

Futures

Such devices as dreams are made on

Rounded with a sleep. **By Mark S. Bailen**



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Miran lay on a mouldy foam mattress, dying. “Go away,” she whispered.

Cal-B observed from the hab door. He was a simple-minded android with stocky legs and a flickering light on his chest. His eyes recorded.

“Why do you care so much anyway? Death is beyond your programming.” Miran sat up, feeling woozy. She hadn’t eaten for 3 days, and her weight was down to 104 pounds. She had run out of repellents and antifungals a month ago.

“Go busy yourself,” she ordered. “Just don’t dig me a grave. I don’t want to be buried on this cesspool of a planet. Cremate me instead.”

Cal-B nodded and left.

The sunlight filtered through the geodesic walls. Clumps of green fungus covered everything. Miran shuffled around a table littered with food trays, vials and syringes. She exited the flaps of the hab and blinked. Sulfurous clouds hung low. Spores danced in the air.

“You finally beat me, you festering planet,”

she wheezed. “But my research will survive.”

Miran had been trapped on Tempest Prime for six years. Each day had been a battle. The planet had gone through a recent Cambrian explosion, less than 100,000 years ago. Every organism had come alive, as if waking from sleep, and had begun mutating furiously. The organisms ate everything, dead or alive. She’d known the mission was risky and time dilation would take away the prime of her life, but she had volunteered anyway. She’d dreamt of witnessing the birth of intelligent life.

But were these microorganisms intelligent? Miran was unsure. She didn’t feel much love for them. They destroyed everything they touched. So was the mission even worth it?

Yes. If her research survived.

Miran’s crew members had succumbed to lung rot less than six months after their arrival. She had buried them in the sodden ground with fabricated grave markers. Miran had been certain her death would soon follow, but after a handful of DNA alterations, risky immune

boosters and antifungal injections, she had kept the rot at bay.

Until now.

Across the camp, inside the workshop, the generator hummed. Miran squinted through the haze. “What’s he doing?” The fabricator whined. “He better not be making a shovel to dig me a grave.” Miran considered confronting the android but her legs were too weak. She hobbled back to her mattress and collapsed.

Later that night, Cal-B climbed onto the mattress beside Miran. His body vibrated, creating a halo of warmth. Miran reached over and felt his chest purr. He folded his hand around hers and she fought the urge to cry. This was one of the few human gestures that Cal-B had learnt on his own. Miran had initially fabricated the android to help with tasks around camp. He was the smartest device in the fabricator database, with rudimentary skills of mimicry and emotion. He looked nearly human. Occasionally he even acted like one.

Futures

After a year by herself on the planet, Miran asked Cal-B to sleep alongside her. There was nothing sexual about it. He wasn't equipped for that anyway. But she felt terribly alone. She yearned for a presence sleeping next to her. At night, while the planet mutated, Miran took comfort in the android's strange noises, his hums, beeps and percolations. She often touched his chassis, reassuring herself that he was alive. She installed an outlet near the bed so that he could charge. When he rose in the morning, she felt the creases he made in the foam mattress. They slept side by side for nearly four years.

The following morning, Miran was too weak to exit the hab. She had Cal-B play the latest recording from the rendezvous ship. It was still three years out and deceleration could add another nine months. Too little, too late.

Cal-B shifted in the doorway.

"What are you making out there?" Miran whispered.

"A device."

"I hope you're not making a shovel."

"No," said the android.

"You need to conserve power. And replace your damaged parts. And survive another four years. When the rendezvous ship comes, give them my samples." She met his glowing eyes. "It's important."

Cal-B nodded.

She took a sedative and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, with the android lying next to her, Miran fell into a coma. A few days later, she was dead.

Cal-B cremated Miran outside the camp boundary. The android watched her body burn for a long time. Then he retrieved the device he had been fabricating in the workshop. It was a crude composite block, vented,

and weighing 104 pounds, the same weight as Miran. The android carried the device to the hab and placed it on the foam mattress where Miran had slept. Cal-B flipped a switch and an internal bellows pushed air through the vent. Then a recording played. It played the sounds of Miran sleeping. Her breathing. Her stirring. Her occasional cough. Even her heartbeat. The android had painstakingly recorded Miran over multiple nights and looped it.

Cal-B understood that he must endure a long wait to deliver Miran's research. He plugged in his charger, lay down next to the composite block, and slept.

Mark S. Bailen has an MFA from the University of Arizona. He published a recent story in *Little Blue Marble* and a children's book titled, *Earf*. Learn more at fakemountain.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Mark S. Bailen reveals the inspiration behind *Such devices as dreams are made on*.

I often come up with story ideas while lying awake in the middle of the night. My wife tends to sleep next to me like a log. This story began with a simple question. When intelligent life appears, will we recognize it? Will we expect a sufficient level of communication? The ability to develop tools? Perform mimicry? Express love? I also thought about Prospero and Miranda's plight in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

