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PROLOGUE



FEBRUARY, 1942

COLLIS AWOKE FROM THE FAMILIAR NIGHTMARE with a start. His arm throbbed; the pain was red-black. He lay in a double bed. His chest was bare and his right bicep had been bandaged.

At the memory of shooting himself, the dream-images of Harmony Three faded.

Collis propped himself up on one elbow, wincing. He stared around him. He'd never seen this lavish bedroom before.

More memories returned: the wound had bled badly, soaking rapidly through his handkerchief. He'd pretended to pass out in a field near where Amity had assassinated

Gunnison, and then really must have. All he recalled afterwards were urgent voices and mumbling to someone that Amity had shot him – that she'd gotten away.

Had she gotten away? Or been captured?

Mac and Sephy had been arrested, he remembered then. The pain of this was even greater than his wound.

Collis sat up all the way, gritting his teeth and pushing himself on his good arm. Breathing hard, sweating slightly, he spotted a small bottle and a glass of water on the bedside table. He picked up the bottle and studied it. Painkillers. Glancing at the water, he longed for one or, even better, a few. He shoved the bottle roughly back into place.

The door opened, and Kay Pierce peered in. She entered, closing it behind her. "Collis! You're up."

He tensed and tried not to show it. "Hi, Miss Pierce. I mean...Madame President."

"Oh, call me Kay."

She came over – small and slim, with a pointed face and blue eyes. Her upswept light brown hair was in stylish curls that didn't really suit her. She wore a tailored skirt and a jacket with broad shoulder pads.

"How are you?" She sounded genuinely concerned – yet Collis knew from Mac that President John Gunnison's former Chief Astrologer had apparently had it in for him.

His temples pounded. *In no mood for this shit, that's how I am.* But his instincts were still there and he gave a weary, rueful smile. "Been better."

"I bet. Here." She leaned over and rearranged his

pillows so that they'd prop him up. She was so close he could smell her perfume and wariness prickled through him.

He sank back against the pillows. "Thanks."

Kay sat on the side of his bed. She nodded at the painkillers. "It's been a few hours. You can have one."

Collis had no idea if she was lying. But thinking of Mac and Sephy again – shot, if lucky, or else already on their way to a correction camp – he didn't need more urging.

He shook out a small pink pill and took it. There were lots. Too tempting. He'd flush them down the toilet later, or he'd be popping one whenever he wanted some welcome oblivion.

He longed to give the painkiller time to work its numbing magic, but knew what he had to say next. "What's been going on?" he asked, putting the water down. "Has Vancour been caught?"

Kay grimaced. "No."

He hid his rush of relief. "*Damn* it," he muttered.

In every lie, a truth. It was how you made people believe you. Collis thought of Mac as he said it and knew bitterly that he'd gotten the helpless anger just right.

Kay tapped her red-painted nails on the covers. "What exactly happened?"

What had happened was that when he'd seen Amity shoot Gunnison – had realized in a panic her fate if captured – he'd lunged forward and grabbed her. He'd hustled her

out of the stadium amid the chaos, shouting that he had her. There'd been no thought to the plan.

He said, "We struggled. She got the pistol and shot me. Then she grabbed the keys to the Shadowcar and took off."

Kay's sigh sounded peevish. "We figured as much when you were found. Were you trying to cut across the fields behind the stadium?"

"Must have been. It's kind of a blur."

"I can imagine." Her gaze lingered on his bare chest. A wry smile touched her lips. "What's it like getting shot?"

The question took Collis by surprise, and he snorted. "It hurts," he said. "A lot." Then he recalled Sandford Cain, Gunnison's right-hand man, collapsing onstage too. "Is Mr Cain okay?"

"The doctor says he will be. The bullet lodged between his ribs. He needed surgery." After a pause, Kay added, "Mac Jones and Sephy Geroux got away."

His pulse leaped. He gave a disbelieving laugh and massaged his forehead, playing for time. "Yeah...I heard their names called. Resistance, right?"

Kay's eyebrows shot up. "How did you know?"

"Started to suspect Mac recently. I went to Johnny with it. I thought that's why they were being taken in."

"No, I had my own suspicions. Mac wasn't as smart as he thought. But now they're still out there, somewhere." Kay gave a small, unhappy laugh. "Guess the Resistance will be after *me* next."

“Don’t worry, we’ll weed the scum out.” Collis’s heart was singing. Mac and Sephy, free. *Oh, Mac, you wonderful, clever bastard*, he thought fervently.

Kay traced her nail on the bedcover. “I shot Cain, you know.”

His thoughts stuttered. “I...you what?”

She looked up levelly. “I’m the one who shot Sandford Cain. Not Vancour. Me.”

The stadium’s stage had been crowded with officials for the Harmony Treaty that would forcibly annex Appalachia to the re-formed Can-Amer. Collis hadn’t had a clear view. He’d assumed that Amity had shot Cain as well as Gunnison.

He studied Kay, apprehension cold in him. Her freckled features were expectant. “Why are you telling me this?” he said slowly.

Kay rose and crossed to the window. They were still in Washington, he realized: he could see the ancient ruins of white, staid buildings beyond.

“Because I think I can trust you,” she said, gazing out. “I admire you, Collis. You’re very good with people. Johnny always spoke highly of you.”

Johnny probably had; he’d seen Collis as a kind of good-luck charm. Collis had taken advantage of it at every opportunity.

“What about Cain?” he asked finally. His arm still throbbed as his mind spun. What perception of him did Kay have? What exactly should he be playing along with?

She shrugged as she looked over the city. "I saw my chance and took it. Wish my aim had been better, that's all. We'll see if we can work with him or not."

We?

Kay turned. "I'm thinking of relocating the capital to New Manhattan," she said brightly. "Biggest city in the country. It deserves to be the capital, don't you think?"

"Sure," he said. "Good idea."

"Plus it has wonderful shopping," she added with an impish smile. "I've cast your chart, by the way."

He swallowed. "Oh?"

"Mmm," she said, nodding. "You have a bright future. Jupiter in Gemini, trine with Venus. A new age of communications."

If she actually believed in astrology, he'd eat his socks. "Well...I guess a new age is fitting," Collis ventured. "Given the circumstances."

Kay came back and sat on the bed again. To his surprise, she took his hand. She turned it over and traced the Leo tattoo on his palm. He flinched, reflexively closing his fingers.

Kay looked up. The emotion in her blue eyes seemed genuine.

"No, don't be ashamed of it." She smoothed his hand open. Her fingers were warm. "It's a badge of honour. You've been to one of those places and survived. That means something. And you'll keep surviving."

It was the memory of Amity's touch he'd winced at.

She'd often traced the tattoo, not realizing it marked him as a former correction-camp prisoner. She sure as hell knew it now.

"I guess you're right," he muttered.

To his relief, Kay released him. "I'll let you get some rest. But there's a role for you in my regime, Collis. We're the most powerful country in the world – I need a right-hand man I can trust."

I could finally have enough money, he thought. Enough to not be a garbage Reed any more. Enough to be worthy of winning a Vancour.

The knee-jerk thoughts brought a familiar self-disgust. At least his actions were what counted – thankfully no one knew the crap that went on in his head. The main thing was that with a role like that, he could aid the Resistance more than ever.

Collis let a disbelieving grin spread across his face. "I'm left-handed," he said. "Can I still be a right-hand man?"

Kay smiled too. "I know you let Amity Vancour go."

In the sudden silence, she studied him, rubbing a finger over her lips.

"So what can we do about that?" she said.

EXTRACT FROM THE UNDERGROUND
RESISTANCE NEWSPAPER
VICTORY, EDITION 8 (MAY 3RD, 1942 AC)

Under Kay Pierce's rule, we're bombarded daily with propaganda seeking to rewrite history. Don't be deceived. The facts are these:

In March 1941, former Peacefighter pilot Amity Vancour – “Wildcat” – was made the scapegoat of the World for Peace scandal that rocked the world. The charges against her were lies. She'd found evidence that dictator John Gunnison was illegally manipulating the old and noble practice of Peacefighting – two fighter pilots pitted against each other to resolve conflicts between nations – to further his own ends.

“Wildcat” sought to expose the corruption. She was arrested, framed for murder and sent to a correction camp.

She escaped. In February, she shot Gunnison as he overtook the entire continent via his infamous “Harmony Treaty”. Kay Pierce, formerly Gunnison's Chief Charlatan (aka his Chief Astrologer), seized power.

“Wildcat” escaped once more. She remains at large, working with others in the Resistance to bring down Pierce.

Gunnison was a madman. Kay Pierce is every bit as dangerous: a scheming liar who uses astrology to control and terrorize. We must fight her regime, or die.

When the time comes, be ready. Fight with us.

– *Somewhere in
New Manhattan*



PART ONE

MAY 1942 – SEPTEMBER 1942

CHAPTER ONE



MAY, 1942

THE CLOCK'S TICKING HAD NEVER seemed so loud.

Distractedly, I scanned my cards. Heat blanketed the shabby apartment, barely stirred by the small electric fan. Taped-up newspaper covered the edges of the closed window blinds.

I put down the three of spades. Mac, sitting across from me with his shirtsleeves rolled up, raised an eyebrow.

"And here I thought you were hoarding threes."

"Think again, pal." I managed not to flick another glance at the clock and took a five. I did need threes, as it happened, but couldn't concentrate.

Mac was leaning back, brown hair rumpled, one foot propped on his battered chair.

“Interesting,” he drawled. He stretched forward to snag my three.

His guise of normality made it easier to act the same. My brother Hal and Sephy, Mac’s girlfriend, were working on astrological charts at the other end of the table...and Hal didn’t know. He had no idea that tonight was make or break for the Resistance.

Mac discarded a four. I swiped it up. The cards felt sticky. Ever since we’d entered New Manhattan, the heat had been oppressive, as if the weather was on Kay Pierce’s side and knew what we were up to.

From the Harlemtown streets below, a Shadowcar’s siren wailed. It chilled the back of my neck. Across the city at the other safe house, Ingo was waiting too, if all was well.

I gave in and looked. Five to nine. Five more minutes and we’d know.

When I threw down another card, Mac took it. “Gin.” He showed his hand.

I groaned, glad of the distraction. “Really?”

He tossed the cards down and stretched, deceptively relaxed. “Shouldn’t have taken your eye off those threes, kiddo.”

Hal glanced up but didn’t comment. In a different lifetime, he’d have asked what had happened – maybe joked that he guessed I wasn’t such a card shark after all.

Now wasn’t the time to try again to put things right with him, even if I knew how. Yet as our eyes met, I hesitated.

“Want to play?” I asked. “Vancour versus Vancour?”

My brother’s face was a male mirror of my own: olive skin, light brown eyes, sleek dark hair. He gave a small grimace and returned to his chart.

“Need to finish this,” he muttered.

I didn’t really blame him. It still hurt.

Sephy gave me a quick sympathetic look. She and Mac were the ones who’d been there for Hal during those long, grey weeks after I’d shot Gunnison. It was a lot more than I’d managed.

Restless, I went to the tiny kitchen. I wasn’t hungry, but opened the icebox and took out some cold cuts from the deli downstairs. The owner, Jakov, gave us free lodging and helped out with food when he could.

“Anyone want some?” I said.

“Sounds good.” Mac gathered up the cards. “Grab the telio, will you, pal?” he added to Hal. “Might as well catch the further burblings of our glorious leader.”

Hal gave a sour grin. “If we have to.”

“Well, it sure is *my* favourite time of day,” said Sephy. Her wavy black hair was caught up in a green scarf, her neck long and elegant.

“Yours too?” I concentrated on the cold cuts I was putting on the table, distrusting my ability to look casual. This was it. Any minute now, we’d know.

Hal snapped on the second-hand telio set. It whined into life. From the twin curlicue speakers, soft music bounced through the room: the famous crooner Van Wheeler.

“Oh, life’s so okay...we all say...with Kay! Kay! Kay!”

They’d started showing film clips as music played. On the small, round screen, Kay Pierce was getting into a gleaming auto, blowing kisses in grainy black-and-white.

As he sat back down, Hal glanced in frustration at the chart he’d been working on. “Do you think we’ll be able to actually get *rid* of her soon, instead of just...?”

The charts he helped Sephy doctor had already saved several people who’d have been found Discordant otherwise. Sephy had been one of Pierce’s astrologers. She knew how Pierce’s mind worked – what astrological dictates she might think up next. We’d started a newspaper too, using an ancient printing press hidden deep in the tunnels below the city.

None of it felt like enough.

I shrugged, afraid Hal would hear the truth if I spoke.

“Hope so, buddy,” Mac said easily, reaching for a slice of ham.

“There’s Collis,” Sephy said, straightening.

I stiffened. My ex was now Pierce’s speech-writer and “special advisor”. We watched as he stood beside her on the screen, the pair of them waving from the balcony of her Centre Park palace. Collie was kind of saluting the air, one hand on Pierce’s back. His shapely mouth was twisted in that smile of his.

Hal shook his head. “Man, he’s a good actor.”

“He has to be,” said Mac quietly.

With an effort, I bit back a response. I was the only one

present with call to be bitter about Collie's acting ability.

Reaching for a piece of cheese I didn't want, I thought of our potential meeting tonight with the deposed President Weir. My guts tightened. We needed it so badly...but if it went ahead, Collie would be there too.

He and I had grown up together – been best friends. When he'd turned up on the Western Seaboard Peacefighting base after four years of silence, we'd fallen in love. I'd have laughed in the face of anyone who told me he was a spy for Johnny Gun and a crooked Peacefighter.

I'd believed in him almost right up until the moment he'd turned me in.

That was over a year ago. I'd ended up in Harmony Five. Yet when he'd rescued me after I shot Gunnison, he'd kissed me.

A man can change, he'd said.

I'd been in such shock that I hadn't protested the kiss – or even known if I wanted to. After waking up from the greyness, I did know: if I'd been myself I'd have stopped him, and if Collis Reed had any sense he should have realized that. He couldn't actually think I'd take him *back*, could he?

The thought filled me with angry amazement – and sadness. How had I gotten it all so wrong?

At nine o'clock exactly, the Harmony symbol's grey and black swirls appeared – a distortion of the old yin-yang, blood and black in real life. A trio of female singers warbled, "*And now it's time...for all of us...to end the day with KAY!*"

“Good evening,” said Pierce in her thin, stilted voice. “I often ask myself, what does Harmony want from me? As you know, I think there’s a purpose to all things. Astrology simply helps us discern it...”

Unlike the earlier images, this was live. Kay Pierce was sitting at a microphone right now, probably in a room cooled by fans blowing over ice blocks, reading the notes Collie had prepared for her.

Hal carefully drew a symbol on his chart. “Her burlblings are as enlightening as usual,” he said.

“...and so, as I often stress when I meet with my advisors, clarity can be achieved by...”

Clarity, following the mention of a meeting.

Collie had just given us the all-clear.

Mac’s gaze met mine. Electricity sparked briefly in his brown eyes. Across the table, Sephy’s shoulders relaxed a fraction.

I cleared my throat. “No surprises there then,” I said in response to Hal.

After Pierce finished, dance music came on, slow and sweet. Sephy casually resumed work on her chart. My pulse hammered, out of time with the music. It was really happening.

I dealt a hand of solitaire, trying to concentrate only on the gentle slap of cards. Forget Collie. The Resistance *had* to get ex-President Weir on board if we hoped to succeed. Nothing else mattered tonight.

Mac finished his sandwich. “Hey, Amity, you want to

have a look at that spot in the tunnels you told me about? The one we could use as a cache?" Our script had begun.

"Kind of late," I said, forcing myself to sound casual.

"Ah, it's too hot to sleep anyway. And we might not get a chance tomorrow."

"All right – shouldn't take long."

For a change, I was glad of the distance between me and Hal – otherwise he'd likely have wanted to come. As Mac and I stood up, he started putting his things away.

"Think I'll take a shower before bed and cool off," he said to Sephy. "Night," he added to me, a touch too late.

"Night," I echoed.

When he'd vanished into the bathroom, Mac's and my movements turned hurried. We grabbed up our jackets – it was cold in those ancient tunnels that spiderwebbed under the city.

At the door, Sephy and Mac quickly embraced. "*Be careful,*" she said.

Mac linked his pale fingers with her dark ones. "We'll be fine. I promise," he said softly. He jostled her hand. "Hey, you could always agree to marry me, if you're really worried."

"Get back safely and I'll consider it."

"You're a witness," Mac said to me.

"I am," I agreed, trying to smile.

Sephy squeezed my arm, and I knew she'd guessed that I wasn't looking forward to this.

"Hurry back, both of you," she said.

A route led into the tunnels from the deli's cellar, but we didn't take it – we were due in less than an hour; not enough time to travel solely underground. We hurried around the corner, where there was a drugstore with a payphone.

Mac ducked inside. I kept to the shadows, praying a Gun wouldn't pass. I gripped my arms and gazed at the shabby brownstones, and a tattered poster for an act at the Eros Theatre: *Harmony Hugh and His Hepcats*.

Ingo should have left the other safe house by now. *Stay safe*, I thought fiercely to him. *Please*.

Mac was back in less than a minute. "Dwight's on his way."

We waited at the rear of an unlit parking lot. Mac's fedora sliced a curved shadow over his face as he leaned against the brick wall, hands in his trouser pockets, watching the street. Headlights from autos with gleaming front grilles passed occasionally.

I knew him well enough now to guess what he was thinking. I nudged him. "Go on. I won't tell Sephy."

He gave a quick, rueful smile. "That obvious?"

"Maybe not to a blind person."

"Ah, what the hell. Thanks, pal." He reached into his jacket's inner pocket and drew out a pack of cigarettes. Cupping a hand around his mouth, he lit one with a quick scratch of flame from his lighter.

“Listen,” he said, putting the lighter away, “if this goes as we hope, I don’t want Hal involved. I don’t even want him to know about it until he has to.”

I let out a slow breath. It wasn’t really a surprise – Mac had been reluctant to let Hal even come into New Manhattan with us. But I knew how desperately my brother wanted to help defeat Pierce. Like me, he needed to feel he was doing something to obliterate our father’s legacy.

“I agree,” I said quietly.

Mac blew out a puff of smoke and glanced at me. “You sure? I know things have been kind of tough between you two. Keeping a secret this big from the kid won’t help.”

My lips quirked humourlessly. I gazed at a bus’s high, curved shape as it passed, an advertisement for Capricorn Cigarettes on its side.

“I’m sure,” I said in a low voice. “He’s only fifteen, Mac. I don’t want him involved in a murder plot any more than you do.”