Forty-Five Minute Miracles

by Wagontrain

Summary

From the Capital Wasteland to the Mojave Desert and beyond, one refrain is heard again and again: *war never changes*. Can humanity ever hope to rise above?

Concludes Messiah in Absentia, The Low Road, and Steel Against Steel.

Notes

2277, June: Joshua Graham leads the first attack on Hoover Dam, resulting in a major defeat for the Legion at the hands of the New California Republic. He is lit on fire and thrown into the Grand Canyon as a consequence of his failure.

2277, August: Soledad emerges from the Vault and begins the quest to find her father.

2278, January: Soledad returns to Vault 101 to resolve the conflict between the Overseer and the rest of the Vault citizens. In the aftermath Amata Almodovar becomes Overseer and orders Soledad to leave, for the security of the Vault.

2278, February: Soledad activates Project Purity, providing a source of clean water for the entire Capital Wasteland. She later travels east to Point Lookout, then north towards the Pitt.

2278, May: Jackson Woodrow uses a cache of Enclave equipment to briefly build a League in the Capital Wasteland.

2278, June: Soledad liberates the slaves of the Pitt from Ashur’s rule.
2278, July: Soledad has a crisis of conscience over giving the infant Marie to the Freemen, and flees into the ‘Burgh. Wernher sends search parties out to recapture her, including Milly and Lulu.

2278, August: Soledad and the infant Marie stumble across the vanguard of the Keystone expeditionary force.

2279, February: In order to meet demand from the ‘Burgh, Wernher “temporarily” reinstates Ashur’s work quotas for the Freemen.

2279, May: Soledad visits the Chinese Wasteland.

2281, October: Clint receives a package to deliver a package to the New Vegas Strip, before being ambushed by Benny.

2281, November: The Grand Clusterfuck begins when Clint murders Benny and the rest of the Chairmen. Over the next several weeks Clint, Boone and Cass eliminate several hostile groups in the Mojave including the Omertas, the White Glove Society, the Crimson Caravan Company, the Van Graffs, the Great Khans, the Powder Gangers, and several tribes. Cass is crippled in the battle against the Van Graffs.

2281, December: Soledad visits the Midwestern chapter of the Brotherhood of Steel in Chicago.

2282, February: Elder Lyons proposes a political marriage between Amata and Arthur Maxson to solidify an alliance between Vault 101 and the Brotherhood of Steel.

2282, March: Caesar’s Legion attacks Hoover Dam in force. Unlike the attack five years before, NCR fails to repel the Legion and retreats out of the Mojave. Arcade Gannon and Craig Boone are killed.

2283, January: Soledad and Marie visit the Republic of Botswana.

2284, April: Charon battles Marcus and the AntAgonizer, and learns the truth about his contract and life before it.

2285, May: The Keystone begin to lay siege to the ‘Burgh.

2285, September: Caesar’s Legion discovers the Hidden Valley bunker and begins efforts to access it. After weeks of blasting, Veronica Santangelo devises a plan for the Brotherhood to recapture their airships and escape east.

2286, June: A representative from the NCR hires Clint to deliver Lucy, a psyker from the Master’s army, to Hoover Dam.

2287, November: In an effort to secure a cease-fire with the Keystone, the ‘Burgh Commissioners agree to allow a joint expedition into the Carnegie Institute, inadvertently revealing the secrets of Trogg Degeneration Contagion.

2288, May: The Mojave chapter of the Brotherhood of Steel arrives in the Capital Wasteland and works to integrate with the local chapter.

2290, November: Soledad and Marie visit Perth, Australia, and barely escape with their lives.

2291, August: Acting on orders from the Institute, Stepford and Armitage assault the Sarah
Today. It’s all going to happen today.

Marie peered at the outfits laid out on her bed. She was going to meet a lot of new people today, and she wanted to put her best foot forward. Which foot that was, she wasn’t sure. At the foot of the bed lay a rough shirt, brahman-leather vest, sturdy pants and a pair of boots. Mom called it “Wasteland chic” when Marie bought it during a trip to Twin Cities. Next to that lay a blouse and trousers, less tailored than formed from something that wasn’t quite fabric. It was a normal outfit for a day on Zeta; light enough that the hot, arid environment on-ship but also sturdy enough to resist the bizarre stains and wear and tear of maintaining the ship’s systems. Finally, at the head of the bed lay the set of power armor mom had commissioned for Marie. Base on designs stolen from the Enclave naval base in Jacksonville and the Imperial garrison at Guangzhou, as well as purchased from the Republic of Botswana, the sculpted suit glinted silvery in the light. The material it was shaped from was distinctly other than terrestrial.

After the disastrous trip to Perth, Mom had refused to let Marie visit the surface at all until the armor was complete. Just the ablative plating wasn’t enough; she wasn’t satisfied until the inertia suppression field, sensor masking, emergency transit signaler and stealth system all worked perfectly. “You do not know how dangerous the Wasteland is,” Mom had said, ending the argument on Marie’s fourteenth birthday. ”You’ve never been shot, and it’s going to stay that way.” Marie groused about her mom’s paranoia, but it was quiet and more out of habit than any actual resistance; the horrible two days they had spent in Perth were still fresh on her mind, more than two years later.

Marie settled on the Zeta outfit. No sense in pretending to be a Wastelander if she wasn’t, and the armor could be kinda intimidating. She dressed quickly and ran a hand through her short, spikey hair. Show time.

She left her room, mindful of the low doorway. She passed a handful of people in the sleek silver hallway. Mom had explained that when she first came aboard Zeta it had been just her, a few other abductees, and a whole lot of aliens. After dealing with the aliens, mom began awakening the dozens of people who had been kept in suspended animation. In the fifteen years since, the Zetans had built themselves a little utopia among the stars.

Marie reached the galley, but a quick scan of the room proved that Soledad wasn’t there. Instead, Marie plopped down at Somah’s table, earning a bemused scowl from the former Wastelander. Somah had been one of the first people mom ran into on Zeta, and nowadays helped to keep the ship running. Mom said that she was crude, but she knew her stuff.

“Hey, squirt,” Somah said.

“Hey yourself,” Marie replied. Somah always called her squirt, and laughed at her when Marie told her it wasn’t an appropriate nickname for a lady of sixteen. “You excited for today? I’m excited.”

“Excited? Yeah, I guess.” Marie stole a purple alien cephalopod from Somah’s plate, munching on a tentacle.
“You don’t sound excited. C’mom, today’s the day we change the world!”

“That’s the plan,” Somah drawled. “Just…keep your head on a swivel, Marie. We got it pretty good up here, but down there…it’s real different. Job I used to do, it wasn’t very pretty. And there’s a lot of people like who I was.”

“How bad could it be?” Marie asked, slurping the rest of the squid down. “You said you worked in paradise.”

“Paradise Falls. Ain’t the same.”

Marie shrugged blithely. “You know where mom is?”

“Probably on the command deck, worrying about everything,” Somah said with a matching shrug.

“Cool. Later!” Marie jumped up from her seat and headed to the arch. A person could step through it to any other arch on Zeta, which was a heck of a time-saver. The ship was huge and trying to just walk to the command deck would probably take half an hour. Marie didn’t have time to waste, on today of all days.

She emerged in the rear of the command deck. Marie blinked her jaunt-dazzled eyes, but before her vision even cleared she heard mom and Elliot talking. “Are all the transit beacons in place?”

“All four thousand of them. There’s one available to pretty much every city, town, village, and settlement on Earth,” Elliot answered. “We could always add more…”

Soledad stood before the command console, arms crossed tightly over her chest. She wore the same beat-up longcoat she wore any time she went to the surface, complete with a rugged stormchaser hat. “Hi, mom,” Marie said. “Hey Elliot.”

“Good morning, Marie,” Soledad replied.

“Mom,” Marie admonished. “Morning doesn’t mean anything up here in orbit. The sun breaks over the horizon, like, every forty-five minutes.”

Soledad nodded out to the huge observation windows, towards the Earth below. Marie could see lights twinkling in the night, marking the Institute, Harrisburg, New Vegas, and Shady Sands. The sun peaked past the horizon, spilling light across the blasted land and revealing the ugly scars of war long gone by.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Soledad said quietly, staring out at the world before her. “Did I ever tell you the first time I saw the sun?”

“It’s the sun,” Marie said. “It’s there, like, all the time.”

“Not when you grow up in a Vault,” Soledad replied. “And when I left…I was running for my life. I got through the rickety wood door hiding the Vault, and was just…struck to my knees by this blinding thing hanging overhead. The sun. I saw that and I knew that the universe was profoundly different than I understood. That my life couldn’t ever be the same again.” Soledad turned to her with a tight smile. “That day, the sun in the sky…it was a miracle. There was nothing else like it, and it was proof that the world was unimaginably bigger and stranger than I’d imagined.” The sunlight crept across the surface below; dawn in the Capital Wasteland. “Now we have a sunrise every forty-five minutes, and each one is a miracle.”

“So why wait?” Marie urged, stepping past Soledad to reach the console. She tapped its surface,
bringing up the communications system. “Come on, let’s start!”

“Hold on. This is a big moment,” Elliot said. He glanced over to Soledad. “Is there anything else we need to do, before we do this?”

“No,” Soledad said. “Marie’s right. We’ve waited to do this for too long as it is.” Marie backed away and Soledad leaned over the communication panel, bracing herself against it. She stroked her finger across the panel, activating Zeta’s powerful transmitters. She opened her mouth to speak, then stopped herself to take a steadying breath.

“This signal is breaking across all frequencies and being translated into all known languages. My name is Soledad. Some of you may know me as the Lone Wanderer.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time exploring our world. The United States and China, the settlements of Europe and the empires of Africa and South America. Anyone hearing this message knows there’s something wrong with our world. Something more complicated than the bombs that fell on the Old World, or the petty skirmishes between one faction or another.”

“Dammit Cassidy, just eat your protein paste.”

Deathclaws, Caesar’s Legion, and murderous androids were no problem, but Veronica had found that her most implacable enemy was a single two year old girl.

“No! I want mutfruit,” little Cassidy demanded.

“Well…you’re practically feral, that’s why I get to make the decisions,” Veronica retorted. “Look, just…just half. Just eat half of it?”

“NO!”

The door to their quarters parted to admit Sarah Lyons. “Veronica, have you heard…” She took in the scene before her with Cassidy, Veronica and the table between them spattered with paste and Veronica’s mounting frustration. She spoke with the tone she usually reserved for recalcitrant initiates. “Cassidy, did you ask for that much food?”

“Yes,” the girl grumbled.

“Then you know the rule. What is it?”

“‘Take all you want, eat all you take,’” Cassidy replied in a sing-song voice.

“That’s right,” Sarah nodded. “Get to it, young lady.”

“Why does she listen to you?” Veronica grumbled as Cassidy dug in to the paste.

Sarah kissed her cheek. “I don’t give her the option to say no.” She crossed the room to the radio Veronica built two years ago in Vault 101. “How do you turn this on? You’ve got to hear this.”

“Cassidy popped on of the circuit boards out of place when she got a little too vigorous playing ‘pin the tail on the super mutant.’” Veronica opened the back and fiddled with the electronics. “Which reminds me, we need to teach her that ‘pin the tail on the super mutant’ doesn’t involve throwing mommy’s radio.”

The radio crackled to life under her ministrations. “I’ve talked to people everywhere I went, and I’ve
listened. No matter where I asked the questions, I got back some variation of the same response: war never changes. The idea that humanity will never be able to rise above and grow because we’ll always tear ourselves apart before we can achieve anything.”

“That’s the Lone Wanderer,” Sarah explained.

“You don’t say? I still owe her a gift basket for that thing with the androids.”

“I don’t know why. Maybe it’s pettiness and greed, everyone looking out for themselves at the expense of everyone around them. Maybe it’s a need for revenge, hurting someone who hurt you in a cycle that doesn’t end. Maybe it’s just because that’s always what we’ve done, and doing something new is too frightening to contemplate.”

“Sounds like the lady’s got a plan,” Veronica mused.

“She’s the Wasteland messiah,” Sarah agreed with a nod.

Squealing, little Alphie Maxson careened into the Overseer’s office, fleeing his father’s tickling fingers. He raced around the half-ring Overseer’s desk, hiding in the foot space for a breathless instant before Amata swept him into her lap.

“You didn’t think you’d get away that easy, did you?” she asked, tickling him mercilessly.

Arthur sat on the edge of the desk, grinning as his son howled in delight. “Told you running to her wouldn’t help.”

Soledad’s message continued from the speaker of Amata’s Pipboy. “That’s all the Great War was, really. Or more recently the conflicts between the NCR and the Legion, the Institute and the Keystone, and the Brotherhood’s civil war in the Capital Wasteland. I’ve witnessed them all. Conflicts that emerged because we as humans couldn’t think of a better way to live with each other.”

Arthur inclined his chin to it, but Amata shook her head: she had a much more important task before her. Alphie’s peals of laughter almost drowned out Soledad’s monologue. “Maybe it’s true that war never changes. By its very nature, war is destructive. People die, entire countries turn to Wasteland. It’s the essence of war itself. War never changes, but we can. I’ve found a better way.”

Alphie finally squirmed free and disappeared under the desk again, undetectable but for his giggling.

“Well I don’t know about him, but I’m tuckered out.”

“What’s that about?” Arthur asked, gesturing to the Pipboy. “Is that the Lone Wanderer?”

Amata nodded. “It is. And I think…I think she’s making her dad proud.”

“In orbit now is an alien space ship, called Zeta. How it got here is a long story, but it’s ours now. Mine and the crew’s. We want to make it yours. The xenotechnology here is capable of feats you couldn’t imagine. If you need power, we have devices that can run forever at no cost. If you need medical help, we have machines here that can restore you to perfect health. If you need transportation, we have transits devices that can send you literally anywhere on the planet. I’m offering it to you, to everyone on Earth, and all I ask is that you use it with good intentions. Harm no one. You don’t need to anymore.”

“Alphie?” The giggling stopped, and the boy peered out at her. “How would you like to go on a trip?”
“Where?”

“Outer space!”

Alphie gaped, and bolted out from under the desk. “I’mma get my coat!”

“Come on.” Amata rose, gesturing her husband out ahead of her. “I want to see what Soledad’s been working on.”

“Lucy? What do you make of this?”

Clint leaned back on the couch, listening to the Wanderer’s words. Their suite was the best the Sierra Madre had to offer with the best furniture left to be scrounged in the village, of which Clint had been taking full advantage for an evening snooze when the radio had rudely burst to life. “Reckon this lady thinks awful highly of herself. Wonder where she and her fancy space ship were when the Legion came to New Vegas.”

Lucy appeared beside him, reality parting to accommodate her. “No! Clint, don’t listen! Don’t listen don’t…”

“I grew up in a Vault,” the woman’s voice explained. “One of the ideas that we took as common knowledge was that the Vaults were supposed to preserve the human race. That’s wrong. We were wrong.”

“What are you carrying on about?” Clint asked with a scowl.

“The Vaults were never meant to save anyone, and it was arrogance on our part to think that we could. A handful of Vault Dwellers or Chosen Ones or Lone Wanderers can’t keep saving the world. It’s too big, you can see that from up here in space.”

And something clicked in Clint’s mind, a long-forgotten demand suddenly pushed to the forefront of his mind until he could think of nothing but. Clint pushed off of the couch, his expression contorted with rage.

“Kill the Vault Dweller first,” he snarled, diving into the footlocker he kept all his old weapons in.

“No, Clint, no!” Lucy cried. Her hands reached out to him in futility, but even as she spoke she knew nothing would change. This moment had already happened, was happening, unavoidably would happen, just as inevitably as Lucy’s arrival to the Sierra Madre with Clint in the first place. “It’s not her, she doesn’t deserve it! She’s just trying to make the world a better place.” She watched helplessly as he tightened his gunbelt, holstering a laser pistol on his hip.

“Then she can’t hurt anyone,” was all he said as he stormed out of the room.

The Wanderer continued from the radio, heedless. “Fighting to make the world better has to be all of our responsibilities, not just keeping our heads down and hoping the horrors happen to the next person.”

Lucy drifted through the window, watching Clint race down the lane towards the Sierra Madre’s gates. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed.
“If you want to build a finer world, come visit us. For help, or just to talk.”

The most striking thing about Clover’s death was not how little anyone mourned her. It was not that she was found with her faded pink dress hiked up over her belly, or that she was found with a knife still sticking straight out of her tit. No, the most striking thing was the look of completely bewildered surprise frozen on her face.

As if somehow the bitch didn't have it coming.

The other slavers knew the score, and stayed the fuck out of Ella’s way when she emerged from the pad. Her hands were slick with blood and a spray had caught her across the belly, and Ella ignored their stares as she stripped out of the scant nightwear Clover had made her uniform.

Upstairs, the radio still blared (conveniently loud enough to cover Clover’s screams). “We’ve put down transit beacons, across the Wasteland and across the world. Everyone is welcome on Zeta, and everyone who comes here will be free. Just come to the beacon and touch it, and we’ll bring you up. I’m looking forward to meeting you.”

Ella pointed at one of the slavers. "Jacket. Pants. And your fucking shoes.” Even if she was a slave and a whore, no one was going to argue with a naked, blood-soaked woman who clearly gave precisely zero fucks. She struggled to pull the boots on and shoved her arms through the over-sized jacket, and turned towards the gate. The last anyone saw of Ella, she was trudging north into the Wastes.

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Soledad let out a sigh of relief as she toggled the receiver off. “Do you think they’ll come?” she asked Elliot.

“You know they will,” he replied with a grin.

Soledad nodded, and turned back to Marie. “Remember what I told you?”

“People are scared of what they don’t understand,” she answered. “They’re going to be uncertain of all this.”

“You’re my emissary,” Soledad said. “Nobody’s going to be able to resist your smile.” Marie ducked her head, trying to feign irritation to cover her embarrassment. “I want you with me at the transit bay when they start arriving. We need to explain things and help them feel safe.”

The command console chirped. Elliot leaned in, examining the readout. “That’s the Arroyo beacon.”

“Come on,” Marie said, grabbing for Soledad’s arm and pulling her towards the arch. “Let’s go bring them up.”

* *

The next few hours were a flurry of activity.

Marie and Soledad worked with a dozen other Zetans to greet the Wastelanders who appeared in the transit bay. They offered earpieces that made any language understandable, and took their guests on brief tours of the ship. “We want to wow them,” Soledad had explained. “Show them how we live, get them asking how they can have all this too.” And it worked better than Marie could have guessed. Three different groups had already asked what they had to do to come live on Zeta.
Marie left her guests with Somah on the observation deck, marveling at the world slowly rotating below, and returned to the transit bay. As she entered she saw Soledad talking with what had to be the Chinese delegation. Even though each of them wore one of the silver earpieces, Soledad spoke to them in the unfamiliar language Marie had heard during their trip to Shanghai.

A sharp buzz rose from the bay, and Elliot called to her from his position behind the podium. “Three from the Capital Wasteland.” A stiff gust shoved against Marie as the incoming transit displaced the air in the room. A flash of light washed through the room, and faded to reveal a woman holding a young boy, both in Vault suits, and a man close by them. “Welcome to Zeta. I’m Marie.”

“Marie?” The woman asked. “Soledad’s Marie?”

*At least she isn’t calling me squirt.* “I kinda think of me as my Marie, but…yeah.”

“I’m Amata, from Vault 101. This is my husband Arthur, and our son Alphie.”

“Oh! Wow! Okay, mom was really hoping you’d come.” She looked across the room, to where Soledad still conversed with the Chinese delegation. “She’s a little busy right now, but I’ll get you set up with a room.”

“Incoming from Jacksonville,” Elliot called.

“Please get clear, we’ve got people coming up pretty fast.” Marie gestured them off the platform. Alphie clapped his hands over his ears as the transit bay charged, and in a flash of light six men appeared. They wore little more than underwear and shirts, and posed as if they were covering the room with weapons they no longer held. “Welcome to Zeta,” Marie said drily.

“What…where is our equipment?” one of them demanded. He advanced on Marie dangerously, only to be brought up short by Arthur’s imposing bulk standing in the way.

“We figured somebody’d try to do something dumb like stage a takeover,” Marie said with a shrug. “Your guns and power armor are being held as energy matrixes in our ship’s computer. You can have them back when you transit to the surface. And if you’re thinking of doing anything stupid while you’re up here…” she patted the sleek blaster holstered on her hip, “…just remember we’re armed, even if you’re not.”

“You listen to me, little girl…” the man started menacingly.

“No. You listen to me.” Soledad approached unhurriedly. She gave Amata a warm hug before turning back to the new arrivals. “You are guests on Zeta, at my invitation. That invitation can be revoked if you’re planning to bring violence to my home.” She stepped close to the man, noting his dogtags, crewcut and clean, unblemished skin. “If the Enclave doesn’t like that, you’re welcome to go home.”

*He so doesn’t like that.* Still, he didn’t see a better course of action. “The President sends his regards,” he sneered.

“That’s kind of him,” Soledad said. Marie relaxed minutely, slipping her hand away from her blaster. “I actually am glad you’re here. I’ve been speaking with the party sent up by the Chinese, and I wanted to introduce you to each other.”

“You think we’re going to talk with a bunch of communists?” the Enclave man scoffed.

“I think that ‘communist’ and ‘capitalist’ are useless distinctions, given that neither of you have functioning economies,” Soledad replied drily. “Come on. You’ve hated each other for a war that
ended before your grandparents were born. You’ve got nothing to lose by having a conversation.”

I have never seen so many people in one place before in my life!

It wasn’t quite true; Reykjavik had tens of thousands of people living in skyscrapers, private homes, and tenements, but Reykjavik wasn’t Zeta. Most of the people who transited up didn’t stay more than an hour or two, just come to see what the fuss was about or to ask for a power module or food transmuter.

Marie took a break after ten hours of meeting and greeting. Being an emissary is a lot of work, she thought as she made her way through Zeta’s residential section. Mom had disappeared earlier, but maybe she’d want to get some food. Marie stopped outside of Soledad’s quarters and pressed her thumb against the protrusion that bumped out from the doorframe to trigger the doorbell.

“Come in,” she heard as the door locks released.

“Hey, mom, you want to get…” Marie’s voice trailed off. Soledad sat at the table in the living room; across from her sat a haggard woman, wearing clothes Marie recognized as being from Soledad’s own closet; she’d borrowed them often enough herself. On the table lay a spread of food, both alien and from the Wasteland below, and the woman ate as if it was the first meal she’d had in years.

Soledad motioned Marie over, but distractedly: her attention was on the other woman. “Marie, this is Bittercup. We met while I was exploring the Capital Wasteland. Bittercup, this is my daughter Marie.”

Bittercup looked Marie up and down. Those eyes. Marie suppressed a shiver. Her eyes are dead. What does that to a person?

“Good to meet you,” Bittercup finally said in a tone that was decidedly apathetic. Marie couldn’t be sure, but Bittercup almost seemed to shift in her chair to protect the food.

Soledad didn’t seem too concerned by the woman’s behavior, even if she did seem a bit savage. “What were you saying, Bittercup?”

The other woman rolled her eyes. “I was telling you that everybody’s got a damned plan, Wanderer,” she replied lowly. “You, the Enclave, Jackson. Every asshole in the Wasteland thinks they’ve got some way to make things better.”

“Everyone’s got hope, Bittercup,” Soledad said easily. “Trying to improve conditions in the Wasteland isn’t a bad goal, even if the Enclave’s got a screwed up idea of what ‘improvements’ are.”

“I’m saying all of you are looking at the wrong problem. Like, Jackson’s Fourteen Points, right? He wanted to build roads, get people to trade shit with each other to get them to depend on each other, get rid of all the nasties like the raiders and super mutants.” Bittercup shook her head. “And even after all that gets accomplished, he throws me out with the trash and the Brotherhood ripped him a new one. He had a plan for everything and it still all went to shit.”

“There aren’t enough resources in the Capital Wasteland to address all of the needs down there,” Soledad replied. “With Zeta’s technology…”

“All you’ve got up here…it’s like…” Bittercup scowled. “It’s like, down there? The Wasteland? That’s Little Lamplight. It’s shitty and dark and it stinks and there’s Goddamned super mutants waiting to fucking eat you. It’s not that bad though because you know there’s this better place you
can go when you get mungo, where it’s just parties all the time. But then you get to Big Town and you realize it’s just a bunch of morons who don’t know what they’re doing and Red running around being a bitch.” She glared at Soledad. “Zeta’s Big Town in this story.”

“I gathered.”

“That’s not fair,” Marie said. Bittercup turned towards her, and Marie felt her glare wash over her. “I mean…um…we’ve got good things up here, you know? Technology. We can use it for good stuff.”

“That’s just it, though,” Bittercup growled. “I heard all about the Wanderer’s righteous rampage in Paradise Falls that left Eulogy dead. And what happened after that? Did the good people of the Wasteland finally make sure that the Falls stayed dead?” She turned her gaze back to Soledad.

“No, they didn’t,” Soledad answered quietly.

“Hell no!” Bittercup snapped. “Mistress was freed by Eulogy getting offed, and the first thing she did was turn around and start it all going again.”

“I’m sorry. I should have made sure that place stayed torn down.”

“You’re missing the damned point.” Bittercup shook her head. “I was in Paradise Falls for…I don’t even know. I don’t want to know how long. I was fucking owned, mind, body and soul, by Mistress. That’s not something that happened because we didn’t have water or electricity. You get that? It happened because she was a goddamn monster. As a person. She had a poisonous fucking soul. How’s your alien shit going to solve that?”

Marie let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Bittercup raged, but there was a tone of pleading in her voice; she was desperate for an answer to the question.

Soledad nodded, thinking to herself. “Have you heard of Botswana? It’s in Africa.”

“What the fuck is an Africa?”

“It’s a place on the other side of the planet from the Capital Wasteland. The bombs didn’t fall there, for the most part; I think it wasn’t very important in the Old World, so no one bothered to blow it up. You know what I found there?”

Bittercup crossed her arms over her chest. “Buncha assholes?”

“A few,” Soledad allowed. “But mostly? I found a place where civilization had never been interrupted by the Great War. They always have clean, running water there, and everyone votes to see who’s in charge. They’re decent people for the most part, but it’s a lot easier to be decent when you don’t have to spend your days scavenging and hiding from raiders. I think that with what we’ve got up here, we can help make it easier for everyone to be decent.”


Soledad reached out to touch Bittercup’s hand, but the other woman flinched away. Soledad let her hand drop. “I really hope Marie and I can prove you wrong,” she replied.

* * *

The terminator was working its way across Asia by the time Marie, Soledad and Bittercup joined the guests on the observation deck. The large room was filled to capacity with more than a hundred
people babbling excitedly in a dozen languages. *Geez, it's like they've never seen the Earth before.* Marie recognized a number of their guests from earlier, and saw Amata and Arthur talking with a number of people wearing different-numbered Vault jumpsuits.

“Wanderer!” A woman in blue robes waved Soledad over. Marie noticed Bittercup stop cold at the woman’s voice, and rather than follow Soledad to meet them she faded into the crowd.

“Sarah Lyons,” Soledad called back, crushing the other woman in a hug. “They made you Elder?”

“It’s a long story,” Sarah allowed.

“The chapter is in good hands,” Soledad said. She turned to Sarah’s companion. “And…yes. You’re Veronica, from that trouble with the Institute. I trust you haven’t heard back from them since?”

“Nope, no androids, robots or other assholes. At least not from the Institute.” Veronica grinned. “The way Sarah tells it, that must have just been an average Tuesday for you. Did you actually ride Liberty Prime into the middle of an Enclave base and take them all out by yourself?”

Soledad arched an eyebrow at her. “I mean, the Lyons’ Pride helped.”

“And she’s humble,” Veronica glanced sidelong at Sarah. “Why didn’t you snap her up?”

“I don’t like humble. Lucky for you.”

Marie scanned the crowd, spotting Somah enter the lounge with a man in to tow. He had a face of rugged stubble, and his eyes flicked across the room warily. The man nodded at a few things Somah said, and began to head over.

“Wait a minute, is that…?” Veronica started. “*Oh my God. Clint! Clint!*” She raced to meet him, grabbing him by the arms. “You’re *alive!* I mean, I figured you would be on account of being a mean old cuss, but…damn!”

“You’re looking fine yourself, Veronica,” Clint said, checking her over. “Can’t help but notice you seem to have let your hair down.”

“Yeah, well…” Marie could see Veronica blushing furiously. “Sarah said she liked my hair down, so I thought I’d give it a shot.”

“Got yourself a lady friend, do you? Well, it’s about time.” Clint turned to Marie. “Reckon we haven’t been introduced.”

Marie stuck out her hand, and recited for the billionth time: “Welcome to Zeta. I’m Marie.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Marie. I’m Clint.” He favored her with a small smile. “Now, I was mighty curious about the woman who sent that nice message. Wondered if I could talk with her for a spell.”

“You and everyone else. C’mon.”

Marie led him back to where Soledad and Sarah seemed to be trading war stories. “…huge battle, elements from every West Coast chapter defending the Lost Hills bunker. *I* get there in time to see Legate Lanius *himself* leading the charge against the Brotherhood position…”

“Mom?” Marie interrupted. “This guy was hoping to talk to you.”

“I’ll tell you the rest later,” Soledad said, turning to Clint and offering her hand. “How can we help you?”
Clint moved, and fast. He took Soledad’s outstretched hand with his own, but also reached past with his other hand and plucked the blaster from her holster under her arm. Soledad had enough time to register confusion before he jammed the blaster into her belly and pulled the trigger.

“Mom!” Marie screamed as Soledad stumbled back. Already Marie could see the vivid blue energy of the alien blaster saturating Soledad’s skin even as she collapsed against the massive bay windows overlooking the Earth.

The room erupted in chaos, with most people running away from the shot and some few running towards it. Veronica grabbed Clint in an arm lock, and Sarah wrestled the weapon away from him. “What the fuck? What did she ever do to you, Clint?”

“I’m sorry. Lucy don’t leave much of a choice when she gets in your head.” He didn’t struggle at all, even as Veronica forced him to the ground. “I just had to.”

“Somah!” Marie screamed, crouched next to Soledad. “Elliot! We have to get her to the infirmary, we have to…”

Amata appeared next to her. “We can try to get her stabilized…” she stopped as she pulled up Soledad’s shirt, revealing the bizarre deterioration the alien weapon left in her flesh.

“But…” Soledad whimpered. “I’ve got so much more to do…”

Her expression went slack.

“No,” Marie murmured. “No, no no no.” The lounge was silent, but for her quiet cries.

“And this is why shit never gets better,” Marie heard Bittercup intone. “Because some asshole’s always gotta fuck it up.”

“Marie, I’m so sorry…” Amata tried to put her hand on Marie’s shoulder, but the girl shoved her away.

“You!” she railed at Clint. “What…why…?”

“Wish I had worthwhile answers for you, young lady. Friend of mine has some problems, and she made those problems mine.” He shook his head. “Best you just kill me now. Can’t say I’d hold it against you.”

“Wait a minute,” Veronica said. “Wasn’t the Wanderer just talking about getting past killing each other? Finding a better way?”

Bittercup glared. “Some people just need to be dead.”

“Killing him isn’t going to help anything,” Amata answered quietly as she moved to close her friend’s eyes.

Sarah only shook her head, and offered the blaster to Marie.

Marie looked at her mom’s still body, at the blaster Sarah held, and finally down at Clint.

She made her decision.

* *

By the closing years of the twenty-third century, humanity had nearly burned itself out. Technology
improved individual’s lives, but also provided the means for greater and greater destruction. As resources became scarce, countries became desperate. Europe and the Middle East devolved into strife, the United States invaded Canada, and eventually the Great War brought most of civilization to a crashing halt. Very nearly brought humanity itself to extinction.

Despite the horrible blows of the Great War, humanity persisted and in time thrived. First settlements, then towns and eventually nations rose from the radioactive Wasteland. These civilizations venerated the technology and wisdom of the Old World, assuming that they would learn from their ancestors’ mistakes. That they would not fall prey to the short-sightedness and stupidity that had ruined the world.

They were wrong. The pointless bureaucracy of the New California Republic, the internecine struggles of the Brotherhood of Steel, the savagery of Caesar’s Legion and the squabbling between the Institute and the Keystone put lie to that.

Because the Great War, and all the other wars that preceded and followed it, weren’t caused by lasers or power armor or nuclear bombs. They were caused by very human traits of ambition, greed, and desperation. That was what the Lone Wanderer recognized as she held her daughter that first night on Zeta: Ashur’s ambition to rule, Wernher’s greed for power, and her own desperation for solace. She understood that human nature could be more destructive than any weapon every created.

In the years following, however, the Wanderer traveled the world. She explored the civilizations that flourished in corners of the Old World forgotten by the bombs, and those that eked out a living in the radioactive dust. She saw both the best and the worst people the Wasteland had to offer, and knew that humanity was more than its basest impulses.

She believed that humanity was capable of rising above, capable of becoming better than they were. But even as she worked to help the world recover, she knew that the improvements she made would only last so long as humanity’s very nature was reformed. There was no guarantee that such a thing was even possible; people are stubborn and set in their ways. But the Wanderer took on faith that they could improve, if they chose to.

So she did what every parent does: she hung her hope for a finer world on her child.

Because war…war never changes.

But people can.

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