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Opening extract from  
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## For my editor, Stephanie King

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# PROLOGUE



MAY, 1941

AMITY VANCOUR'S TRIAL HAD BEEN going for eight days.

Mac Jones's footsteps echoed as he approached Courtroom Four, his eyes on the guard. He kept his shoulders relaxed, a slight saunter to his step.

A pair of golden scales hung from the ceiling. They were in the Libra building of the Zodiac: the twelve-domed capitol complex that housed President Gunnison's regime. Far away outside, downtown Topeka buzzed with traffic.

*Restricted – by official arrangement only*, read the sign.

Mac showed his pass. "Okay if I sneak in?" he said with an easy grin – what his girlfriend Sephy called his *resist me*

*if you can* look. Being short always helped. Who was wary of a guy only five foot three?

The guard hesitated and then shrugged. “Yeah, suppose. It’ll be wrapping up soon for the day anyway.”

Hiding his tension, Mac pushed open the heavy panelled door and slipped inside.

Though barely May, the courtroom felt steamy, the gallery a solid mass of double-breasted suits and flimsy feminine hats. *No surprise it was packed*, Mac thought grimly. Everyone wanted to see “Wildcat” go down.

Amity Vancour was up on the stand. Her sleek dark hair fell past her jawbone. Weariness etched her unsmiling face. Two Guns with pistols flanked her. Nearby, a moving-picture camera whirred on three spindly legs.

“No,” she said, her voice level. “That is not what happened.”

“Don’t *lie*, Miss Vancour,” said the prosecutor. “I’ll ask again...”

No seats. Mac stood with a knot of people near the back. He spotted Chief Astrologer Kay Pierce at the prosecution’s table and his muscles relaxed, though Pierce was one of his least favourite people.

Good – she was here. He’d grab her once she had finished and somehow wheedle the information he needed out of her.

It was the only reason he’d come. He could do nothing to aid Vancour, not now. Watching her, Mac felt the familiar, helpless anger. If the timing had been only

slightly different...if he'd met Vancour *after* she got hold of the documents proving the corrupt Peacefights, instead of before...

He grimaced. *Let it go.*

Vancour still wore the pilot's gear she'd been arrested in six weeks ago. A dark bruise stained one olive cheek. She looked nothing like the laughing young woman Mac had met the night she'd been out dancing with Collis Reed. "Collie", she'd called him.

There was no sign of Collis in the room.

The prosecutor rocked on his heels. "But isn't it *true*, Miss Vancour, that you're a cold-blooded murderer?"

She sat straight, unmoving. "No, it is not."

"Yet on March 13th, you won a Peacefight against the former Central States – and then *shot your opponent down* as he parachuted to safety!"

"*No.* Our planes were both sabotaged. My wing exploded when I—"

The judge banged her gavel. "Speak *only* when asked a question."

"Admit it, Wildcat!" the prosecutor sneered. "You killed him because he was going to report you for taking bribes, *isn't that right?*"

One of her fists clenched. "No," she said. "Cain's men tried to kill me so that I couldn't tell what I knew. The other pilot was killed so that there'd be no witnesses. I—"

"Ah, I *see*. Yet prior to this, you called the World for

Peace ‘outdated’ and claimed that pilots should make money however they liked!”

“That’s not true! I never—”

“Silence, Miss Vancour!” barked the judge.

A photographer passed Mac a camera. “Hold this, buddy?” he whispered.

Mac took the large, boxy instrument. The guy rummaged in a bag and pulled out a flashbulb; he reclaimed the camera. “Thanks.”

“Pretty lively. Has it been like this all along?” muttered Mac, watching the front of the courtroom.

The photographer nodded as he inserted the new bulb. “No one’s listening to a word she says. Half the time they don’t even let her speak.” He quickly caught himself. “Well, of course not – she’s guilty as sin.”

*Don’t worry, pal; I’m the last guy who’d report you for being a threat to Harmony,* Mac thought. He propped himself against a column, his eyes still on Vancour. “Sure is,” he said. “Good thing they caught her.”

*Yeah. Terrific. Thanks, Collis.*

A large Harmony flag – Gunnison’s flag – hung on the wall, its red-and-black swirls a corruption of the old yin-yang. Mac knew Vancour must hate seeing that every day. Hell, it was hard enough for him.

The Western Seaboard, Vancour’s home country, had fallen to the Central States’s illegal army just days before she was captured. The newly-reformed “Can-Amer” now extended from the west coast to the Miszippi River.

Only Appalachia, stretching beyond that to the eastern shores, remained free from John Gunnison's rule on this continent.

For now.

"Then after the murder, you broke into the World for Peace building with your accomplice, *didn't you?*" demanded the prosecutor.

Something flickered in Vancour's eyes. "I broke into the World for Peace building, yes. I didn't have an accomplice." And Mac, watching, thought this was the first lie he'd heard her tell.

"Oh no? Ingo Manfred! We know you tried to plant a bomb, Miss Vancour. We found your failed device! The fingerprints match!"

"*No!*" she burst out. "I took documents proving that Peacefights had been thrown – that it all led back to Gunni—"

The judge's gavel went wild. "Miss Vancour! I will *not* tell you again!"

The Guns stepped close, pistols ready. Vancour's attorney lounged back in her chair, legs crossed, one foot tapping the air. Mac thought she needed only a nail file to complete the picture.

Vancour took a deep, shuddering breath. "This is a farce," she said, so quietly he almost didn't hear.

*That was the word, all right,* he reflected bitterly, still slouched against the column. And what was happening in the other courtrooms was just as bad.

The world had erupted when news of the thrown Peacefights came out. There'd been no fights since. The World for Peace – the governing body trusted for generations – was in tatters.

As well as declaring himself president of the new Can-Amer, John Gunnison was chairman of the investigating committee. Somehow, thought Mac, Johnny Gun, who'd orchestrated the whole web of corruption to put himself in power, had emerged a gladiator for justice.

Seventeen honest World for Peace officials had so far been hanged.

Inside his trouser pockets, Mac's hands were fists. *We'll bring him down*, he promised himself.

Suddenly he caught sight of Walter. The *Topeka Times* editor sat like a large, rumpled lion at the end of one of the benches.

Their gazes met. Walter's flicker of relief matched Mac's own: now they wouldn't have to try to meet later.

Walter waved Mac over and moved down his bench. "I think we can make space for a young man as important to Sandford Cain's office as yourself, Mr Jones," he rumbled in an undertone.

The woman beside him had been about to protest. At the mention of Cain – Gunnison's right-hand man – she glanced apprehensively at Mac and said nothing.

Mac was Cain's assistant. *A young up-and-coming star of the Gunnison regime*, he'd been called.

He slipped onto the bench. "Thanks," he said. At the



front, the prosecutor was conferring with the judge. Vancour slumped in the witness box, eyes closed as she rubbed her bruised cheek.

Under the buzz of whispers, Walter murmured, “Any news on what we talked about?”

“Yeah,” Mac said, his voice just as low. “It could be big, Walt. Exactly what we need to get rid of the bastards.”

Walter shot him a look but didn’t comment. The prosecutor had begun again; you could hear a penny drop.

Everything Vancour had done was being twisted beyond recognition: trying to expose the corruption, her first arrest in Angeles, escaping the Peacefighting base to help confront Gunnison’s troops.

Collis’s name wasn’t mentioned – though Mac knew he’d been in it up to his neck.

“Peacefighting!” boomed the prosecutor. “Let me read you the official definition, Miss Vancour.” He whipped out a piece of paper. “*So that the world shall never again experience the horrors of war, all disputes between nations will be resolved by Peacefighting: two honourable combat pilots going up against each other under a strict code of rules.*” He slapped the paper down. “Did that mean *nothing* to you?”

Vancour sat very still. From her expression, she was trying to contain some deep emotion.

“It meant a lot,” she said softly.

Mac sighed and scraped back his unruly brown hair. For the hundredth time, he wished he’d known the crucial

role Vancour was fated to play. He could have tipped her off about who “Collie” really worked for.

Everything might have been different.

Finally they let Vancour off the stand. She sat at the defence table massaging her temples, not looking up.

As conversation mumbled through the gallery, Walter leaned close. “All right, tell me.”

Mac brought his attention sharply back to the matter at hand. In a whisper, he told Walter the news.

“It’ll be a big extravaganza,” he finished. “Both him and Cain up on a stage together – exactly what we need. I just have to verify the date with Pierce.”

“Finally.” Walter let out a breath. “Will we have time to prepare?”

Mac nodded, keeping his gaze on the front of the courtroom. “Sephy thinks there’s a date early next year that Pierce might choose. It’s perfect, Walt. It gives us a chance to—”

“Madeline Bark to the stand,” announced the bailiff.

Mac fell silent. Vancour’s head snapped up. She twisted in her seat to look behind her.

The courtroom doors opened. An auburn-haired woman wearing a tailored skirt and a jacket with broad shoulder pads entered. Her high heels clicked against the floor. She didn’t look at Vancour as she was sworn in.

The prosecutor smiled. “Now, Miss Bark, you’re a

special advisor to President Gunnison, is that correct?”

Vancour sat bolt upright at this. She gaped at the woman who Mac knew had been a trusted family friend.

Bark fiddled with a golden Libra brooch. Her lipstick was very red. “Yes, I work for Mr Gunnison. I used to work for the World for Peace.”

Keeping her gaze firmly from the defence table, Bark testified that “Wildcat” was a loose cannon. “Always, from the time she was a child,” she said, her voice stilted. “A... rebel, I guess you’d say.”

“You knew her late father, Truce Vancour?”

“We were Peacefighters together.”

Bark explained what the world by now already knew: twelve years ago, Amity’s father had thrown the civil war Peacefight that divided the Central States from the Western Seaboard. It had put Gunnison in power.

Mac glanced at Vancour. She sat staring fixedly at Bark, her expression one of deep sorrow – impotent anger.

“And how did you feel when you realized what Truce Vancour had done?” asked the prosecutor, his tone sympathetic.

Bark cleared her throat. “Oh – shocked, of course. As was President Gunnison. This was only a few months ago; some new evidence came to light.”

Mac gave an inaudible snort. Nope, Gunnison had had *no idea* that the fight that put him in power was thrown. But now his “discovery” let him justify the Western Seaboard takeover: the wrongfully divided countries, reunited.

“Part of me suspected at the time that Truce might have thrown it, which horrified me,” Bark went on. “Naturally, we all wanted Mr Gunnison to win, but manipulating Peacefights was unthinkable.” For the first time, her eyes flicked nervously to Vancour and she stumbled: “I talked him into...I mean, I talked *to* Truce about it, and...”

Mac’s eyebrows lifted.

Vancour’s chair scraped the floor as she lunged upwards, her hands on the table. Her voice was hoarse. “*What* did you just say?”

The courtroom went silent. “Sit, Miss Vancour,” said the judge icily.

“You talked him into it,” whispered Vancour. “*How?* What did you—?”

“*Now!*”

Mac tensed as the Guns started for her, pistols drawn. *Sit down!* he wanted to shout. Vancour didn’t move. For a long moment she and Bark remained locked in time, Bark’s wide-eyed gaze meeting Vancour’s own.

Belatedly, Vancour sank into her seat, looking dazed.

She didn’t say another word throughout the rest of Bark’s testimony.

It was over for the day. As the rustling crowd got to its feet, Walter clapped Mac’s shoulder.

“Good luck finding out the date,” he muttered. “Don’t let her suspect anything. What will you do?”

Mac glanced at Kay Pierce. In the hour he'd been here she'd shown astrological charts to the prosecutor several times. She'd also joked across the aisle with Vancour's defence attorney.

"See if she wants to go out for a drink after her long, tiring day," he said. "We're buddies. She likes me."

Walter smiled slightly. "Everyone does; that's why you're so good. Let me know what you find out."

Mac nodded and started for the front of the courtroom. Kay Pierce stood talking to the prosecutor. Nearby, Guns flanked Vancour, waiting for the room to clear before taking her away.

As Mac approached, he took in her drawn, weary features – and with a pang, recalled the single time he'd met her, that night in The Ivy Room. She and Collis had been out on the dance floor, holding each other close. She'd gazed at "Collie" as if he'd made her every dream come true.

Collis had looked at her the same way...but then, Collis was a consummate actor.

So was Mac. He had to be.

He leaned against the prosecution's table, waiting for Kay to turn around. Vancour looked over and saw him.

Her nostrils flared in recognition. Bitterness creased her face. "Figures," she breathed. "*You* work for Gunnison, too."

No one would have guessed Mac's feelings. His half-smile and shrug said only, *Yeah, that's how it goes sometimes.*

The Guns jerked Vancour around and cuffed her. “If you see Collie, tell him...” she started, and then broke off. She ducked her bruised face towards her shoulder. She was trembling. When she spoke again, her voice was hard.

“No,” she said. “Don’t tell him anything.”

As the grey-suited Guns took Vancour away, Kay turned. “Mac!” she said, beaming. “What are you doing here?”

“Felt like seeing the great Miss Pierce in action,” Mac said with a grin. “Want to grab a drink?” He was acutely conscious of Vancour just exiting the courtroom, hustled between the Guns.

Mac didn’t know the exact details of Vancour’s arrest – only that Collis had been involved. Inwardly, he winced at a sudden mental image: “Wildcat” up on the gallows with a noose being cinched around her neck.

He hoped she’d be so lucky.



## “WILDCAT” FOUND GUILTY

*Angeles Advent*, May 4th, 1941 AC

The sensational “Wildcat” trial of former Peacefighter Amity Vancour has now drawn to a close. Vancour, arrested in Topeka on March 25th, was today found guilty of first-degree murder and of deliberately losing Peacefights for financial gain. Sentencing is expected imminently.

“Vancour made a mockery of Peacefighting just like her

late father,” said President Gunnison. “Her punishment will never make amends for what she did, but with the help of the stars we’ll create a truly Harmonic society.”

Our gloriously reunited nation of Can-Amer is lucky to have President Gunnison steering us through these troubled times...







## CHAPTER ONE



MARCH, 1941

WIND AND RAIN CHURNED THE tree branches. I stood hidden in the twilight shadows, gazing down the drive at the farmhouse.

In the light from its open doorway I could see Collie, his broad shoulders hunched against the wet. As he talked with the farmer, he motioned to a used auto with a *For Sale* sign in the yard. The farmer nodded and beckoned him in.

I pressed tightly against a tree. *Be careful, Collie. Don't let him know you're a pilot.*

The storm had been a stroke of luck. After we'd escaped the battlefield hours before, we'd flown the Firedove as far as its fuel tank would take us. Nothing was as distinctive as a Firedove's roar, but under the rumble of

thunder and wind it seemed unlikely we'd been heard.

In the gathering darkness, we'd landed in a nearby field and hidden the Dove in a dilapidated barn. The barn's condition hinted that we might still be in the Western Seaboard. I peered into the lashing darkness, wishing I knew for sure.

Yet even if we were still in our home country, it might not be ours for much longer.

Cold rain darted down my neck, but my shiver was from revulsion as I recalled bombers, tanks, soldiers: all supposed to exist only in history books. That morning Gunnison had attacked the Western Seaboard. All of our Peacefighter pilots, myself and Collie included, had flown into battle. We'd lost.

This day – March 18th, 1941 AC – would live in infamy for ever.

I straightened with a jerk as the farmhouse door opened. Collie and the farmer shook hands, then Collie jogged through the rain to the auto, not even glancing towards my hiding place. The whole country was on the lookout for “Wildcat”. My photo had been front-page news for days.

A few minutes later, we were cruising down the road, rain streaking against the windscreen. I shrugged off my wet jacket. “What happened?” I said. “Where *are* we?”

The faint glow from the dashboard showed Collie's features – his broken nose, his strong chin and full lips. His sandy hair was damp; he swiped a hand through it.

“Western Seaboard still,” he said, shifting gears. “He was listening to the news on the telio. Nothing about you, for a change. Gunnison’s attack has distracted everyone.”

I studied him anxiously. “And?”

Collie blew out a breath. “It’s bad, Amity. His troops are still advancing. Now towns are surrendering without him even having to do a thing.” He grimaced. “Hell, I think half the country *wants* him to take over, no matter how crazy he is.”

Gunnison was crazy, all right. In his speeches he talked about using “the power of astrology” to “maximise Harmony and weed out Discordant elements”. I sat motionless, recalling his henchmen, the Guns, arresting a woman. Blood had run down her battered face as she was shoved, sobbing, into a Shadowcar and taken away – just for having the wrong birth chart.

My brother could be taken too, if he was discovered.

The rain beat against the roof. “Thanks, Dad,” I said.

Collie glanced quickly at me. “Don’t say that.”

I sighed and dropped my head back against the seat. I’d learned only hours before that my father had thrown the fight that put Gunnison in power. I knew in my heart it was true.

Collie was watching me. “Hey,” he said. “Come here.” He reached his arm out. After a beat, I slid across the seat towards him. He pulled me close against his side and kissed my hair.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” he murmured. “No matter what, Tru was your dad. You’ve got to let it go.”

I wanted to relax into Collie’s warmth but couldn’t. “How can I? It changes everything.”

His arm tensed. The windshield wipers swished back and forth a few times. “Why?” he said. “Just because you found out he did something bad?”

“Something bad,” I echoed ironically. “This goes a little beyond that, Collie.”

“All right, but...he was still the same person.”

My throat was tight. “No,” I whispered. “He wasn’t. I wouldn’t even have *been* a Peacefighter if it wasn’t for him. If he was capable of doing this...then I never really knew him.”

Collie started to speak and stopped, his expression conflicted. We drove through the rain in silence. The worst thing, I thought, was that I’d never know Dad’s reasons. He’d been dead since I was thirteen.

The night before his fatal plane crash, I’d found him drunk in the kitchen. He’d said I was braver than he was – that he thought I’d be a Peacefighter too one day.

I’d perched stiffly on a kitchen chair, longing to really understand him...and ashamed that Peacefighting wasn’t what I most wanted to do. I wanted to be a transport pilot. I knew I’d never, ever tell him.

Dad had mentioned his mother, a former Peacefighter who’d died when I was three. “Oh, she had no idea,” he snorted.

“About what?” I’d asked in a small voice.

And he’d stared at me as if he’d forgotten I was there.

“Nothing,” he said. “Times change, don’t they? She knew what it was like for her, but not for me. And if you become a Peacefighter, all you’ll know is what it’s like for you. No one can judge your actions unless they’ve been there. Got that? Nobody.”

“Dad...you can tell me anything.”

His smile hadn’t reached his eyes. “Maybe someday. When you’re a Peacefighter too. It’s the only thing worth being, Amity...I always knew that.”

The headlights streaked through the rain. I felt made of glass: he’d been talking that night about throwing the civil war Peacefight. What words could he have possibly used to explain?

Collie still seemed tense. Abruptly he took his arm from my shoulders. He pulled us off onto an overgrown dirt road and killed the engine. High overhead, stars were caught in the pine trees’ dark, prickly branches.

He exhaled and stroked the steering wheel up and down. “All right, look...I’m just driving aimlessly here. We need to decide what we’re doing.”

I nodded and pulled a weary knee to my chest. “How are we doing for money?”

Collie’s hands slowed and then stopped. Finally he gave a small, sour smile. “We’re fine. More than fine.”

“What? How?”

Twisting towards the back seat, he snagged his flight

jacket. He drew a brown envelope from the inside pocket and opened it, angling it towards me.

Cash. Lots of it.

I quickly took the envelope from him and flipped through the bills. “How much *is* this?”

“Almost ten thousand credits.”

My gaze flew to his. “The Tier One fight,” I whispered, and he nodded.

I’d been told to throw it. I’d pretended to agree. It had been a set-up to try to kill me. After I went on the run, Collie was told to throw the fight instead. He’d fought fairly, but still lost in the end.

The result had given Gunnison the right to extradite all so-called Discordants from the Western Seaboard. My brother Hal had been named one. He was still in hiding in a neighbour’s house, if he hadn’t been discovered yet.

The envelope felt cold in my hands. I stared at Collie. “But...you tried to win that fight.”

“Sure, but *they* didn’t know that.” Collie took the envelope back and rifled through the bills, his expression bitter. “Hendrix called me into his office and paid me just after I landed.”

“And you *took* it?”

His head snapped up. “Of course I took it. What was I going to say? ‘No, I refuse, you’re all corrupt?’”

When I didn’t answer, Collie dropped the envelope and gripped my fingers. “Amity...come on,” he said in an undertone. He stroked my hair. “I hate it too, but we’re

going to need money. How do you think I bought the auto?”

The wind whispered through the pines. I sighed and rubbed his palm with my thumb, circling his Leo tattoo – a souvenir from his life in the Harmony-obsessed Central States.

“Okay. Yes,” I said. “You’re right.”

Wordlessly, Collie cupped his hand behind my neck and kissed me. For several heartbeats I took refuge in the feel of our lips together. When we drew apart he rested his brow against mine.

Neither of us spoke. Finally Collie cleared his throat. “So...I was thinking we should head for the coast, maybe up around Puget.”

“Puget? What’s there?”

His eyebrows rose; he gave a short laugh. “Well, there’s getting the hell out of the country before Gunnison takes it over, for one thing.”

I frowned. I leaned back against the seat’s cracked vinyl and rubbed my forehead. “Collie, no...the main thing is to get hold of those documents again.”

He stared at me. “Amity...”

“They still exist – they have to!” I’d told him already how I’d trusted a police officer with the documents after my arrest. “Can’t your contacts do anything?”

The contacts who’d helped Collie escape the Central States were shadowy figures to me. A guy named Mac Jones was the only one I’d met; he and Collie had talked

in The Ivy Room the evening my team leader, Russ Avery, was murdered.

That night I'd broken into Russ's house and found out everything I believed in was a lie. A date book, newspaper clippings, notes in Russ's handwriting about his thrown fights – it was all there. Later, I'd discovered documents in Madeline's office safe that implicated the World for Peace at the highest levels. Everything led back to Gunnison. It was enough to bring him down, if we could just get hold of it again.

I pushed away what else I'd discovered: Madeline's betrayal of me and her affair with my father. She'd been like an aunt to me, growing up.

Collie's jaw was stone. He hadn't spoken. Outside, a night bird gave a long, plaintive call.

"You...don't want to try," I said slowly.

"No. I don't. And if you're sane, you won't either."

"You can't *mean* that! Gunnison's busy taking over our country right now – everyone who's already in hiding will be in even more danger! What about Hal?"

Collie winced at my little brother's name. All I could think of was the look on Hal's face as Ma and I had closed the trapdoor over him. The tiny room under a closet was in the home of someone I wasn't even sure we could trust.

"I know," Collie said roughly. "But, baby, there's nothing we can do about it."

"But—"



“*Listen to me!* It is over, all right?” He kissed my hand and clutched it. “Either that cop tried to help you, or he turned the evidence in. Either way, it’s been destroyed – probably shoved in a furnace the second he handed it over to someone.”

The news of what I’d found had broken days ago, mangled beyond belief. I started to reply. Collie gently put his fingers over my mouth. His eyes were dark green in the shadows, locked on mine.

“The whole world thinks you killed another pilot to cover up taking bribes,” he said. “No one will believe a word you tell them. It’s like I’ve said all along – Gunnison’s going to win, and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop him.”

A weight pressed on my chest. I stared out at the dark, dripping trees.

“I hate it as much as you do,” Collie said in a low voice. “But the *only thing* we can do now is escape. Grab a steamer to somewhere – the European Alliance, maybe, or up to Alaska. Amity...being happy together, living a long life together...that’s all we can do to fight this. And it’s not a small thing.”

My heart clenched. Collie turned me to face him; he caressed my cheekbone with his thumb. I could feel his skin’s warmth, the slight roughness of a hangnail.

“You can’t always be a hero,” he whispered. “Sometimes just surviving is the best that you can do.”