

Futures

Venetian blinds

A future in the past. By Gretchen Tessmer



I was in the underground lab when I heard someone at the top of the stairs call out my name. “Mehyt?”

But I was bent over an antique microscope and not particularly pleased with the interruption, so I didn’t answer straight away. He called my name again, thinking I hadn’t heard him.

Reluctantly, I pulled my eyes away from squirming microbes.

“I’m kinda busy, Anhur,” I reminded him, once I’d walked over to the foot of the staircase. My colleague’s tall, broad form was outlined in a filmy, hazy glow. Vicious heat and ultraviolet rays slithered and steamed to the open mouth of my underground lab, turning my stomach to rot.

We needed more than blinds to keep out the Sun these days.

The cooling systems were all failing fast. Extreme climate change had reached its natural, dire conclusion. The latest report gave

us 31 days, 4 hours and 15 minutes until the crisis point.

I found the exactness of the report obnoxious. The Model Projections Department is fastidious in a way that I could do without.

“The life-study experiments are being postponed indefinitely.” He broke the news bluntly.

“What?” I demanded. I’d been fighting with the bureaucrats upstairs for weeks now. Funding had dried up months ago, when the government decided to tell the whole world that it was a lost cause.

Still, the life-study division of the Last-Chance Task Force was not a natural place to start cutting. Atmospheric, mineral and bacterial samples from the substitute planet continued to flow in daily. Our research was promising but we’d started the research and contingency plans about, oh, let’s say five centuries later than we should have. And with the temperatures rising steadily and hitting the critical mark of 45 °C twice in one week ...

“You *do* realize that we’re about to jump ship, don’t you?” I replied, a little too hotly. “And I don’t think any of us would appreciate jumping without some reassurance that we’re going to *survive* this jump.”

“It doesn’t matter now.” Anhur had descended the stairs while I spoke. Gingerly, he took a seat on a lower step, eye level with me. “Outdoor temperatures surpassed 49 °C today. It’s over. We’re leaving now.”

“Leaving?” I spluttered. “We can’t leave yet. We don’t have any confirmation that the new planet was seeded according to plan or that the introduced species are adapting. We lost any sort of communication three months ago —”

“I know,” Anhur spoke with too much calm.

“The last solar spike spoiled half our supplies. Remember that?” I asked. “If we go now, our chance of survival is minimal —”

“Mehyt ...”

“And none of the infrastructure is in place. So if we *do* make it, we’ll be back in the Stone Age.

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Thousands of years of advancement and we'll be starting from scratch! Do you *understand?*"

Anhur waited until I finished ranting. "It doesn't matter now."

"It matters to me!"

He just stared at me with a measure of pity that I could do without. Didn't he understand that we still had more work to do? How could he say that it didn't matter? With news like this, it mattered more than ever.

Don't you get it? After all our planning, all our charts, reports, plans and projections ... well, we're screwed, Mehyt.

"The initial projections were wrong," I muttered, with dawning realization.

"By weeks," Anhur confirmed, reaching out and taking my hand. "We have to go. The shuttle's leaving in an hour."

"We can't ..." I shook my head.

We'd be leaving everything behind. I would never see another lab like this one again. We'd spend our first years on the new planet just trying to survive. I'd be an old woman and we'd still be living in caves and mud houses. That antique microscope on the table, an odd

curiosity here, would be a wonder in the new world.

"Some of us might make it," Anhur tried to reassure me.

He was too optimistic. Not me. Our home was about to boil itself alive.

"Maybe this new planet will surprise," he said, reaching forward to bring my chin up. Before he left me, he added: "Maybe starting over is a chance to make things right."

As Anhur climbed the stairs, I found myself rooted to the floor of the lab, giving a frantic, wistful glance around my lab, finally settling on the microscope on the table.

I could slip it in my bag. I could take it with me.

And what would you do with it? Study the inner workings of the invisible world while you're gathering firewood and eating shrivelled grass and raw meat from the bone just to survive?

In a moment of impulse, I walked over to the microscope and hurled it across the room. It hit a cluttered row of beakers lining the back wall and I was rewarded with the satisfying crash of broken glass.

My left hand was twitching wildly. I made a fist and it stopped. I bit my lower lip and blinked back something that someone else might mistake for tears. Of exhaustion, of fear.

I used the back of my hand to stop whatever was happening with my eyes. And, after one last moment of hesitation, I ran up the stairs to join Anhur.

In one hour, even less now, the last of my people would be flying away from our home on the second rock from the Sun and planet-hopping one over. A thousand years ago, one of our astronomers had marked it on a star map as *Earth*.

On our way to the shuttle, while hurrying to catch up with Anhur's much longer stride and absently wondering if the Model Projections Department was feeling pretty stupid right now, I wondered if the name would stick.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Gretchen Tessmer reveals the inspiration behind *Venetian blinds*.

Welcome to my latest Nature Futures story! Or, in this case, I suppose... Futures-Past?

The main idea of this story has been rattling around in my head for a while. I think we learnt the names and characteristics of the nine (yes, it was nine at the time, thank you very much) planets* in second or third grade. I was completely fascinated with Venus, mostly because it's our nearest neighbour in this big old Universe.

And our sister planet! With similar size and mass, spinning and frolicking in that goldilocks distance from the Sun. You'd think we'd be best friends. But not so much. This is definitely not the kind of neighbour you ask for a cup of sugar. Unless you're looking for clouds of sulfuric acid instead...

But anyway, I remember reading some concept articles on terraforming Mars a few years ago and it just got me thinking about how new beginnings sometimes lead right back to the same old endings. So, I thought it might be fun to imagine an alternative reality where Venus was once not so unlike our planet.

*Side note: I'm still not over Pluto's demoted status, by the way, but I'll save the rest of that rant for another time/story.

