

CUSTODIAL MEASURES

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1

THE MAP

THE GLOWING SEA DIDN'T START AT A LINE ON A MAP. IT STARTED IN YOUR THROAT.

A few clicks south of the ruined town of Natick Banks, the air went from dusty to metallic in three steps. Rook pulled her scarf higher and smelled salt, old sweat, and the faint chemical tang of the filter puck she'd jammed into her improvised respirator.

A wind came up from the southwest, carrying ash and something worse—ozone, lingering like a static charge just under the soil. Her Geiger clicked politely at first, then found its courage.

Tick... tick... tick-tick-tick.

"Yeah," Rook muttered. "I hear you."

Behind her, the Commonwealth's last scrub grass gave up and turned black. Ahead, the land slumped into a cratered basin of busted rock and warped concrete. Half-buried houses sagged. A highway sign stuck up out of the dirt at an angle, its face sandblasted down to an apparition of letters.

She'd promised herself she'd never come back here. Then Mamaw Della coughed red into a rag and the settlement's well started tasting like pennies and rot, and "never" became "now."

Scavenging anywhere in the wasteland was dangerous, but stepping into the Glowing Sea was suicide. And yet some had survived, returning with stories of preserved pre-war tech, caches of RadAway, and other buried secrets.

Rook crept along the edge of an old service road, picking her steps between fissures. Every crack in the ground disappeared in fog.

She saw the body when the wind shifted.

It lay face-down in a drift of gray dust, one

boot half buried, the other kicked out at an angle like it had tried to sprint and died mid-stride. The clothes were recent—patchwork leather, plastic armor plates, a cheap shoulder pauldron.

Rook's hand went to her pistol. Old habit. It didn't stop her from approaching, slow and careful, eyes on the horizon.

Flies weren't buzzing. The silence was complete enough to make her ears ring. She nudged the corpse with the toe of her boot.

The head lolled, and the face turned just enough to show the mouth open wide, lips peeled back in a stiff scream. The cheeks were blistered in patches, like the skin had tried to crawl off the bone. One eye was gone, the socket a wet dark pit full of ash.

Rook swallowed hard. "Sorry," she said, reflexively.

The corpse's hand was clutching something flat. A map. Not a crumpled paper scrap, but a tough, laminated polymer sheet, edges sealed, surface glossy in a way that felt obscene out here. It had the faint grid lines of an old USGS

survey, and over that, in newer ink, someone had drawn a route with a steady hand.

She took it carefully.

The ink was dark and fresh enough to shine. The markings were specific: rad pockets circled with "NO," sinkholes marked with little teeth symbols, and a thick line running in a careful curve, avoiding the worst of the Sea.

At three points along the route, someone had written the same phrase: FOLLOW THE BROKEN TOOTH.

At the end, a box labeled LANTERN.

Under that, a final note in tight, angled letters: *IF YOU HEAR SINGING, YOU'RE TOO CLOSE.*

Rook frowned. *Singing?*

Her Geiger's clicking spiked. The wind shifted again, and she felt a crawling warmth on her skin.

She glanced back at the corpse. Recent, but already cooked.

"Why were you carrying this?" she asked the dead scavver, not expecting a response. "And why weren't you wearing any protection?"

Rook folded the map once, almost reverently, like folding a flag, and slid it into the inner pocket of her coat. Then, like a hundred times before, she checked the dead person's pockets.

A few caps. A bent spoon. A single Rad-X vial, empty. A note in shaky handwriting: *"Tell Wren I'm sorry."*

Rook stopped with the note between two fingers, then tucked it back where she'd found it. She stood, and the wind tried to push her for-

ward. "Alright," she said to nobody. "Let's see if you're a liar."

She followed the map's route, the thick line guiding her around a low basin where her Geiger screamed even from twenty paces away. The air there shimmered faintly, heat distortion like a mirage. A rad pool, maybe. Or something worse.

She skirted it, boots crunching glassy grit. Her throat burned under the scarf. The old radiation scars on her forearm itched.

Twenty minutes in, she hit the first "impossible" landmark. It was a pre-war utility pole, snapped and charred, leaning at a drunken angle. Someone had painted the number '19' on it.

The map had a circle around that spot, with a note: "TURN AT 19. DON'T CROSS THE BASALT."

Basalt? What is that? Rook looked at the ground. The patch of sediment was darker, smoother. It looked solid. Her Geiger clicked faster when she stepped toward it.

"Yeah," she whispered. "No."

She stayed on the route, and for a while, God help her, it worked.

She moved from landmark to landmark: the corner of a foundation with a twisted rebar "hook" sticking up like a finger, the bent spine of a billboard half buried in ash, a cracked culvert that exhaled warm air like something breathing. Each one matched the map.

Then the radstorm hit.

The sky went from pale sickly gray to bruised green and yellow in under a minute. The wind gained teeth. Ash turned to needles. Her Geiger



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went from chatter to a steady rattle like someone shaking a jar of pebbles in her ear.

Rook sprinted, head down, eyes watering. She scanned for shelter—anything. A culvert, a truck, a crumbling wall.

She found an old bus on its side, half-buried, with its windows blown out. The metal was warped like it had been in a fire. Still, it was better than open air.

She dove inside and curled up against the

floor, pulling her coat tight around her ribs. The bus smelled like rust and old smoke. The wind roared through broken seams.

Lightning flashed in the ash cloud outside, blue-white and wrong. For a second the world lit up and she saw her own hands shaking. She counted her breaths. In. Out. In. Out.

A sound came from outside the bus.

Heavy footsteps.

Rook froze, hand on her pistol, heart thumping loud enough she thought it would draw attention.

The footsteps stopped.

A shadow fell across the bus opening. Enormous. Broad shoulders. A silhouette framed in radstorm lightning like something from a child's nightmare.

"Human... in my bus," a voice rumbled, low and thick.

Rook's mouth went dry. Her pistol felt like a toy, but she raised it anyway, just because. "Keep walking," she said. "Find your own rust bucket."

The shadow stepped closer.

Lightning flashed again.

A super mutant filled the opening—green skin mottled with scars, heavy brow, thick lips pulled back just enough to show big, square teeth. He wore a harness of scavenged straps and metal plates, and his hands were big enough to crush her skull without effort.

He looked at her face, and his nostrils flared. "You smell like..." He squinted, thinking hard.

"Edge people. Not city. Not Diamond."

"Congratulations," Rook said, trying to keep her voice steady. "You can smell."

He didn't lunge. He didn't laugh. He just stared, as if deciding whether she was worth the trouble of killing. Behind him, the radstorm screamed. He stepped inside the bus, ducking his head. The metal frame groaned.

Rook's pistol tracked him.

He lifted both hands, palms out—not surrender, more like *don't do anything stupid*. "Not here," he said. "Storm kills both."

"Storm doesn't eat people," Rook shot back.

He frowned, offended. "I no eat people."

Rook blinked. "Sure, you don't."

The super mutant leaned closer. He stank of oil, grime, and fresh blood. His gaze dropped to her coat pocket. "You have something," he said.

Rook's grip tightened. "No."

He tilted his head, listening—not to her, but to something beyond the bus, something she couldn't hear over the storm. Then he reached forward shockingly fast and hooked two fingers into her coat, yanking her toward him.

Rook slammed her pistol into his chest and fired. The shot was deafening inside the bus.

The mutant jerked back. The bullet flattened against a metal plate in his harness and fell with a tink.

He stared at the plate, then back at her, eyes narrowing. "Rude," he said.

Rook scrambled backward, boots slipping on

the bus's tilted floor. "Get the hell away from me!"

The mutant reached again, but not for her. This time for her coat pocket. He grabbed the map.

Rook lunged, clawing at his wrist that was as thick as her thigh.

He flicked her off like an annoyance, and Rook hit the bus wall hard enough to see stars. The mutant unfolded the map with surprising care, big fingers gentle on the plastic. His eyes moved over the ink.

His breathing changed.

A sound escaped him that wasn't a laugh. It was a sick, bitter little grunt. "Stupid," he said. "Stupid map."

Rook pushed herself up, dizzy. "Give that back."

He didn't look at her. He stared at the phrase FOLLOW THE BROKEN TOOTH like it had insulted him personally. Then his eyes found the label LANTERN. For a second, just a second, the mask slipped.

Something old and human flickered behind those beady eyes. He swallowed. "No," he said, voice rough. "No, no. Not again."

Rook's stomach tightened. "You know what it is?"

He held the map up between them like evidence in a trial. "This map," he said, and his voice gained weight, "is *liar's map*."

"Seems pretty accurate so far," Rook said.

He bared his teeth. "Not same as *true*."

Outside, lightning cracked again, and for a

moment the ash glowed green. The bus rattled like it wanted to come apart.

The mutant squeezed closer until he was too close, and Rook had to fight the instinct to press herself into the wall.

"You go to LANTERN," he said quietly, "you don't come back same. Maybe not at all."

Rook lifted her chin. "I'm already not coming back the same."

He studied her. Was that a trace of sympathy in his yellowed eyes?

Then, from somewhere in the storm, a different sound carried faintly through the howl of wind. Not thunder. Not Geiger clicks. A distant, tinny melody—thin and warped, like a speaker underwater.

Singing.

Rook's blood went cold.

The mutant's eyes narrowed to slits. "That," he said, voice like gravel, "is why."

The song drifted closer, broken by static, a cheerful pre-war tune wobbling on the wind.

Rook stared at the map in the mutant's hands, and for the first time since she'd stepped into the Sea, she wondered if the route wasn't leading *to something*. Maybe it was leading *away from something*.

The mutant folded the map, shoved it into his harness, and looked past her into the storm as if he could see through it. "We leave," he said.

Rook swallowed. "You're *not taking my map*."

He looked down at her like she was a child

arguing over a toy in a house fire. "I am," he said. "You go alone, you die."

"And if I go with you?"

His mouth twitched—almost a smile, but not kind. "Maybe we both die," he said. "But slower."

The song outside sharpened for a second, louder, and then cut off like someone had flipped a switch. In the sudden absence of it, the silence felt worse.

Rook realized her hands were shaking again. "Fine," she said, hating the word as it left her mouth. "Lead."

The mutant nodded once. "Name," he demanded.

"Rook."

He grunted. "I am Graft."

Rook stared at him. "That's a name?"

Graft shrugged, as if names were just things you used until they broke. "It works."

Outside, something heavy moved through the ash. It was too big to be a person, too low to the ground to be a building shifting. Rook's Geiger began to scream.

Graft's head snapped toward the sound. He put a hand on the bus frame, bracing, and his voice dropped to a warning. "Quiet," he said. "Broken Tooth is close."

Rook's throat tightened. The Glowing Sea's cliff edge yawned wider.

Somewhere out in the ash, something listened.

2 BROKEN TOOTH

THEY MOVED WHEN THE RADSTORM SOFTENED, WHEN THE WIND EASED AND NO LONGER BURNED LIKE SANDPAPER.

Graft went first, his enormous, green feet sinking into the ash as he leapt from the bus. Rook followed, keeping one hand on the rusted frame as she climbed out, the other on her pistol.

"No waste bullets," Graft said without looking back.

"Didn't ask for your advice," Rook answered.

He snorted. "Shot me. Bullet wasted."

"Made me feel better."

Graft paused long enough to glance at her. "That is stupid reason."

Rook squinted into the haze, her breath heavy behind the improvised respirator hidden by a thin scarf. "The wasteland runs on stupidity."

Graft led her along the map line, stopping at landmarks that meant nothing to her and apparently everything to him. A twisted chunk of rebar that looked like a hook. A cracked slab of asphalt shaped like a fish. A collapsed wall where someone had painted a faded blue stripe.

"Here," Graft said, tapping the ground with a thick finger. "Old path under ash."

Rook stared. "You can see that?"

Graft huffed. "I can smell it. Asphalt smell different from dirt. Also... memory."

That word again—memory, like a splinter he couldn't pull out.

They reached the "broken tooth" near midday.

It was a radio tower once, long ago. Now it was a jagged skeletal stump of metal jutting from the ground at an angle, snapped off halfway up like a molar broken at the root. The ash around it had hardened into glassy sheets. Wind sang through the torn metal with a thin, warbling whistle.

Rook approached carefully, boots crunching. The map had a mark here: a tiny tooth symbol, and the note TURN WEST. COUNT THREE SINKHOLES.

Rook leaned close to the map as Graft held it up. "You trust this?"

Graft's big thumb smudged over a section of ink. "I trust some of it. Not all."

"Why?"

He hesitated. Then he pointed at a line that looked slightly thicker, slightly darker, like someone had gone over it.

"Here," he said. "This part... newer."

Rook frowned. "It's all new."

"No," he insisted, and his eyes narrowed. "Some new. Some... newer. Different hand."

Rook felt a chill that had nothing to do with the poisoned wind. "Someone changed it?"

Graft nodded.

"Why?"

The super mutant's jaw clenched. "To lead wrong people. Or to kill right people."

"Comforting," Rook muttered.

They walked. The first sinkhole was easy: a round depression filled with black water that shimmered faintly. The Geiger clicked fast near it, and Rook kept her distance. The second sinkhole was worse. It was a jagged split in the earth with warm air rising from it, smelling like wet copper.

The third wasn't on the ground at all. It was a hole in a house.

A half-buried pre-war home, its roof collapsed, one wall still standing like a stubborn relic. The foundation had caved inward, creating a sinkhole inside the living room. Sunlight fell into it at an angle, revealing a drop into darkness.

Rook peered over the edge and saw old furniture wedged at odd angles, a couch half swallowed, a child's plastic toy truck caught on a beam.

A human hand protruded from the dirt near the edge, pale and swollen, fingers curled like it was still trying to claw out.

Rook's stomach turned.

Graft crouched, sniffed. "Fresh-ish."

"Define 'fresh.'"

Graft shrugged. "Not skeleton."

Rook swallowed bile. "So someone fell in."

"No," Graft said, voice flat. He pointed at boot prints in the ash. There were multiple sets, heavy and deliberate, leading to the hole. And drag marks, like they were pulling something.

Rook's eyes narrowed. "He was thrown in."

Graft grunted. "Yes."

Rook looked around. The ash plain was wide and empty, but she felt watched.

A weird sound like clattering metal broke the silence. Then a cheerful voice crackled through a speaker somewhere nearby: "Hellooo valued citizens! This is your friendly neighborhood service unit, reminding you to remain calm during routine containment—"

The voice stuttered, warped by static. "—routine con—con—contain—"

It cut off with a squeal.

Rook froze. "What the hell was that?"

Graft's face tightened. "Singing machine. Not singing now. Talking."

Rook glanced back at the map note: IF YOU HEAR SINGING, YOU'RE TOO CLOSE.

"Is it close?" she whispered.

Graft stared at the half-buried house. "Closer."

They found shelter that night in a maintenance tunnel, an old service conduit running under the ash, exposed by a fissure. It smelled like mold and rust, but the Geiger quieted down inside, clicking slow and tolerable.

Rook sat with her back against the cold concrete and took inventory like a ritual: two RadAway, one Rad-X, half a canteen, a pouch of jerky that tasted like smoke and old salt, thirty-two rounds of .38, one flare.

Graft sat opposite her, huge in the cramped space, knees drawn up awkwardly. He had a bag of something that looked like old military ra-



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tions, and he chewed them with grim patience.

Rook watched him. "So," she said, keeping her voice casual because casual was safer than scared, "why are you out here?"

She stared without meaning to. She had never seen a mutant up close before. Not a living one, anyway. The deep lines in his face, once conveying adrenaline-fueled rage, made him look old, weary. Even elderly.

Graff's eyes flicked to hers. "Why you out here?"

"I asked first."

He snorted. "Human rule. Stupid."

Rook's mouth twitched despite herself. "It's tradition."

Graff chewed, thought, then said, "I live here."

"In the Glowing Sea?" Rook stared. "Why?"

Graff's gaze drifted to the tunnel ceiling. "Quiet. No people screaming at me. No Brotherhood flying metal birds."

"Still plenty of screaming," Rook muttered, lis-

tening to the wind above them.

Graff's jaw tightened. "Not that kind."

Rook hesitated, then pulled the map out of his harness while he watched, not stopping her. The plastic felt colder than it should. "You said you knew 'Broken Tooth,'" she said. "What is LAN-TERN?"

Graff's hands flexed. The tunnel seemed to shrink around his silence. "It was place," he said finally. "Before."

"Before what?" Rook pressed.

Graff's lips pulled back, not in a smile, and his eyes darkened. "Before I was... this."

"You were human." Rook examined the map carefully with a penlight, and its red lens caught something she hadn't noticed before. Under 'LANTERN' was scrawled the word 'CLEANSRING.' It was nearly invisible, like someone tried to erase it. Rook felt her heartbeat in her throat.

She opened her mouth to ask more, but the tunnel lights flickered on. They were not bright overhead lights but weak yellow strips glowing to life along the wall, one by one, like the tunnel was waking up.

She shot to her feet, pistol up.

Graff stood too fast, head nearly hitting the ceiling. He stared at the lights with a mix of anger and dread.

A speaker crackled overhead, and a thin, cheerful melody began—warped, tinny, singing.

Rook's stomach dropped.

Graff's voice went low. "We are too close."

The song grew louder, and beneath it a mechanical voice tried to talk through the music:

“—welcome back, authorized personnel. Custodial protocols are now in effect—”

Somewhere deeper in the tunnel, a door clanked. Then another. A heavy, slow rhythm, like something large was unlocking itself.

Rook’s Geiger began to chatter again.

Graft grabbed her by the sleeve, not hard, but urgent, and pulled her toward the darkness ahead. “We go,” he said.

“Where?”

The mutant’s eyes reflected the weak yellow light, and for the first time, showed fear. “To LANTERN,” he said. “Before it comes to us.”

And the singing followed them into the dark.

3 LANTERN

THE TUNNEL LED DOWNWARD IN A LONG SLOPE, CONCRETE WALLS SWEATING. THE YELLOW LIGHTS FLICKERED AS THEY RAN, THROWING THE SUPER MUTANT’S SHADOW HUGE AND MISSHAPEN AHEAD OF THEM.

Behind them, the singing continued... cheerful, relentless, as if the song itself was pushing them along.

They reached a split: one corridor collapsed, rubble piled like a deadfall; the other marked by a metal sign half peeled from the wall.

LANTERN — AUTHORIZED ACCESS ONLY

Rook’s mouth went dry. “It’s... real.”

Graft didn’t answer. He looked at the sign like it offended him.

The speaker crackled overhead. “—custodial breach detected. Assets must remain in designated zones—”

Rook’s grip tightened on her pistol. “Assets?”

Graft’s voice came out hoarse. “People.”

They moved into the LANTERN corridor, and the air changed. Less mold. More antiseptic, residue of it clinging to metal. Old world clean, spoiled into something sour over the centuries.

A security door stood ahead, half buried in debris. A keypad beside it blinked weakly, like a

dying heartbeat.

For the first time in days, Rook dropped the scarf from her face and removed her makeshift respirator. The stale air filled her lungs. It felt... good. She knelt, tool kit out. “I can bypass—”

Graft shoved past her. He stared at the keypad, head tilted, lips moving silently. Then his thick finger pressed four numbers. The keypad beeped. The door clicked.

Rook froze, staring up at him. “How did you—”

Graft didn’t look at her. “Hands remember.”

The door began to slide open with a groan, metal protesting after two centuries of silence. The singing stopped. For a heartbeat, the corridor was quiet enough to hear Rook’s pulse, then the door opened fully... And a gust of cold, stale air rolled out, carrying a smell that made Rook’s eyes water.

Old blood. Old chemicals. And something faintly sweet beneath it, like rot wearing perfume.

They stepped inside. The facility beyond was dim, emergency lights painting everything in dull red. The floor was polished tile under a layer of dust. The walls were lined with glass that looked into rooms full of upright desks and chairs.

A receptionist counter sat abandoned, a little bell still perched neatly on top as if someone might ring it and ask for directions.

Rook swallowed. “This place looks like it closed yesterday.”

Graft’s shoulders rose and fell. “Never closed. Just... waited.”

A "Mister Handy" robot drifted into view around a corner, one thruster sputtering, eye lens cracked. Its metal body was soot-stained, but a little bow tie was still clipped to its chassis, absurdly intact. It rotated toward them, saw Graft, and froze.

"Oh!" it chirped, voice overly bright. "Authorized personnel detected. Custodial unit SIR-7/LANTERN reporting for duty."

Rook's pistol rose automatically.

The Mister Handy's saw arm twitched, then retracted politely. "Please remain calm." It made a little whirring noise that might have been meant as a laugh. "Containment protocols are designed for your safety and comfort."

Graft stared at it. His jaw worked. "SIR," Graft rumbled, voice vibrating with restrained violence, "you still here."

"Of course!" the robot said. "I have been maintaining LANTERN's standards for two hundred and eight years, three months, and—"

Its voice stuttered, then resumed.

"—and fourteen days. Would you like a refreshment? A towel? A complimentary orientation pamphlet?"

Rook's eyes flicked to the robot's underside. Something old, dried, and dark was smeared on its casing. "No refreshments," Rook said sharply. "Just directions."

SIR-7 rotated, eye lens focusing. "Destination?"

Rook pulled out the map and pointed to the label. "LANTERN." Then, guessing, "CLEANSPRING?"

The robot's thrusters sputtered, and its voice dropped half a pitch, losing some of its cheer. "CLEANSPRING is a restricted resource."

Graft's hands clenched into fists.

"Sounds like we need it."

"Need is not authorization," the robot replied. Then, as if remembering itself, it brightened again: "However! Authorized personnel may request an exception via intake. Please proceed to ASSET PROCESSING."

Rook and Graft exchanged a look.

"Asset processing," Rook repeated. "Lovely."

They moved deeper. The halls were labeled with cheerful, bureaucratic signage: WELLNESS, COMPLIANCE, INTAKE, COUNSELING. Words meant to sound gentle, lull you into a false sense of security.

They passed a room with rows of chairs bolted to the floor. A children's corner in one, tiny plastic chairs, a faded cartoon poster of a smiling atom character giving a thumbs-up.

Rook's stomach twisted. "They kept families," she whispered.

Graft's voice was flat. "Kept everything."

They reached INTAKE, and the door was already open. Inside, the walls were covered in old forms pinned to boards. A desk sat in the center with a terminal on it. Behind the desk, a thick glass window looked into a room with restraints bolted to the floor.

Rook stepped in, boots scuffing dust. Her light swept across the floor and found the bones. Not scattered like after a fight. Arranged.

A circle of skeletons sat propped against the walls, backs to tile, legs stretched out like they'd sat down to rest and never stood up again. Some still wore lab coats. One had a clipboard tucked under its arm.

Rook's throat tightened. "They... waited."

Graft's face hardened, but his eyes didn't leave the terminal.

Rook approached it, wiping dust from the screen. The monitor flickered on with a soft hum. A login prompt appeared.

Graft leaned in. His big finger hovered over the keys.

Rook caught his wrist. "Wait. You remember passwords now?" She was confused. Had he lured her here? Was she going to end up like those others?

Graft's gaze dropped to her hand on his wrist. He didn't pull away. "Not password," he said. "Name."

Rook swallowed. "What name?"

Graft's voice was a rasp. "Harlan." He pressed the keys slowly: H A R L A N. The terminal beeped. A file list appeared, and at the top, in bold letters:

ASSET INTAKE — SUBJECT G-7 (HARLAN) — STATUS: TRANSFERRED

Rook felt the hairs on her arms rise.

Graft stared at the screen like it was a mirror showing him something he didn't want to see. Behind them, the Mister Handy drifted into the doorway, eye lens whirring.

"Congratulations!" it chirped. "ASSET PRO-

CESSING has recognized authorized personnel. Please proceed to COMPLIANCE for corrective evaluation."

Rook's voice went tight. "Corrective evaluation?"

The robot's saw arm extended a fraction, then retracted again, polite as ever. "All returning assets must be assessed for contamination, deviance, and compliance."

Graft's breathing grew heavy. His hands shook.

Rook looked up at him. "Graft—*Harlan*—listen to me. We're not doing 'evaluation.' We find this CLEANSRING, whatever it is, and we leave."

Graft swallowed hard. "They... did this."

"Yeah," Rook said, voice hardening. "And now we're going to take something from them. Something that might save the lives of people I care about."

The distant sound of boots echoed through the facility. They were measured, disciplined steps.

"We're not alone," Rook whispered, stiffening.

Graft's head snapped toward the hall, nostrils flaring. "Metal. Oil. Gunpowder."

Rook's stomach dropped. "*Gunners.*"

The Mister Handy tilted its body, as if puzzled. "Unauthorized personnel detected." Its voice brightened with unsettling enthusiasm. "Initiating containment measures."

The lights overhead shifted from white to flashing red. And somewhere deeper, a heavy



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door began to slowly open, with the grind of old machinery forcing itself to life.

Rook's Geiger clicked faster. She grabbed the map and shoved it in the super mutant's face. "Where's CLEANSRING?"

Graft's eyes were wild, but focused. He pointed down the hall. "WELLNESS wing?" he said. It sounded like a guess. "Near... farm?"

"Farm?" Rook repeated.

Graft's mouth twisted. "Fake farm. For assets.

To make them... calm."

The echoing footsteps grew louder. A voice called out from the corridor, muffled but clear enough: "Spread out!"

Graft moved, grabbing Rook by the shoulder and pulling her toward the wellness wing. They sprinted, the facility's lights strobing.

Rook's heart pounded. "How many Gunners?"

"Too many," Graft growled.

They turned a corner into a hall lined with

murals of smiling families holding watering cans. A door at the end was labeled:

CLEANSRING — AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT UNIT (FIELD)

"There!" Rook's breath caught, and she rushed the door. It was locked. *Of course it was locked.*

Graft shoved her aside, then planted both hands on the handle and ripped. Metal screamed. The handle tore free.

The door remained shut.

Rook cursed. "It's reinforced!"

Graft bared his teeth. "Then we break wall."

He stepped back—And the facility's speaker system came to life again, the cheerful song returning, louder now, layered with the Mister Handy's voice: "Containment breach in progress. Lockdown will commence in thirty seconds."

Rook looked at the door. Looked at the hall behind them, where a dozen shadows moved and gun barrels glinted. "Graft," she said, voice tight, "if lockdown hits, we're trapped."

Graft's eyes met hers. For the first time, he looked less like a monster and more like a man standing in the wreckage of his own past. "Then," he said, "we take what we can carry."

The door's seams began to hiss.

Lockdown was starting, and the Gunners were almost at the corner.

4 CLEANSRING

ROOK DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO BE CLEVER—SHE HAD TIME TO BE FAST.

Above the door to the AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT UNIT, a red light blinked: LOCK-DOWN ACTIVE. Rook stared at the door, its handle broken, then at the wall beside it. The wall was older concrete, poured thick, but not meant to stop someone like Graft.

"Do it," she snapped.

Graft nodded once, stepped back, and drove his oversized shoulder into the concrete. The impact boomed down the corridor. Dust puffed out like breath. He hit it again, and cracks spiderwebbed.

A Gunner's voice barked from behind them: "Flash—NOW!" A canister clattered on the tile and spit white light.

Rook turned her face away, eyes squeezed shut, and blindly fired her pipe pistol toward the sound, not sure if she would even hit anything.

Graft roared, more in anger than pain, and slammed the wall again.

This time it broke.

A jagged hole opened into a room beyond, and cold, nitrate rich air rolled out, clean enough

to make Rook's lungs ache with how different it was. Inside the cavernous space, amidst rows of hydroponics stations and raised beds bathed in dim emergency lighting, sat the CLEANSRING unit.

It wasn't beautiful.

It was a squat, modular system strapped to a pallet: a soil scrubbing tank the size of a refrigerator, a bundle of filter housings, two sealed cartridge canisters stamped with pre-war logos, and a small water-treatment unit with hoses coiled like sleeping snakes. A faded manual lay in a plastic bin labeled FIELD MAINTENANCE.

Rook's heart lifted, then immediately dropped when she saw the floor. There were bones here too.

A skeleton lay curled beside the unit, arms around the manual bin like it had tried to protect it. Another lay near the hose reel, ribs cracked outward. The floor was stained dark in places where old blood had soaked into concrete and never fully left.

Rook swallowed. "They died trying to keep this running."

"Or died trying to take it," Graft growled, grabbing the unit's strap harness.

Rook lunged for the manual bin and yanked it up. The back cover was plain, bureaucratic, but contained the following disclaimer in bold letters:

OUTPUT CAPACITY: LIMITED — SUPPORTS UP TO 30 PERSONS WITH PROPER MAINTENANCE.

Thirty. Not salvation, but a future.



CREATED WITH GPT-IMAGE-1.5

CLEANSRING AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

THE CLEANSRING SYSTEM WAS DESIGNED AS A SELF-CONTAINED SOIL AND WATER REMEDIATION PLATFORM INTENDED TO SUSTAIN SMALL, ISOLATED POPULATIONS UNDER ADVERSE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS. UNLIKE LARGE-SCALE PURIFICATION INSTALLATIONS,

CLEANSRING WAS ENGINEERED FOR **LOCALIZED STABILITY**, NOT MASS OUTPUT. CAPABLE OF SUPPORTING APPROXIMATELY TWO TO THREE DOZEN INDIVIDUALS WITH POTABLE WATER AND MARGINALLY DECONTAMINATED CROP YIELDS WHEN PROPERLY MAINTAINED.

THE SYSTEM COMBINES THREE PRIMARY SUBSYSTEMS MOUNTED ON A REINFORCED TRANSPORT PALLET: A **SOIL SCRUBBING TANK**, WHICH USES LAYERED CHEMICAL RESINS AND MICROBIAL CATALYSTS TO REDUCE RADIO-NUCLIDE UPTAKE IN CROPS; A **WATER-TREATMENT MODULE**, EMPLOYING PARTICULATE FILTRATION AND LOW-GRADE RADIATION SEPARATION; AND A **DUAL-CARTRIDGE FILTRATION ASSEMBLY**, UTILIZING REPLACEABLE PRE-WAR COMPOSITE MEDIA STAMPED WITH CIVILIAN DEFENSE AND VAULT-TEC CONTRACTOR MARKINGS. FLEXIBLE HOSE LINES ALLOW MODULAR ROUTING, WHILE ONBOARD PRESSURE GAUGES AND MANUAL VALVES PERMIT OPERATION WITHOUT ADVANCED DIAGNOSTICS.

THE SYSTEM REQUIRES FREQUENT CARTRIDGE REPLACEMENT, CAREFUL CALIBRATION, AND A STABLE POWER SOURCE, WITH FAILURE RATES INCREASING SHARPLY IF MAINTENANCE SCHEDULES ARE IGNORED. IT WAS NEVER INTENDED TO RESTORE ECOSYSTEMS—ONLY TO KEEP DESIGNATED POPULATIONS ALIVE LONG ENOUGH FOR “LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS” TO ARRIVE.

The Gunners rounded the corner. Four of them in patched, dirty combat armor, each piece crudely stenciled with a faded white skull symbol. Their leader, a man with a scar running down his cheek, moved with a menacing calm.

He didn’t shoot immediately. He simply aimed, assessing the threat: one young woman and an unarmed super mutant. They hardly seemed worth the ammunition expenditure.

“Easy,” he called out. “Don’t make any sudden movements.”

“We got here first!” Rook protested.

The leader smiled like she’d told a joke. “That’s cute.”

His eyes flicked to Graft. “Big guy—step away from the filtration unit and keep those paws where I can see ‘em. You’re a lot of trouble, and trouble’s expensive for me.”

Graft’s lips peeled back. “You are in wrong house.”

The Gunner leader’s smile tightened. “But it’s got valuable furniture.”

He nodded, and another Gunner lifted a rifle, sighting down at Rook’s hands, which still shakily clutched her kitbashed pistol.

Then, from behind the Gunners, SIR-7, the Mister Handy robot, drifted into view, bow tie bobbing.

“Unauthorized personnel are in violation of containment protocols.” Its voice brightened. “Please remain calm while corrective measures are applied.”

The Gunner leader didn’t even look at it. “Shut

up, toaster.”

SIR-7’s saw arm whirred and a beam of light flashed—some kind of cutting torch, small but vicious.

It struck the Gunner on the left across the neck.

It was not a clean decapitation. The beam burned through armor plating, through flesh, through tendon. The Gunner screamed once, high and surprised, and then his head rolled, half-attached, steaming hot blood into the cold air. He fell, gurgling wetly, hands clawing at his throat in reflex.

Rook flinched.

The Gunner leader swore, finally losing his calm. “Kill that damn robot!”

They opened fire, and bullets sparked off tile and metal. SIR-7’s casing took hits, spun, and slammed into the wall, thrusters sputtering wildly. Its cheerful voice turned ragged with static, still trying to keep its tone polite:

“Please—remain—calm—”

Graft moved. He didn’t charge like a beast, but fast and hard, like a bowling ball gliding toward the pins. He grabbed the nearest Gunner by the chest plate and lifted him one-handed. The man’s legs kicked, boots scraping air.

“GAH—” the Gunner choked.

Graft slammed him onto the floor hard enough to crack the armor. The man’s spine snapped with a sound like breaking wood, and he went limp.

The Gunner leader opened fire wildly.

Rook fired back. Her .38 wasn't a hero's caliber, but she was just trying to make space.

The two remaining Gunners ducked for cover, and Rook sprinted forward, shoving the CLEANSRING manual bin into her bag with her free hand.

"Graft!" she shouted. "Modules!"

Graft had already grabbed the two sealed cartridge canisters under one arm and yanked the water-treatment unit free with his other hand, hoses whipping.

Rook stared at the soil scrubber tank. It was too big, too heavy. "We can't take all of it," she gasped.

Graft's eyes flicked to the tank, then to her, and something like grim acceptance settled over his face.

"Take brain," he rumbled, tapping the manual bin. "Take heart," he said, hefting the cartridges. "Body... later."

"There won't be later."

Graft looked past her, toward the facility's deeper halls where the singing still warbled. "Maybe not," he said. "But tomorrow, you live."

The Gunner leader backed toward the corridor, bleeding from a shallow cut along his scalp where Rook's bullet had grazed. His calm was gone now, replaced with cold calculation.

"You're not leaving with that," he said, voice flat. He tossed something toward them, a small device that clattered along the floor.

Rook's eyes widened. "Grenade—!"

Graft didn't hesitate. He shoved Rook back,

then turned and hurled one of the dead Gunners' bodies toward the beeping device.

The explosion was sharp, contained. The corpse took most of it, armor shredding, meat vaporizing in a wet mist that splattered the room like paint. It was ugly, sudden, and not remotely cinematic.

Graft staggered, shrapnel peppering his shoulder and neck. Dark blood ran down his arm, but he didn't fall. He grabbed Rook's sleeve and pushed her through the hole in the wall.

"Move!"

They ran.

The facility's speaker system rose into full, cheerful hysteria. "Lockdown escalation. Assets must remain in place. Please—remain—calm—"

The singing resumed, louder, with a new layer: a child's voice, prerecorded, reciting something like a pledge, warped into eerie nonsense by broken speakers.

Rook's skin crawled.

They sprinted past murals and empty offices, past the intake room where skeletons sat in their patient circle. Behind them, the Gunner leader shouted orders, trying to round up the remainder of his men who had split off to explore the facility. He was still breathing, still hunting.



CREATED WITH GPT-IMAGE-1.5

They reached the security door where Rook had first seen the sign. It was closing slowly, inexorably.

Rook's eyes went wide. "No—!"

Graft shoved the modules through first, then Rook.

She stumbled out into the corridor beyond as the door kept sliding.

Graft was still inside.

For a heartbeat, Rook saw him framed by the narrowing gap: massive, bleeding, eyes bright with something fierce.

"Harlan!" she screamed, using his human name and grabbing the door edge with both hands. "Don't you—"

Graft shoved the last canister through to her

and shook his head once, then reached into his harness and pulled out the map, the liar's map, and thrust it toward her. "Take," he growled. "Fix it. Make true."

Rook's fingers closed around the map. "Come with me! You'll die in there."

Graft's mouth twisted into an expression not quite a smile, not quite sorrow. "I can't," he said as the door narrowed. Graft's gaze turned, toward the hallway where the Gunners' silhouettes appeared, weapons raised. "Harlan died here," he said. "I end it."

Then he lifted his hand, palm out in a commanding gesture. "Go!"

The door sealed with a final, heavy THUNK.

Rook stumbled back, clutching the map and the cartridges. Her Geiger clicked in her ear like a nervous habit.

Inside, muffled by steel, she heard one last burst of gunfire, then a deeper sound, a grinding roar of collapsing machinery, like Graft was tearing the facility's guts out by hand.

The singing cut off mid-note. Silence returned, heavy as the radioactive ash that blanketed the Glowing Sea.

Rook stood there for a long second, shaking. Then she did what the wasteland demanded. She turned and ran.

* * *

The trip back wasn't heroic. It was a slog through poison with a prize that felt heavier with every mile. She used RadAway when her vision began to blur at the edges. She rationed water until her

throat was raw and lips cracked. She slept in shallow bursts, pipe pistol at the ready, waking at every slap of wind.

Twice she thought she saw movement behind her. Once she found boot prints that weren't hers. Either the Gunners had someone else out here, or the Sea was playing tricks. She didn't stop long enough to find out.

When she finally reached the settlement of Juniper Ridge, the guards almost shot her on sight. She must've looked like a ghost: ash-caked, eyes bloodshot, legs trembling under the weight of her backpack.

The settlement was a handful of shacks perched on the edge of livable land, buildings pieced together from whatever they could scavenge, and a few workbenches and trading stalls. Mamaw Della was waiting, wrapped in blankets, her cheeks hollow.

Rook held up CLEANSRING like an offering.

Della stared. "What is that?"

"Hope," Rook replied, voice cracking.

They installed CLEANSRING in the old pump shed over three days, bolting the filter housings to a scavenged frame, rigged hoses with tape and prayer, wired the water-treatment unit to a jury-rigged generator that complained like an old man.

The first time clean water ran into a bucket, the whole settlement stood around it like a religious event. One of the children dipped a finger, tasted, and grinned wide enough to split his dirty face.

People laughed with relief. Someone cried.

Someone clapped Rook on the shoulder hard enough to bruise. But she didn't smile. Not yet.

That night, after the celebration dulled into exhausted sleep, Rook sat alone on the ridge with the map spread out on her lap.

She took a pen and traced the route again. At the "broken tooth," she added a note in her own hand: TRUST THE LANDMARKS. At the end, near LANTERN, she wrote: SEALED. DO NOT OPEN. She double underlined the last remark.

The wind off the Glowing Sea was quiet tonight. The sky was clear enough to see a few stubborn stars. Rook folded the map carefully and tucked it away.

Somewhere out in the ash, she imagined a heavy door, sealed and silent, and a super mutant with blood on his hands making sure it stayed that way. She didn't know if Graft had lived, but Juniper Ridge drank clean water now. It wasn't salvation. It was enough. ❖