

# Futures

## Clean-up on Planet 9

Turtle chaos. By Carol Scheina



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**M**y bad back gave warning spasms when I stepped off the ship and saw the state of Rental Planet 9.

A giant sea turtle swimming in a building-sized aquarium. Fields of toothy purple flowers. Goddamn dollhouse-sized pine forests. Quite a bit wasn't the size or shape it was supposed to be.

Ana, my cleancrew mate, was already on her tablet, tracking down posts from the planet's recent guests. "Looks like it was their 'best vacay ever'."

I felt my face harden with a resigned grimace: rich folks and their gene-modification tools, whatcha you gonna do? They'd just pay the fine and move on. And we were the ones who'd clean up the mess. My back was already groaning.

Rental planets weren't large, and clean-bots could restore things in a day or two, but this amount of genetics tinkering went way beyond the usual janitorial job. I sent our bots off for a planetary assessment while Ana pondered the

giant turtle before us.

"We should name her ... Calypso?"

"We're going to need to do more than that."

We'd seen animal-mods before. Company policy was to trash everything the guests left behind, animal-mods included, but we'd sneak the critters off-world. There was always someone willing to adopt bee-frogs and rat-a-pillars.

But a transport-sized turtle? No way we could move it, and that cheapo glass aquarium wouldn't last long.

"Have the bots make her a saltwater lake," Ana proposed. "We'll hide her in there."

"Management won't authorize that."

"So we won't tell."

"They'll notice if the bots aren't cleaning."

"We'll just use two bots. The rest'll be working. No one'll notice."

It might work, but: "It'll take a while for two bots to dig a lake. Plus, the turtle's not part of the ecosystem. What's she gonna eat?" I hated saying it. Maybe there were some messes we couldn't clean up.

Ana put her hands on her hips, eyebrows asking, *Wanna let her die instead?*

The turtle rubbed her beak against the aquarium walls. *Squeak*. At that size, her leathery skin looked more like a rocky coastline. *Squeak*. Enormous eyes pleaded at me.

I sighed. "Reprogram some bots to start digging. I'll tackle the rest of the cleaning. We'll figure out food later."

Ana grinned. "I'm on it!"

I rode a team of bots over to the beach area, with its constellation of chip bags, candy wrappers and beer bottles. My back pain splintered something awful as I snatched up wrappers. "Damn. Planet. Trashers!"

Behind me, bots dismantled the giant "WE RULE" crafted from felled palm trees.

When Ana radioed, I could hear her worry. "The tank's cracked."

As I approached, I could see Calypso's limbs beating a frantic rhythm. The turtle knew something was off. Giant glass walls dripped like a leaky showerhead.

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"We'll need all the bots digging if we're going to make Calypso a new home fast." I eyed Ana. We'd be 100% ditching our clean-up job for a turtle rescue operation. Management would probably catch that the bots weren't doing what they were supposed to. Not only would that result in us being fired, but what would that mean for the turtle's future?

But the turtle *had* no future if we didn't act. Damn it, we couldn't let Calypso die.

Ana's face beamed a *HELL YEAH!*

I nodded back. "Let's do this."

In a short time, geysers of dirt flew about as our entire team of bots sprang into action.

Ana snapped pics of the turtle with her tablet, posting them in that virtual black hole of gazillions of other people's snapshots of vacations and food and babies.

"No one cares about janitors," I grumbled. "Hell, even management won't see stuff in that mess."

"It's for us, so we'll remember Calypso."

I couldn't say anything to that.

When the hole grew deeper, I pulled out the

genetics kit. It was supposed to grow new forests quickly, do landscaping, stuff like that, but I figured it could help jump-start some food for an oversized turtle. I injected a strand of seaweed, and slimy green exploded around me.

"Smile!" Ana caught my face cringing, eyes half closed. She posted the damn thing.

The aquarium had dripped to half empty after two days of bot digging, but we had a mostly full lake with newly planted giant seaweed for our big girl to munch. That was when management sent the message: "Report to Planet 1 headquarters. Immediately."

"Just wrapping up here," Ana responded with nervous typing fingers. She muttered to me, "I'd really hoped they wouldn't notice."

I felt a rock in my swallow. "Gig's up, huh?"

It was a complicated manoeuvre to program, but Ana got the bots to remove a side of the aquarium, causing a gush of water that sent Calypso bobbing and sliding into the lake. Our reptile girl vanished into the deep, air bubbles popping like fireworks on the surface. Ana recorded the whole thing and posted it.

Eyes all wet, she posed in front of the lake, captioning the pic: "Love you, Calypso."

What else could we do in the face of this mess? We were going to be fired. The next clean crew would follow orders and eliminate the giant turtle. But at least we'd given Calypso some time.

Dust or something hit my eyes hard. I rubbed them hard as I prepped our departure.

Ana's tablet beeped with a message, and she squealed. "Hold on! People saw my posts! There's a Save Calypso movement! They've already raised enough money to buy the planet."

"Well, damn." I felt it then, as my back straightened and didn't even twitch. Call it a janitor's intuition that this whole mess would clean up well with a happy ending.

**Carol Scheina** is a deaf speculative fiction author from the Northern Virginia area. Her stories have appeared in publications such as *Flash Fiction Online* and *Escape Pod*.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Carol Scheina reveals the inspiration behind *Clean-up on Planet 9*.

As humanity innovates, the messes we create change as well. It wasn't that long ago that the world didn't need to worry about oil spills, orbital debris, nuclear waste or even how to properly dispose of our LED bulbs and old computers.

This story was inspired by my wondering what kinds of messes the future might bring, and who will clean them up. It's also a tribute to the people who are helping to clean up our planet right now, from those rescuing wildlife following spills to those who ensure they recycle their old electronics. Every bit helps.

Calypso was a real, 500-pound turtle at the US National Aquarium, with three limbs and amazing grace and beauty as she swam through her tank. She passed away unexpectedly in 2020. The turtle in this story bears the same name in memory of her.

