to do. Try to hold your questions until I give you leave to ask.”

Elizabeth tucked the violet behind her ear, set her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. “Hit it.”

Much like she did that morning, Gaia began to walk in a slow circle, looking down as she spoke. Elizabeth

decided that if she closed her eyes she would be able to pay better attention to what Gaia was saying.

“As I said before, I am Gaia. I am the whole of the earth. As a whole being, I breathe, I move, I rest, I live. I will also die, but I am hoping that will not happen too soon. Remember what I told you about your little toe?”

Elizabeth looked down at her own muddy pinky toe. She thought for a moment about all the cells in that toe and how she never had to think about them for them to work. “Yes.”

“OK. So, and please do not be insulted by this, but you are like one electron in one cell in my little toe. I know people think that because they can think, that means they must be the most important thing. However, all the creatures of the earth, plants and bugs included are essential to making it work.

Just like you need your lungs as much as you need your heart, I need my oceans as much as I need the beetles that help decompose the trees that fall. It all works together.”

Elizabeth interjected, “My father and mother taught me that too! I have seen it on Tree T. V. and

then when we dump our dinner leavings into the compost bin, it does the same kind of thing. We dump the compost on the baby trees. The baby trees grow up and give us more shade and oxygen, right?”

Gaia paused in her circling. “You were born with a gift, and you also had the great good fortune to be born to people who knew that this world is meant to live in a balance. I first heard you when you were just a little thing walking up and down your garden rows thanking the earthworms for making the dirt that fed the black-caps that you love so much.

Elizabeth, people have always used my water, and eaten the creatures that roam upon me, and that was all well and good and balanced. But something is changing.”

Elizabeth waited patiently for Gaia to continue. The otter stared at the ground and when she turned her eyes toward Elizabeth, there were great tears trembling in the corners of them.

“Grave things are happening: things I have never before felt. The water deep in my belly is being drained faster than it returns. My mountaintops are being

shorn off and great tears in my flesh are being made. Rivers have been made to stop flowing to the sea and the sky is filled with foulness. It hurts! I have tried to shake off such pains and have only killed thousands of innocents.”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth was feeling scared again.

“There is only so much I can do. I shake, but these new pains do not go away. The holes do not go away. The sky does not clear. I only feel the added pain of 5,000 people dying. I know these are not the people drilling because the drilling does not stop. Everything I have tried -- flood, fire, famine -- has only hurt those who are doing me no harm. I have struggled to find a way to be more precise. I need to save myself without destroying more of you!”

“How can I help?” Elizabeth felt close to tears. She felt sorry for Gaia. She felt bad for all the people that had died in earthquakes and floods and fires.

Gaia rolled onto her otter back and closed her deep brown eyes. She lay like that for a while, her otter belly going up and down with deep breath. Elizabeth began

to wonder if she had gone to sleep.

“I have not gone to sleep,” Gaia said. Elizabeth, again, was startled. How did Gaia know? “I am enjoying the feeling of this belly fur being warmed by the sun. It is so different than the sunshine on my mountain peaks or the sun that warms the southern ocean waves: different, but just as pleasurable.”

Gaia rolled back to her paws. She walked over and put her front paws on Elizabeth’s knees and rose up until they were nose to nose. Elizabeth thought she should be scared, but the truth was, she wasn’t. She could feel the otter breath against her nose and see the reflection of her own face, dirty and streaked again, reflected in Gaia’s big brown eyes.

“You can be much more precise than I can. Now that I know you can hear me, now that I know you can adopt some of my power, we can, together, redirect or remove the ones that hurt me most. You are one of four. You are the earth and to you I give the power over soil, rock and mountain top. You will be able to work with the creatures that reside within the soil. Bugs and bunnies, woodchucks and weasels will listen when you

call. Earthworms and echidnas will respond to your will. (Elizabeth wasn't sure what an echidna was, but she trembled at the thought of these powers.) As you have discovered already, you are able not only to hear the trees, but also to talk to them and to ask them for help. Listen, and let us begin your lessons."

Gaia balanced on her back legs and reached out her wee paws to draw Elizabeth's eyelids closed. "Listen," Gaia said, and the word sounded like a symphony of bells.



13 *A Wild Ride*

Elizabeth took a deep breath and focused on the bell-like echo of Gaia's words. *Listen, listen, listen,*" the echo said. Elizabeth sat with her eyes closed and began to feel a slight sway in her body. The swaying she felt

was soon accompanied by lilting music. The tune was light and breezy and somehow funny. She began to smile. “Open your eyes,” she heard Gaia say.

She opened her eyes and all around her the trembling aspens that made up the fairy ring were swaying to and fro in unison. Elizabeth was swaying right along with them! Their spinning, sparkling leaves seemed to be giggling. The trees were laughing and singing, and although her ears were filled with music, words that she could understand somehow came forth. *Welcome! Welcome! Lover of trees, ask to come up and be sure to say please.* The trees swayed and the music seemed to move from the tips of their leaves down to their roots and through the ground to her. Elizabeth started to laugh and laugh. She waited for the right moment in the wild green music and sang out, “Please!”

The aspen directly in front of her bent forward at a frightful angle that would normally break its trunk in two. Two large branches scooped Elizabeth up from the ground and she found herself held high above the fairy ring. For a brief moment she was scared of falling. But she quickly realized that unlike when she climbed

a tree, she didn't have to hold herself fixed to the branches. The tree alone was holding her and she was safe to sway to and fro and be part of the wild green song.

It was better than any ride she had been on at the county fair. Elizabeth laughed a wild laugh and she flew left and right. She was suddenly reminded of being very small, a toddler, and having her father toss her high in the air. It felt like that. Children don't worry about their father dropping them and Elizabeth didn't worry about this beautiful aspen dropping her now.

Into the song she heard a high voice call, *My turn! My turn!* Elizabeth's breath caught as the tree that held her pulled back and then with a mighty whipping motion, threw her in a high arch across the fairy ring. She let out a long squeal as she flew. She could see Gaia's pointy otter head looking up at her as she passed overhead. The aspen across the ring caught her neatly in its boughs and Elizabeth dissolved into laughter of relief.

All the trees seemed to be laughing with her. She

finally gasped, “Put me down, please.” And the aspen bowed forward and put her neatly down. She rolled onto her back, turned her face to the sun and caught her breath. The music of the trees began to fade and when she opened her eyes the trees were still as could be, just the tremble of their leaves revealing the wind’s direction.

Elizabeth rolled to her belly and pushed herself up. She walked on wobbly legs to the center of the ring and perched on the rock. Her hands were shaking, but she couldn’t stop smiling. Gaia came to her in that strange otter humping gait. “Well?” Gaia asked.

Elizabeth stared at Gaia for a moment. She finally said, “Thank you, Gaia! That was wonderful! Somehow I always knew, but I didn’t really know, ya know?”

Gaia laughed a laugh that sounded like moonlight sparkling on water. “I think many people sort of know. Not many are lucky to grow up in such a green place and have the peace to listen as closely as you have. Now, close your eyes and think of the oak in your backyard; tell me what you see or hear.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath and in her mind

pictured The Chaplain. She thought of the pattern of shadow that it cast upon the house. She thought of the strong branch that held the swing. It was then that she heard quite clearly her mother's voice. "Elizzzzzabeeettthhh!" Then she heard the big school bell clanging.

Elizabeth's eyes flew open. At her house, the clanging bell meant it was time to be in for supper! "Gaia! I'm late! I'm gonna get in trouble!"

"Shhhh. Think of the oak again. Ask permission of the earth and the roots and all the creatures for safe passage. Put your feet onto the ground and send your request into the roots of the earth. You will be home before you know it."

Elizabeth closed her eyes and again thought of her backyard oak. She took a deep breath in and thought, *May I please pass through all the roots and dirt and passages to The Chaplain in the backyard.* She felt the question travel from her mind to her toes. She felt a slight shaking and opened her eyes in time to see the ground beneath her feet open wide and for the third time that day, she was plunged into darkness.

She felt the bending, twisting and rending of her body. Her eyes and ears and nose were full and she had no thought as to where she was or what was happening. She heard the clanging of a bell getting closer. She felt a quick rising up and then, to her astonishment, she was in the oak in her backyard.

Below, her mother was swinging the old school bell back and forth. The deep clang was a sound that Elizabeth knew well and it made her smile. Her mother cupped her hand to her mouth and called again, “Elllizzzzzzabeeetttttthhhhh!”

“I’m here,” Elizabeth called down. Her mother jumped. She gazed up into the green of the tree. Elizabeth almost laughed to see her mother’s eyes and mouth opened wide in surprise.

Her mother quickly closed her mouth and recovered her motherly composure by saying, “Elizabeth Angier, come down here. Look at you! You are dirtier than when I sent you to the creek! I think you have climbed enough trees for one day! Where are your shoes?”

Elizabeth began to climb down. She had never

climbed so high in this tree before and realized that she wasn't sure of the path down. She heard a low chuckle and the branch below her left foot bent itself to accommodate Elizabeth's descent. "Thank you!" Elizabeth whispered, and patted the trunk with appreciation. She swung from the lowest branch and landed in the cool grass of the backyard.