

# Futures

## The Christmas Tree Barn

A festive new friend. By Mary E. Lowd



**T**he cardboard box with the robotic Christmas tree in it was darker on the bottom, lighter on top. Water damage. Becca hoped the tree's wiring wasn't shorted out. She couldn't face fixing it herself; her mother had always kept the tree running. She was a wizard with electronics. Had been a wizard. A wave of sadness washed over Becca. She rushed back upstairs and closed the basement door behind her, like she could shut her grief away with a slab of wood.

"What about the tree!?" Jenny whined. "You said we could put it up! Kennedy's family got their tree out weeks ago!"

Becca tried not to cringe at being compared to Kennedy's perfect family, yet again. "You've been bugging me all week about the new, live Christmas trees. Let's go take a look."

The Christmas Tree Barn was one of those temporary stores that pops up for a few weeks right around the holidays and disappears afterwards. As soon as the front doors slid open, the smell of pine needles was overpowering, and

'Jingle Bells' roared cheerfully over low-quality speakers

The whole place was set up like a pet store on adoption day, when local shelters bring all their foster dogs in. Except behind the waist-high puppy gates, instead of dogs were rows and rows of trees – some decorated, some not. But all of them ... dancing. Branches waved. Trees twirled. Some seemed to be playing chase, crawling over the warehouse floor with their exposed roots. A couple of trees leant over the puppy gates, playing some kind of self-decorating game with bright-eyed toddlers whose parents were definitely going to be buying pet trees for Christmas.

Becca wanted to turn around and leave. But her own daughter, usually a surly teenager with a snarky comeback for everything, had bright eyes, and her mouth had fallen open, speechless.

Becca risked reaching over and grabbing her daughter's hand. Squeezing it.

Jenny squeezed back and turned to look at her mother with a glowing smile. "There are so

many!" she said. "And Kennedy told me they dance! But ... but ..."

Jenny didn't have to finish her sentence. Becca knew she was picturing their old, robotic tree with its rotating branches. Becca had spent many happy days lying beneath that tree as a child, listening to it tell her Christmas stories and make up riddles about what was in her presents. It had been a top of the line tree back then. Now ... Well, apparently, the world had come full circle – live trees to fake trees to robotic trees with limited AI, and now live trees again, gengineered to be ... this.

"Can I help you?" asked a woman in a cheap green blazer with a nametag reading, "Hi, I'm Angelica, Your Christmas Elf-Helper!"

"I'm surprised they don't make you wear Santa hats or blinking light necklaces," Becca said, though she immediately felt bad for being snarky at a retail worker ... especially in front of her daughter, who didn't need any encouragement in that direction.

Angelica laughed. "We like to let the trees do the shining. Besides—" She held a hand up

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beside her mouth, pretending to be conspiratorial. “— the Doug Firs are such hounds for decorations, I’m sure they’d steal any holiday bling I tried to wear!”

Now Jenny laughed, and it was the kind of whole-hearted, wholesome laugh that Becca remembered from when her daughter was younger, not a teenager’s snide snicker. “Kennedy told me they decorate themselves.”

“That’s true,” Angelica agreed. “Just put out your box of ornaments, and they’ll have a ball playing dress-up. If you don’t have ornaments, give them a pile of crafting supplies, and they’ll make some!”

“I have to admit,” Becca said. “These trees are charming.”

“If you listen closely —” Angelica placed a hand theatrically beside her ear. “— you’ll hear they even sing along with the carols.”

Jenny walked towards the enclosure of frolicking trees as if pulled by magic. Totally enthralled. “They sound ... like cellos ... or violas.”

“Yes, their needles vibrate to make the sound.”

“They’re so active,” Becca said. “What stops them from flailing around and blindly knocking over furniture?”

“Oh, they can see.” Angelica pointed at the nearest tree. “See those clusters of red berries? They look festive, but they’re actually photosensitive. Primitive eyes. Our trees can even recognize faces. They’re approximately as smart as labradors.”

A horrible thought occurred to Becca. “What ... happens to them after Christmas?” One of these trees couldn’t get disassembled and boxed up in the basement for 11 months a year. “And how long do they live?”

Angelica’s cheerful voice turned serious. “We do take them back. But they’re very easy pets — set a tree free in your backyard, and it’ll get all the sun and water it needs. Also, they can be trained to be excellent gardeners.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes, teach one of these trees to care for

your garden, and you’ll have a perfectly tended garden for years to come. Because they do live for years. And ...” Angelica’s voice got even more serious. “They get attached to families they spend Christmas with. So, we really don’t recommend returning them.”

Becca nodded. She wondered if one of these trees could be trained to hold down the ribbon with the tip of a branch while she wrapped presents after Jenny was in bed. It would be nice to have a companion for that. And ... it would be nice to have a pet that didn’t require more attention than she could give. With only her and Jenny in the house, they couldn’t properly care for a dog.

“I guess it’s time,” Becca said, “to pick out a new friend.”

**Mary E. Lowd** is a science-fiction and furry writer in Oregon. She’s had more than 190 short stories and a dozen books published, always with more on the way.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Mary E. Lowd reveals the inspiration behind *The Christmas Tree Barn*.

I named all the trees around my house as a kid. The crab-apple was Agatha; the plum Cordelia; and the pussy willow (I planted myself) Helena. There were others, but those were my favourites. My brain has always been excessively good at anthropomorphism. If a piece of technology was glitchy, it was grumpy. Stuffed animals stared at me with eyes so full of life I could tell whole stories about them, just from a chance meeting in a toy store. And that, of course, is how I ended up spending most of my adulthood writing furry fiction.

Furry fiction (sometimes called anthropomorphic fiction) usually features talking animals, but there are exceptions. The animals don’t have to talk, as long as their thinking or behaviour is anthropomorphized. Alternatively, the anthropomorphic character doesn’t have to be an animal. Sometimes, it’s a toaster or a cowboy doll. Or a tree.

Anthropomorphic trees have appeared frequently in my work over the years — usually as Doraspian, a tumbleweed-like alien featured prominently in my Entangled Universe trilogy from Aethon Books. For this piece, though, I decided it would be fun to try another of the standard methods in furry fiction for creating anthropomorphic characters — instead of aliens, genetic uplift.

