

Futures

The singular proposition of trees

Staying in sync. By Wendy Nickel



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

There's a gravity here that our instruments can't measure – a force that draws us to the trees.

We feel it from the moment we land, but as harried and discordant as we are from the squabbles of our journey and stresses of close-quarter living, it takes days for the four of us to share enough to realize we're each experiencing, differently, the same thing.

For me, it is a presence. A nudge. A gentle hand slowly turning my chin towards the windows, where their white trunks reach skywards and their golden leaves glow in the three-sun dawn. I find myself pressing my fingers to the tempered glass when I'm supposed to be conducting experiments or tidying up the mess hall. My feet work their way into the airlock without conscious reason.

Flynn dreams of papery bark unrolling like scrolls of wisdom. He sleepwalks and wakes with a hunger our freeze-dried rations can't satiate.

Avery hears music – a rustle of branches

in the generator's hum, in the static of the comms, in her head.

For Cooper, it manifests as phantom smells, carrying flashes of warm childhood memories. The richness of soil. The sharpness of leaves. "Like the woods by Grandpa's old cabin."

We are sojourners in the unknown.

Avery insists on documenting our symptoms, but Flynn won't let her file an official report. It's curious, yes, but no risk to the mission. And who wouldn't be a bit jumbled by arriving on a shining new world? By this massive forest of honey-coloured leaves and bright white branches rising skywards, their arms spread out in every direction?

We move up the date of our initial excursion. For the first time, consensus comes easily.

Our feet are the first to mark the soft and silty soil. Tiny birdlike creatures flit among the trees, as curious about us as we are about them. As we wander, I gather a feather. A leaf. A handful of dirt. A curl of bark. A twig.

Flynn photographs the forest. Cooper

collects our data. Avery keeps an eye on our vitals from the safety of the habitat. I only notice we're working in perfect rhythm – shutter *click*, hygrometer *beep*, gather, step and step – when I hear her voice humming along.

Another tone harmonizes.

"Is that your oxygen tank?"

It is. Beeping.

Hours have passed unnoticed, untroubled. We are deeper into the forest than intended. Farther from the habitat. Somehow, without argument, without discussion, without a single spoken word, we coordinate our movements to connect the extra tank to my suit. It's a complex process, but I forget which hands are mine as they all work in synchronicity.

At the airlock, we extract ourselves from the forest. Climbing inside, limb by limb, is like trying to untangle a length of vines without snapping any branches. We sit, gasping, trying to collect ourselves. Trying to understand this sudden sense of loss. Still breathing in rhythm with the wind.

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Inside, we go about our separate tasks, but the new-found cohesion prevails. Each role is essential, balanced, aligned, making our previous conflicts seem absurd, our previous views so narrow.

The samples whirl in the sequencer like a maple's samara fruit. One after another, results blink onto the screen, the hive of coordinated pixels displaying the answer I somehow already knew. *I must tell the others.*

And then they're here.

"Every single sample –"

"– has exactly the same DNA. It's as though they're all –"

"– the same thing somehow. Some massive, complex, universal –"

"– organism. But wait, I thought I was –"

"– speaking. How did you know what I'd –"

"– say?"

There's another sample that must be tested. Another question we must answer.

A hand is held out. Another readies the test. Scalpel pierces the skin, and we all flinch at its painful parting.

The sequencer spins. Pixels light the screen.

Same. Same. Same. Same.

"There must be a mistake."

There's not. We've felt the change from the moment of our arrival: the gravity that pulls us to the trees. To the soil. To the air. To the tiny birdlike creatures as curious about us as we are about them. To that which is unknown, beyond. The force that pulls us all together, despite – perhaps because of – our unique individualities.

"Protocol dictates that ..." if anything goes wrong, we must leave. Abort mission. An instinct to flee rises up, but to abandon now

would be a betrayal: of peace, of life, of each other.

"But perhaps ..." If we are the trees, then we belong to the forest. If we are the soil, then this is our earth. If self is the knife that splits us apart, then our longing is to be whole. Many and yet one.

A blood-stained palm opens the airlock. A breath rushes in, rushes out.

Together, we raise our branches and sing beneath a sapphire sky.

Wendy Nikel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.