

## PROLOGUE



THE RAIN BEAT DOWN.

I stood half-hidden in a doorway with my hands jammed in my coat pockets, staring out at the gloomy city street. The glow from the street lamps daubed at the shadows. In the downpour, the light itself looked streaked with damp. Distantly, I was aware of the emptiness in my stomach – a hollowed-out feeling, as if someone had gouged away my insides. It was two days since I'd eaten, not that it mattered. If I could just get what I needed, I'd be fine.

A light went on in the diner opposite. Five a.m. I could see a bleached-blonde waitress tying on her apron, and silver stools with red leatherette seats. My hands tightened in my pockets. It all seemed so ordinary.

I was desperate to get in there and see a newspaper, but forced myself to wait until other people had drifted in: a postman, a woman who wore sensible shoes like a nurse, a few more. Then, my heart beating hard, I flipped up my coat collar and left the safety of the doorway. My boots splashed in the puddles as I jogged across the street, shattering reflected light with each footfall.

My boots. They were regulation boots, nothing like the pretty shoes that most women wore. I prayed no one would notice and stepped into the diner.

The sudden warmth and dryness was an embrace. Conscious of how bedraggled I looked, I slipped onto the seat at the end of the counter – the one nearest the door, in case I needed to run.

The waitress came over. Her upswept hair was in stylized curls. “Help you?” she said cheerfully, swiping at the counter with a damp rag. *Betty*, read her name tag, with a symbol beside the letters that looked like a lashing tail. I tore my gaze from it.

“Just coffee, please,” I said.

Six months ago I wouldn’t have known what the symbol meant. Now I knew it was the glyph for Leo, the lion. People didn’t have to display their birth signs yet...but plenty were.

*Don’t think about it. Just find out what’s going on.*

The coffee came in a large white mug. I stirred in a dollop of cream and cast a sideways glance down the counter. The postman sat munching bacon and eggs with

a copy of *The Angeles Advent* propped in front of him. I could just see the date at the top: March 17th, 1941 AC.

March 17th. I’d been on the run for four days.

His gaze crawled back and forth across the sports section. After an eternity, he picked up the paper, slowly shook it out, and refolded it to another page.

My fingers gripped the mug.

“Is that the only paper?” I asked Betty when she came to refill my coffee.

“Yes, sorry,” she said. “Morton comes in every morning to read it. Cheap so-and-so; you’d think he could buy his own once in a while.”

She didn’t bother to lower her voice. Without looking up, Morton waved his mug at her. “More coffee, less talk, you dizzy dame.”

Betty refilled his coffee and then leaned her hip against the counter. “Any news on Wildcat?” she asked him brightly.

My knuckles turned white. I stared down at my coffee, letting my bobbed dark hair fall forward around my face. *The door’s only a few feet away*, I told myself frantically. *I can escape if I need to—*

Morton squinted up at her. “Who?”

“*Wildcat*. You know. That World for Peace scandal. Come on, half the country’s talking about it! You been living under a rock?”

He grunted and took a slurp of coffee. “I’m reading about last night’s game.”

“Well, is she still on the run?”

“Don’t you have someone else you can bother?”

“Oh, but *you’re* so sweet I just can’t help myself.” Betty shot me a dimpled smile, inviting me to laugh with her. I smiled weakly back and hoped I wouldn’t throw up.

“She’s still on the run,” called over the nurse. She got up and started pulling on her coat. It fitted snugly at the waist, with broad shoulder pads. “Or she was last night. I heard on the telio.”

Betty shook her head and scooped up the change the nurse had left on the counter. “Shocking, isn’t it? Gee, we’re supposed to be able to trust those pilots. If *they’re* crooked, who knows what else is going on?”

“She’s as low-down as they come, all right,” agreed the nurse. A golden crab brooch glinted on her lapel. “They’re talking about trying her for treason when she’s caught.”

“*Really?* I thought it was just murder!”

“Yes, but it’s treason too, isn’t it? Anyway, she’ll be up for the death penalty. Good riddance.”

The coffee tasted like bile now. I choked more of it down. After the nurse left, Betty switched on the battered wooden telio that sat on a shelf. A black-and-white daisy whined into view as dance music filled the air.

I gazed tensely at the telio’s small round screen with its curlicue speakers to either side. This wasn’t one of the times of day when the daisy disappeared and a programme came on. I wished it was. The music reminded me too much of Collie...of how I’d danced in his arms that night,

with candles flickering around us like fireflies.

Was he still alive? My throat tightened. I ducked my head against the memory.

Finally Morton left, and Betty passed the folded paper across. My fingers itched to open it. Somehow I waited until she’d turned away.

*Please, it’s got to be in here by now.* I took a sip of coffee as if I hadn’t a care in the world...and then flipped to the front page.

My own face stared back at me.

Ice slammed through my veins. WILDCAT STILL AT LARGE! screamed the headline.

They’d released my photo. They’d actually *released my photo*. Around me was the low buzz of conversation; the rise and fall of music; forks clinking against plates. Trying to look casual, I refolded the paper and glanced towards the door.

The way was clear. My fingers felt thick and clumsy as I tucked the paper inside my coat. *Stay calm, Amity.* I put a few coins on the counter and slid off the stool. Keeping my head down, I started for the door – but hadn’t gone two steps when it swung open.

A pair of policemen came in. The taller one took off his hat and shook the rain from it.

He had a newspaper under one arm.

Without pausing, I veered for the restrooms. Behind me I could hear the policemen sitting down, calling for coffee.

The Ladies' was a haven of black and white tiles. I locked the door behind me and slumped shakily against it.

*The window.* I leaped across the small room the moment I saw it, but it was painted shut. I yanked at it in frustration; it didn't budge. The only way out would be to break the panes – but they'd hear that in the diner, surely?

My heart felt like it was trying to escape from my chest. I unlocked the bathroom door and opened it a fraction. I pressed one eye to the crack. The policemen were sitting at the counter; Betty was pouring coffee for them.

"Just a quick cup," I heard the tall one say. "Take the edge off that damp, right, Vince?"

His newspaper lay on the counter. My gaze flew to the black-and-white image of my face. Would the waitress notice it? But no, she'd already turned away.

"Keep your shirt on, I'm coming," she called to another customer.

I swallowed and eased the door shut; bolted it again. I'd have to wait them out – slip away once they'd gone. I hesitated...and then pulled the crumpled paper out from under my coat.

Amity Vancour, an 18-year-old Western Seaboard pilot, has been known as "Wildcat" by the press since her daring escape four days ago, following the murder of a Central States pilot during a regulation Peacefight. Her case has caused international furor, leading to the unprecedented step of the World for

Peace waiving its anonymity policy for Peacefighter pilots and releasing her name and photograph.

"I'm delighted that the WfP has seen reason," stated John Gunnison, leader of the Central States. "Vancour must be captured – and will be. I have seen it in the stars."

I'd devoured stories about Gunnison for months now; it was very strange to read one where he mentioned me. An astrology chart accompanied the article, supposedly predicting my downfall. How could people *believe* that stuff? Especially here in the Western Seaboard, where we weren't even under Gunnison's rule.

At least the story didn't mention Ma and Hal. The last thing my family needed was the press sniffing around; they were in enough danger already. *Stay safe*, I begged them silently. *I'm sorry if any of this is my fault.* But going over and over it in my head...I still didn't see what else I could have done.

The photo was the official one from after my induction ceremony. It showed a girl with sleek dark hair falling to her jawbone; light brown eyes under stark eyebrows; a strong-boned, oval face. I wore a serious expression even though I'd been wildly happy.

Just a few months ago, Collie had studied that photo in my bedroom back on the base. "Wish I'd been there," he'd said as he gently touched the frame.

"You're here now," I'd answered, and he'd grinned and wrapped his arms around me.

"Yeah, and guess what? You're never getting rid of me, Amity Louise."

I pushed aside my longing, my fear for him and rifled through the paper. There *had* to be something in here by Milt. He'd promised to write it all down exactly like I'd told him.

When I found the small story on page nine, it knocked the breath from me.

"No," I whispered, clutching the paper. I read the words again, willing them to be a mistake. "*No.*"

I started as the doorknob rattled.

"Hello?" called a woman. A knock rapped. "Is anybody in there?"

My gaze flew to the thin silver bolt locking the door. Faintly, I heard the waitress's voice: "Is there a problem, ma'am?"

The woman sounded peevish. "Well, I don't know. I didn't see anyone come in here, but the door's locked."

"No, that girl went in," called out someone else. "The one sitting at the counter drinking coffee, about ten minutes ago."

A high-heeled stride and then a different knock, rat-a-tat-tatting at the wood. "Hon? You all right?"

My throat was sand. "I'm fine," I managed, lifting my voice. "I'm sorry, I...I don't feel very well."

"Well, you can't stay in there all morning," grumbled

the woman.

"I'll just be a moment." I'd folded the paper again; I pinched my fingers up and down its crease. I could still hear them standing outside, only a few feet away, murmuring together.

I dropped to my knees and pressed my cheek against the tiles. Through the thin slit under the door, I saw two pairs of women's shoes...and two pairs of scuffed black men's ones, heading this way.

I scrambled up just as an authoritative knock pounded. "Miss? You all right?"

I felt electric with fear. I took a step back and glanced at the window. "I'll be fine," I called. My voice sounded reedy. "Please, just...leave me in peace for a minute."

"Hon, if there's something wrong, you can—" The waitress broke off. "Oh!" she gasped. "Officer, your paper! That girl on the front page!"

I shoved my own newspaper down my denims and yanked off my coat. In an excited babble outside I heard: "That's her, that's the girl in the bathroom! All she ordered was coffee, but I could tell she was hungry—"

"Open up!" shouted one of the policemen, beating on the door. It rattled on its hinges. "You're under arrest, Vancour!"

With my coat wrapped around my fist, I punched the window. It didn't give. I punched again and again, frantic now, and then jumped up onto the radiator to kick at the glass with my boot.

It shattered, falling to the alleyway in discordant tinkles.

“She’s getting away!” screamed the waitress.

“Stand back!” Gunshots echoed through the tiny room; one of the tiles on the wall exploded.

The wooden window frame was still in place. I beat at it wildly with my foot, my hands. Just as the door swung open, the frame gave way with a splintering crack and I propelled myself out the window, taking the rest of the glass with me.

“Stop!”

I landed on a scattered mess of wood, glass, trash from the alleyway. Pain – my hand was bleeding – I lunged to my feet and ran, pausing only to push over a trio of garbage cans and send them rolling in my wake. Panting, I veered out onto the sidewalk, my boots thudding against the concrete.

The clatter of trash cans from behind me. “Stop that girl! Stop her!”

Rain muffled the words. It was coming down in solid sheets now, the sidewalk busy with early-morning commuters hunched into their trench coats, jostling past each other with streaming umbrellas. There was a grey knit cap in my coat pocket. As I wove through the river of people I pulled my coat back on and yanked the cap onto my head.

I slowed to a brisk walk, keeping my hands in my pockets, face down. My pulse beat against my skull; with each step I expected a hand on my shoulder. When I came

to an intersection my instincts shrieked at me to turn. Instead I crossed the street and kept going straight. Finally I risked a glance back. The policemen were standing on the corner, staring up and down the cross street. One spoke urgently into a talky; I could see its long antenna.

I let out a trembling breath and kept walking, fists clenched in my pockets. My right hand throbbed. It was slick with blood.

By the time I heard distant sirens, I was over ten blocks away. I kept going until I couldn’t hear them any more, until the only noises were the mundane ones of the city. The elevated train was up ahead. No one paid attention when I paused under its bridge. People passed by as the trains rumbled above, shaking the ground at our feet.

A shard of glass glinted from the fleshy part of my thumb. I gritted my teeth and pulled it free, then found a handkerchief in my pocket and wrapped it tightly around the wound.

The whole time, my thoughts were tumbling, screaming.

I knew that I had not misread the story on page nine. But I pulled out the paper and read it again anyway:

#### JOURNALIST KILLED IN AUTO CRASH

Milton Fraser, 28, was found dead yesterday evening after he apparently lost control of his auto and broke through a safety rail, crashing over fifty feet into a canyon...

I swallowed hard as another train rattled overhead and the trash whispered against my ankles in the breeze. They'd killed Milt, an ordinary journalist who they shouldn't even have *known* about. How deep, how broad, did this whole thing go?

*Collie.*

My sore hand clenched its bandage. Suddenly I felt short of breath. He had to still be alive; he *had* to be. And I had to get back to him, somehow – we both had to escape if we could—

With the rain still drizzling down, I started to run.

From *My Vision* by John Gunnison, required reading for every Central States schoolchild:

...it is my duty – no, my destiny – to make your life happy and harmonious. How? By using the ancient tool of astrology. The power of the stars allows me to find Harmony's true way and make good decisions for you and your family.

HARMONY is the key. Everything I do, I do for the sake of Harmony and for you...

## CHAPTER ONE



THE PREFLIGHT ROUTINE WAS AUTOMATIC. My hands moved across the plane's control panel, flicking levers as I studied the dials. Undercarriage down, flaps up, throttle half-inch open. I checked the temperature gauge and then primed the engine, working the handle quickly in and out.

I switched on the ignition and the small plane roared into life, trembling with power: a MK9 Merlin Firedove, one of the finest machines ever built. It was just like the Dove I'd learned to fight in. We understood each other, this plane and I.

I gave the primer pump another stroke. Anyone watching would've said I was scowling: I could feel deep furrows ridging my forehead, like always when I'm fully



absorbed. Underneath my concentration was a rock-hard resolve.

Today, of all days, I had to win.

I signalled to the fitter and he ran to pull the chocks from my wheels. “You’re good to go, Miss Vancour!” he shouted.

With a distracted wave I eased open the throttle and started taxiing, facing into the wind. The plane was trembling, eager, picking up speed by the second. The undercarriage bumped against the ground as fields rushed past in a blur...and then I was airborne.

Usually I loved the moment when I lifted into the sky, so light and free. This time my jaw felt tight. I headed south-west at four thousand feet. Once I’d left the complex of airbases behind, I could see faint, ancient lines sketching the earth where streets had once been, and fragments of ruins up in the hills.

No cloud cover. Good. Some Peacefighters hate that, but I know how to use the sun.

The European Alliance pilot was already over New Bay when I reached it. His MK9 had stripes instead of camo swirls; that was the only difference. Our battle would be skill against skill.

The ocean glinted silver. On its beach stood a commentator with a bulky field phone, describing the scene for millions clustered around their telios. Few Peacefights were broadcast live. That this one was, just cemented my resolve.

My opponent and I faced off, circling each other as we waited. The vibrating drone of my engine filled my senses. Far below, seagulls wheeled over the water.

The instant the clock showed 15.00, I banked and headed for the sun.

I used it mercilessly, hiding in it, darting out at him from its glare. My thumb worked the firing button. A muffled staccato sound shuddered from my wings. Tracer shot through the sky, raining damage down on him.

He whipped away and came at me from above. Gunfire rattled across my windscreen’s bulletproof glass. I swore and rolled; sky and ocean spun. I got him back in my sights, shot again. The way my opponent flew was familiar – I’d fought him before. Today he didn’t stand a chance.

“You will *not* stay up,” I told him softly as I jammed down on the firing button.

The other pilot twisted away unscathed and went into a screaming turn that held his plane a knife-edge from stalling. Tricky, but two could play. I stayed right on his tail, making the turn tight – tighter – feeling the G’s as my plane juddered, rattling my bones.

Hold it. *There.*

I fired, spraying his fuselage. Smoke started streaming from his tail. He broke the turn, tried to climb, but I was right there ahead of him. *Fire.* Bullet holes peppered his hood. The horizon tipped on its side as I peeled away.

Suddenly the only engine I could hear was my own.

The other Dove had gone silent, flames leaping up from its hood. The pilot bailed. I watched as his plane twirled down to the bay, black smoke spiralling, while the white circle of a parachute floated languidly, the pilot a dangling stick-figure clutching its cords.

Base already knew, just like the rest of the world – but I reached for my mic and completed my job: “Victorious. Opposing pilot bailed and needs assistance.”

When I released the button, I could breathe again.

The airfield looked tiny as I brought the Dove back in. And now, despite what day this was, I was so light inside that I couldn't help humming – some stupid song that was playing a lot on the telio, from one of those band leaders, Van Wheeler or someone, whose smile is more of a smirk but no one seems to mind; everyone flocks to the clubs where his band plays and dances the night away.

*Love me in May,*

*Oh, please say you'll stay...*

I could see the crew below. On impulse I did a victory roll right past them, laughing out loud as the world spun. Grinning, I soared high and came in again from an angle. When I got below a thousand feet, I shoved open the hood for the landing.

Wind whistled through the cockpit. I throttled back and lowered the undercarriage and flaps. The Dove slowed obediently, nose lifting; forward visibility vanished.

*Love me in June,*

*Oh, darling I'll swoon...*

I peered out the port side, wind snapping at me. Right on track for the runway. I gave it a touch more throttle, still humming. A bump, then a pause – another jolt, and I was down, taxiing.

I was singing aloud by then. I eased on the brakes and finished the song just as the plane stopped. I killed the engine. From the propeller's blur, four flashing blades emerged and slowly stilled.

In the sudden silence I peeled off my leather helmet and gloves, then gently touched the ID tags that hung around my neck.

“I did it,” I whispered. A smile burst across my face. “I did it!”

The fitters came running up as I climbed from the cockpit. “Good job, Miss Vancour!” Edwards stretched up a hand to help me. I'd given up telling them to call me “Amity”. The Western Seaboard base was full of traditions and that was one of them.

“Thanks.” My smile threatened to split my face. I jumped down from the wing. I always felt more *alive* after a fight. Colours were brighter, the air cleaner.

“Heard it on the telio,” Edwards said, his eyes shining. “Man, what a great day for a rumble!”

My Dove sat behind us on the runway: a small grey and tan plane that looked sleek, muscular. Its nose jutted upwards as if eager to leap back into the sky. The other

fitter had just put the chocks under my wheels; he bobbed up with a grin.

“The other guy didn’t have a chance, the way you held that turn! I bet he’s *still* wondering what went wrong.”

“He’ll get me next time, probably,” I said. The pilot I’d forced to bail was excellent. I didn’t know his name, but knew the way he flew. He beat me as often as I beat him.

An open-top truck with the Western Seaboard sunburst emblem on its side came hurtling across the airstrip. The driver was half-standing, whooping, leaning on the horn.

Russ, my team leader. He screeched to a stop and jogged over, a big black guy with a face like a boxer. “How’s my favourite wildcat?” he boomed, scooping me into a hug that lifted me off my feet. “Vancour, that was perfect! Just what I like to see: insane flying with no regard for personal safety.”

“What was the dispute?” I gasped eagerly. We weren’t allowed to know before a fight.

With slow ceremony, Russ drew two cigars from his breast pocket and held one out to me. My eyebrows shot up. This was a first.

“That good?” I asked.

“Oh, yes.” He wagged the cigar seductively back and forth, its cellophane wrapping gleaming in the sun. “*And* it was a clean win. Go on, kiddo, you deserve it.”

I started to say no, then laughed and took the cigar. Why not? Russ was right; the clean win made it even better. The other pilot hadn’t been able to get his plane

down – if he had, then whatever dispute I’d just won could be challenged sooner. Now the European Alliance would have to wait the whole five years to appeal.

Five years of a clean win felt mighty sweet.

Copying Russ, I bit off the cigar’s tip, then let him light it for me with a quick scratch of flame from his metal lighter. I took a deep, considering draw and managed not to cough.

The fitters were grinning. “Wish I had a camera,” said Edwards.

“Nothing to see here, gentlemen,” said Russ. “Just a pilot enjoying a well-earned stogie after a fight, that’s all.”

With a wink at me, he looped an arm around my shoulders and we headed to his truck. The airstrip stretched out around us, shimmering into heatwaves and lined with palm trees. It was warm here in Angeles County, even now in November. In my home town further north, a chill would be huddling up against the bases of the mountains.

*Home.* Even now, I kept forgetting that Ma and Hal didn’t live there any more. I pushed the thought away, refusing to let it dampen this moment, and opened the truck door.

“You still haven’t told me,” I said as Russ started the engine. His own cigar was clamped between his teeth. He twisted around to glance behind him, squinting against the sun.

“What do you think of your celebratory cigar?”

“It’s foul.”

“Ah, but it’s the principle of the thing, isn’t it?”

“*Russ*. Tell me.”

He faced forward and gunned the accelerator; we careered across the airstrip, the warm breeze stroking our faces. Russ drove the way he flew – the way he pushed all of us to fly. *Harder, faster, trust the plane*, he was constantly shouting. *Have I got pilots or a bunch of pantywaists?*

“You know I’m not really supposed to tell you,” he said, lifting his voice over the engine.

“And you know I’ll just comb through the paper until I figure it out.”

He raised a scarred eyebrow. “What is this, insubordination?”

“Just telling it like it is. Sir.” I took the cigar out of my mouth and licked my lips, trying to get the taste of it off them. “This is terrible. How can you stand the way the tip goes so soggy? It looks like something you’d scrape off the bottom of your shoe.”

Russ chuckled. “Give it back if you don’t appreciate it.” He wasn’t much older than me, maybe twenty-one. Most Peacefighters were still pretty young.

I stubbed out the cigar in the overflowing ashtray. “Are you going to tell me, or not?”

“All right, here it is, Vancour.” Russ intoned the words like a quiz-show host on the telio. “In your fight today... against a representative pilot of the European Alliance... you successfully rejected their claim...”

“*What?*”

“That twenty-seven per cent of our oil rights should be ceded to them.”

I gaped as the magnitude of this sunk in. “That actually passed the Conflict Council?”

Russ shifted gears. “Yep. They got it through on an ancient dispute claim. It was on the table, but *you* took it off.”

At first I couldn’t respond. This was why we weren’t allowed to know what we were fighting for beforehand. “Why...why was that a Tier Two fight and not a Tier One?” I said finally.

Tier One fights didn’t happen often – they were for the gravest, most monumental disputes. Russ might have fought it instead of me in that case; he was a T1 pilot as well as my team leader.

He grinned at me. “Just missed being T1 by a hair. Heard they debated it for days. Aren’t you glad?”

“*Now* I am. If I’d lost...” I swallowed, thinking of raised prices – hardship – millions affected.

We reached the office, a worn building with sky-blue paint and our sunburst emblem over the door. Russ pulled up with a lurch. “But you didn’t,” he said, his voice firm. “Now go make your report and then celebrate. A few hours to rest on your laurels before you’re nothing again.”

I smiled. I knew the drill. “‘You’re only as good as your next fight,’” I quoted.

Russ let out an expansive stream of smoke. “‘So don’t cock that one up and you’ll be fine,’” he finished.