

## 2 - Fire Brandy

# The Nameless City

[TJ]

Year 47 DW (Dry World) - 30th of Midsummer

*“The Betrayers have closed in on The Grove and are now attacking towns in the nearest vicinity. There are still no reports of anyone surviving. Here is what President Julius has to say on behalf of what has happened thus far:*

*‘This is an act of war. Tonight we mourn the loss of the Hales, our sister Family. Tomorrow, we defend our homes against those aiming to take it. We will fight, for that is how we prosper, for that is why we are still here. As nature flourishes after calamity, so shall we. In the end, we are all one Family.’”*

“What a load of shit.” TJ finished his glass as Nelly set down the bottle of diluted bourbon. “Get me another one.”

Nelly reached for the bottle, when another patron shouted at her to turn up the television volume. She aimed a nearby remote at the television, clicking a button several times, before filling TJ’s glass to the brim. “It just happened three days ago. Been the only thing on the news since. Some folks are thinking it’s the Clydes, or even the Quinns. They’re the only ones with Vitality.”

TJ sipped his drink. It burned his throat on the way down. “You mean other than The Prospect?”

“Someone said that yesterday too.” Nelly had been staring at TJ. She reached over the counter, touching his left cheek. “Job didn’t go too well?”

TJ flinched away, as she brushed the sore spot on his cheekbone. “Client got into some kinda ‘business altercation.’ Other guy thought it’d be smart to hit me instead.” TJ rubbed his cheek. “Not that it matters. Job is done. Pay was good.”

Nelly chuckled. “Thanks for sharing it with me.”

TJ raised his glass in response.

The tavern was buzzing with nervous energy. There were more Nameless folks than usual, nearly every seat in the booths and along the bar were occupied. They had gathered to watch the broadcast on how The Grove had been wiped out by the Betrayers. The camera panned over a forest that was shrouded in crimson light, and most of the buildings had already been burned down. Farmlands were

smoldering, and dirt paths weaving between grey buildings were covered with bloody bodies and livestock. Then the broadcast switched to a news reporter offering his condolences.

"They must've come from the south like we thought." Nelly drew a cloth from her back pocket and wiped down the surface of the bar. "The Prospect will get rid of them soon enough."

TJ swirled his watered-down bourbon, ice cubes clinking in the glass. "Crazy shit always happens when I'm away, doesn't it?"

"Maybe you should stop being away, then." There was a hint of frustration in Nelly's tone.

TJ downed his glass. The pain in his cheek seemed to fade more, as the drink burned all the way down to his stomach. "You think they're gonna draft us again?"

"Most likely." Nelly was wiping the inside of another customer's mug. She shot a glance at TJ. "Now that you're old enough, you'd be just what they're looking for."

TJ rolled his eyes. "I'll make sure to *not* be home when they come."

He slid his empty glass over, and Nelly filled it again. After passing it back, she then leaned on the counter, resting her chin in both palms. While she glanced around at other patrons, she had the slightest smile, like she enjoyed the confusion in her tavern. Maybe because it kept the place lively.

Nelly was a little older than TJ, with fair skin, freckled cheeks, and a slender figure. She kept her blouse unbuttoned all the way down her chest, showing off a beautiful white chain. Other than her pointed nose, she was one of the prettiest girls in the Nameless. Even her father had taken a liking to her. Looking back at TJ, Nelly smiled again. "Back then you were all bones. Now you're twenty-two and grown through."

He was still skinny, and only average in height. He had already stopped growing by the time the war ended eight years ago. He raised his glass again, taking a longer, slower sip. "I'm twenty-three, Nelly."

Nelly dismissed him with a shrug.

The news reporter had just finished rambling on the television. "And now we're going live with Joanna Julius, who has more to say about The Nameless City."

TJ lifted his head at the Name. Around the tavern, it seemed as if every patron had fallen silent, their attention glued to the television. The camera fixed on a young woman around TJ's age, who sat behind a desk surrounded by cameras and microphones. TJ's heart sank when he saw her: black hair falling to her chin, with pale skin and pink lips. Her eyes were colorless.

An interviewer was asking Joanna a question off-screen: “The Nameless City is the closest major city near The Grove. What does this mean for the Nameless, and should they be concerned?”

Every patron in the tavern was waiting to absorb every word Joanna had to offer. She interlocked her fingers, her gaze where the interviewer spoke from. “The Nameless are strong, able to survive in the worst conditions even without Family, but this should not give them a false sense of security.” Her voice was strong, confident. “The Betrayers are coming, and they *will* attack the Nameless when they are certain of victory.” She looked between the crowd, commanding their attention. “This is war, and during wartimes, Family must stick together. Whether you’re Named or Nameless, it is as we always say . . .”

Then everyone in the tavern said it together. “We are all one Family.”

Everyone except TJ.

Reporters continued asking Joanna questions, and she continued answering, to which TJ paid no mind to. Soon the broadcast switched back to the news reporter, who was now accompanied by another man in a white suit.

Nelly had been cleaning glasses and mugs with her cloth. She only looked up at the television when the reporter asked the man in white about the Dragonflies. “You know, I’ve always wanted a Dragonfly to carry me out of this place,” she said. “Fly me to another city, far far away from here.”

TJ swallowed the last gulp of bourbon. It burned less than before, but his face had already begun feeling warm. “If we ever meet one, I’ll be sure to let them know.”

That made Nelly smile. She leaned against the counter, tracing the back of TJ’s hand with her finger. “We can’t fly like they can, but we *could* set aside some money. Save up enough to get to another city or a village.”

TJ turned Nelly’s hand over. Her palm was raw with blisters, which always seemed to worsen the more she scrubbed and wiped things down. TJ let her go. “We’ve been over this before. There is nowhere else to go.”

“But still—” Nelly bit her lip, refusing to accept the truth he always told. “We’re almost there. I just know it. Just a little more for Cybil and the kids, then we can all stop wasting away in this shithole.”

Nelly reached for his hands again, but she stopped herself short. Something had caught her attention by the entrance of her tavern.

TJ followed her eyes to the right, where a Nameless man was dragging his boots through the tavern with a yawn. He had buzz-cut brown hair, with a permanent scowl that might as well have been branded to his face. More notably, he had a red bandana tied around his left arm, one he hadn’t taken off since the War of Life ended.

The ex-soldier had a posse of four other Nameless behind him. The other patrons watched them carefully, as they made their way over to the bar counter. The posse stood around as the scowling man sat next to TJ. He was a few inches shorter, but he was also one of the Nameless who found enough food to have a muscular build. He kept his head forward, pretending not to notice TJ. “Ya look beautiful as always, Nelly.”

Nelly’s shoulders stiffened. She shot a glance at TJ. “What do you want, Damian?”

“That’s not a way to say ‘hello.’” Damian stole another patron’s drink, who did no more than shoot a glare. “Been away on a long job, needing to see ya again.” Damian downed the glass, then he licked his lips. “You’ve always known how to take care of us, Nelly. What can I do to make it up to ya?”

“You can pay.” Nelly’s voice was trembling. She held herself, like she was ready to flee at any moment.

“Hmm.” Damian followed Nelly’s gaze to TJ. Then his eyes widened dramatically, pretending to be shocked. “Sorry. Didn’t see ya there, Ace.”

TJ looked over his shoulder, back at Damian. “That drunk already?”

Damian exchanged a look with his posse, then he grunted. “When’d you get back?”

“Sometime before you did.” TJ took an unbothered sip.

But Damian didn’t seem impressed. “And how many chips did ya make?”

From the corner of TJ’s eye, Nelly shook her head. He shrugged back. “Seventeen.”

Damian snorted. “Made twenty.”

“No one gives an even amount of chips, Damian.”

“Not normally. Guess my client was feeling generous.” Damian grinned as his posse chortled with laughter. “Ya ought to be more friendly, Ace. It’ll get ya favors better than a right cross.” He pointed at his left cheek, mocking TJ’s bruise.

Looking at the posse, TJ didn’t recognize any of them; probably folks that Damian picked up from The Sticks. Folks there were dirtier, more willing to do anything involving chips, but they were also skinnier, weaker than the ones living in The Ranks. “I hear friendly folks offer to buy drinks for others.” TJ exchanged a glance with Nelly, and he smiled. “That what you and your friends came here to show me?”

A few other patrons around the bar were listening in, and some of them snickered. Damian’s scowl deepened. “Just overheard that word of the Ace has been getting around. Even people from other cities are learning about you.” He smirked sinisterly. “The Prospect might start drafting again. Might be smart to send our ‘best guy’ out there to protect us, don’t you think?” His posse chortled

again, as he rose from the stool. "Time for the 'Ace' to do some real work." He adjusted his sleeve, specifically at the red bandana.

TJ kept his eyes low, as Damian and his posse's steps thudded away, until they left the tavern. Eventually the other patrons resumed their conversations, murmurs returned to cheers and laughter.

Nelly had been watching TJ for some time. She lowered her head with concern. "Don't let him get to you. Nothing you could do about being too young."

TJ avoided her eyes. "I guess not."

Nelly leaned over the counter, closer to his face. "Well, then. If you're interested, I've got another job for you." She waited until TJ looked up. "After I close up for the night, why don't you take me home?"

TJ narrowed his brows. "You still scared of the dark?"

"I've got a feeling that some folks are gonna stay longer than I want them to." She nodded at the entrance, then went back to wiping down the counter. "I'll pay you good."

The sun had already set by the time TJ arrived at the city. It was at least midnight, and he expected patrons would want to stay longer because of wartimes. He usually took the next few days off after a long job, but Rosie always eventually caught wind of his return. TJ finished the last of his drink. "Don't close up too late."

"Don't worry. You'll be able to see the kids tomorrow." Nelly clasped her hands together, her face a little brighter as she went to fill other patrons' drinks. She was usually full of sprite, and she seemed to enjoy TJ's company. She was only two years above him, but at that moment she seemed a lot older. Perhaps more weary.

For the next two hours TJ kept himself busy, tapping his fingers on the counter, playing with the edge of his knife. The blade was a bit shorter than his forearm, and its black shine had faded over the years, but it was still razor sharp. He had gotten that knife from Roth, his best friend, and since then he always kept it with him, strapped to the right side of his waist beneath his jacket.

The tavern began to quiet down, as patrons left one by one. Once there were only a few left sitting in the booths, Nelly began stowing away her extra bottles of alcohol. She set the empty bottles in a dirty box, which she took to the storage room around the left side of the counter. She would wash and reuse them the next day, filling each bottle with alcohol that she made herself that morning. That was her, everyday. Somehow it seemed harder than the jobs TJ took.

Once the last patron left—an elderly homeless man who spent his last chip on a sip of vodka—Nelly took his empty glass to the storage room. Shortly after she came back out, hair already tied back and blouse already buttoned all the way up to her neck. She waved at TJ with a cute smile. "Let's get outta here."

The nights were always starless in the Nameless City. The only things helping them see the sidewalk were foggy moonlight and candles in windows of rundown homes. The cool breeze of encroaching Autumn sifted between the lining of TJ's jacket. He took off the jacket and threw it over Nelly's shoulders. "You should really start wearing something warmer."

Nelly shivered beside him, pulling the jacket tight. "I'll be fine if you do this every night."

"You know that's not gonna happen."

"I know."

Nelly's tavern was at the innermost edge of The Ranks, next to the gates that separated them from the Capitol. Unless one lived inside of the gates, The Ranks were the closest thing to easy living for a Nameless. A crowd of Nameless was standing by the gates, chanting with no particular rhythm. Nelly kept her eyes on the crowd, as they walked away from the Capitol walls. "What do you think they're chanting about this time?"

"Same dumb shit as usual. Chips, food, maybe for them to open the gates." TJ kept his head forward. "Folks here have it way better than those in The Sticks. Complaining's only gonna make them seem stupider."

Nelly trailed behind, her attention still to the crowd. "What was it like growing up there?"

"A lot of begging and stealing. Never going back again." TJ quickened his pace. "Quit staring at the wall. The doors never even open."

Nelly hurried to TJ's side, her lips pressed tight. "They opened once."

TJ thought to ask, but he already figured out the answer. "You saw them open during the draft?"

Nelly nodded. "They took everyone away. Even my dad."

That was probably for the best. Whenever Nelly talked about her father, she always grew uncomfortable in her own skin. "Good thing you didn't go," TJ said. "Someone as much of a chicken as you would've never survived."

"I was fifteen, TJ." Nelly rolled her eyes. "I think I would've been a great soldier. If I was even a year older, I might've ended up like Joanna Julius."

TJ kept his head low while Nelly giggled beside him. She caught on soon enough, nudging him on the shoulder. "What's the matter? You're looking even sadder than usual."

TJ played it off with a shrug. "Nothing. Just glad you didn't go."

Nelly leaned close to him, her shoulder brushing against his. "Is this about Roth?"

"It's not just him," TJ said. He had been clenching a fist. "I just hate The Prospect. Nobody needed to die for a war they caused."

“That’s not true. The Betrayers attacked them first, and they helped us a lot during the war.” Nelly’s voice was rising, and she crossed her arms. “I’m sure Roth was a good man. Both him and S were. If it wasn’t for them, we never would have won.”

Nelly had always thought too highly of The Prospect. TJ kept his eyes forward, to the ground, anywhere other than at her. “We haven’t exactly won yet, have we?”

Nelly frowned at that.

Across the street, several men were chasing a boy along the pavement. One of the local gangs; the boy must’ve owed them money. He let out a scream echoing between the buildings as the gang chased him down. Still, it drowned in the liveliness of the city: in the next alleyway, a man was mounting a prostitute, and they had just passed by a man sharing a story to his brothers of how he violently tore out the throat of the last man he brawled with. To TJ and Nelly, it was all just white noise.

They crossed the street over to the next sidewalk. Foot traffic and voices thinned as they walked further from the Capitol, approaching Nelly’s neighborhood. Houses there were more sparse, and loose sand speckled the asphalt. The neighborhood was dreary, and by the time they reached Nelly’s house they were the only two people outside.

They climbed the porch steps, oakwood creaking beneath their boots. Nelly jangled the lock with a key. Once she opened the door, she stopped in the doorway, turning back to TJ. “Aren’t you going to come in?”

TJ stood on the top step. He shook his head, looking further down the sidewalk. “Rosie’s probably staying up for me.”

Nelly chuckled, tilting her head downward. “She’s so smart it’s almost scary. I’ve been seeing her follow Charlotte around more these days too.”

TJ nodded. “She always wanted to be a broker, so I expected it.”

“That’s good.” Nelly leaned against the doorframe, thinking to herself. “I thought I’d give you your payment tonight, but I left it somewhere in the house. You’ll have to come and help me find it.”

TJ looked back down the sidewalk, anxiety filling his stomach next to the residual alcohol. “Don’t take too long.”

Nelly gave him a sly smirk. She skipped into her house, and TJ closed the door behind him, not bothering to lock it. The house was a single floor, but unlike most Nameless Nelly actually had a basement. Her house was only the size of a living room, with a small kitchen attached on the right side. The kitchen had a stove with a match-lit cooktop, a broken refrigerator, a sink with three unwashed dishes, and a trapdoor to the basement where Nelly kept most of her alcohol in storage.

The living room had a grossly tan carpet, with a small rocking couch in the center that faced the television. Beside it was Nelly's bed, more like a cot with a thick, heavy blanket. Nelly turned on the television. The Prospect broadcast was still playing. "Wait here. I'll get your present."

While she disappeared into the kitchen, TJ settled his weight on the couch. There were only a few channels that the Nameless were allowed to watch, most of which were game show reruns or Lost World sports like football or basketball. TJ clicked through the channels, but that night there was only Joanna, still answering questions being thrown at her.

The trap door echoed from the kitchen as Nelly slammed it shut. She came back into the living room, holding a large fancy bottle with a grin. "Look!" She held the bottle out to him: *Fire Brandy, authentic from The Mech City*. "A real Quinn actually came to the tavern about a week ago, and he sold this to me for cheap!"

TJ took the bottle in hand. No damage to the seal or any sort of tampering. For all he could tell, it *was* legitimate. "How much was 'cheap?'"

Nelly cringed. "A hundred and twenty chips?"

"Holy shit!" The fire brandy suddenly felt heavy in TJ's palm. He held it close to his chest, cradling it like a baby. "What the hell were you thinking? We can't drink this!"

"TJ. It's *mine*." Nelly sat on the armrest of the couch, swinging her legs onto his lap. "We can do whatever I want with it, so crack it open."

TJ cursed under his breath. His fingers grew numb with regret, and he ripped off the seal with a whimper. "I'm just saying we could've flipped this for two hundred—maybe three hundred chips!"

Nelly guffawed with laughter. "It's okay," she said, ruffling his hair. "This is the perfect way to show you matter to me."

TJ grumbled as he popped off the cork. "I wouldn't even do this for myself." "I know."

Nelly crossed her legs, hands on her lap. She watched eagerly, nodding for TJ to proceed. Slowly, he raised the brandy to his lips. Spicy, burning much more on the way down than Nelly's watered-down bourbon, and it had an overwhelmingly-sweet aftertaste.

He handed the bottle back to Nelly, who squirmed in her seat before raising the bottle high. She dropped it immediately, wincing at the heat, then she swallowed with a hiss. "It's spicier than I thought."

"It's called *Fire Brandy*. What'd you expect?"

Nelly turned her nose up at him, taking another, smaller sip. "This is amazing. Worth every chip I spent on it."



She handed it back to TJ, who drank. In truth, he preferred the bitter taste of Nelly's hand-crafted brews, but he would never tell her that.

A few more sips, then he handed it back to Nelly. Brandy in hand, her eyes glued to the television, watching intently as Joanna Julius spoke some more. "How do you think she did it, TJ?"

He already knew what Nelly was getting at. "She was the one who made the Vitality bomb. I guess you could say she was the one who actually destroyed Summerheart."

"Yeah, but *how*?" Nelly tilted her head at TJ. "Like, how do you make something that even The Prospect couldn't make? How smart do you think she has to be, to even be able to come up with that?"

Joanna had been speaking on the television for hours, yet she never seemed tired. She never seemed to waver. "I don't know what goes on in her mind, Nelly. Even back then, I never did."

"Some people are just different, I guess. And you're one of them." Nelly placed a hand on his, smiling sadly. "I know you would've been there with them if you could've. With her, Roth, *and* S."

TJ sighed, leaning back against the couch. "We don't have to talk about them."

Nelly's eyes relaxed, a little sad. "Okay."

She returned her attention to Joanna, taking a few more sips of the fire brandy before stowing it away in the kitchen. Then she plopped back next to TJ on the couch. She threw her arms around him, snuggling her cheek against his shoulder, the way she did when she had too much to drink. Soon enough, she began snoring gently. TJ turned down the television volume and carried her over to her bed. He hadn't done that for the past few months, and she felt lighter since then.

After he set her down, covering her with the blanket, he made his way back to the rocking couch. Fatigue washed over his body as he sat back down, and the mixture of brandy and bourbon made his mind foggy. Maybe he would go back to Cybil's tomorrow.

TJ was glad that Cybil still let him stay at her place. Her and Nelly both did. There were many things TJ wouldn't have liked about living alone, but what he hated most was the quiet. It was as if he could hear voices in his head. "*Do it*," they would say.

TJ reached deep into a pocket between the cushion of the couch, until he touched metal. It slipped from his grasp a few times, before he pulled out the heavy hunk of Lost World iron. It had a wood-studded handle. His finger danced lightly on the trigger, and he opened the revolving cylinder. Cybil had given that

six-shooter to him a few years back, but soon Nelly took it for herself. She didn't trust him with it, apparently.

TJ dumped the bullets onto his palm; five in total. He played with them a bit before rechambering them into the gun. The War of Life ended a year after the bombing of Summerheart. Since then, The Prospect placed a worldwide ban against firearms, with *“any evidence being punishable by death.”* TJ chuckled at the thought.

The television was still on, Joanna still answering questions. She was staring into the camera, as if she could see his every move.

TJ twirled the gun in hand, his finger itching against the trigger. “What would you think of me now, Jo?”

He let the television play until he fell asleep.