

Futures

Her branches reach for the stars

Seeds of hope. By Jo Miles

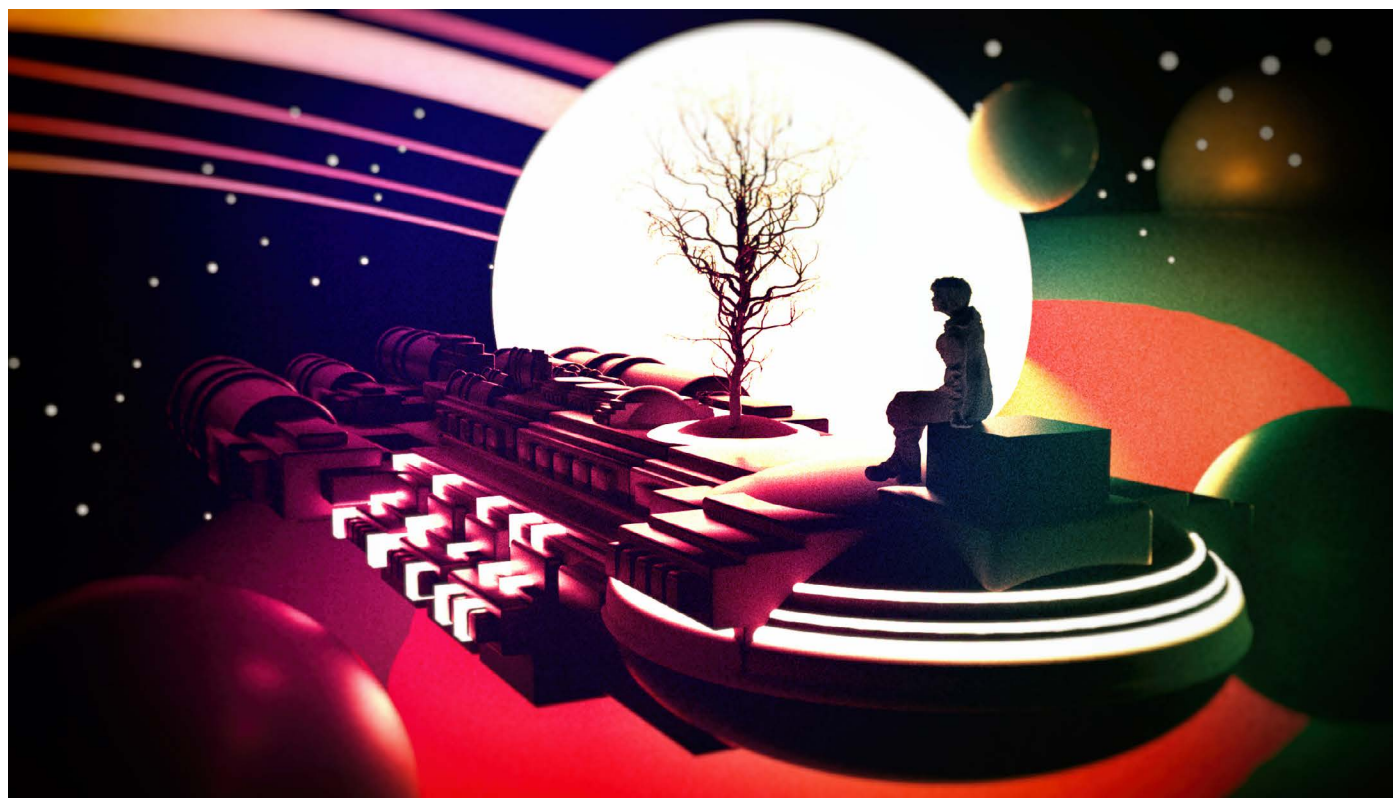


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Lieutenant Auri Murr knew the exact moment when her grandmother died.

She was on duty in engineering when Grandma Shanna's dappu-wood bead on her kin-necklace cracked: a sharp, dry, quiet sound, unmistakable to anyone from Darmindu Colony. It could have woken Auri from a sound sleep.

Her fingers curled around the bead, tracing the crack that ran through it. Her grandmother had hand-carved this bead from a branch of her own kin-tree, and Auri had carried it her whole life. Silent tears streamed down her face as she pried it free by touch from the cord that held her other kin-beads, the ones gifted from her parents, aunts and uncles, siblings and nibblings, her two best friends.

"Murr, what's the readout on ... What's wrong?" Her engineering chief, Commander Corey Yates, saw her tears and zipped her chair to Auri's side. Her face changed as she saw the bead cradled in Auri's palm. "What's happened?"

The crew didn't really understand about kin-beads and kin-trees – no one else came from Darmindu – but they knew it mattered to Auri.

"My grandmother." Auri sniffed hard.

"Grandma Shanna? Oh, Auri, I'm sorry."

Other crewmates drifted closer, touching her shoulder and murmuring condolences. They'd all heard her Grandma Shanna stories, eaten her dappu-syrup cookies, even benefited from second-hand grandmotherly wisdom.

"It's not a surprise. She was 132, and she's been fading for a while. She had a good life. A strong tree."

"That can be comforting, but it's still hard." Yates squeezed her hand. "Go take some time for yourself. The rest of us can finish here."

Auri left, but didn't go to her quarters. Soon she'd go wrap herself in the wool blanket Grandma made for her long ago when she enlisted in the science fleet. She'd watch old family holos while clasping her dappu-wood mug – the first thing she'd ever carved, with Grandma Shanna's help.

Soon. But right now, she had a responsibility to attend.

She found Captain Ramsey in her office. At the sight of Auri's tear-stained face, the captain sat her down and made her a cup of tea.

"My Grandma Shanna's kin-bead cracked. That means she's passed away." Auri held out the bead: whorls of russet brown and amber against the lighter brown of her palm, its silky smoothness marred by a jagged crack. "I need to ask: are there any habitable planets we could detour to? I'm supposed to plant the bead where it can grow. Preferably on Darmindu, but ..."

Their ship was three years into a long-distance survey mission. All their homes were far, far away.

"I'll check, but I don't think there's anything close enough. I'm no expert on Darmindu customs, but ... do you really want to plant it on some barely known planet, so far away?"

"It's not ideal. At home, my family will be

Futures

chopping down Grandma's soul-tree for its wood and planting all her kin-beads in its place. If there are new babies in the community, one of the new trees will become theirs. The others won't be *for* anyone, but they'll be honoured, protected. That's how we keep our forests strong – all the trees are family. The more love you share, the more forest you grow."

Auri realized she was rambling, although Captain Ramsey listened with kind attention. "Anyway, if we're off-world, we're supposed to find someplace special to plant it. But there's not much choice. I'd rather plant her *some-where* than let her fade."

"What about in a container? Until our assignment's over?"

Auri shook her head. "It's not supposed to be replanted. I need to give it a home."

"Let me see what I can find."

Hours later, the captain called Auri to the lower lounge. Wrapped in Grandma's blanket, she was startled to find the whole crew there

waiting. Yates offered a plate of cookies, and the distinctive sweet-sour richness of dappu-syrup filled the air. They were still warm.

"You ... made Grandma's cookies?"

"I borrowed the recipe. Hope you don't mind, I used some of your syrup stash."

Auri couldn't answer. The taste of home brought fresh tears to her eyes.

"And I think we've got a solution for your bead," Captain Ramsey said.

The crew shifted, revealing a wide planter built into the middle of the floor. Auri blinked, confused.

"Dirt from hydroponics, enough to get it started. Yates says we can shift conduits under the floor, lower the ceiling on the level below, and add supports so there's room for the roots to spread without breaking anything."

"But dappu trees grow 20 metres high ..."

"They're tall but narrow, right?" Yates held out a pad: blueprints, showing holes cut through the decks above, walls and equipment shifted to clear space overhead. "We'll give it

room to grow. As long as this ship's in commission, it can grow upwards deck by deck, and it'll never have to be moved."

"I don't understand. I love you all, you're the most amazing crew, but why are you doing this? You never knew Grandma Shanna."

Yates clasped her shoulder. "No, but we know and love you, and she helped make you who you are. So she's helped all of us, in a way." She grinned. "And she made amazing cookies."

Auri's heart had never felt so full. She scooped a hollow in the dirt, and planted Grandma Shanna's kin-bead: with soil from her ship, with water and with love. Its roots would never touch her home-world, but its branches would reach to the stars.

Jo Miles writes optimistic science fiction and fantasy, and has stories in *Strange Horizons*, *Analog*, *Lightspeed* and more. You can find Jo online at www.jomiles.com.