

## Chapter 15: Birds of a Feather

Nick sat quietly in the rain, already soaked and therefore not caring anymore. The weapon, he had place behind him, beneath a ledge that could keep it dry enough, but wouldn't do the same for him.

He would glance at the locking mechanism from time to time, which had been torn up beyond use. He wondered if the key was ever used.

He took a shaky breath, trying to wash his hands with the rain water, as if it would chase away the feeling. After a little while, he would look up at the stars, as if he could see any.

Hoping that they were still out there, somewhere.

He remembered a line from a book that Alex used to read to him. He whispered it softly.

*Even below a starless night, may the Northstar guide us home.*

To his surprise, a response sounded from behind him, from the other side of the brick wall against which he sat.

"I know that one," the voice claimed, "An old tale, is it not?"

Unable to find the energy within himself to recall, Nick groaned, "Something like that."

"There are shelters by the harbour," the unknown one spoke, his voice soft, but deep, like a hum in a tunnel.

"I have a home."

"Forgive the assumption."

"Why aren't you at a shelter?"

"Just watching the tears," the voice stated, his words drifting as he audibly raised his gaze to the sky.

"Can't see them through the light. And the smog..."

"Most cannot."

"What, are you some kind of psychic?"

The stranger chuckled, "Some kind, yes."

"Why don't you read me my future, old man?"

"Why should I be old?" The voice seemed amused more than offended.

"You talk like a tome."

"You speak like a stray."

"I'm not a stray."

"Say that again, but slowly."

"I'm not- Fuck you."

The man snickered.

"If you are going to fuck with me tonight, at least tell me your name."

"Call me Iris."

"I guess I can return the favour... I'm Nick."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

A deep breath sounded from the other side of the wall.

"You have something for me, actually."

Nick's eyes widened for a moment, before he shot up onto his feet.

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I like to know who I am talking to."

The man climbed over the wall, indeed donning a subtle, barely visible symbol on his right sleeve that reflected the streetlight.

Nick quickly picked up the gun case and handed it over, to which Iris grasped it firmly before laying it on one arm and opening it.

First, he opened the chamber, verifying it to be empty.

Then, he typed a code into a numpad on the side, which caused the magazine to spring loose. He glanced within it, before pocketing the empty part.

He then pulled out a new mag, this one filled to the brim with sterilised copper. He placed it within and closed the case, making sure to engage the clamps before handing it back to Nick.

"I did the job, as you asked," Nick assured him, recoiling as he rubbed his hands.

"You did, which is why you are keeping this. Quite frankly, we don't want it back."

"So what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Keep it. Take it to work when needed."

"What kind of job requires me to take a sniper rifle with me to the office."

"This one."

Nick fell silent for a moment, somehow not following until now.

"This one...?"

"Welcome to the Collective."