

## Montana in 2070

By Nora Myers

The young creature jumped about the forest, it usually stuck to the denser forests where life was harder to catch. After all, there were still tall ones roaming about. They feared to stray from the sparse leaves and open patches of sunlight. But the creature wanted to explore the sunlight, to reach out from the shadows. In the pass between the great mountains the trees were at various levels of growth, sunlight still leaked through the leaves to reach the lowest foliage. Bits of broken, too smooth, stone lay everywhere. They've had such a grand time learning about the kinds of forests that the tall ones cultivated.

Every once in a while there would be a long tree made completely of silver, once shiny and reflective, now tarnished and dented. The creature wished their friend could be here with them, but they knew that they dared not stray from home.

After wandering along the broken stoned path they reached an outlook near the other side of the great mountains. From there they could see leftovers of the tall one's "society." There were fewer trees in the valley, they had a hard time breaking through, you could still see the rivers of smooth stone running throughout the place like a grid. Temples to the mountains rose up in different heights and shapes. Deciding that they wanted a closer look, they crept towards the stone valley. Wary of being caught by the Tall ones. There was a crumbling bridge over one of the stony rivers. On the other side was a wide pool of stone, more of the silver trees were everywhere. Small cracks were forming in the stone, trees still trying to break through.

As they were traveling they left some of their powder on each of the cracks, the sound of cracking stone and creaking wood followed them as they wandered. Cautiously they approached one of the mountain temples. It was tall and wide with big blue shapes above the shattered clear panels. They saw bits of paper hung everywhere. Strange writing, looking urgent and frantic. Images of trees crashing through their temples in other places were pasted to walls. They climbed through one of the broken panels, glass crunched beneath their feet on the other side. The inside had millions of tiny suns poking through the roof. Some were flickering, others shattered. Tall white structures that resembled the way shelf mushrooms sit on the sides of trees were everywhere. Some were knocked over, there was food scattered across the floor.

A couple times while navigating through the mazes of decaying food and broken stuff, they'd run into a tall one, lying on the ground. Their skin was pale and cold to the touch, they'd begun to decay long ago. Sickly red fluid had flown from gaping lacerations, but now dried, clinging to their skin. Pooled around their lifeless bodies. Small snails and worms had begun to make their homes in the flesh, as the tall ones once did to Mother Nature. The creature giggled to themselves at the irony. They left some of their powder sprinkled on the body, small patches of moss sprouted out of the

pores and tiny ferns reached upwards. There was a crash, one of the clear panels shattering, and the thunk of a stone hitting the smooth floor inside the temple.

A small squeak left the creature as they hid among a bin of fluffy and furry imitations of animals. Ones that used to be everywhere, now only bedtime stories. The sound of harsh booming voices echoed through the abandoned temple. They dared peer out of their mound of fur as the sound of footsteps passed. The noise was coming from Tall ones, they had long carved trees in their hands, held like they could swing at any moment. They were looking around, trying to find something in the stacks of stony shelf mushrooms. Another shout from one a ways away as they held up a shiny cylindrical object. The others rushed over and opened cloth sacks they carried on their backs.

Curious, the creature slowly crept out of the fluffy hiding place and approached the tall ones, hiding behind the structures when they turned to survey their surroundings. They were making conversation in their ancient dialect. The creature found it odd how they wore cloth on themselves. Were they hiding something? Were they protecting themselves?

As they were pondering they crept closer, they now hid only a short distance from them. One of the tall ones looked from the object, they had cracked open and were eating the contents, it noticed the creature and shouted some warning call to the others. They whirled around, startled. Some raised their sticks defensively. The creature tried to hide but they followed them. One of the tall ones grabbed them by the mossy patch on their back, it spoke some kind of question at them but they couldn't understand.

"Please don't hurt me!" they said, holding their arms in front of their face, struggling to be freed.

More garbled speech from the tall ones and they tried to get the creature to lower their hands. Their voices were softer this time, less scared, the creature realized. Had the tall ones feared their kind just as they feared them? Peering out curiously they asked a question.

"I can't understand your dialect, does that mean you can't understand me either?" but all the tall ones heard seemed like chattering and bumbles.

The tall ones conversed and set them down, they happily brought them over to one of the decaying bodies they had found before, they seemed hesitant but followed anyway. The creature sprinkled powder on the body and watched as they saw small plants sprout forward and grow. The creature went with the group of tall ones, finding ways to communicate without speech and helping grow food to feed everyone. They never saw the dense trees of their home again but they found a new one in the sunlight.