

# Assiduity Twenty

by J. Mykell Collinz

I experience a presence when walking through the forest, as though the trees possess a collective consciousness with the ability to communicate in a nonverbal language, inspiring me with visions and a sense of knowing. Uzma appears awestricken and I'm wondering if she is experiencing something similar but I'm interested in seeing if she will mention it on her own without my suggestion.

"Just thinking about how old these big trees could be is mind expanding," she says: "They were probably here when the forest extended hundreds of miles in every direction, wrapping around lakes, rivers, and wetlands. I'd like to have lived here then."

Luv is squirming in my arms to get down. With the dense canopy high above us, snow on the ground is not very deep, so I oblige. Returning to the conversation, I say:

"It wasn't easy living here back then."

"People were doing it, weren't they?" Uzma says: "Even some of the first immigrants managed to survive here. Imagine what the world would be like today if the Europeans had found a way to harmonize with the natural order similar to the so called American Indians. But no, instead, they paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

"Joni Mitchell, one of my favorites," I say.

"Just imagine what the world would be like without all ecological disaster between then and now."

"It would be nice, yes," I say: "To have all those trees back the way it was, along with the pristine air and water. Yet that would also imply a massive reduction in human population growth. Imagine all the people you would be eliminating, including yourself, possibly."

"I guess you're right, I should be happy just being here now. With the way things are, I'm surprised it still exists. Such an amazing place, almost human, like it knows we're talking about it."

"I get the same feeling," I say, emphatically nodding my agreement.

Luv is heading towards the outer edge of the cathedral like hollow created by the taller trees. I move quickly to reach her before she steps out of sight through an opening in the lower branches which are very long and slope downward to the ground on the white pine trees forming the hollow's boundary.

"Did you notice?" Uzma says: "She went directly to it."

"Yes," I reply: "I had my eye on her all the way."

"It looks like the entrance to an animal's lair. The ground inside is covered with a thick, dry carpet of pine needles. I can see myself sleeping here if lost in the forest."

"You might have some unwelcome company," I say.

"Why? Are there dangerous animals living around here?"

"I hear stories about wolves, coyotes, and bobcats returning," I reply: "Although I haven't seen any sign of them myself. But I'm not an experienced hunter or tracker, either. I come here to visit with the trees. I don't worry too much about the other animals. They seem to vanish whenever we come around. I guess they're worried about us, too."

"We shouldn't have allowed Luv to wander away by herself like that."

"No," I say: "I didn't realize she could scoot so fast. I'll be more careful in the future."

Luv appears to be enjoying our concern, knowing she almost succeeded in running away and hiding on us. She giggles when I bounce her on my arm. And then she slowly scans my face as though seeing me in a new, brighter light.

