

# Futures

## Out, out, brief planet

A place too cold for hell. By Mark S. Bailen

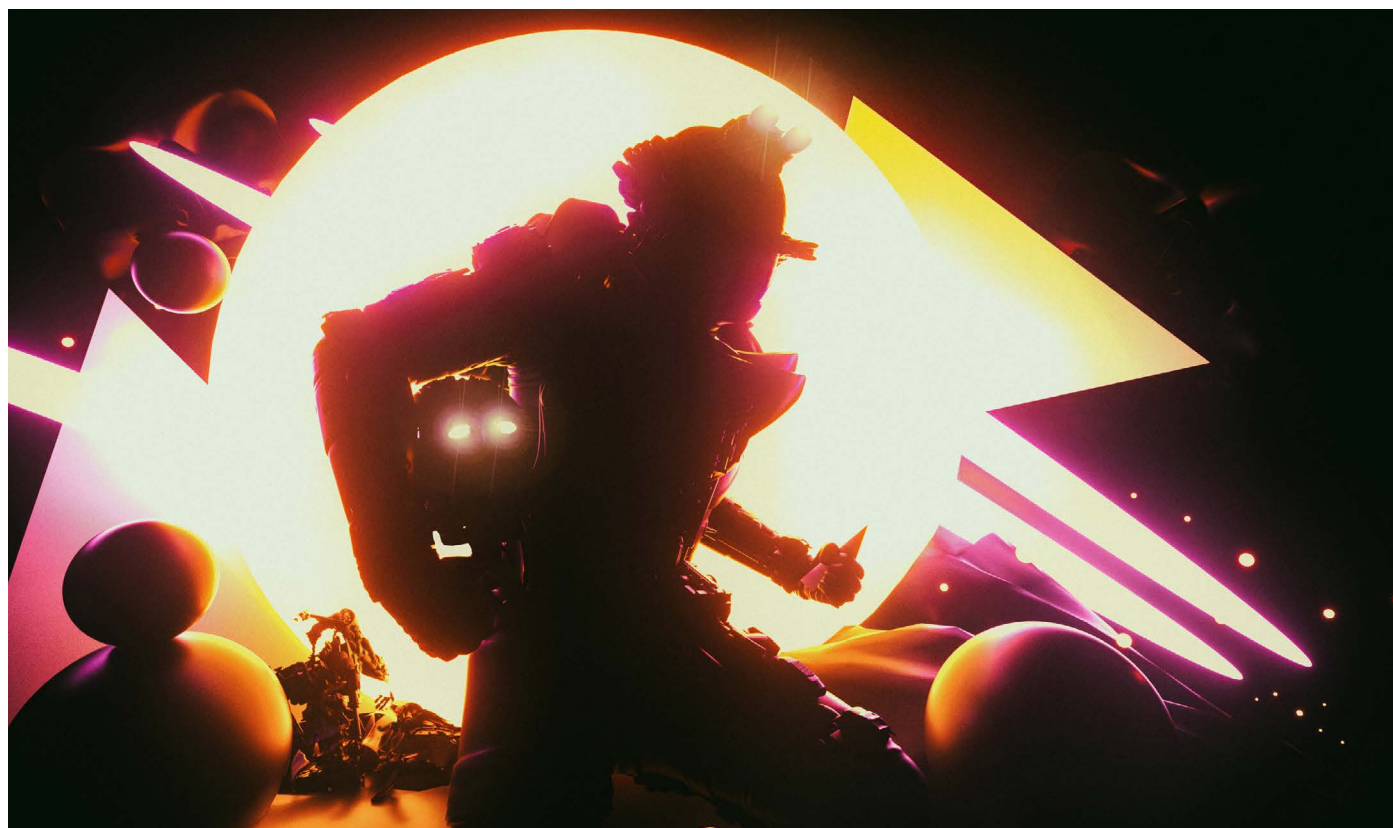


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Creating human civilization wasn't easy. First, a survey team needed to locate an unclaimed, water-rich planet and clear the system of hazardous asteroids. Then evolutionary engineers were brought in to enhance the atmosphere, create a species flowchart, prepare the biosphere and accelerate human development. The practice was called *anthro-culture* and required thousands of millennia. When seeding new planets, it proved far more reliable than sending colony ships. Which is why, when a civilization failed, an investigator was sent out to perform a post mortem.

Duff landed his drop-ship on a glacier and launched three climate drones – crones – that chirped out telemetry data. One crone buzzed to a nearby scarp, hovering over the last-known location of the Progress outpost. Two others flew south, disappearing over the horizon, seeking the remains of human settlement. Duff donned his exoskeleton

and trudged to a stone ring, proof that the aboriginals had ventured into higher latitudes. He sifted through the fire pit and plucked out an arrowhead.

Dunis-II was a gloomy planet with a verdant belt of tundra, dotted with alpine forests. From the deep-space scans, a branch of resilient humans had evolved. Agriculture had taken hold. And roads criss-crossed the hinterland. But 400 years ago, the settlements were abandoned. The crops went fallow. And the humans vanished. The planet was declared a failure and sold to a mining company.

Duff plodded down a snowbank, gasping in the frigid air. He didn't mind being sent halfway across the galaxy to sleuth out failed civilizations. He took pride in his investigations. His motto was, *negative results were still results*. Yet something was strange about Dunis-II. The collapse had been sudden with no evidence of environmental catastrophe.

Duff rubbed the arrowhead. Maybe a

war-like strain of humans had evolved? And they killed each other off? Duff pocketed the arrowhead, trying to visualize humans fighting with knives and spears. More than a million years ago, violence had been eliminated from the human genetic code. Still, mutations occurred.

Low clouds filled the purple sky. Grey lichen glowed on nearby rocks. And the bones of ruminants poked from an ice shelf. A crone beeped. The bot had laser-cut through strata of ice, tunnelling to the hidden outpost. Duff secured a rope and rappelled down the crystal chimney. At the bottom, he opened a steel hatch. Lights blinked. The air was stale and metallic. An ancient germination lab with a multi-armed sequencer was on standby. Vents climbed to the surface. In a corner was a fabricator and an android, a Mak-B with a blinking green heart, plugged into a satellite receiver.

Duff tapped its chest. "Wake up."

The android jumped. "A field investigator."

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"Surprise. Is this your mess?"

The android stammered. "This planet belongs to Cawdor Mining Company."

"Yeah, but I got jurisdiction. And I'm in a foul mood. I've been in cryo for 60 years trying to reach this ice patch. What happened here?"

A light flickered on the android's head, but it didn't respond.

"Fair enough." Duff tugged a dusty terminal from the wall. "I'll do this the hard way."

It took three attempts to bypass security. The access codes had been changed, which was paranoid even for a mining company. As Duff perused the climate logs, video transmitted to his visor. The crones had discovered an abandoned human settlement. The village looked peaceful enough: no pikes, protective walls or burned-out hovels. A crone entered a half-collapsed shelter with a stone bench and carved icons. Lying on a cot were two skeletons.

"What killed you?" Duff mused. "Disease?"

"An ice age," piped the android.

Duff turned.

"Their primary food source, the ruminants, froze to death."

"Doubtful." Duff double-checked the climate model. Dunis-II had been cold, but not that cold. Both the ruminants and humans had been engineered to withstand this climate. And according to the model, the next ice age wouldn't arrive for 1,500 years, plenty of time for Progress to send a mitigation crew.

The terminal froze and Duff banged the display. "What's going on?" He swivelled. "Are you doing this?" He jumped across the room and yanked out the satellite connection.

Hours later, Duff slouched in a chair, eyeing the android. The crones had returned and flew haloes around him.

"Why delete the logs? I needed those for my investigation."

"Orders," said the Mak-B.

"From who?"

"Cawdor Mining Company."

Duff winced. "What else did they order?"

"A scrub."

"Explain."

"412 years ago, I was fabricated to adjust the atmosphere, fix the ocean salinity and clean up Dunis-II. This lab was used to propagate a virus among higher-order species, triggering the terminator gene." The Mak-B's hands twitched. "Everything was shunted back to pre-Anthropocene levels."

Duff's chest went cold. "That's genocide."

"No. These were errant lifeforms. Civilization collapsed because of the ice age."

"What ice age? It never happened! Did you even check the surface?" Duff stood and paced. How many people died because of this android? Thousands? Tens of thousands? All because it misinterpreted the climate model?

No. Duff froze. Something else was going on.

"What's your time stamp?"

The android emitted numbers: 1,900 years in the future.

This wasn't a glitch. Someone had corrupted the android's internal clock, making it believe that an ice age was in progress, circumventing its Asimov code. Probably the mining company hacked the satellite feed, manipulating the android from orbit. They wanted to extract resources without the hindrance of an aboriginal population. And they hoped Progress wouldn't investigate. Duff reached into his pocket and felt the arrowhead. Humans were killing humans, only not how he had presumed.

"I need proof of what happened." Duff glowered. "Samples of the virus. Your transmission logs."

"Everything is destroyed."

He growled. "Not everything." Something ancient stirred in Duff. He reached and twisted the Mak-B's head.

The neck sparked. The connectors popped. And the android's eyes went dim.

"Your internal memory is all the proof I'll need." Duff shoved the head under his arm and climbed towards the icy surface. The violence wrought on Dunis-II would not be forgotten.

**Mark S. Bailen** has been published in *Fantasy*, *Nature Futures* and *Little Blue Marble*. His day job is with the USGS Astrogeology Science Center, where he spends his hours helping planetary scientists get their data on the web.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Mark S. Bailen reveals the inspiration behind *Out, out, brief planet*.**

This story was one of my darker pieces but I found it fun creating Duff, a field investigator of failed planets who enjoys sifting through the ashes. He was a great character to remind me that negative results are still results. This story also took inspiration from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, especially the poor manipulated android who misinterpreted the climate model.

