

# Futures

## In the dark

Ground truth. By Gretchen Tessmer

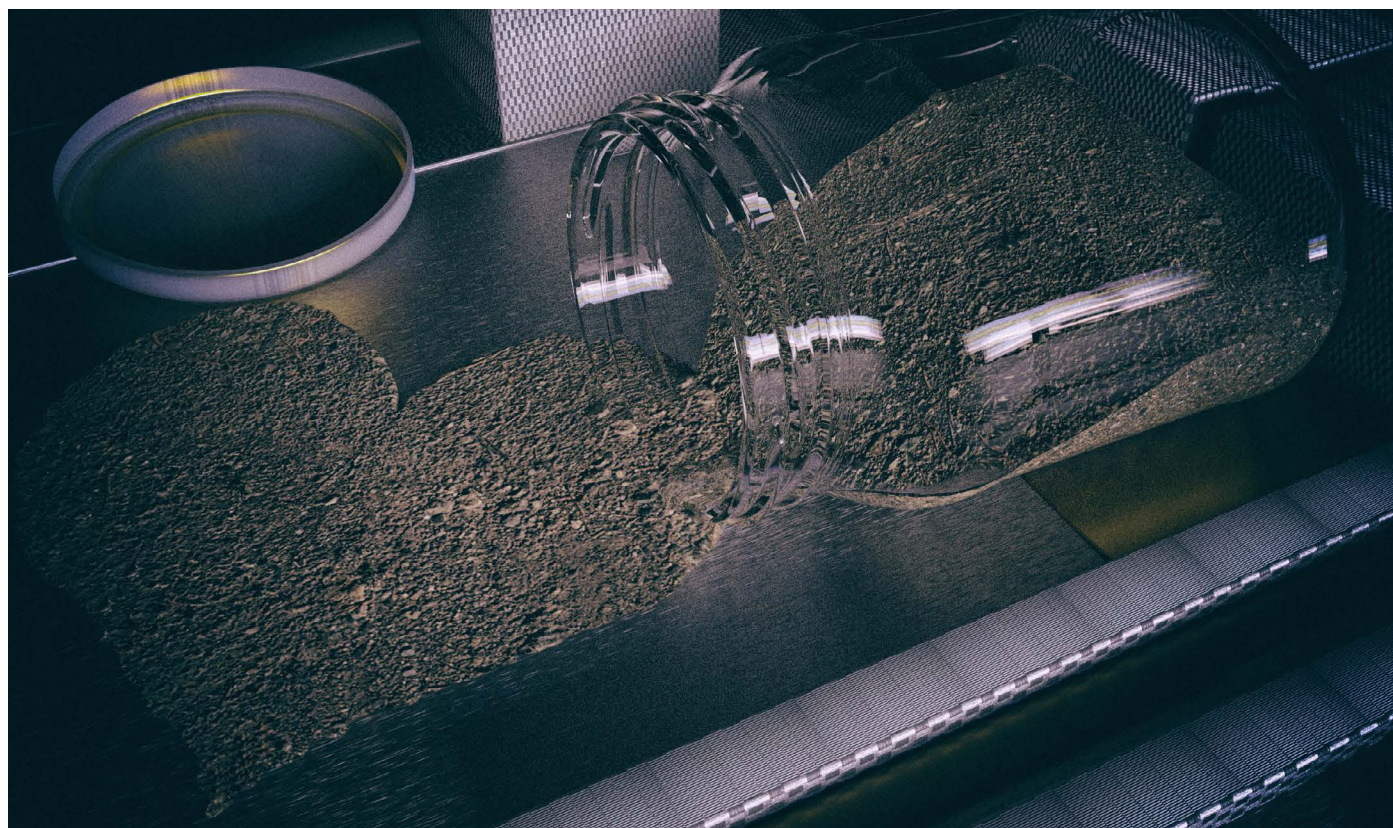


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**B**ryan can't sleep. He's been up half the night. Or is it day? They don't have a clock in this cabin and their porthole window offers nothing but black, starless space.

Notes are scattered on his desk. His head is pounding from trying to memorize the speech. He's had it down a dozen times, revised it a dozen more; been forced to memorize it all over again.

Phrases such as 'dwindling supplies', 'lost', 'gratitude' and 'last chance' stare up at him.

Megan's tired of this. She doesn't think he should give this speech at all. It's unlike him and he should know better.

They had a fight about it and she went to bed without him. But she's not sleeping either. At the sound of more crumpled paper, she finally throws back the quilt in their sleeping bunk, her feet finding the ark's glossy, metal floors.

The floors are always so cold on this ship, with no sunlight or starlight to speak of these

days – they're in empty space – just emergency lights that pulse red and give off a dire warning that total darkness awaits them, should they dare push farther on. But her feet are warm, bundled in wool socks. When they fled Earth, they were told to pack only what was absolutely necessary. But Megan insisted on bringing those socks.

She insisted on bringing something else too. She kneels by the bunk, pulling out the drawer beneath to dig through their sparse luggage. Once she finds it, she marches across the cramped cabin, setting a glass jar on the desk beside him.

"Now come to bed," she says.

Bryan looks at that jar, overcome with old memories. Night, a field, Megan smiling up at him.

His tired eyes flicker to hers, going softer, promising, "Soon."

The lingering tension between them shifts, showing cracks. But she still shakes her head

at him, sighing.

Conflicted, Bryan watches Megan return to the bunk. He picks up the jar.

A jar of plain dirt.

He's expected to give the speech first thing in the morning. He's to tell the ragged group of survivors that the resistance is over; that they are to enter into a treaty with those who destroyed their planet. That they should be grateful for the mercy shown by those stronger than them and welcome humanity's newest chapter.

Bryan's not sure why they chose him for this task. There are better orators and he's made no secret of his unease with the treaty.

"But the people trust you," Nathan insisted, just this morning. "They'll accept this if you tell them they must."

Bryan didn't reply, feeling Megan side-eye him. She was holding her tongue, but barely. She'd never liked Nathan. She made that clear

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a long time ago.

“He reminds me of my father,” she’s said more than once, and it’s no compliment. “He thinks living and survival are the same thing.”

Megan knows about the difference between living and survival too well.

The night she ran away from home, she met Bryan in the field between their houses. She had new bruises on her arms but she told him they didn’t hurt so much. He urged her to hurry. They didn’t have much time before her father ...

But she stopped briefly, bending down to grab a handful of field dirt, funnelling it into a little glass jar.

“What’s that for?” Bryan wondered, casting wary glances back towards her father’s house.

“I want to take this with me,” she said, with a brave smile that turned into a half-kringe, as her lip was split and the cut reopened with little effort. Still, the pain played second fiddle to her excitement. She’d been waiting for this night for a long, long time.

She explained, “I want to remember this spot forever, where you and I met, where we ran away. Together.”

She kissed the jar soundly, reaching up to take Bryan’s offered hand with another smile, split lip and all.

“They’ll kill us,” he whispers at the curve of her ear after he joins her in bed.

“We’re dead either way,” she replies, wrapped in his arms. “But I’d rather die on my own terms.”

“They gave us their word. The treaty promises a new planet, a new home, a new life.”

“If they hadn’t destroyed our old home, we wouldn’t need a new one.”

“They apologized. They say they didn’t know their own strength.”

“They never do.” Megan mutters, not talking about alien conquerors now. “And they never change their ways, no matter how many times they say otherwise.”

“Nathan says they’re far more powerful than we can imagine. They could have vaporized the ship days ago, as soon as they tracked us down. But they didn’t.”

“To toy with us ...”

“To show mercy ...”

“You can’t be that naive.”

And he’s not. Battered by defeat, less bold

than he used to be, sure. Life wears down the good and the bad, in equal measure. He tightens his grip on Megan, burying his head against the nape of her neck.

When they were 15, Bryan met Megan in a field. She told him about her home life and how she had nowhere else to go.

“You can go with me,” he promised, stubbornly. “I don’t know where or how. But we’ll just go. We’ll disappear in the dark.”

In the end, he tells the gathered survivors the same thing, leaving his notes in the cabin as he takes the podium, speaking from the heart, much to the wide-eyed horror of Nathan and the rest of the governing body.

“You can stay and take their offer if you want,” he tells them calmly, before shaking his head and reaching for Megan’s hand. She takes it with a small, soft smile. “But as for Meg and me, we’ll take our chances in the dark. Together.”

**Gretchen Tessmer** is an attorney/writer based in the US/Canadian borderlands of Northern New York.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Gretchen Tessmer reveals the inspiration behind *In the dark*.

This story sparked from a collision of two quotes that I read in succession: “The most powerful weapon on Earth is the human soul on fire” (Ferdinand Foch) and “True love is like ghosts, which everyone talks about and few have seen” (Francois de La Rochefoucauld). The quotes don’t map exactly to the story but there were elements in both that I found compelling — especially the idea of the human soul on fire.

And I thought, OK, but what if you have two souls on fire? Watch out, alien overlords.

The image of Bryan struggling over his speech came to me quickly and the rest of the story just spilled out from there. Ride-or-die love stories tend to be my favourites, and I’m always up for my characters defying the bad guys. I mean, sure, maybe you’re thinking these alien overlords aren’t being given a fair shake here and maybe they had good reason for destroying our pretty blue-and-green planet.

They didn’t. As the writer of this story, I can confirm that Meg’s instincts are spot on and they should run, run, run...

