The Carousel's A Metaphor
by Azzandra

Summary

Gage really thinks the new Overboss is going to make something out of Nuka-World.

Yes, she certainly intends so. She's going to make a respectable town out of it, whether Raiders like it or not.

(Time to reform this hell-hole.)
How to make friends and influence Raiders

They didn't exactly get off on the right foot.

Understandable to some degree, and Gage could concede that. She didn't exactly sign up to be the wrangler of even one raider gang, much less three, and he did kind of shove her into the role face-first and with no forewarning.

On the other hand, though, he could do with a smidge less sarcasm on the new boss' behalf. She did willfully step into a death trap knowing what was waiting on the other side of that train ride, and without his intervention, she'd be a cooling puddle of viscera on the Cola-Cars arena floor by now.

That first conversation, up in Colter's old digs at the Fizztop Grille, Gage had to make it real clear what would happen to her--to both of them--if she turned down the gig now. And boy, she did try to turn it down.

She was unimpressed. Not the power, not the view, not the whole goddamn potential of the place looked like it stirred any kind of joy in her. Shit, maybe she had her fill of power. Leader of those Minutemen has-beens who were on the up and up again, woman who took down the Institute and Brotherhood of Steel... Maybe having the Commonwealth at her fingertips was enough.

Gage couldn't get a bead on her right away, but that was why they were having this little talk. See what she was made of. Mule-headedness and shit-talking, as far as Gage figured, but there had to be something he could work with.

She made a round of the Fizztop Grille, brushing her fingers over the countertop and scowling at the dust like it wasn't supposed to be there or something (it was just fucking dust, that shit was everywhere, what did she expect), and then she took a Nuka-Cola and tapped the cap off on the edge of the counter. She sat down and drank as she listened to Gage give her the what-for, and fine. Fuckin' great, let her drink that shit, she was going to get sick of the stuff soon.

As long as she remembered that she had to get the gangs on her side to continue enjoying her goddamn soda.

"Don't worry, everybody loves me," she'd quipped in too-cheerful tones.

Gage honestly couldn't tell if she was mocking him or if she was a genuine idiot.

"Yeah, I wouldn't count on that," he said, in case the idiocy was genuine. He saw her performance in the Gauntlet. Some of that shit she pulled seemed like there was some cunning in her head, but then, Gage knew that sometimes, the dumber someone was, the harder they were to kill.

She listened to Gage outline what she had to do, with a far-away look on her face.

When he was done, she nodded, more to herself than Gage.

"I can fix this. I can make this work," she said, and Gage maybe saw the first glimpse of an Overboss, and not just some crazy broad in over her head.
Gage couldn't hand-hold her through meeting with the gang leaders. He was already in deep shit, already seen like the real source of the Colter problem, so he couldn't treat the new Overboss like his puppet. She had to be her own woman, preferably with her screw-ups not reflecting on him more than necessary.

He did have eyes and ears in the gangs, though, and keeping tabs on the new Overboss was technically in his job description.

She went to Nisha first. Gage thought that was a good call at first. Nisha had her moments. When she was reasonable, she was more reasonable than Mason, Mags and William put together.

Then he found out the boss flubbed the meeting. Wasn't completely the boss' fault, maybe. She put her best foot forward. Problem was, this wasn't a tea party in Diamond City, this was a fucking Raider camp. She was lucky that foot didn't get chopped off.

"The Disciples are gross," the boss told Gage point-blank when she relayed her meeting with Nisha.

To her credit, she was at least aware enough to know when she'd screwed up, and confessed there were probably a dozen better things she could have said to Nisha than what ended up coming out of her mouth. She was, at least, perceptive enough to provide details of the meeting that even Gage's contacts in the Disciples hadn't picked up on, or hadn't wanted to reveal to him. There was a lot he'd forgive a boss for the sake of two brain cells to rub together.

Next she'd gone to the Operators.

"Might've left them with the impression I'm some Nuka-Cola nut," she confessed.

Gage had the fortitude not to pinch the bridge of his nose in annoyance.

"They're not very good at picking up sarcasm, are they?" she mused, snorting lightly.

"They're not very good at picking up anything that ain't caps," Gage said.

"Rich kids," she sighed, with a lot more feeling than Gage expected.

As for the meeting with Mason, that one went... surprisingly well.

"I told him if he's a good little dog, I won't have to put him down," she said. "It was incredibly clichéd, and it worked like a charm."

Gage wasn't completely sure he understood how she managed to win Mason's respect in one neat animal metaphor, when the Pack's nuances eluded even him at times. He couldn't discount the fact that maybe Mason and the new boss were on some similar frequency of crazy.

"He gave me a gaudy gun," she said, putting it on the counter, right next to her open Nuka-Cola.

Gage picked it up, checked it out, gave a long, impressed whistle.

"I used to know so many guys like him in college," she said, a glassy look in her eyes. "Frat boys," she said, like she was clarifying, even though that made absolutely nothing clear to Gage. Some pre-War bullshit, maybe.

He'd heard the rumor about her being an icicle, and he did think he could spot the same brand of weird in her that went into this park. He tried not to think about it. Nuka-World could give a man headaches at times.
She opened up a park pamphlet on the table, and her finger went to Kiddie Kingdom first.

"Good place as any to start," she said. "We're going in the morning."

Gage startled at her decisiveness. She'd dragged her feet so much in the beginning, he thought he'd have to badger her into taking the rest of the park. Not hardly, it seemed. Not even the Overboss for a day, and she was already getting a move on.

"Sure thing, boss," Gage agreed quickly, before she changed her mind.

He'd warned her about the radiation in Kiddie Kingdom, of course he had. Didn't want the boss to jump in unprepared, though with all the junk she hauled around in her pack, he couldn't imagine her going in unprepared even if he said nothing at all.

She input something on her Pip-boy, some kind of countdown and alarm, then she took out a bottle of Rad-X and popped two pills into his hand.

Gage popped them into his mouth right away and swallowed them dry.

"Gage!" the boss snapped, and he blinked because he wasn't sure what he did wrong. She pushed a bottle of purified water in his hands. "Don't dry-swallow pills, you're going to mess up your throat. Is that how you always take them?"

"They're just pills, boss. Out of all the things gunning for me, a little Rad-X ain't gonna be the thing that does me in," he replied, annoyed.

"Whatever, tough guy, you won't feel that way when there's a burning hole in your esophagus," she said sternly.

It was bizarre.

She took her own Rad-X with water and a chiding look to Gage (see? This is how you take pills), and they stepped right through Kiddie Kingdom's front door.

"I think we got turned around," she remarked, and squinted at the surrounding walls like she was considering which one to ask for directions.

She got hit by one of the little railcars as she was gaping at the walls, the bumper clipping her calf and sending her limping forwards and swearing. She turned towards the car, already disappeared into the distance, and yelled,

"Learn to drive!"

Which struck Gage as a particularly strange thing to say when the ride was obviously empty of any passenger, much less a driver, but the damn ghoul laughed over the speakers, sending a taunting remark down their way way.
Winding up the Overboss like that was going to get that ghoul killed real bloody, and Gage almost laughed at the thought of it.

The boss' Pip-boy gave a little chirp, as the alarm she'd set went off. She reset the alarm, and then took out the Rad-X and a bottle of water.

This time, she handed Gage the bottle of water first. He obediently drank down the Rad-X pills.

"Hey, boss, that thing about pills burning a hole."

"Yeah?"

"What's an ey-sofa-guss?"

She sighed, her shoulders slumping in exhaustion.

"I'm sure it's something you've seen ripped out of someone at some point," she replied, and he thought maybe she considered that question too stupid to answer. "It's the inside of your throat. The bit you use to swallow things, between your mouth and your stomach." She paused for a beat before adding, "You kinda need that."

Well, alright, Gage was gonna admit that did sound like something he'd need to use on the regular.

"Alright, now let's try this again," the boss muttered, stepping up to one of the colorful maps that were erected throughout the park. Their location was helpfully circled, the words 'You Are Here' scribbled next to it.

It was the most useless goddamn unintuitive piece of shit map in history.

The employee tunnels under Kiddie Kingdom offered a welcome respite from the radiation-soaked park above, especially since even with as much Rad-X as they took, soaking up some rads along the way was unavoidable.

The boss had stretched out on one of the beds, curled around the only pillow that could be found around the place, as a Radaway bag hung from the frame of the upper bunk, sending a steady drip through a tube and into her arm. Gage was less picky, so she sat on the floor as he took his own dose of Radaway, leaning again the edge of the boss' bed and watching the door opposite of the one she was facing.

"Hey, boss," he started, then thought better of it when he realized she might be sleeping.

He peered over his shoulder, but she was faced away, unmoving, only the curve of her silhouette visible against the dim lighting. Gage had switched his eyepatch to the other side when they entered the tunnels, to use his eye that was accustomed to darkness instead. Much better than the boss, who, coming in from the bright day, had squinted in the sudden semi-darkness, and had had to hold onto a wall as she carefully made her way down one stair at a time.

There wasn't anything waiting in the darkness to ambush them, but if there had been, Gage would've seen it, and there'd been other times when this precaution had saved his ass.

"Yeah?" she said faintly after a few seconds of silence, when it was clear Gage wouldn't continue
"You gave any thought to who you're giving this park to once you're done mopping up the ghouls?"

There was a long pause, a sigh on her part. She turned, laying flat on her back, staring up and not at Gage. She'd taken her glasses off, set them on a sidetable, and her face looked weirdly incomplete without them.

"Well, I can't deny I've been having fantasies about those little railcars smashing into the Disciples' shins constantly," she said eventually. "Y'know, like, smack! Yelp! Aah, my foot!" She accompanied this with a comical hand gesture of distress.

"Har har," Gage said flatly. "Seriously now."

"I'm serious," she said, her voice evening out to sober. "They like the Gauntlet? Then I'm sure they're going to find this place just oodles of fun. Just the things they'd use that Funhouse for makes my blood run cold."

"Huh."

"What's 'huh' for?" She turned her head to look at him. There was nothing angry or dangerous in her expression, but Gage was not an incautious man by nature, his lifestyle choice to be a Raider notwithstanding.

"Nothing, I just..." Gage shrugged. "I think it's a good idea."

"As my second in command, shouldn't you be expressing less shock at my good ideas?"

"Considerin' all the lip you gave me about not wanting to be the Overboss?" Gage snorted. "Guess I didn't expect you to take the job so seriously. More serious'n Colter ever did, at least."

"Yeah, well, I'm getting the sense I should be thankful for all the many low bars Colter set for me."

"Spoken like you've met the man."

"I have. I killed him with a squirtgun, remember?" she said flatly.

Gage snorted a laugh at this. More because he remembered that she'd picked that Thirst Zapper up even before he even got her to talk to him on the intercom, and before she could possibly know how useful that little thing would turn out to be.

"But really, boss. Good call."

"After the way the meeting with Nisha went, it's probably the least I could do."

"Not gonna lie, boss, this is gonna soothe some of the feathers you ruffled," Gage agreed. Nisha had found him later that day after meeting her, and he'd gotten an earful about it. "I'd just be careful how you frame it next time you see Nisha."

"Because I don't want to give the impression that I'm scared of her and I'll just roll over so she won't hurt me?" she asked.

That was a bit more astute on her part than Gage had expected, and a bit more direct than he was used to. But it did sum it up pretty well. If Raiders scented blood or weakness, they'd go for the kill.

"I was thinking of just going with 'I fucking despise you all, but I guess I need you, so I'll give you
what you need,'" she suggested.

"Maybe leave that first part as subtext, but yeah, go with that."

"You know what subtext is, but not the word 'esophagus'?" she asked, blinking slowly at him.

"Don't need to know what it's called to know how to rip it out of a man," Gage replied.

"Ah, there's that Raider charm I'm getting used to," she said, and turned on her side again, with her back to Gage.

Gage wasn't sure if that was a criticism or another one of her pithy remarks. He'd only been half-joking, anyway. He'd prop a corpse on a pike no problem, it was just one of those fucked up things you got into the habit of doing as a Raider to let people know who's on top of the pecking order, so at this point it didn't even register as something out of the norm anymore. But ripping out internal organs was more of a Disciples hobby. Not really his dish when it came down to it.

Hell, maybe he was overthinking it. She wouldn't be showing her back if she didn't trust him not to stick something in it. Should probably talk about Colter, though. It was bound to become a sore spot between them if she thought he backstabbed Overbosses on the regular.

When the ghous had finally been ousted, the radiation misters turned off, and the Disciples' flag raised over Kiddie Kingdom, the boss dropped her pack and her weapon, and sprawled onto the step with a weary sigh.

Gage felt that sigh down to his bones. It'd been a rough few days, and honestly, after the runaround they'd been given, it stuck in his craw that she decided to talk the ghoul into leaving instead of just shooting the bastard in the face like he deserved.

But, well, Overbosses were like boots, Gage supposed. You weren't ever going to find them in your exact size, you just needed to find some that didn't chafe too bad or fall apart too soon. He let her have this one.

Gage sat down a few steps down from her, not too close as to not be too intrusive.

"Hey, boss, can we talk now?" he asked.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Yeah, sure, all things considered," he said. There was probably another dose of Radaway in both of their near futures, but he ignored the nauseous throb of rad-sickness for now. "Just been thinking, is all."

She got a look on her face like she was going to go 'uh oh' but stopped herself.

"That whole thing with Colter. I know we talked about it some, but..." She looked at him expectantly. "It could be a sore spot between us, yeah? I mean, here I went and turned on the Overboss. Who's to say I won't do it again?"

He could see her eyelids lower as she considered it.
"The thought crossed my mind," she admitted.

'Course it did. She'd have to have the wind whistling between her ears for her not to think of the possibility even in passing. But, well, here they were, and he hadn't exactly given her any other choice but to trust him for now and... and what? Get rid of him later? Prepare for some inevitable betrayal? Deal with it as it came?

Gage wasn't sure which of those possibilities she'd choose to deal with him if he really was up to double-cross him in the future. She was a grab-bag of crazy-prepared and flying by the seat of her pants that he had a tough time predicting.

Seemed like the type to appreciate honesty, though, so he owned up to it. He owned up being the asshole responsible for the ultimate disaster that Colter became. Admitted that things didn't exactly turn out the way he'd intended. That Colter didn't turn out as intended. He let her know how things stood before she came along.

"He was stubborn. Let shit go to his head. Ain't the first time I've seen it, honestly. But it was one of the worst."

"What are you saying?" she laughed. "You've made a habit out of doing this?"

"No, no. This Nuka-World plan was way bigger than anything I done before. One thing I've learned over the years: being the guy in charge also means you're the guy with the largest target on your back."

She raised an eyebrow at him, quirked a little smile. Oh, she knew all about that. She'd been snide about it when they first met up at the Grille. 'So are you just going to paint the target directly on my back, or what...?'

But, well, he had to face the issue head on. Couldn't ignore it.

"Where are you going with this?" she asked.

"Hell, boss, I ain't good at this... You ain't like Colter. That's what I'm getting at. You ain't like the other Raiders I've run with."

"You could say I'm not a Raider at all," she interjected.

Gage gave her a witheringly deadpan look.

"So far, you make a pretty damn good Overboss," he said, "and it's been fun running with you. I'm just saying. I'm starting to be glad we teamed up, is all."

"Famous last words," she piped.

Gage tilted his head, wondering if that was another joke, some thoughtless quip, or some slip about her intentions. It was in the small things that some people revealed themselves, and paying attention to the small stuff had often saved Gage's life. A little paranoia always paid its way, some other Raider had once told Gage when he was a snot-nosed brat still learning the ropes. Gage remembered that a little more paranoia might've saved that guy from getting a bullet to the face.

"Are they?" he hazarded the question. "Last words, I mean?"

The boss seemed momentarily surprised by the question, and then thoughtful.
"...I guess not," she shrugged eventually. "I've had other people tell me the same, and they're still alive."

Gage was as reassured by that as by anything, and his whatever unease he was feeling behind a grin.

"Way to make me feel special, boss."
In Which Gage Unlocks the Overboss' First Approval Talk

True to her word, the boss gave Nisha her due with very little apparent begrudging. Nisha was too smart to not pick up on the fact that the new Overboss disliked her and her gang, but it soothed her internal sense of fairness to know that the boss would not let petty dislike influence decisions of power and territory.

The boss returned to the Grille afterwards, where she had more Radaway stashed, and Gage followed her reflexively. He didn't even realize he'd done it until she stuck the needle in his arm and hung up his bag of Radaway, and by that point he had to assume she didn't mind his presumption. Sometimes Colter would get prickly about Gage's presence, and Gage had to learn when to become scarce as to not bear the brunt of the man's temper.

The new boss was offering him his pick of refreshments.

"You ever wanted to get into Colter's booze?" she asked.

"Nah," Gage shrugged, careful not to dislodge the needle in his forearm as he sat at the counter. "That shit dulls your senses."

"I understand that's part of the appeal," she said, and brought him some bottle he didn't recognize. The label proclaimed, with a flourish, *Vim!* "You're probably sick to the stomach of Nuka-Cola, huh?"

She poured him a glass of the stuff. It was brown, like Nuka-Cola, but a shade off. It didn't smell alcoholic, and it tastes more bitter than sweet, lacking some metallic aftertaste he'd come to associate with Nuka-Cola. Gage thought he liked it well enough, though. Gave him a bit of the pep that radiation poisoning had sapped out of him throughout the past few days.

The boss sat down across from him, sipping Nuka-Cola straight from the bottle.

"I need to leave for a couple of days," she said. "Maybe three."

Gage tried not no look alarmed.

"I'm not taking the monorail and disappearing into the night, or anything," she reassured. "I just want to check out the lay of the land."

Gage put down his drink.

"Sure, boss," he said carefully. "Be careful, though. Plenty of things outside the walls just itchin' to sink their teeth into you."

"Plenty of things inside the walls, too," she snorted. "This is really going to affect my review of the place."

"Nice place to live, but you wouldn't wanna vacation here, huh, boss?" Gage asked.

"Ain't that the truth," she said, and tapped her bottle against his cup in a sardonic toast.
The next morning, Gage tailed the boss as she headed out the gates. Paranoia paid.

He caught up just as she picked a fight with some Gunner, though she riddled the poor sap with bullets before Gage was even done running up to her.

She gave him a cold look as she shouldered her automatic rifle.

"I'm too old to need a babysitter, Gage," she said.

"Well, that works out fine, since I don't like wipin' snot from anyone's nose," he retorted.

She held his gaze silently for a few seconds. He could already hear the words, the exasperated 'go home, Gage', as she sent him off and proceeded to be a goddamn idiot across the barren landscape.

The words didn't quite form, however, and because she turned away without saying anything, he followed.

They traveled in silence for a while, in a wide arc around Nuka-World, roughly following the roads. He pointed out the towers of the bottling plant to her, and she marked the location on her Pip-Boy.

After checking the map, she took them south, and west, and they ran into more Gunners at an overpass.

"Eyes peeled for Assaultrons," she warned, even as she picked off the Gunners one by one.

Gage spotted the first Assaultron up on the crumbling edge where the overpass dropped off, its lasers burning bright red lines against the night sky, making them easy to avoid. The Gunner up there shot ineffectually, too far away for good aiming. When he came too near the edge, though, the boss managed to get him in the foot with one burst of her automatic rifle, and he fell over the edge, splattering against the ground.

It was kinda funny, though the boss didn't seem to pay it any mind. She looked up, instead, where the Assaultron was pacing in confusion, programming winding down the threat level as nobody was shooting at it anymore, or giving it any instructions.

She made her way to the elevator, and Gage hopped on just as she mashed the button. He was getting a weird feeling about the look on her face, like she was having other concerns than just the Assaultron. Something was happening behind her eyes, and Gage wasn't sure it was anything good. Her finger rubbed almost tenderly over the pin of a fragmentation grenade all the way up.

But he was jarred out of any train of thought when her hand shot past him. Even before the elevator had stopped with a shudder, she'd already chucked two grenades into the shed where the Assaultron was powered down. Before it cycled back up completely, the boss already swept a hail of bullets at its legs, blowing them up and reducing the Assaultron to crawling across the ground.

From there, it was just easy dodging out of the way of the Assaultron's clumsy laser sweep, and gunning it down.

The boss barely even paused before continuing on down the overpass, making bloody sport of every Gunner along the way. She was free-handed with the grenades, almost impatient, the way Gage hadn't seen of her inside the Gauntlet or Kiddie Kingdom. Maybe because this was outdoors, less chance of something breaking off in an explosion and hitting her on the head, but there was something weirdly focused about the boss' expression. She made her way down the length of the overpass, strode across the improvised footbridges the Gunners had built...
Until they reached the dead end. When all the Gunners were dead, and they reached the crumbling edge of the overpass, the boss just... paced.

There was a long chunk of the road just broken off, the next bit of overpass a long way away, but Gage sort of got the alarming thought that she was judging distances, like... like maybe she intended to jump.

"Hey, boss, almost dawn," he said. "Should get some sleep."

Her toes were practically on the edge of the crumbling concrete, her eyes fixed in the distance on the road disappearing into the mountains. She tore her gaze away to look at him.

"Saw some mattresses earlier on," Gage said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of some shacks.

"Yeah," she said. Just 'yeah'.

But she stepped away from the edge, over to the shacks, like nothing was wrong, and Gage wondered if he'd imagined it for a moment there. He looked across the drop, ridiculously wide, so much that nobody would ever mistake it for jumping distance. She couldn't have been thinking of it, and Gage slept better having shrugged off that thought.

When she woke up again around noon, she was perky as a perfectly preserved slice of pie, and Gage was happy to conclude her strange mood was done with.

They took the long road back to Nuka-World, and that road took 'em through the Hubologist camp. Bunch of kooks, but harmless. The world needed people like them so people like Gage had someone to rob, but the boss had a hard time seeing opportunities like these. Leadership, she seemed to know how to handle, but she wasn't no Raider yet.

"Why did only the weirdest shit survive the War?" she asked once they were out of earshot of the Hubologists. "Everybody forgot about crop rotation, but the cult some sci-fi writer founded as a weekend side-project between writing his books is still around."

It was one of those remarks she made sometimes, the off-handed references to the old world that made Gage think it wasn't exactly bullshit that she was some pre-War human icicle.

"Boss," Gage said wearily, "if you don't even know, how the fuck am I supposed to understand anything about your ass-backwards pre-War fuckin' hobbies?"

There was a long pause before the boss responded.

"Well, when you put it that way..." And then she just trailed off.

The Hubologists probably put the idea into her head, because the next park they went to liberate was the Galactic Zone.
Gage couldn't really wrap his head around that robots shit, but the boss made all kind of 'ah-hah!' noises as she went through the terminals, and she seemed to have a good handle on that Starcores shit. Didn't matter to him, he was just going to shoot whatever she pointed him at.

The place must've gotten her in a nostalgic mood, though, because she started telling him about Giddyup Buttercups for some reason.

"Every kid wanted a Giddyup Buttercup when I was growing up," she said, as they were trotting up a ramp to the park's upper levels. "Me and my sister begged Dad every year to get us one for Christmas, but it was always too expensive."

"Ain't that the way shit always goes," Gage grunted, because he got the feeling she expected him to actually participate in this discussion.

"We had some hard years when I was young," she continued, undaunted, "but things picked up steadily. At some point, we stopped just scraping by, and eventually, it was three years since we even had to visit a rationing center, and Dad could finally afford that Giddyup Buttercup for us."

Gage had never seen the appeal, personally. Maybe because these days most of those weird-ass horse things were more valuable as scrap than as toys, and he'd always looked forward to a full belly more than playtime as a kid. But hell, this was her story, might as well let her tell it.

"Unfortunately," she continued, with a wide grin belying her words, "by that point I was sixteen, and my sister was fourteen."

Gage actually laughed at this, as the image unexpectedly rose in his mind of the Overboss, as a solemn baby-faced teenager, trying to ride around on a bright yellow toy horse.

"Money well spent," Gage said.

"Oh, hush," she smacked at him as she peered around a corner. Then she repeated in a more urgent voice, "Hush!", as she spotted something, and took out a pulse grenade.

After the brief skirmish with a Nukatron and a couple of Eyebots, she picked up the story again.

"Anyway, that's how we got into modding," she said, elbow-deep in robot innards and rooting around.

"...What?" Gage asked, not realizing right away that she was picking up the same line of conversation again.

"Yeah, there was a huge Giddyup Buttercup modding scene back then," she said, as she took out a circuit board and blew the dust off it. "Lost of girls who outgrew their Buttercups got into robotics that way. Very simple design, intuitive, came with a detailed manual and you could buy parts from any hardware store. There were even these zines that had a lot of helpful advice for beginners. Geez, most of the girls in my Robotics Club at high school were either reading or writing for those zines."

She flipped over the circuit board, inspecting it. Gage didn't really understand what she was looking for, the way her eyes scanned the object, but she probably knew what she was doing, since she put the thing into her pack.

"It was fun until the crackdowns really started," she sighed, staring off into the distance. "Atomatoys made a legal case that the technology was proprietary and anyone modifying a Buttercup was infringing copyright or some bullshit. Personally, I think it set a dangerous legal precedent which infringed on consumer rights, but since the world blew up, I guess the point is now moot."
Belatedly, she noticed Gage's glazed look.

"Oh, which part of that didn't make sense?" she asked.

"Shit, boss, was any part of that supposed to?" he said.

"I guess it might as well be gibberish these days," she said ruefully. "Used to feel so important back then, but I might be the last person on Earth who even cares about that anymore."

She laughed, but it was strained.

Gage wasn't the most sensitive person, and frankly, he couldn't really understand what it would be to lose an entire world. But the boss was obviously going to be lapsing into that weird mood again, like at the overpass, and that made him more uncomfortable than he was willing to admit.

He cleared his throat.

"So what was all that second part about?" he asked. "Did we move on from robotics to some other subject or am I more unschooled than I was made to believe--" He kicked the remnants of an Eyebot, "--about these hunks a' junk?"

The boss actually turned towards him, bodily, so she could smile.

"It was about law," she said. "I graduated law school, actually. I didn't exactly become a lawyer like Mom always wanted, though. I was more interested in the flashy cases and courtroom theatrics than in the actual, y'know, thankless tedium of filing paperwork, which would have been maybe ninety percent of my work volume."

"Flair for the dramatic, huh?" Gage said, pretty sure he'd understood most of what she just said.

"Oh, yes. Maybe too much. I accepted a job at this kind of... this kind of consulting firm? Um. How do I explain this. Back then there were these people known as 'fixers'. They helped rich people escape the consequences of their actions by manipulating the media, the public, and the legal process."

Gage squinted at her.

"And you were one of these fixers?" he said.

"No, I was more like the person who worked for someone who worked for someone who was a fixer," she said. "Most of it, ironically, was tedious paperwork-filing. But I did occasionally get roped into weird errands. I once had to spill coffee on a guy."

"Why?"

"Oh, because he was going to depose our client. He was a very clean guy. That coffee stain on his shirt threw him off his game completely. I think he forgot half the questions he was gonna ask."

Gage blinked slowly.

"You ain't making the world back then sound any less weird, boss. Y'know that?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling widely, genuinely, like the weirdness was delightful. "But you know what I learned?"

"How to use a full pot of coffee to destroy a man completely?"
"No. Well, I could probably do that too, but no. I learned more than I ever needed about rich people." She raised a finger and made a circling gesture to the surrounding park. "I'm giving this one to the Operators."

"Your call, boss," he said.

"I don't expect much gratitude in return, but I'm sure this place will keep them entertained for a while."

Distracted, she probably meant. In the Vault-Tec tunnels, when they'd come across those mind control experiments, she'd had the good sense of erasing large chunks of the data. 'Wouldn't want to fall into the wrong hands,' she'd said.

A good call, since Gage didn't much fancy the thought that the Operators might have the means to have him dance to their tune. But the prospect of recovering that data would keep Mags and William, and especially Lizzie, preoccupied and out of trouble for at least a while.

Boss knew what she was doing. Gage had to trust she did.
A Series of Successful Speech Checks

It took three and a half days to take the Galactic Zone. They came out of it a lot better for wear than
they did out of Kiddie Kingdom, but trying to bring the place back online had involved a lot more
legwork, as they scraped together the necessary Starcores scattered throughout the park.

After they were done, Gage followed her back to the Grille again, more sure he'd be welcome this
time.

The boss took out some weird creepy glass object she'd found in the cupboard of an employee
kitchen somewhere, kind of like a dish but with a ridged half-sphere in the middle. She said it was a
lemon squeezer. It looked like something that would keep Disciples entertained for a few days.

Then she proceeded to mash some mutfruit to a bloody pulp, with more skill and force of muscle
than he expected her to expend for his sake.

"You really don't have to do that, boss," he'd said.

"Oh, hush, and go wash your hands," she instructed, scowling at the mutfruit like she was going to
scare the juice out of them. "I'm putting out snacks for you, too."

"Yes, boss," Gage muttered, in the same tone one might say 'yes, mom'. He went through the terrace
doors to the inside half of the Grille, where the bathrooms could be found.

Nuka-World did still have running water, and the traders had rigged up purifiers that kept the water
free of contaminants, despite the slightly brown tinge it still had. Made Gage grateful. Human beings
couldn't survive on Nuka-Cola alone, or at least, probably really shouldn't. He was mostly indifferent
to washing, but heck, there were worse things the boss could've asked him to do.

It didn't take that long at all, but she actually squeezed him a tall glass of goddamn mutfruit juice,
which she placed in front of him along with two sugar packets and a bowl of Fancy Lads snack
cakes.

Then she picked up the sugar packets again and flipped them over to read a series of numbers
inscribed along the back.

"Oh, wow, no, these are very expired," she said with alarm, throwing them in the garbage can. "Let
me find something else."

"It's fine, boss," Gage said, weirded out a bit by so much hospitality. He took a sip of the mutfruit
juice, a bit sweet and with a bitter tang. "Honestly the best thing I've had in months."

"Well, if you think so..." She sat down across from him, in a booth by the window, with a Nuka-
Cola--still not sick of the stuff, Gage noticed--and propped her chin on her fist as she stared off into
the distance.

They sat in silence for a while, just drinking, but honestly this much sitting and not talking was
making Gage feel itchy.

"Hey, boss, can I ask you something?"

Her attention snapped away from the view and back to him so promptly it was a bit startling.
"Didn't you just?" she replied with a flash of a smile.

"Oh my god, maybe I oughta just shoot you instead," he said, in one long exasperated sigh.

But he had do say it. Truthfully, she'd accomplished more in a week than Colter ever did in his entire time in Nuka-World, and she hadn't even wanted the job to begin with. It was like she could stumble into more competence on her clumsiest day, than Colter had ever displayed over the course of a year.

Parks had just been sitting there, good for the taking, and Colter had had masses of Raiders just hankering for a good fight. Hell, he could have just sent people in. 'Cept he didn't. Hadn't even occurred to him he should.

The new boss just strode in and cut her way through obstacles like a hot knife through brahmin butter, and all she ever had was Gage and his gun watching her back.

Shit, he liked her. He could make a proper Raider of her yet.

"But seriously, though. We been running together for a while now. You ain't afraid to take what you want, and don't let anyone get in your way. Got more guts than most folks."

"Well, that's a flattering way of describing my tendency to reckless self-endangerment," she said, an amused glint in her eyes.

"I guess what I'm wondering is, why? What's behind all this for you?"

"Do I need a reason?" she asked.

"Nope, suppose you don't."

"Because I could give you one, but I'm sure it would make your head hurt."

"I appreciate your consideration for my health, boss," Gage deadpanned.

There was a lull as she turned to look out to Nuka-World spread before her again, the sky tinged into evening. She probably thought the conversation was over, but there were still things rattling in Gage's head that he wanted to force out.

"You ask me," he said, "this whole world is here just to tear you down." She turned to look at him again, eyes soft and a bit curious, and he looked down to his glass of squeezed mutfruit juice, rubbing a thumb along the rim thoughtfully. "Deck's stacked against you from the very beginning. Most folks are too stupid to realize it." A tinge of bitterness, the words came out too forceful. He went on. "They just sort of stumble through, managing to scrape together some shitty little life for themselves. They struggle every day, until something catches them off guard, and then that's it. Lights out."

He took a long swig of the juice, washed down the bitterness with the sweet tang of the liquid.

She stayed silent, her hands curled around her bottle of Nuka-Cola, expectant. Her head tilted like she was studying him, and Gage tried not to feel judged. She was just letting him speak, was all. Had nothing to say. The thought kept his mouth flapping.

"But then some folks are too aware of it, y'know?" he said, a fidget starting in his fingers. "They see the world for how fucked up it is. And so they decide they have to have it all, right now. All the booze, all the caps, all the chems, and they don't care how they get it. In fact, if they can get it from others, they feel like they're getting the upper hand. Only, they ain't. Fucking Raiders... They get so
greedy, so focused on 'right now' they make shitty mistakes, and wind up dead. Hell, maybe some of them are trying to get killed."

His fingers tapped nervously against his glass, but the dull noises irritated him further. He gripped the glass tightly, instead, his knuckles turning white from the force.

Her hands reached out unexpectedly, covering his own and tugging his fingers away from the glass to lay them flat on the tabletop. She pressed down gently with her palms, which were warmer and softer than he expected, but firm and unmoving.

"Not you, though," she said, her eyes focused on him, and still with that thoughtful little tilt of her head that made him feel she was paying rapt attention to him even beyond his words.

It was a weird-ass moment. He hadn't been touched like this in years, if ever at all. Didn't quite know what to do with himself, so he found himself grateful she had his hands pinned so he didn't have to think about that. It was still strange.

"All these people," he continued, not knowing what else to do, "they either try too hard or not enough, maybe not at all. You and me though... we're different. We know how to walk the line between fighting for what we deserve and getting out of control."

He rambled his way into telling her about his childhood, about running away, about joining a gang, working his way up.

"Running with you now... seems like it was all worth it," he said in the end.

"Mm, maybe not yet," she said.

Her palms were still pressed against the backs of his hands, keeping them flat on the table, but now her neck straightened, her demeanor shifting into something altogether more serious.

For some reason, even though there was nothing threatening in her posture, Gage felt a tingle of alarm start crawling up his back.

His eye flicked down to her hands, to her body. No weapon in sight, but why did he feel so damn exposed under her gaze? What about her was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up?

"Big plans ahead, boss?" he asked innocently, counting the inches and seconds that separated his hand from his gun. He'd hung it on the booth's backrest, right behind him, right at his elbow.

He weren't about to shoot the Overboss, but god, why'd was she make him feel so twitchy all of a sudden?

"I think you're right about one thing, at least," she said. "The deck's stacked."

She leaned forward, and smiled at him. She had too many teeth; Gage never met someone with as many perfect teeth as this woman, and now the unwarranted thought rose up that she was going to take a bite out of him.

That was stupid, he knew she wouldn't.

He was pretty damn sure she wouldn't.

Fuck. Would she?

"But you know what your problem is, Gage?"
"I get the feeling you're about to tell me," he said neutrally.

"You thought you had it all figured out at twelve." She let go of his hands, leaned backwards and crossed her arms.

With the space widening between them, it felt like her presence receded a bit, and Gage leaned back as well, taking a deep breath like he'd just remembered he had lungs.

"You think a stacked deck is something you have to work around just long enough to get what you want," she said.

"Well, ain't it?"

"No," she said bluntly. "When the deck's stacked, you flip the table, you punch the dealer in the face, you bring your own cards and make everyone play nice. And if you lay down the rules well enough, then everyone gets what they need, and most people get what they want, and nobody gets hurt."

"And if brahmin could fly, milk would rain from the sky," Gage replied snidely.

"Don't even need the brahmin, just need enough milk, a hose, and a guy willing to stand on the roof," she said. "If that's what floats your boat," she added with a shrug.

"This ain't a joke, boss."

"I'm not joking, Gage." She folded her hands over the table top, serious as death. "The world's a mess, but it's a fixable mess. There's, ironically, so much wrong with the world, that literally any improvement made to it feels like leaps and bounds."

"Shit, you're actually fuckin' moralizing at me," Gage scoffed. "Sitting there like you're not the fucking Overboss."

"I'm the Overboss," she agreed. "But I should make it clear, I'm no Raider."

"And how the hell is that going to work out for you?" Gage growled.

Fuck, she played him. She made him think for even just a moment that he knew what she was about, that she was someone he could believe in. He was a goddamn fool, and she was never going to do what was needed from an Overboss. Taking back the parks was a distraction, a bone she threw them so she could make them believe she was playing their game.

He wasn't going to fall for it again, he wasn't going to let another Colter jerk him around for a year. His gun was still at his elbow, and heavy on his mind. His hands were free, and he would've taken it, shot her in the face.

But.

If there was even a chance he misunderstood, or a chance that the new boss could work to his advantage somehow, he had to be sure not to blow it.

"The real question here, really, is how it's going to work out for everyone else, isn't it?" she said, steeping her fingers as she looked at him. She was so calm and sure, it drove Gage up a wall. "Let's start with you."

"Alright, boss, let's. What about me?" he asked. Keep her talking, and maybe he could find the leverage he needed to get her back the right track.
"Well, what is it that you actually like about being a Raider?" she said. "Is it taking what you want, or having what you want?"

"What the hell's the difference?" he snapped.

"Come on, Gage. Of course there's a difference. Like there's a difference between being smart, and being smart for a Raider. Have some insight into yourself. What is it that brings you satisfaction, joy in life? Is it doing the bloody stuff, or is it the fact that the bloody stuff gets you the caps and power you're really after?"

Gage ruminated on the question for a few seconds, trying to find the trap in it. Seemed pretty straightforward.

"I'm no Disciple, boss," he said. "If bein' nice and minding my please and thank-yous got me power and caps, I wouldn't be doing this shit. But that ain't how the world works."

"What if I made it work that way, though?" she said. "What if you could live the life you wanted without hurting anyone?"

Gage let out a rattling laugh, from somewhere deep in his chest where his cynicism had long since hardened. She had no idea what life he wanted, and hell, at this point, he wasn't sure he knew either. Everything up to this point had been fighting for survival, scheming for power, trying to get Raiders to be smarter and always, eventually, failing. Maybe the struggle was what he wanted.

"And here I thought you weren't stupid," he said. "You can't have it both ways. You're in or you're out. The gangs won't stand for another weak Overboss jerkin' them around."

She took a sip of her Nuka-Cola, as serene and implacable as a vault door.

"The gangs probably didn't think they could work together, until they did," she said. "They'll learn. People can change, when it's in their interest to do so."

"And you think you can make it in their interest to... what, go soft? Let their guards down so some meaner motherfuckers can steamroll them?"

It was her turn to laugh now, and lean back in her seat, much too relaxed.

"So that's the thing you're really scared of, isn't it?" she said. "That someone bigger and meaner is going to come along and take what's yours. Live by the sword, die by the sword."

"I prefer guns," Gage replied bluntly.

"But you never really stopped being that twelve-year-old who saw his parents being menaced by some punk with a gun, did you?"

Gage felt stung by the comments, more deeply than he would've liked to admit.

"I don't need to listen to your bullshit, boss," he said. There was sarcasm on that last word, more than he'd ever dared use in the past.

"If you want to know what I intend to do, you kind of need to, though," she pointed out.

And... shit.

Shit, she was right.
He needed to know what crazy-ass agenda she had. He couldn't storm out in a huff over this, and revealing his displeasure as much as he had already put him in a tight spot, limited his options for manipulating her in the future. He'd showed his hand too much, and he was stuck.

"You don't like Raiders," he said.

"I don't."

"Hell, nobody does, do they? Hardly anyone has enough guts or fight in them to do something about us. But you do, don't you, boss?" he said, watching her face closely. "You wouldn't even need to fight us in the open. You're the Overboss. You could just take us down from the inside." Put a bullet in him, and nobody would even question her. Some would even thank her, maybe, with how popular a guy he was lately.

"True," she said. "But like I said, people change. That includes me. I decided I need to stop being the kind of person who blows up entire organizations I don't agree with." Her lips pursed for a moment, and she cast a rueful glance at the table. "It was putting me down a bad path."

Gage worked his jaw soundlessly as he chewed on that. Shank had given him a whole bevy of information on the new boss, and even just the parts that were verifiable fact and not wild rumor were enough to earn a heaping dose of respect, if not outright fear.

She'd blown up both the Brotherhood of Steel and the Institute, and Gage had seen with his own eyes how even one Courser or one Brotherhood vertibird could fuck up a Raider gang's day. He knew for a fact he wouldn't've been able to do what she did, and wouldn't've ever thought of trying to begin with.

To have that brand of crazy and dangerous working as the Overboss had seemed to Gage a great boon for them all. Something that would put them on top.

To have it working against them seemed like a death sentence.

Made him think like, maybe, if he had any brains, he'd be grateful that she decided to stop crushing her enemies, because then Nuka-World would be running with Raider blood.

But then, there was his gun, still hanging from his backrest. No matter how scary the boss was in battle, she was unarmed now. She probably wouldn't be able to do as much damage to him with a bottle of Nuka-Cola as he could with a bullet between her eyes. And then the only option he'd have would be to bolt from Nuka-World, move onto somewhere else, start from scratch again.

Gage's lips tightened into a line, displeased.

"Okay," he said. "I'll hear you out."

She smiled, and slid a pamphlet with the park map onto the table.

And then she started talking.

And kept talking, long into the night, long past the point Gage would have thought he'd stop listening.
In the end, if Gage had to admit one thing, it was that he got sucked into it.

He wasn't even completely sure how it happened, except the boss was a complete fiend with words, and had his head turned around before he even knew what happened. Had he been a complete chump by agreeing to go along with the way she wanted to do things? Shit, he couldn't tell. Felt like he didn't know which way was up anymore.

He didn't make it back to his own bed that night, given how late she kept him up. He woke up in late morning, groggy, after catching a few hours of sleep on a couch. His armor was piled next to the couch, his gun was on the table nearby.

And the boss was cooking.

He hadn't been woken by her moving around, which he would've expected. Raiders tended towards being light sleepers, if they wanted to live long, and Gage was committed to having a long goddamn life if he could help it.

But being woken by the smell of roasting meat, he found, was much preferable to startling awake at the sound of someone coming to kill him.

Gage sat up with a groan, every old wound tugging and aching as he got his bearings.

"Morning," the boss said with entirely too much pep this soon after Gage just opened his eyes.

He grunted something back and sat blinking for a few minutes, before getting up. He stretched, his joints cracking, went to take a piss, remembered to wash his hands because the boss was weirdly particular about that kinda thing, and came back to the terrace to see that the boss had set out two plates at one of the booths.

Out of all her personality quirks, he appreciated her tendency to feed him the most.

But breakfast still wasn't done, so he settled into his usual morning routine, checking his armor and gun and making sure they were in top shape.

"...The hell?"

His weapon's magazine was empty.

He coulda sworn...

No, he always made sure it was loaded.

And why the hell was it sticky? Gage sniffed it, and it smelled suspiciously like mutfruit.

His eyes slipped to the boss, and back to his gun, and it suddenly clicked.

That wily bitch. She sent him to wash his hands last evening so she could take out his bullets? What the hell. She'd been planning to hook him in from the start, even before he started flapping his lips. He'd played into it more neatly than she'd even anticipated.
It was unnerving to him. He'd worked for a lot of gang leaders in his day, and he'd gotten used to the idea of being the smarter in the set. That kinda thinking wasn't gonna help him with the new boss, and he'd have to remember that. He'd possibly have to *never wash his hands ever again*.

She was just loading up the plates with food, though, so he put aside the matter of the gun for now.

There was more food in the plate than he'd reasonably been expecting. Five strips of meat, rad-rat, but cooked properly in oil and so succulent that he could see the juices seep out of them. Some scrambled egg, salty to the taste, so probably mirelurk. A small cup of brown sauce, tasting mostly of tato. A weird kind of golden-yellow mash. It tastes familiar, but like nothing he could immediately identify. Kind of sweet, kind of salty, kind of weirdly textured.

"I made that one out of potato crisps," the boss explained. "And eggs, and also grated carrot and tato. Some brahmin milk. Sometimes I have to get creative with the ingredients."

Fuck if he could figure out how she'd done it, but he liked it well enough.

They ate in silence at first, too busy with the food to talk. The boss ate like some lady from old magazines, with cutlery and everything, wielding fork and knife with a kind of practiced ease that most wastelanders lacked.

Gage wasn't as picky. He picked up the meat with his fingers, gnawed on it with his good teeth. He did use a fork for the eggs and weird mash, but that was just for shoveling the stuff in his mouth more efficiently. He appreciated how easy to chew everything was, even the meat, which had been cooked so well it practically melted in his mouth. He drenched everything in tato sauce anyway, and found that only improved the flavors further.

The meal lifted his mood so much that he actually felt optimistic about the boss' plans, and he felt so utterly full by the end of it, he didn't even bother to lick the plate clean. It was better eating than he'd had his whole life. He didn't even mind if he was being played again, if this kind of meals was what it would involve.

"You have plans for today, boss?" he asked, over a cup of weak, long since expired coffee.

"Of course," she said, with unbridled enthusiasm. "I'm getting to know the constituents today."

"Uh-huh?" Gage said. "Don't think anyone's accused this crowd of being *that* before."

"Well, by the time I'm through with them, I'm sure they'll be called all manner of horrifying things, maybe even 'upstanding citizens'."

"Let's not get ahead of yourself," Gage said.

"Right, first things first," she agreed. "We're going to have a day on the town."

She made it clear that she didn't expect him to join her, and she turned on the elevators so he could go ahead (and the fact that she turned off the elevators at night was the kind of precaution that wouldn't have occurred to Colter, but that he hadn't needed anyway. If he'd been the kinda guy you could kill in his sleep, someone woulda done it before the new boss ever rolled through town).

He lingered in front of Fizztop Mountain, having a smoke as he waited for her.

She showed up in a nice denim dress.

Well, okay, she didn't seem to like armor even at the best of times. She usually walked around in
jeans, a leather jacket, and a battered old trilby, which he thought was plum stupid, even though she inexplicably seemed to never get hurt as grievously as she ought.

She still had the jacket, unzipped, and the trilby, but man, she wasn't nearly scary enough to be able to pull it off as the intimidating kind of confidence.

"So, what is there to do around Nuka-Town?" she asked, like she was expecting a tour.

Gage told her about the general stuff; the market, the Nuka-Cade, Cappy's Cafe. She knew the general layout, and where the gangs were headquartered already. It was all boring stuff, places every Raider in the place had already gotten sick and tired of.

He forgot to warn her about NIRA, and the boss just trotted up the creepy red bottle-shaped abomination and started asking questions.

The robot answered with unrelenting cheerfulness, up to a point.

"Now, before you set out on your grand Nuka-adventure, let me tell you about..." The creepy AI's voice cut off with an error message. "System malfunction," it droned, its chipper veneer peeling off entirely, dropping into a lower, distorted voice. "Are you finished wasting my time, you filthy low-life scavver? Cause I'm getting bored, and when I get bored, I get violent!"

The boss blinked, jaw hanging open in almost comical outrage.

She turned to Gage.

"Is it really going to attack?" she asked.

"Nah, that's just to scare newcomers," Gage said. "Whoever messed with it probably didn't know enough to program it to attack, otherwise I imagine they woulda."

"That is the most horrifically implemented subroutine I have ever encountered. They couldn't even integrate it without triggering an error message," she said next.

Gage shrugged.

"Who did this?" the boss asked.

Gage scratched his cheek awkwardly. He knew exactly who, because someone had once come to Colter with a holotape recording to tattle on the pranksters. Colter had had a good laugh, and promptly shot the guy who'd come to complain right in the face, saying he didn't like snitches.

And Gage really didn't want this to turn into a whole thing.

"I could, uh... probably point them out to ya, boss, but seems like poor programming skills aren't really worth your time to get angry about."

"I'm not getting angry, I'm just improving on the flawed execution of a good idea," she said, inputting something on her Pip-boy.

She rounded NIRA, hands searching the back of the robot until she found a panel, and pried it loose. She hooked up her Pip-boy to NIRA next, and powered the robot down.

"Alright, you're going to have to help me with the next part," she said, and Gage reluctantly walked up to the creepy thing, hoping he wasn't going to be asked to do anything unsavory to it.
It was late afternoon when two Operators, tipsy, but not enough to actually be stumbling into each other, crossed paths with NIRA.

"Oh, shh, shh," they said, elbowing each other as a hapless traveler walked up to NIRA. They giggled, full of anticipation.

"Well, hello there, young man!" NIRA chirped. "Welcome to Nuka-World! I'm NIRA, your friendly Nuka-World Informational Robotic Assistant! Is this your first visit to Nuka-World?"

The traveler, heavily masked and hunched over with nervousness, wrung their hands and confirmed it was.

NIRA welcomed the traveler with enthusiasm.

The Operators, anticipating what was going to happen next, elbowed each other again, smothering their giggling before it got too loud.

"Now," NIRA continued, "before you set off on your Nuka-adventure, let me tell you about Nuka-Town!"

The Operators blinked, unsure they'd heard right.

"Nuka-Town is the central area of Nuka-World," NIRA continued, barely a hitch to her voice, though it was pitched a bit off from the regular pre-programmed lines she originally spouted. "It's the part of the park open to travelers and traders! Places of interest include the Market, Cappy's Cafe, and the one of a kind, fully functional Nuka-Cade! Would you like to learn more?"

Under the incredulous eyes of the two Operators, the traveler requested details about Cappy's Cafe, and NIRA very helpfully provided directions.

"Aw, man, they ruined it!" one of the Operators groused, scowling. "Now it's a piece of shit again."

"Who the hell," the second Operator demanded, "would even mess with it? What kind of humorless plebe would program it to be helpful?" The Operator's voice dripped with disgust on the last word.

"I don't know, but I'm not putting up with this," the first Operator huffed as she walked up to NIRA.

The robot zeroed in on the Operator with its large, creepy, unblinking eyes.

"Well, hello there, young lady! Say, don't I know you from somewhere?" NIRA asked.

The Operator stopped in her tracks, her feet frozen in place. She looked over her shoulder at her companion, whose mouth hung open in apprehension.

"Luce, come on, leave it," he said, his nervousness apparent. "It's not even worth the effort."

But she was undeterred, and she squared her shoulders as she turned back to NIRA.

"No," she said. "It's just a stupid robot. I can do whatever I want to it."

Just as the Operator said that, there was a crackle and an ear-piercing audio-distortion. NIRA's voice
pitched low, threatening.


"Fuck! What the fuck!" the female Operator screamed.

Her companion all but evaporated, leaving her alone to face the AI, so she fell back on instinct and took out her gun, shooting wildly towards NIRA but missing completely. She stood her ground all of seconds before turning around and running off.

From off to the side, in the shade of a lean-to, Gage laughed so hard he almost puked, just barely keeping himself upright against a building.

"I can't believe she shot her gun in the middle of the street, someone could have gotten hurt," the boss grumbled.

Gage shook his head and gave the boss a hard pat on the back, that nearly knocked her over. He was still laughing too hard to be able to speak.

The boss trotted up to NIRA, opening the panel in the back again, and connecting the cable from her Pip-boy to NIRA's jack.

"What're you doing now?" he asked, walking up to her.

"Erasing that subroutine," the boss said. "No point alarming anyone else."

"Did people really used to put naughty children in boxes?" Gage asked.

"Oh my god, Gage, no. Not traditionally. Not if they wanted to keep their kids."

"Well, I don't know, you people used to do a lot of fucked up things back in the day."

"As opposed to these days, when everyone is a pillar of reasonable sane choices. Thanks, Gage. I really appreciate the constructive criticism."

Gage just shrugged.

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The rest of the afternoon was spent at Nuka-Cade, where the boss demonstrated a lot of enthusiasm for the games, and a lot more skill than most people did on their first run through the place. She didn't try to smash anything when she lost badly, either, which already put her high up the list of desirable repeat customers.

Late afternoon found them walking towards Cappy's Cafe, but they were stopped on the way by a Pack member, a Disciple and an Operator sitting around a makeshift table in patio chairs. The Disciple was sullenly shuffling a deck of cards while the Operator flashed a bright smile towards Gage and the Overboss, inviting them to join a game.

The boss was immediately reeled in, before Gage could discreetly inform her that the main reason such an example of inter-gang interaction would occur was because it allowed them to cheat brazenly at cards without pissing off anyone who might know where they sleep.
"Sure, sounds like fun," the boss said, much too perkily, and Gage tried not to groan.

She dragged a patio chair near the improvised table, to the right side of the Pack scavver, who showed her teeth in a sneer and gave the boss a malevolent glare. The boss seemed blissfully unaware of the hostility, and inserted the patio chair into place anyway.

"Scamper off, cow," the Pack muttered, just low enough that it might not have been heard, but pitched just right for the disgruntlement to come through, if not the words.

The Pack yelped as the boss' patio chair was dragged right over her foot.

"Oh, I'm so sorry about that," the boss said, her voice entirely too good-natured and apologetic. "Better tuck in, space is at a bit of a premium."

The Pack scavver's gaze flicked with indecision--cheerful oblivion was not a common Raider response to open hostility, and it was throwing her for a loop--but the Operator and Disciple seemed to be looking anywhere but at the scene, and Gage, sitting on the boss' other side, was quietly fingering his gun and checking the magazine.

"So, what's the game?" the boss asked as cards were dealt.

It was a sort of variant on poker, if you squinted, except with the rules all wobbly, making it easier to cheat. The boss made interested noises as she learned the rules, and asked all sorts of rookie questions that had the Operator in particularly smirking.

The cards were dealt, the stakes were set, and the game started.

Already, they were plotting to separate her from her caps; except the Pack scavver, who seemed more to be thinking about separating her from her limbs.

Gage supposed that was inevitable. The Disciples and Operators had been temporarily appeased, and willing to give the boss some leeway, or at the very least some semblance of civility. But the Pack hadn't been given any new territory yet. Gage heard the grumblings, the roiling discontent. They would want something soon, or Mason was going to have a hard time keeping them in line. Colter had effectively burnt through all the gangs' patience.

The boss seemed unaware of this.

She also seemed to be losing caps. Not a lot, at first. They were testing her, see what she'd do if she lost. Colter would have smashed some heads into pulp, but the new boss just made some blandly disappointed awws and well-that's-too-bads that would only spur on the Raiders to take more of her caps.

"Come on, 'boss', it's not that hard," the Pack scavver sneered as the boss lost another hand. "Even some dumbass like you should be getting it by now."

"Well, that's a rude way to address someone you're getting so many caps from," the boss said, completely unfappable, as she picked up a card and arranged her hand, not even looking at the Pack.

The Pack scavver sneered, threw down her hand. It was a pretty good one, maybe a winner if the rest of them couldn't do one better. Gage threw down his cards, the Operator threw down his, so did the Disciple. They all glibly ignored the fact that between all of them, they had three queens of hearts and two eights of diamond.

"Oh, dear," the boss sighed, and they all prepared for her to put down a complete disaster of a hand.
"Is this any good?"

Five aces. Two of them were aces of spades.

What the fuck.

Gage and all the Raiders blinked down at the cards. Nobody just put down duplicate cards like that, especially not aces. That was how you got shot in the face. You had to pretend you were the only honest fucker in the whole game, the only one playing honestly. If someone else had a card just like you, well, obviously they were the filthy cheater with sleeves full of cards.

Who had even been putting the aces in the game? That was a brazen move. Given the shade of purple the Pack scavver's face was turning, it had probably been her.

"That is a good hand, yes?" the boss asked, her face frozen in some frightening mask of good cheer as she stared them down. Suddenly, there was something a little too affable about that expression, a little too friendly.

The Operator and Disciple exchanged just the slightest glance, before it was obvious they got a bad feeling about the whole thing, and readily agreed that it was a good hand.

"Oh, isn't that just delightful," the boss said, and raked in all the caps on the table, most of which had been hers to begin with.

The Pack scavver ground her teeth, twitching with hatred as she watched the Overboss collect her winning.

The game turned after that. The boss didn't win every hand, but she didn't lose every hand either. The game turned in every player's favor eventually, like shifting tides, except the Pack, who was becoming more visibly angry and out of sorts, and managed to lose every hand from that point on.

Gage didn't much like that the boss was sitting next to her. He wasn't sure the boss was good enough to spot a Raider coming unhinged, and react to a violent outburst quickly enough. When his eyes weren't on his cards, they were on the Pack, watching every twitch of her muscles for the tell-tale tension before a meltdown.

The problem, of course, was that it only ever took a second for things to go sideways, and in the exact second Gage's eyes had flicked down to check what card he'd drawn, there was the crack and shudder of the table, the Pack scavver's chair flung back, a burst of fire from an automatic rifle--

Reflexively, the Operator grabbed the table to stop it from flipping, and the Disciple grabbed her knife.

Gage grabbed his gun, ready to jump in--

--and the boss jumped to her feet, grabbed the barrel of the Pack scavver's gun, yanked on it. When the scavver didn't release it, the boss pushed it up and back, cracking the scavver right in the face with the barrel, making her nose explode in a fountain of blood and sending her staggering.

This surprised the Pack so much, that the boss finally managed to rip the rifle out of her hand, and drive the butt of the gun into the Pack scavver's stomach. The wind was knocked out of her, and she nearly doubled over.

There was a shocked silence as everybody stared at the Overboss. She'd taken at least half a dozen bullets against the middle, but the only blood on her was whatever had sprinkled from the Pack
scavver's nose.

At most, she'd lost the battered trilby from her head, and looked slightly disheveled, but otherwise unharmed.

And angry. Jesus, they'd never seen the new Overboss pissed before.

"Are we ready to behave ourselves now?" the Overboss thundered, in the same voice a terrifying schoolmarm would use before taking out a ruler and smacking some knuckles. It had the same effect, too, because suddenly everybody present felt like schoolchildren about to be punished, even if only two of the present party had ever attended a school.

The Pack scavver whined deep in her throat, staunching her bleeding nose with both hands, looking up at the boss with terrified eyes.

"Good," the boss said, mollified. "Sorry about your nose, but someone could have really gotten hurt, and you know the rules about hurting members of other gangs."

The Pack scavver nodded slowly.

The boss placed the rifle on the table. Three bullets were melted against her lower torso, and she picked them out of their shallow indents in her dress, dropping the malformed slugs onto the ground and letting them clink off against the pavement. Then she picked up her chair which had been knocked down, and the Pack's chair which had suffered the same, and settled back in for another hand.

Now the Pack scavver stood stiffly as far away as possible from the boss, eyes averted. She was dealt in, but didn't even pick up her cards, and nobody said a thing about it.

They continued playing, but the mood was real weird. The boss didn't seem like she was going to do anything more to the Pack scavver than she'd already done, and everybody was too fucking terrified to ask how exactly she wasn't picking her guts off the ground right now. People could survive getting shot point blank, but generally those people were wearing something a bit more sturdy than a goddamn dress.

They all sneaked peeks at the boss, trying to determine is she was bleeding any, if her complexion was grayer, if her hands were shaking. Maybe that was a wince of pain, but maybe she just got a bad card; hard to tell. And shit, it shouldn't be hard to tell apart whether someone was grievously injured, or just doing badly at a card game, but here they were trying not to stare at the boss or ask how the hell she was still alive.

The sun set on the last few hands, and a lantern was turned on, but the boss took this as her cue to turn in for the night.

"Seriously, you'll all ruin your eyes," the boss said, collecting her modest winnings and stuffing the box of caps into the inside pocket of her jacket.

She gently patted the Pack scavver's shoulder before leaving.

"Should get someone to have a look at your nose," the boss advised.

Gage turned in his own hand as well, and trailed after the boss. They were maybe halfway to the Grille when he couldn't stand the suspense anymore and asked her.

"How'd you do it, boss?"
"Get shot? It was easy, I just stood still and let the bullets hit me."

He grabbed her arm and spun her around.

"I mean how come you ain't dead!" he hissed, trying to keep his voice low.

She made a pained little yelp as he did so, and flinched, a hand hovering protectively over her ribs, not quite touching. Gage looked down, and saw nothing except distressed denim where the bullets hit her, no blood. But now he noticed the stiffness around her middle, like the way some people carried themselves when their ribs were broken.

"This is maybe an indoor discussion, Gage," she said warningly.

He nodded dumbly and followed her up the elevator and into the Grille, where she turned off the elevators for the night before coming back to the terrace, a stimpak in her hand.

She shrugged off the jacket, threw it over the counter, and began undoing the row of button on the front of her dress.

Probably would have been gentlemanly to avert his eyes when he first saw the flash of her dusty white bra, stark against her skin, but hell, if the boss didn't care about modesty, neither would he. There were two wedding bands hanging on a shoelace around her neck, some story there Gage thought he maybe shouldn't ask about, but the next buttons popping open revealed the ugly red and purple blotches of bruises across her lower torso, blooming around nasty scabs where the bullets had hit her.

The scabs were already clotted and closed, and she had to unpeel the lining of her dress where it had stuck into the wounds, but the wounds themselves were inexplicably shallow. Oh, they were nasty, but they only cratered the skin, making it pucker dark and ugly. It didn't seem any bullet went any deeper.

"Do you think I have any internal bleeding?" she asked.

"Fuck, boss, how should I know?" Gage blurted out. "It's a goddamn medical miracle you ain't got some extra breathin' holes in you. How the fuck?"

The boss sighed at him, apparently disappointed he was being this unhelpful.

She shot herself up with a stimpak, and the bruises evened out into copper-colored, blended into her skin until they were just gone. The scabs stopped bleeding, new flesh rising from the wound holes until they were plugged with uneven new skin, just a shade off from her regular skin color.

The boss touched her ribs carefully, still wincing from remembered pain.

"Boss, you'd tell me if you were some kinda robot, right? Like one of those synths," Gage asked carefully. No, a robot probably wouldn't be affected by stimpaks. "Or, like, an alien. Or a human-deathclaw hybrid."

"A human-deathclaw hybrid," the boss deadpanned.

"I'unno what crazy bullshit vault experiment they did back in the day," Gage scowled, suddenly defensive. "Just sayin', this ain't natural, boss. How'd you do it?"

"What if I told you I was actually a vampire?" she said.
"Don't even joke about that, boss," Gage muttered. Oh god, he hoped that wasn't the actual explanation. There was only so much bullshit he was capable of handling.

"Relax, Gage, I'm perfectly regular human. It's just the dress," she said, and turned the material over.

He stared maybe a bit too long at her breasts before realizing she meant to show him the lining, but the woman at least had the patience of a saint. The lining was weird, shiny, textured a bit too heavy for being just a regular dress lining.

Gage couldn't pretend he wasn't utterly relieved by this information.

He actually sat down on a stool, mind reeling with the possibilities about what stories those three Raiders would be spreading about the boss following that evening. What stories they were already spreading, most likely.

He could work that in the boss' favor. Whatever that weird homey bullshit she was doing was, the fact that it hid some bite would definitely make everyone think twice about pissing her off.

But hell, maybe he could get a little bit of fuckin' warning next time.

"You're gonna be the death of me, boss," he sighed. "Slow, lingerin' death."

"Oh, I'm sorry, would you prefer I just shot you and got it over quick?" she said, sending a lopsided smile at him as she buttoned her dress again.

"I'm considering it," he groused.

Chapter End Notes

The context behind NIRA, for those who have not played Nuka-World, or missed it in-game.
The next park on the boss' list was Safari Adventure.

It was, well... It got off to a weird start. Weirder than usual at least. When the first thing they came across was some guy in a loincloth having a close-up, drag-out, knock-out fight with a giant fucking mutant deathclaw, it tended to set a tone, and Gage supposed the tone was 'batshit'.

Boss rolled with it, of course. Batshit was kind of her wheelhouse from what Gage gathered.

Gage couldn't figure out how she guessed right away that the Cito guy had been raised by apes, though.

"That kinda thing used to be common or something?" Gage asked, and the boss actually sighed and looked up at the sky, or maybe just the ceiling of the Primate House.

"This is my life," she said.

She flipped the holotape Cito had given her into her Pip-boy. It started playing with a click, and the rough voice of a dying ghoul began offering an explanation of whatever was plaguing the park.

"Oh, animal cloning facility! Of course," the boss said. "Couldn't just be hordes of gatorclaws, it's infinite hordes of gatorclaws we have to worry about. This is fine."

She popped out Doctor McDermot's holotape.

"You seem nervous, boss," Gage remarked.

"I'm really not comfortable around things that would just as soon eat as look at me," she confessed.

"Aw, heck, boss, you seem to handle the Disciples alright."

That actually drew a smile from her.

"I'm going to ask Cito if he knows where the cloning facility is," she said.

"Think he'd even know what that is?"

"He's lived here all his life. I think the amount of things he knows would surprise you."

Gage snorted, but didn't argue. They really did need to plug whatever leak these gatorclaws had sprung from if they were gonna give this park to the Pack. The only thought more off-putting than the Pack all being mauled by gatorclaws and blaming the boss was the Pack actually learning to control the things and having an infinite supply of gatorclaws at their disposal.

Shit, now that he thought about it, Gage hoped the boss would shut that facility down as soon as possible.

Things proceeded, as they tended to do when the boss was involved. Found the cloning facility, put
a pin in it. Swept the park for remaining gatorclaws. Boss saw a treehouse as she was raising the Pack's flag over the park, and she insisted they go up there for a look. They got lost in a hedge maze for a couple of hours, but she got a shiny medallion out of the thing. Okay.

It was more of what had become par for the course.

And then she allowed Cito to stay at Safari Adventure.

"You sure the Pack'll appreciate that, boss?" Gage asked.

"What are you talking about, they'll love the guy. He was raised by gorillas. Ghoul gorillas." She snapped her fingers, struck by sudden inspiration, "Ghoulrillas! Oh my god, it was so obvious."

Gage wasn't so sure about that. The Pack could be territorial at times. But what the hell, the worst that could happen was that Cito got murdered right in the face and his family got caged for the entertainment of a bunch of assholes. Wasn't any of Gage's concern, and the boss obviously didn't have any either.

And Gage could admit, that more interesting than the question of Cito was the question of what the boss was going to do in the next days before taking back another park. She already had half of Nuka-World convinced she was bulletproof, where exactly was she going to go from there?

"I'm inviting Nisha, Mags and Mason for dinner," the boss replied when Gage actually asked the question, back at the Fizztop Grille. "Maybe not in the next couple of days, but right after taking back all the parks."

"What, like, all three at once?"

"Unless you'd like to be the guy to figure out what order I should invite them over that's not going to insult one or more of them?"

Gage thought on this question for about thirty seconds before his mind just instinctively recoiled from even considering the problem. Any of them might tolerate the notion of being called second, but not a single one would take it well if they were called last.

"Seriously hoping you know what you're doing, boss," Gage said.

"Well, I admit breakfast is more my strong suit, but I cook a mean dinner when I have to. Dinner parties were like the Gauntlet of suburban housewives."

"So what exactly is it that you're trying to accomplish with this dinner party?" Gage asked, ignoring the lapse into pre-War bullshit.

The boss turned from the hotplate with two steaming mugs. The weather was overcast and drizzly that day, and Gage realized as he took a sip of the coffee mixed with brahmin milk that something hot really did hit the spot. As ever, the boss set out some sweeteners for him, which he didn't even touch because his drink was already perfect. Woman just had a goddamn sweet tooth she thought she needed to inflict on everyone around her.

She grew serious in response to his question, though, and opened up a pamphlet map of Nuka-World.

"There's five parks," she said. "Not enough to split evenly between three gangs."

"Gonna be a problem," Gage agreed.
"Not really, no," she said. "The gangs are already balanced fine right now. The last two parks are just going to have to serve different purposes."

"Risky, boss."

"It's going to benefit everyone in the end, I just have to teach some delayed gratification. It's on my to-do list," she said. She tapped the pamphlet map. "Infrastructure is next."

"Structure of the park seems fine, we got nice solid walls around us. I got guys checking for any weak points on the regular," Gage said.

"That's very good thinking, thank you, Gage. But I said infrastructure, not structure. That's the things that make a place worth living: electricity, running water, what-have-you."

"Okay?"

"This place had to be powered somehow back in the day. We can't just keep hanging lamps everywhere, that's a fire hazard." She lapsed in thought for a while before looking at Gage. "Someone, somewhere must have some idea how this place was powered. Can you find out and let me know?"

"Sure," Gage said. He had some idea that there was a power plant nearby, he was sure he'd heard it mentioned before. Shouldn't be too hard to find out more, with some caps in the right people's pockets.

"And we need to do something about the water, too."

"Water seems alright enough, boss," Gage said mildly.

"It's brown."

"Yeah, but it's a clear brown. Ain't nobody getting sick from it or nothin'."

The boss gave Gage a long-suffering look, but damn if he knew what the issue here was.

"The water purifiers are apparently strained," she said. "But I've been talking to Sierra Petrovita--"

"That soda nut?" Gage said in a burst of contempt.

"--and the World of Refreshment had a functional bottling plant," the boss continued undeterred. "They probably bottled all their Nuka-Cola here to save on shipping it in from another place. But when you make soda, you know the main ingredient you use?"

"Sugar?" Gage guessed.

"Water," the boss said. "Bottling plant had to be getting its water from somewhere. The towns around this place, too. We might be able to work with that."

"If you say so, boss." Gage rubbed his chin, as he looked down at the map before them. "Sounds like you're thinkin' of turning this place into a regular..."

"City," the boss said, pleased that he'd noticed, "instead of just another Raider camp."

"Some people like livin' in a Raider camp just fine."

"It's easy to like it when you've never experienced a better alternative."
Gage watched the boss for a few seconds, mulling over things Gage had spent his whole life not even considering.

"Y'know, boss... Most people don't get into this line of work for easy livin'," he said, broaching the subject carefully.

"They get in it for caps and violence instead, I get that," she said.

"Yeah, but... do you, though?" Gage said. "How exactly you gonna tame a bunch of Raiders? Sure, you could probably get most of the Operators nice and quiet by stuffing enough caps in their pockets, maybe, and you could distract the Pack with... shit, I dunno, shiny lights and pretty colors, I guess? Some new pets? But what're you gonna do about a gang like the Disciples?"

The boss looked back at Gage seriously, and maybe he could see the first flicker of worry behind her eyes. She could work with people who could be appeased by material things or hedonism, but the Disciples were in it pretty much for the sadism. Gage had done some blood-curdlin' stuff in his day; hard to be a Raider and not have some disgusting shit floating around in your past. But people like the Disciples lived for nothing but their knives in other people's flesh. The screams. The blood.

The boss wasn't into that. She killed as well as anyone, and better than most, if Gage was to opine. But she wasn't into pain or causing suffering.

And here they were, with the Disciples in their base inside Fizztop Mountain like ants in an anthill, practically swarming under the boss's feet every time she returned to the Grille. If there was anything that ought to keep her up at night, this was it.

The boss folded her arms and leaned against the countertop, a thoughtful look on her face.

"So, I hear tell that before joining the other two gangs at Nuka-World, the Disciples would never leave a victim alive," the boss said.

"I don't think you really can imagine how not-alive they left most people, boss," Gage said grimly. To really gain a reputation above the baseline bloodthirst of the average Raider gang, you really did have to go up and beyond.

"Right, but there's Nuka-World rules now, right? Raiders aren't allowed to hurt anyone from the other gangs."

"Yeah, the rule holds, but it ain't like enforcing's been a picnic. You know 'bout Nisha's one rule?"

"Don't get caught?"

"Right."

Gage wasn't surprised she'd heard about it. The Disciples could be surprisingly open about the fact. It didn't make them popular with the Pack or the Operators, even though those guys pretty much had the same rule as the Disciples. Raiders were rough, shit happened, and sometimes you needed to make sure some corpses were never found. Didn't mean they bragged about the fact that they were doing it, though.

"The thing is, Nisha needs that rule to keep her people in line," Gage said. "Not killin' other Raiders woulda been a bit of a deal-breaker otherwise. Too much of what the Disciples are is tied up in killing others before they get to kill you."

"A fun crowd," the boss said.
"A crowd that's held together pretty much by personal loyalty to Nisha," Gage said. "And Nisha takes care of her own."

"Well, that's encouraging."

"Is it?"

"That means we have something in common."

Gage tried not to sigh, or roll his eyes. Boss could be tough when she needed to be, and she didn't need that kinda disloyalty from him. But he hoped she knew what she was doing.

"Just don't make the mistake of thinkin' you have more in common than you do, boss," he advised instead, his voice low.

Fuck, he really didn't want to see the boss dead.

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Gage made it back to his own little hole in the wall that night. It was a mattress, a terminal, and a weapons workbench crammed into what had once probably been a utility closed, but it was hidden and nobody was gonna murder him in his sleep there. A man had to prioritize.

He went to his terminal first, scrolling through messages from his various contacts, and came across a message from the boss.

_Hey Gage_

_I'm going to the market tomorrow. Need to stock up. You can take the day off. Do whatever it is you do for fun. Play some yahtzee, shave your head. I don't actually know what you do for fun._

Another message from her, this one sent just a minute after the first.

_Chase kids off your lawn! That's probably fun, right?_

He shot back a message of his own.

_What the fuck is a lawn?_
Gage didn't exactly keep a formal schedule, but he had people he pumped for information, instructions he laid out to keep the place running. When Colter had been wasting time, Gage had devised some tasks to keep the antsy Raiders busy, and now everyone had just gotten used to Gage letting them know when something needed doing so the place wouldn't fall apart.

A few of the patrols needed shuffling around, on account of a couple of drunk idiots and some belligerent assholes. Then Gage dropped word with some of his little birdies to get as much information about the power plant as they could, and after that it was just the regular stuff.

So he bent his ear to the rumor mill for the rest of the day.

Shank always knew what was what in the Commonwealth, but he had nothing other than the regular state of things to report for now. It seemed the Commonwealth was a dull place without the Vault Dweller to stir shit up, so Gage moved on.

The most obvious source for information in Nuka-World, then, was Red Eye. He nattered about the latest happenings on the radio, transmitted the latest taunts between Raiders, brought updates on the most infamous ongoing bloodfeuds, and relayed news about rival gangs from inside and outside the Commonwealth. You couldn't rely on half of what that rambling insomniac said being true, but Gage found it a good indicator of what the denizens of Nuka-World would be talking about.

Today, Red Eye's attention was consumed by the Overboss allegedly being shot full of bullets, absorbing them into her body, and spitting them out so hard that she shot at least a dozen people—fatally, of course, because Red Eye didn't believe in half-measures when it came to lying his ass off.

And sure, why the fuck not. As Gage worked his way through Nuka-Town, he kept track of the chatter. And when people asked him about the incident, Gage gave answers just noncommittal and vague enough to feed into the Raiders' imagination. Wasn't like anything he could come up with could beat whatever people could imagine for themselves.

He made sure to not let their imaginations run too wild, though. Believing the Overboss was the toughest, scariest bitch they'd ever meet was one thing, he didn't need Red Eye putting the thought in their head that she was some sort of supernatural abomination from the stars, or worse, a synth.

He considered circling to the market, but he didn't want the boss to think he was hovering. He headed for the Nuka-Cade instead.

Fritsch met him at the door, greeted him with what might even be considered warmth, and handed him a few tokens for free.

"The boss is really killing it today," Firtsch said.

Gage was surprised, he hadn't realized the boss would be here. But hell, how much shopping could a person stand doing, anyway? Least she appreciated the Nuka-Cade. It wasn't the kind of place Colter ever frequented. He was a sore loser, and not particularly skilled at anything that didn't involve tinkering with power armor.

But in the long stretch of time Colter had spent sitting on his ass, the Nuka-Cade had thankfully offered at least some small distraction to keep everyone from tearing into each other. The novelty had worn off at this point, but if you weren't up for getting drunk, shopping, or loitering, it was still the most obvious place to go.
Gage found the boss by the sound of sycophantic twittering. Sure enough, while the boss was poised over the Whac-a-Commie station, a small gaggle of Operators was hanging off her, watching closely.

"Oh, come on, boss, just hit something!" one of the Operators complained, leaning against the machine while coyly playing with a lock of her artfully curled, bright red hair. She'd somehow managed to dye her hair an improbably bright shade of red that most likely had countless Pack members jealous.

"Maybe you need some help with that?" a second Operator asked, placing a much too friendly hand against the small of the boss' back, and giving her a bright smile. He had the kind of full set of teeth that growing up in a big settlement with food and plumbing got you.

The third Operator, more demure, short, and pleasantly plump, merely made a critical 'hm' deep in their throat, watching the game machine closely, but they were standing just a bit too close to the boss, practically hovering.

Gage got the feeling this was Mags Black's doing. Not that the boss couldn't attract a crowd all on her own, but these three were being way too friendly for just some randos who happened across her.

And Mags always knew how to wield her people like bright, shiny lures, drawing victims right up until the moment the trap closed.

The boss didn't seem to notice, or at least, wasn't concerned with it. Her attention was focused on the Whac-a-Commie game, though she wasn't hitting anything. She just stared, weirdly intense, at the little figurines popping up and back into holes.

"Concentrating," she muttered to her hanger-ons, when their whining got a bit too loud.

The game eventually stopped on its own, and the Operators groaned.

"What," the boss laughed, "they don't teach that good things come to those who wait, anymore?"

"Do they?" the redhead drawled. "I guess it's more of a 'take what you want' kind of world nowadays."

"Oh, you kids and your modern cynicism," the boss said, rolling her eyes as she inserted another token into the machine. "In my day, we just feared the inevitable complete nuclear annihilation of the world and we were grateful for it."

"Hey, come on now, boss, you're pretty spry for your age," the male Operator offered with a smile that suggested he could imagine her spryness in some very distinct scenarios.

But the boss was already not paying attention to him.

The Whac-a-Commie had started again, and this time, each time something popped out of a hole, the boss' whacker was already there, hitting it and sending it right back down again. The machine clinked and shuddered and made its little boops and whistles, and the boss hit every single target while the Operators stared in silence.

Finally, the machine wound down again, and spat out a long line of tickets.

"Damn, boss, how come you didn't do that the first time?" the third Operator, who had been silent until now, blurted out.

"Had to memorize the pattern the first time," she said. "I'm not sure why, most of the time my memory might as well be a sieve, but it's fantastic at retaining useless information."
whacker around her hand once, before placing it down.

"You used to do that kinda thing often before your, uh, deep freeze?" the male Operators asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, sort of. Someone should tell Fritsch that before the war, they used to program more than one pattern into these games to prevent exactly this sort of thing."

They all laughed, apparently just overtaken with the boss' talent and wit, and Gage couldn't help a little scoff.

The boss' eyes turned to him almost immediately--shit, did she hear him?--and she waved him over.

"Alright, guys, fun's over, the hall monitor's here to break it up," she said in a stage whisper, winking at them.

They groaned in disappointment. Jesus, they were layin' it on thick, weren't they? Gage tried to look stern, but he suspected he just looked sort of sour.

"And here I thought we were just getting to the good stuff," the redhead sighed, rubbing her hand up and down the boss' arm with a pout.

"Aw, Lori, are you gonna miss me?" the boss asked, sugary sweet.

The redhead--that's right, Lori was her name, wasn't it?--nodded, looking up from under the eyelashes at the boss. She seemed terribly pleased with hooking the boss' attention, probably thinking she was the only one who wasn't going to get dismissed.

"Well, in case we don't cross paths again, might as well leave you with something," the boss said, with a somber nod.

Then the boss just grabbed Lori around the waist, hooked her other arm behind Lori's neck, and dipped her into a kiss. Lori yelped at first, surprised. The dip was shallow, but Lori was off-balance in this position, and held up only by the boss. Her fingers dug into the boss' jacket as she hung on, but hang on she did, her eyes fluttering closed as she kissed back.

The kissing went on for a truly uncomfortably long series of seconds.

The Operators stared openly, while Gage found the ceiling infinitely more interesting.

Eventually, the boss decided to wrap up the show, because she picked Lori back up from the dip and released her with a flourish, sending Lori halfway into a pirouette, and ending with her leaning against the game machine, blushing and breathing heavily.

"You guys've been great, see you around," the boss said, sounding just barely out of breath, and she took Gage's arm as she walked him off to the back room.

Once they were out of sight of the Operators, the boss winced and knuckled her back.

"Wow, I remember that used to be a lot easier on my back when I was in my twenties," the boss muttered unhappily.

"You did this a lot?" Gage asked.

"No! Of course not. You do it too often, and it loses its shine. You gotta know how to space out the dips, you know?" The boss gestured in demonstration, mimicking a widening distance between her
hands. "Make them special every time."

"Lori sure did think that was special," Gage said. "So's Mags gonna think."

"Oh, so Mags Black sent them," the boss snickered. "I did think my jokes were rating way too high with that crowd. Anyway, Lori's the red herring."

"That some pre-War code or some shit?"

"No, I just mean I'm more into brunettes," she said. "But Mags doesn't need to know that. Variety is the spice of life, anyway."

"Boss," Gage started slowly, "I know some of those Operators can be pretty to look at, but you ain't wanting to use them as your dating pool, now, are ya?"

"Of course not," she waved off the question. "The other gangs would get jealous."

"And the Operators would get you killed," Gage groused. "They're more dangerous than they look."

"And they do care a great deal about how they look, don't they?" she said, pleased. "Don't worry, Gage. I'm just getting a handle on them early on. Networking, you know? Can't exactly go golfing to make connections anymore." She paused, and her brow furrowed in thought. "Well... actually, maybe we could. There's bound to be an abandoned country club somewhere, and I bet wouldn't even have to pay a membership fee or anything. Who's gonna charge me, the radroaches?"

"Boss, I ain't got the first clue what you're talking about," Gage interjected.

"Nah, guess you wouldn't. Anyway, no, Gage, I'm not using the Operators as my personal sex harem, or whatever it is you're worried about."

"Uh-huh."

"Makeouts are fair game, though."

"Uh-huh."

"You're sounding very judgmental right now, Gage. Fine, I'll even it out. I'll find some people from the other two gangs to kiss."

Gage tried not to sputter, because he suspected that would only egg her on.

"Boss, you ain't taking me seriously," he accused.

She probably really wasn't. Her lips were pressed into a tense line, like she was trying very hard not to smile, and tilting far into stern instead.

Gage sighed when he realized she was pulling his leg.

"You know, you lay on the folksy pre-War charm a bit thick when you're with the rank and file," he pointed out.

"Mm. Too much?"

"You make it work, I suppose," he conceded. "Can't figure out what you're tryin' to make work, though."
She shrugged.

"Learn to improvise, and you too will never have to make another plan ever again," she said, grinning widely.

"I like plans," Gage said, trying not to sound pouty. He narrowly succeeded.

"Of course you do," the boss said. "Now, is there something you wanted to talk with me about?"

"Nah, was just... checking up on you, I guess," he said, suddenly unsure why he was there. He just found out she was there and got drawn to her, like... gravity. She was one of those people who they'd say had an orbit. Hard not to be sucked into it.

She smiled at him, bright and warm enough that he had to look away.

"I appreciate the concern," she said, and gave him a smile he didn't quite understand. "But I really must get back into the fray."

She swept past him and back into the Nuka-Cade, where her new fans were no doubt breathlessly waiting for her.

He spotted the boss throughout the day a few more times, in the company of Raiders from different gangs. Pack members were circling her cautiously now, unwilling to challenge her anymore.

It was kinda weird, seeing the boss having a quiet conversation with a Disciple, their heads drawn together and shoulders hunched, as the Disciple presented a blade and fondly caressed the edge, explaining something in a raspy whisper. The boss nodded along like it was just another day at the knitting club, or whatever shit people used to do in the old days.

Later that day, it was requesting a rubber tube and a funnel at Cappy's Cafe, because she wanted to demonstrate what a 'keg stand' was, much to the intrigue of several Pack members.

Then she demanded cooking oil and a pan, and made funnel cakes for everyone using the stove in the back. This fascinated absolutely everyone there. The boxes of funnel cake were littered throughout Nuka-World, still packaged and shot through with enough preservatives that they were still good two hundred years later, but nobody had much understood how they were meant to be cooked or eaten, and a lot of Raiders would have just eaten the batter raw before even trying to figure it out.

For a crowd of Raiders, who throughout their lifetime had nurtured no other skill than violence, to see this kind of display of skill at something so domestic by a Raider boss was nothing short of incredible.

It had been impressive enough in the Gauntlet that she'd displayed nimble hands in easily lockpicking every door she came across--it was the kind of skill many Raiders admired, but very few had the patience or dexterity to cultivate, Gage included--but that she displayed such a fascinating breadth of knowledge in such a variety of subjects including and expanding beyond the various ways of committing violence was making them all gape in absolute awe of her.

The smell of hot cooking had put everyone in a strangely homey mood, and they jostled at the
counter, peering into the back room, each Raider waiting with a place or a tray for their portion. No matter how rough, how independent, how proud or standoffish they usually were, their stomachs, for the moment, overrode any other instincts.

The boss was keeping a running commentary on the culinary history of carnival foods as she cooked. They were all learning more than they cared to know about cotton candy, but she was feeding them and she was the Overboss, so that was two counts on which they couldn't really argue.

Lauren Plummer, whose peaceful afternoon propping up the counter had just been disturbed, ran around fetching ingredients for the boss now, and helping her with the cooking, and even Keith Dawkins had been commandeered from his usual floor-sweeping duties into scrounging the storage for more plates for the Raiders.

"Naw, boss, just hand it over to me straight, it's fine," one Pack member said, and extended his empty hands, obviously expecting her to put the freshly baked funnel cake straight into his palms.

"It's hot," she said, looking mildly offended, and her tone implied an unspoken 'you idiot' tagged at the end as well.

"I ain't afraid a' no glorified ugly donut!" the Pack member growled, and his companions hooted in ill-advised encouragement.

"Sure," the boss sighed. "Lauren can sell you a stimpak."

She used her spatula to pick up the funnel cake from the pan, shaking as much hot oil off it as possible, letting it cool off a little.

"Come on, boss, I'm no wimp over here, hit me already."

She dropped the funnel cake into his hands.

"This is fine," he said in a strangled voice. "Smells good."

She waved him off with her spatula, and ignored the pained sound in his throat as he retreated to a table with his hovering Pack companions.

Eventually everyone got a portion, a few even got seconds, and Raiders around the room were seated at the few tables, standing next to walls, or just sitting straight on the floor and eating.

There were only a few notable exceptions. Lauren and Keith were still running around, made more busy by this disruption in their routine. The boss was making some final cakes with whatever batter remained.

And one Disciple, sitting in a corner and nursing a drink, had a sneer of her face, that had been deepening with every cake flipped onto a plate.

It was when most people were already wolfing down their funnel cakes that she said anything, not seeming to address anyone because she was sitting alone, but apparently knowing how to project her voice just well enough that everyone heard.

"This the kind of Overboss we have now?" she asked. "One who cooks like some collared bitch."

The air seemed to momentarily get sucked out of the room. Every Raider stopped eating to cast sidelong glances at the boss, waiting for a reaction. Lauren's jaw tightened, and Keith's eyes turned wide and glistening with terror. His fingers shot up to the slave collar around his neck, and its
blinking red light.

Gage, who'd been stuffing down a funnel cake himself (shit was good, who was he to turn down good eatin'?), slid his hand down to his gun, propped next to his chair. He was damn sure there were bullets in it this time.

The boss, wiping her hands on a dishrag, casually strolled over by the counter like everything was perfectly normal. She finished wiping her hands, and flipped the rag onto her shoulders in a practiced motion, picking up a plate of funnel cake as she did so.

The boss tilted her head at the Disciple.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the boss laughed, "do you think you could do better?"

The boss smiled widely, but the question felt like a trap. It had to be a trap. It was always a trap. Every single Raider in the room had witnessed a variation on this exact thing at some point in their careers. Every single one had witnessed the scenario of the mouthy upstart challenging their gang leader, and it was depressing how often the question 'think you can do better?' was uttered during this exact moment.

Granted, it was rarely about cooking, but the bosses who smiled while they asked? They were the ones you really had to watch out for. At least the ones who got angry were straightforward, predictable in their reactions. The ones who didn't even look angry were the profoundly terrifying ones.

And the Overboss was giving an outright glowing smile at the moment. She seemed not only to not mind it, but to be actively delighted by the notion. It had to be a trap.

The Disciple's lips tightened into a line, and seconds ticked by without her saying anything.

"How about this," the boss said, and swept herself aside to put the stove in full view. "You make a better funnel cake than I can, and you can have the job."

"What," the Disciple blurted out.

What, mouthed everyone else in the room, a confused murmur rising.

"Yeah, cook a better funnel cake and I'll step down and give you the job of Overboss," the boss continued. "These guys are my witness," she added, gesturing loosely to the assembled Raiders. "Come on, you think you can do better, I'm up for giving you a chance. And after all, how hard can cooking be, if even a collared bitch? Was it? If even a collared bitch could do it."

The Disciple seemed momentarily stumped by this offer, and she cast an uneasy look around the room, like they might be in on the joke. But everyone around the room was various shades of confused and incredulous. And while her mask and cowl hid her own face, it was clear from the lines of her body that she was just as confused as anybody.

"Come on, one time offer here. Nobody's going to get this sweet deal other than you," the boss goaded.

The Disciple straightened up, settled into a posture more stubborn, and squared her shoulders.

"Yeah," the Disciple said, licking her lips. How hard could it be, right?
"Pre-mixed batter next to the stove," the boss said, and took the last plate of funnel cake to a table, sitting down. "Hey, Lauren, you got any more forks?"

Lauren scurried to fetch a fork for the boss.

"Thank you, you've been a star today," the boss said as she was handed the implement. "Sorry for the mess. Hey, sit down, have some funnel cake. You too, Keith. We've got plenty."

Lauren and Keith, twitchy, took that under advisement.

The Disciple, meanwhile, advanced towards the stove with grimness more fit for the gallows. All eyes were on her, Raiders watching closely to try and figure out what the boss meant to achieve with this. They couldn't discount that she was just a genuine kook, odds were pretty high for that. Wasteland living tended to turn just about everyone in some kind of nutbag.

But they all wanted to know how this would play out.

The fire hadn't burnt out in the stove yet, but the Disciple threw in some extra kindling through the hatch, making the flames jump. She narrowly avoided setting herself on fire, but then she had to pick up the batter dispenser. The boss had used not an actual funnel, but a weird improvised bag which she'd squeezed to send the batter right into the pan quickly.

And in all honestly, the boss had made it look easy. She could bang a cake out every minute. But the Disciple fumbled with the bag, squeezed too slowly, then too quickly.

The batter was a clumped mess. When she tried to flip it over with the spatula, she once again displayed far less skill than the boss. The cake kept slipping off and flopping back into the pan on the same side, getting more burnt one side and yet still raw on the other.

By the time the Disciple had a cake on a plate, it looked profoundly unappetizing. Clumpy, loose, burnt and uneven, it wasn't something anyone there would have eaten. That was visible from across the room, to even the most nearsighted of Raiders.

The Disciple slammed the plate on the counter, face flushed with humiliation.

The boss came up to assess the funnel cake. She was still chewing happily on her own cooking, and tapped the fork thoughtfully against her chin.

"Guess I'm stuck with this job," the boss said with a dramatic sigh, and the Raiders all tittered.

"Fuck you!" the Disciple burst. "You knew I couldn't do it! It was the only reason you even made the offer."

"Well, of course I did," the boss said. "What kind of Overboss would I be if I didn't know how to make a mean funnel cake and hold on to the job?"

With a flick of her wrist, the boss stabbed the burnt funnel cake with her fork. The Disciple flinched, but she had no response to that. When accused of showing weakness, most gang bosses didn't respond very well to it. Everyone in the room had probably been expecting the fork to end up in the Disciple's jugular.

"I do appreciate your concern, however," the boss continued sweetly. "What's your name?"

"Lara," the Disciple answered, after a moment's hesitation.
"I'll let Nisha know she has people looking out for her best interest," the boss said. "Now I suggest you either sit down and behave yourself, or leave."

Lara moved slowly, shuffling past the boss while managing to keep her back to a wall the entire time, and quietly left Cappy's Cafe.

"Well, that sure put a damper on the mood in here," the boss muttered.

Every eye in the room turned to the Overboss now, the same confused question buzzing through all their heads. It was blurted out by someone in the back.

"Boss, why didn't you kill her?"

The boss scoffed.

"Let's not be overdramatic," she said. "I don't consider bad cooking a lethal offense."

There were scattered chuckles around the room.

"Besides which," the boss continued, "this seems like the perfect opportunity for a demonstration."

She pointed to a Pack member, sitting on a stool at the counter and wolfing down her funnel cake. Her hair was dyed bright purple, same shade as the colorful face-paint she wore.

"You," the boss said, "can you cook?"

The Pack member blinked, looked around like she wasn't sure she was the one being addressed, and then back at the Overboss.

"Uh... no, I can't cook for shit," she said.

"Fry anything? Boil an egg? Boil water? No? Nothing?" The Pack member had shaken her head throughout the interrogation.

"She's killed more pots than people!" someone shouted from a gathered clump of Pack, and she turned furiously, trying to figure out who'd tattled. But her fellow gang members were just laughing.

"Perfect," the boss said. "Get to the stove."

"Um, what?" the Pack member asked, turning back to the boss.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not making you Overboss," the boss said with a grin, and there was another round of chuckles around the room. "You're going to help me make a point."

"What point?" she asked apprehensively.

"Why I'm Overboss," came the reply, as the boss gave the Pack member a perfectly level look. The Pack member squirmed, feeling pinned under that gaze, like she'd turned the corner and unexpectedly came face to face with a hungry yao guai.

Yeah, Gage recognized that look. The boss had had the same look on her face the evening they had their chat at the Fizztop Grille.

"I'm going to tell you what to do exactly," the boss said evenly, "and you'll make some funnel cake."

"Uh, sure, boss," the Pack member said, rising from her seat.
"Hey," the boss said, and grabbed her shoulder. "You're not just going to *make* that funnel cake, you're going to fucking. Demolish. It."

"Yeah," the Pack member said, already straightening up into the typical Pack posturing that was more familiar grounds to her.

"You're going to make that funnel cake your bitch," the boss continued. "That funnel cake is going to get the *shit* cooked out of it."

"Yeah!"

All the Pack in the cafe roared in agreement, making a few nearby Raiders wince and rub their ears. The boss handed the Pack member a spatula, and she threw her head back and howled. Gage tried to neither sigh nor looked too impressed by this spectacle. But boss sure could play to a crowd.
"What do you think are the chances I could get a Nuka-mixer up in the Grill?" the boss asked idly as she and Gage walked back to her digs.

"We'd need some pulleys, couple people in power armor," Gage started.

"Jesus, I'm not serious." The boss' head whipped around, and she gave him a horrified look. "That's a stupid idea, Gage. Someone would get crushed."

"Well, maybe," Gage said, "But you are the Overboss. And Colter had us doing way dumber shit than that."

"What this place needs is some good representational democracy."

"Shit, you're not gonna run for mayor or anything stupid like that, are ya, boss?"

"God, no. If I wanted to be mayor, Diamond City's having elections next fall. But this place needs to actually be run. It needs administration if it's going to be a real town. I have no idea how it's been kept going so far."

"Well," Gage rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, "when somethin' needs doing, there's the traders to do it."

The boss pursed her lips, giving Gage an indecipherable look. Slavery was probably a no-no in her book, but they collared the traders fair and square, and at this point, there was no way any of the Raiders would look kindly on letting the slaves loose off their chains. No Raider would risk having to do a day's honest work like that.

"We're gonna need a lot of scrap," the boss said suddenly.

"...Okay?" Gage said. "That something to do with your bid for mayor, boss?"

"And all the park's robots," the boss continued, as if she didn't even hear him. "I'm going to need..." She looked off into the distance, where the bottle-towers of the World of Refreshment loomed, and blinked slowly at some passing thought. "Hell, I'm going to need help," the boss said after a long pause.

What followed from there were effectively three days of strenuous fighting as the boss pushed to finally take back both the World of Refreshment and Dry Rock Gulch.

Wasn't exactly fun, going from wading waist-deep in some mirelurk-infested glowing water, to trudging through some dustbowl of a fake cowboy town, but hell, at least his boots got to dry off while they were fending off bloodworms in Dry Rock Gulch. Boss hadn't even taken any days off between parks, but this was the final push. After this, she would have all five parks under Raider control.

Gage still didn't know what delivering Nuka-Cola bottles to some skeletons had to do with anything, though. He hardly would've seen the point if those people had been alive.
"Boss, you're good with robots, couldn't you just reprogram them to think you did what they asked you to do?" Gage asked.

"Yeah," the boss replied simply.

"So why don't you?" Gage asked, when it was clear she wouldn't elaborate further.

"I take my fun where I can get it," she said.

She returned to the robot in the saloon, where the Protectron was idling, waiting for her return. It whirred back to attention when they approached.

"Good job," the robot said in its halting voice. "Did Old Prospector Owen give you one of his great tall tales as reward for his drink? What about Miss Trixie and Handy Hank?"

Gage tried not to snort too loudly.

The boss gave a hooting, over-the-top laugh.

"Oh yeah," the boss said. "Owen, Trixie and Hank told me aaaaall about the California Gold Rush. Fun and educational!" She smiled widely at the robot.

Gage had no clue what the fuck the California Gold Rush was supposed to be, but the robot apparently accepted this answer, because the metal dumbass gave the boss its part of the safe combination.

Alright, well. The boss' fake cowboy drawl was as hilarious as it was awful. He probably shouldn't be finding it half as funny as he did, but Gage could admit it was. He was willing to get his fun where he could find it, too, though he didn't mention it out loud.

They eventually found their way to the source of the bloodworm infestation, and the boss solved this problem with some help from her good old pals, handfuls of fragmentation grenades.

Gage was filled with a buzz of excitement as they returned to Nuka-Town that day. But there was an edge of trepidation to it, too.

The flagpoles above the World of Refreshment and Dry Rock Gulch stood empty, and all the eyes in Nuka-World were looking right at them, wondering why no gang's flag flew over them.

Gage could only hope the boss had a good enough explanation for everyone.

The boss went back to the Grille, washed up, and changed into her dress, then she went on an evening stroll through Nuka-Town. Gage trailed after her, perfectly willing to let some of her success rub off on him.

They were greeted with enthusiasm by the Raiders wherever they went. Celebratory clumps of Raiders congregated on the sides of roads, sharing drinks under awnings, or chems as they sat in patio chairs under a convenient bit of shade. Firepits were set up, ringing the market, and the menu of the day was bloodworm and mirelurk, most of which Gage suspected was taken from the World of Refreshment and Dry Rock Gulch after he and the boss gunned their way through.
"Oh, yes, actually," the boss confirmed. "I had some of the traders come in after us and pick up anything that looked good to cook. I figured a feast might go over well."

"Well, I'll spread the word about that then," Gage said, laughing. "These assholes should know who to be grateful for."

The boss flashed him a smile, approving. Then she straightened her jacket and went off to schmooze.

Gage was half a step behind her when he spotted Shank, stepping out from the shadows of the entrance to Nuka-Town to give Gage a slow, meaningful nod. Gage gave the boss a final glance, making sure he wouldn't be missed, and then slipped off towards Shank.

If Gage had anything resembling a like-minded ally in the place, it was probably Shank.

Gage had originally brought Shank in to advise Colter on how to best spread his influence in the Commonwealth once Nuka-World was secure. Now Shank was in charge of the caravans which kept caps flowing through Nuka-World, and through his eyes and ears in the Commonwealth. The thing with Colter hadn't exactly worked out, but Shank still kept Gage informed about the state of things outside Nuka-World.

And as Shank had pointed out in the past, the state of things was pretty much always 'ripe for the picking' if you knew what you were doing.

"New boss working out well, I see," Shank said, leaning against a wall with arms folded as Gage approached. "Not dead yet, at least."

"She's turnin' out tougher to kill than most," Gage agreed mildly.

"Would you be arranging an accident for her right now if she wasn't?" Shank asked, and if he were a less cold-blooded individual, he would probably be giving Gage a thin smile just then.

"That ain't all there is to her," Gage said, "so not yet, I guess."

Shank snorted, tilting his head towards the distance. Gage followed his gaze to the boss, surrounded by a captive audience. They couldn't hear what she was saying, but she was gesturing widely, and the Raiders around her, a mix of Operators and Pack, were hanging on her every word, their eyes wide, their teeth set in incredulous smiles as if in spite of themselves.

"Yeah, she has that knack for sucking people in."

"Has the knack for wiping out whoever she doesn't suck in, too," Shank pointed out. "She set up those Minutemen real nice up at their Castle, but I hear tell of how she cleaned out the Combat Zone with nothing but a Mr. Handy. And I don't mean it in the sense that she used a broom."

Gage mulled on that for a few moments. True, he'd heard about the Combat Zone too. That happened just as they were preparing the assault to take Nuka-World, so he hadn't been interested in any of the bloody details at the time. Hell, he hadn't even fully believed it; some scavver wipes out everyone at the Combat Zone single-handedly? Easier to think it was a battalion of those Brotherhood of Steel mooks, or some hired Gunners, or even a fucking Deathclaw bursting from the sewers.

Now that he knew the boss, though, it seemed more than plausible. He wasn't even surprised it'd been her.

"You see why we'd want her on our side, then," Gage said.
"Not arguing she isn't a mean ol' bitch, Gage," Shank said. "But is she going to give us what we want? Because it seems to me that if she had to choose between the Commonwealth and us..." Shank's expression darkened. "Well, we wouldn't exactly come up on top in that equation."

"The fact that we ain't dead oughta tell you all you need to know," Gage said.

"Only thing it's telling me is that I'm not dead yet," Shank replied bluntly. "But I'll wait. Waited so far, I can give it a little more time. She the one, Gage?"

"She's definitely somethin'," Gage said, letting all his perplexity show.

Shank snorted, a smile twisting on his face.

"She got you all tied up in knots, then?" Shank asked.

"Dunno what that's supposed to mean," Gage said.

"Means be careful," Shank said. "You might find out strings can be pulled from either ends." He touched the brim of his hat in a vague greeting, and turned to walk away.

That last remark sat heavy in Gage's stomach as he walked back towards the boss, but he didn't dwell on it, and definitely didn't let it show on his face.

The boss had a bottle of Nuka Cherry in her hand, and she was in the middle of explaining the proper use and operation of a Nuka-mixer to the assembled crowd, to varying levels of understanding.

"Wait, so, it's just a machine to make more soda out of soda?" one of the Pack asked, his nose scrunching as he apparently concentrated really hard on grasping this notion. "Why the fuck would we want that, we already got more Nuka-Cola than we know what to do with. Hell, I heard the bottling plant has a whole river of Nuka Quantum. Now that's something. Would be drinking from that for months!"

"It's not actually Nuka Quantum, it's just water dyed blue," the boss corrected.

The Pack Raider shrugged.

"Would still drink it," he muttered.

"And there were mirelurks living in it," the boss continued. "Probably using it as a spawning ground, from what I saw. There were a lot of nests down there."

The Pack member shrugged with a blankly uncomprehending look on his face. Another Pack, standing right behind him, rolled her eyes and leaned over his shoulder to say,

"Boss means the 'lurks were fuckin' in it."

This apparently finally got the message across, because the Raider gagged in disgust. There was a good laugh had all around.

"So, boss," an Operator interjected, with a perfect smile affixed to his face, but not reaching his eyes, "the burning question everyone's dying to know the answer to. Who gets the last two parks?"

Now all eyes were on her, Pack and Operator alike, united in their curiosity. Speculative. Gage didn't like that sharp glint, but he couldn't warn the boss about any danger without undercutting her.
The boss smiled, seemingly oblivious, but most likely not.

"But isn't the more interesting question: what will everyone be getting out of the parks?" she said.

There was a moment of silence.

"No," one of the Pack replied, simplistic as always.

Some of the other Raiders slid that guy some sidelong glances, but sometimes it took the village idiot to really stump the smartest person there. When they all looked back at the boss, expectantly, it was with an edge of tension. None of them had wanted to say something so directly, but now that the thing had got said anyway, well...

The wrong word from her, and it could all turn very bad. Gage wasn't sure if the conversation with Shank had him so on edge, but here he was, holding his breath, hoping the boss was half as good as she left the impression she was.

The boss stared for a few seconds, before bursting into snickers. The Raiders waited, politely, until she got a grip again.

"Okay, who else is on Team Instant Gratification?" she asked, and then because she needed to clarify for the dullards in the group, "Anybody else impatient about getting a park? Ah, there we go." A few hands had gone up, sheepishly, all around the group. "Now, how many of you have done jack-shit to take back a single park?"

Hands went down and smiles wiped off faces instantly at the shift in the boss' tone. Her expression was stonier than any of them had ever seen.

"Yeah, I figured," she said, and leaned back in her chair, propped her elbow on the top of her backrest, crossed her legs.

Something about the pose felt judgmental, and given that everybody there had a list of crimes to their names as long as Nuka-World was wide, it meant damn near nobody was comfortable in that moment, least of all Gage.

"Now, you all have your piece," she said. "Your own park to do with as you please. Nobody's getting left out in cold here, right? But at least some things you're going to have to earn. I'm not running a charity here."

"So, a test, then," one of the Operators said.

"I didn't say that either," the boss replied. "And if I was testing any of you, I'd tell you up front and give you the scoring sheet to boot. No, let's say for now that I appreciate good behavior and I'll reward it appropriately."

"If you're loyal, you get a treat," the boss said.

She let them chew on this for a few moments, before her demeanor changed again. Her face turned to sunshine, and she picked up a bottle of Nuka Wild.

"Now, who wants to see a cool trick?" she asked, bright as a summer morning.

They damn well all wanted to see a cool trick, and fell over themselves to say so.
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