No Ordinary World

by TiggyMalvern

Summary

Retirement and a bowling alley didn't work out, and Ray Vecchio's back in Chicago being a cop - it's the only thing he knows. He keeps meeting a guy with a British accent who seems to be mixed up in something weird. If only he could figure out what...

Notes

I've never been to Chicago, but I tried as far as possible to keep the details in this fic accurate, even down to the numbers of the bus routes. The internet is a wonderful thing. Having said that, there will inevitably be errors, some from trying to make the imaginary Chicago of Due South fit with the reality, and some simply for the sake of the plot. I've also borrowed from Highlander the convention of the abandoned factory that still has power and equipment, because why not?

Huge thanks to Laura Jacquez Valentine and Tritorella for exceptional beta work. Their input made an enormous difference. I think I might have written this in 2001 or 2002? That sounds about right…
Chapter 1

Vecchio glared at the vending machine as if it were to blame for its pathetic contents. You'd think they'd make a point of stocking something you could actually eat at the precinct. How was a cop supposed to work if he couldn't get decent food?

He checked his watch and made a slight face. It would be tight, but he figured he could spare half an hour for the trip to Tony's and still get the last of the reports finished by three. And, hey, if it was a bit after, no harm done. The latest assistant State's Attorney wasn't drop-dead gorgeous like Stella, but at least she was willing to cut him a little slack.

He avoided line-of-sight on Welsh's office as he made his way out of the Two-Seven. No point tempting fate. Outside, he looked at the rows of near-motionless traffic filling the street. Shit. Must have been an accident or something.

He resigned himself to walking the couple of blocks, knowing it put something of a dent in his thirty minute limit but deciding he didn't care. He was damn hungry, but not far gone enough to face the vending machine again.

Tony's was busy - he'd expected that, figured he could grab a take-out rather than eating in. Even so, the queue didn't seem to move much. He didn't recognise the girl on the deli counter; she was obviously new and slow.

He glanced at his watch again and cursed under his breath.

"You wouldn't happen to be a regular here?" asked a British accent from behind him.

Vecchio turned to the man standing next in line - maybe an inch or so taller than him, short dark hair in spikes. Dressed like your average slum junkie. "What's it to you?" he asked bluntly.

The guy didn't take offence at his tone, just shrugged. "I was wondering if the food's worth the wait."

Vecchio looked over to where Tony was serving customers. "It's okay." He lowered his voice and added, "You won't get food this good at these prices within five blocks of here, but don't tell any of the staff I said that."

The man smiled at him lop-sided. "Whatever you say."

Vecchio shuffled forward as the queue shed another person from the front.

"So what do you recommend?"

He looked back to the Brit. "If you've got the time, I'd say eat in and try the carbonara. Tony won't tell me what he does to it, but it's the next best thing to home-cooked."

"Sounds like I'll have to come back another day."

"If you're gonna be around here, you should."

"So what about the sandwiches?"

Vecchio considered. "Go for the rolls. Whatever filling, they're all good."
"Thanks for the tip," the guy replied with another quick smile.

"No problem." The woman ahead of him finally got her change counted out slowly by the girl and moved away. Vecchio placed his order and watched the kid wander off to make it. She looked about sixteen. He turned back briefly to the man behind him. "Hey, if you're after a great restaurant one night, try LaStalla on Monroe. You gotta book."

"If I get the chance, I will."

Vecchio only half-heard the reply as he grabbed his food and handed over his cash with relief. He was already eating by the time the set foot on the street outside.

He even managed to get the reports done by 3.15.

*****

Some things really bugged Vecchio about living in the city. All he wanted to do was go to the bank, but it was lunchtime and he'd had to park over a block away. And it was raining.

He shuffled along the crowded sidewalk, couldn't walk any faster without crashing into oblivious shoppers. Didn't these people have any place else to go, something better to be doing than wandering round the streets peering into windows? He weaved between two young girls chattering away as they pushed their strollers, narrowly avoiding getting poked in the eye with an umbrella that tipped backwards across someone's shoulder. Distracted, he walked straight into the middle-aged woman who'd stopped to look at something in a window display. Water shook from her umbrella and ran down his neck.

"Sorry." The woman glanced at him briefly to mutter an automatic apology.

"Watch where you're going," Vecchio snapped. He barely caught her astonished expression as he stalked past. The rain started to come down harder, the shoppers crowding closer to the buildings to avoid the worst of the wet. Vecchio took the clearer path next to the road, keeping a wary eye out for curbside puddles. Getting splattered by a passing car would really make his afternoon.

There was a ripple as the crowd came to life near the intersection ahead, the mass of people parting abruptly with one or two startled cries. A woman in a long grey coat stepped forward into the road, arms extended, holding a gun in classic firing range stance. Aiming it at the huddle of people on the opposite side of the street.

Vecchio's gun was out as he broke into a run, elbowing people aside. "Police, out of the way, get down, get down!" He was too far away to get a good aim even if all these damned people weren't in the way. Four shots exploded in quick succession from up ahead, a collective gasp rising from the crowd as a man on the opposite sidewalk hit the deck.

He threw a quick check over his shoulder before leaping out into the street, hearing the screech of tyres on wet road behind him. "Police! Drop your weapon now!" But the woman was already disappearing back into the mass of people on the sidewalk. The metallic crunch of a fender-bender rang out as he started running again.

It was easy enough at first to keep track of her - just aim for the gap in the crowd where everyone tried to get the hell out of her way. But she took a side turning, merging in with people who hadn't had a clear view of the shooting. The woman was short enough to just vanish into the mass, aided by the cover of bobbing umbrellas. He dashed frantically along the curbside, peering amongst the bodies ahead for a glimpse of grey coat. There she was! Fifty yards away, climbing into a white
station wagon; pulling out and melting into the streaming traffic.

It was way too far back to the Riv.

He swapped gun for cellphone, calling it in as he ran back to the intersection, trying to get the words out between laboured, wheezing breaths. He wasn't into the exercise thing any time, and this coat was too damnd heavy when it was rain-soaked. He slowed to a jog as he approached the circle of vultures gathered around the fallen guy, waving his badge so they’d let him through.

The man was climbing to his feet, buttoning up his coat and brushing the worst of the dirt from it. Weird. It was the Brit from Tony's the other day. His hair was plastered down to his forehead instead of up in spikes, but you didn't need a thing for noses to remember this guy's. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. I thought I'd be less of a target lying down." He barely looked at Vecchio, gaze flickering along the street. Not a panic reaction, more a systematic search.

"Who was she?"

"I have no idea." Search over, the man's eyes returned to Vecchio, crinkling as he smiled. "What are you doing here anyway?"

He flipped his badge open again. "Vecchio. Chicago PD." The Brit didn't look surprised. "If you didn't recognise her, how'd you know she was shooting at you?"

"I don't, but she was pointing too close for comfort."

"Why would some random woman be trying to kill you?"

"I honestly don't know. You should ask her when you find her." The man's tone was dismissive and he was already turning away.

Vecchio reached out to take hold of his arm. "Hey, you're not just gonna walk off!"

He peered around the streets again, more nerves coming across in his face this time. "I thought I'd get out of here before that madwoman comes back. And I'm going to be late for a meeting."

Vecchio looked down below the edge of the coat and wondered who went to meetings in jeans. "Can you make time to give a statement first?"

The man checked his watch hurriedly. "Not really."

"Look, you'd be doing me a real favour." Vecchio put all his charm into the words. "I just walked into a shooting, caused a traffic accident, the damn shooter got away from me an' all I got to go on is a woman in a grey coat driving a white station wagon. It'll help a lot if I can go back to the station with something in the way of a lead."

"I don't think I'll be much help, really. I didn't get a good look at her." He ran a hand through his wet hair, scraping it back from his face.

Vecchio gave him a crooked smile. "Hell, that don't matter. Just so long as all the paperwork's there to fill out the file. You know how it goes."

The man returned his smile. "Yeah, I know about paperwork." He held out a hand. "Pierson, Adam Pierson. Detective, er, Vecchio, was it?"
"Yeah." Vecchio shook the offered hand.

"I'll give you a statement, but I'll have to miss my meeting. Can I make a phone call from the station to explain?"

Vecchio fished out his cellphone and offered it. "You can call now if you like."

"No thanks." Vecchio looked at him suspiciously and Pierson shrugged apologetically. "You'll probably think I'm a crank, but I've got a thing about the radiation. You know, brain cancer." Vecchio just stared. There were sirens now as the first blue-and-white rolled along the street.

He arranged for the uniforms to take Pierson to the precinct - no way was someone with that much Chicago grime on his coat getting in the Riv. Vecchio watched as Pierson settled himself back into the rear seat of the car, arranging his coat carefully. At least the man had the sense to look after his clothes, muddy or not.

He made his way back along the block to the Riv and checked in with the two-seven. The woman in the station wagon had disappeared - no surprise there. There were just too many of the damn things in the city and not enough manpower to stop and question all their drivers. He thumped the edge of the steering wheel with his palm.

Damn. And he never made it to the bank.

*****

Pierson was making his call on the public payphone when Vecchio arrived at the 27th. Two women waited in the queue behind him. Vecchio waved to attract his attention, then gestured in the direction of his desk. Pierson nodded at him, continuing his conversation all the while.

Vecchio headed for his desk and started on his own report of the incident. Pierson showed up just a couple of minutes later, sprawling across the chair opposite. The chair that Vecchio still thought of as Fraser's chair.

Pierson was still wearing that filthy coat, so he wasn't planning on staying long. He'd dried himself off somewhat and his hair stood up in spiky disarray. Right now he looked about twenty-five, though at the intersection he'd looked more like his mid-thirties. Vecchio found himself having trouble pinning this guy down in every respect. It bothered him - he was usually better than that at snap judgements.

"So, interrogation time I take it." There was that crooked smile again.

"Nah, just a chat." Vecchio returned the grin; he wanted to keep Pierson sweet here. "What's your full name?"

"Adam Pierson."

"Just that?"

Pierson shrugged. "Blame my parents."

"You got ID?"

Pierson handed him a rather tatty driver's licence, which gave his age as thirty-four and a Seacouver address.
"You from England?"

"I was once. It's been a while since I lived there."

"So now you live in Seacouver."

"Sometimes." Vecchio looked at him for clarification. "I travel a lot. Recently I've moved between Seacouver and Paris."

"Texas?"

"France." And there was Pierson looking at him like he was an idiot. Damn, this guy could be annoying.

"Sounds great." He stayed friendly with an effort.

"Not really. It's full of French people."

That seemed to cut the chit-chat dead. Clearly Pierson wasn't feeling sociable. "So what are you doing in Chicago?"

"Business."

"Who d'you work for?"

"I freelance. And since I'm in the middle of negotiations right now, I'm not about to tell you who's considering employing me."

Vecchio decided not to push - for now. "How long you been here?"

"Six days."

"You been here before?"

"No." Pierson looked distinctly bored.

"And you're absolutely certain you never saw that woman before today?"

"I told you, I have no idea who she was."

"Anybody you can think of might want you out of the way? Maybe pay someone else to do it?"

Pierson made a face. "Hardly. My life story's a bit on the dull side."

Vecchio sighed - he was getting nowhere here, Pierson wasn't going to give him anything. "Can you describe the woman who shot at you?"

"No better than you can. I was lying on the floor for most of it, if you remember."

Vecchio gave in. He shoved a form across the desk and handed Pierson a pen. "Fill this in; write down as much as you remember." He returned to his own report, half-watching Pierson over the top of the monitor. The man filled in the details rapidly with large sprawling penstrokes, then pushed the paper back towards him.

"Can I go now?"

Vecchio checked the signature - basically illegible but it matched the one on the licence. "Yeah,
"Tell me, where are you staying?"

"The Sheraton."

Vecchio wouldn't have guessed it from the clothes the guy was wearing - not the best hotel in the city, but decent. "Look, here's my cell number. You think of something else or anything happens, let me know."

Pierson took the offered card. "I don't think that's likely, Detective."

"If you're gonna be leaving town, I want an address before you go."

Pierson smiled wryly. "Of course." He turned and headed for the door, not hurrying but covering the ground in long, loping strides.

Vecchio stretched back in his seat, still not sure what to make of the guy. All his instincts screamed that Pierson was being deliberately evasive and it bugged the hell out of him. Something wasn't right about the attitude and while he couldn't say for sure the guy had lied to him, he suspected he hadn't been totally straight either. He couldn't track the number Pierson had called - a half a dozen people must have used the phone since, and even if he pulled the phone company records there would have been several calls within just a few minutes.

His gut was telling him to check out Pierson.
Chapter 2

One Week Earlier - Seacouver

Methos swivelled his head towards the doorway as he felt the buzz, breaking into a grin as MacLeod entered. The Highlander joined him at the bar, perching elegantly on the stool. "Thanks, Joe." The drink was handed to him almost before he sat down.

"So Amanda's gone back to Paris again?" Methos asked innocently.

"Oh, and what makes you think that?" demanded Duncan.

"Because you're deigning to spend the evening with me and Joe instead of closeted in your candlelit apartment." He did his best to wave an admonitory finger, but the effect was spoiled by not putting his beer down first.

"That doesn't mean anything!" MacLeod defended himself. "I don't forget about my friends just because Amanda's around - we came down here most days in case you'd forgotten."

"But only in the afternoons, Mac," Methos replied, wide-eyed.

MacLeod turned to Joe, his expression an appeal for assistance. Joe gave a shrug and an apologetic grin. "Sorry, Mac. Much as I hate to agree with the old guy, he's got a point. We haven't seen a lot of you after dark the past week or so."

"Well at least one of us should have a decent love life," Duncan said, going into a poor imitation of a sulk.

Methos tilted his head to one side. "Do you think we were just insulted, Joe? I'm inclined to take that as a slur upon my reputation."

"Me too," Joe agreed. "No gloating allowed in my bar, Mac."

Methos snapped his expression into neutral as the tingling swept through him once more. Duncan reacted simultaneously, both Immortals casually watching the door with peripheral vision. Joe's face shed its good humour a moment later, then visibly relaxed as he identified the newcomer. "Good guy," he muttered quietly to his friends. "Minds his own business."

Methos swung around on his barstool for a better look and froze. Damn. And the evening had been shaping up so well. Too late to slip out quietly, Foster was heading right for him.

"Hello, Doctor. I was told you'd been seen with one of the MacLeods. You should join me later for a chat," he said, smiling. "We can catch up with old times."

Methos took a long pull at his beer. "I don't think there's anything new to say. I recall our conversations getting a bit repetitive."

"Care to introduce me to your friend, Adam?" Duncan was always too nosy to stay out of other people's business. Joe had withdrawn tactfully to serve customers further along the bar. Methos gestured towards the newcomer. "James Foster, or at least he was once. Duncan MacLeod, but you already seem to know that."

"Only his reputation." Foster didn't offer to shake MacLeod's hand, but his tone was friendly
enough. He turned his attention back to Methos, face hardening. "You know what I want."

"Old ground, James." Methos slouched back on his bar stool, elbows propped on the bar behind him. "I really don't want to discuss it any more."

Foster leaned forward. "You killed Isabelle!"

"If you say so." Methos' face remained impassive.

"I won't forget that."

"Obviously not."

"I'll see you around." Foster turned and stalked out of the building.

Methos felt the tension drain out of him as the man's buzz faded from his head. He swivelled back to face the bar and invested his full attention in his beer. Duncan, of course, could only hold back for about five seconds. "So what's going on?"

"The beer's getting warm."

Joe made his way back along the bar to rejoin them. "What did you do to get Forell all riled up? That guy hasn't challenged anyone in over a hundred years."

"Ah, yes, that's what he's calling himself now. Any chance of another drink over here?"

Duncan gave the barman an exasperated look. "Our friend's decided to be enigmatic."

"Nothing new there."

"He said Methos killed someone called Isabelle." The Scot's voice was low, the band loud enough to keep the conversation private.

Joe's eyebrows went up. "Did you?"

"Do I get another beer before I answer that?"

"No, you get a beer after," he said with a quick grin.

Methos shrugged. "Maybe I did, who knows?"

Joe frowned at the reply, but handed him a bottle. "Who was she, anyway?"

"His wife. She got the yellow fever in the Philadelphia outbreak in 1793. I tried to treat her." "So why's he blaming you?"

"Because the treatment was calomel and bleeding." He took another generous swig of beer.

"Calomel." MacLeod was looking thoughtful. "That's mercury, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And he thinks his wife would have lived if you hadn't treated her." Duncan shook his head.

"He could be right."

"But nobody knew any different then, he can't blame you for it."
Methos gave the Scot his best stare. "Clearly he thinks otherwise."

"But to hold a grudge for two hundred years over it, that's crazy!" Joe's opinion of Foster was obviously dropping by the second.

Methos rolled an empty beer bottle between his palms. "Well, it isn't rational, but then it wouldn't be, would it? He loved her."

"Yeah, but whatever happened, she would have been dead at least a century and a half by now. I mean, he was always going to lose her, he knew that."

"But that's just it, Joe." Duncan stared morosely into his own drink. "You know you're going to lose them and you'll give anything for that bit more time."

Joe gave Duncan a long look, then returned his attention to Methos. "So what are you going to do about him?"

"Same as ever, Joe. Time to go travelling again."

"What makes you think he won't follow you?"

"He'll try. But I'll lose him."

"He's come after you before, hasn't he?" Duncan asked.

"He's turned up once or twice."

"And you just keep letting him run you outta town?" Joe sounded almost affronted on his behalf.

Methos might have found it amusing, but instead found himself touched by the concern.

"It's just easier." His fingers played with the neck of the bottle. "Besides, I really don't want to kill him. I liked him once."

*****

Methos was rarely grateful for Seacouver's climate, but the unseasonal rain meant that he'd driven down to Joe's bar. The buzz was there as he climbed into the Range Rover and again outside his apartment, but neither of the busy streets was a good venue for a sword fight.

He packed with the rapid efficiency of a man used to travelling at short notice, calling a cab to take him to the airport. He didn't want to risk a challenge in the people desert of long-stay parking.

The Presence was missing when he climbed into his taxi. He didn't feel anything at the airport either, but he knew someone would likely be keeping tabs on him. The first flight out with free seats was headed for Chicago. That was fine - he hadn't been there in over a century; the last time they'd barely finished rebuilding after the fire. He could take a look around. It was as good a place as any to disappear.

He withdrew his cash limit on three different cards and booked seats on the next four flights to anywhere.

*****

The Sheraton staff hadn't been too impressed with his appearance or his luggage, but they respected cash. He spent most of the weekend holed up in his hotel with the joys of cable, room service and a
really big bath with an unlimited hot water supply.

By the afternoon of the second full day he was going crazy with boredom.

He had no way of knowing if Foster had even tracked him to Chicago, let alone this hotel. He'd followed him easily enough in the past, but the last time was almost a century ago and fast mass travel hadn't even been close. He knew from his research with the Watchers that Foster had money, but he didn't know whether he had the contacts to get at confidential electronic data. Safest to assume he did.

Maybe it was time for him to ditch Adam Pierson anyway. Too many people could put the name to his face now; even the Watchers were onto that identity. Spotting and losing each new mortal on his tail was becoming increasingly frustrating; the rest of the Council even cut Joe out of the loop when it came to Adam Pierson's Watchers. He'd grown fond of being Adam and the legal technicalities of transferring all his assets to his new persona were a bitch, but Foster was basically one problem too many. Once he'd sorted out his immediate situation, he'd set everything up and become someone else again.

But right now he was feeling restless and penned in and just needed to get away from the hotel room. He'd take a look around Chicago, and in the process he'd probably find out whether James had followed him. No point in holing up here indefinitely.

The reception staff were helpful, and armed with the information they provided he took a bus along Michigan Avenue to the water tower. The plaza around it was fairly crowded even this early in the tourist season, visitors milling amongst the artists selling their paintings of Chicago. A few buskers were dotted around the edges, spread thinly enough for the differing music styles not to overlap. But despite the altered surroundings, the water tower itself stood there basically unchanged. The industrial grime had been cleaned from it at some stage, the limestone a good deal brighter in the weak spring sunlight than he remembered it.

The last time he'd been here, he was with Annette. The tower was a symbol then, a survivor alongside the people rebuilding their city. Her family had been burned out of Terrace Row, losing most of their possessions; to her, this one remaining landmark represented their reviving fortunes. She'd watched the shadows flicker across the tower, laughing in the sultry heat as he watched her - dark hair glowing a hundred shades of red and brown, loose tendrils escaping the bun to play around her face in the breeze. She'd been so, so beautiful, the last of his wives. So long gone.

He strained to remember her face, but he couldn't picture her. He remembered how she moved, the way she laughed, the over-riding impression of someone who loved being alive; but the details were gone - the exact line of her nose, the spacing of her eyes, all lost to time. He'd carried her photo for decades, grateful for the chance to keep something of her fleeting beauty. And then in one of his many flights across the years and the continents, that too had gone.

"Sorry." The young woman who'd jostled his elbow looked at him with a wide smile of perfect teeth and open interest. He was half inclined to go with it, lay the ghosts as it were, but decided she would be too much trouble with Foster liable to show up at any moment. He gave her a regretful smile and turned away, heading to the John Hancock Centre that dominated one whole section of sky.

"It wasn't quite as high as the Sears Tower, but he'd been assured that the views were better. The observatory elevator whisked him to the 94th floor; the leaflet he'd been handed on admission told him that these were the fastest elevators in the world. It was certainly a lot quicker and easier than getting to the top of the similarly-sized Eiffel Tower."
He ignored the latest tourist gimmicks, the VR Chicago tours and the talking telescopes, going straight to the enormous glass windows. To the west was only endless cityscape stretching past the horizon, concrete blocks divided by the converging arrows of the wide streets. Northwards, Lincoln Park was still immediately recognisable by its distinctive outline, a shape he'd previously only seen on maps, running alongside the lake. Hemmed in by more of the uniform urban grey, it stood as a solitary green lung amid the drowned land.

The most spectacular views, though, were from the open skywalk, looking southward towards the Loop, swept by the bitter wind from across Michigan. Only here were there buildings close in height to his own, the rising towers of Michigan Avenue and the business district disturbing the even concrete sameness seen in the other directions. Lake Park was somewhere down there, concealed amongst the overwhelming mass of downtown Chicago.

He stayed as dusk approached and the city began to glow with neon, the gleaming pier isolated in the growing darkness of the lake. The increasing cold finally drove him back inside through the revolving doors to return to the Sheraton and room service.

*****

Methos decided to continue his sight-seeing with the Art Institute. The melancholic harkings back to the past of the previous day weren't his usual style and today he planned to enjoy himself. A firm believer in not leaving a warm, comfortable bed too early, it was late morning when he rose and he ordered lunch before he left. Tuesdays were late night opening, so he could spend as long as he liked at the Institute - their collections were supposed to be extensive.

South on Michigan this time. Impressive views from Michigan Bridge as they crossed the river. He was trying to remember the last time he'd been on a bus - not for some years. The screaming baby near the front reminded him of why he didn't do this when he had the option of driving. At least nobody was going to wave a sword at him on a crowded bus.

The Institute was at the north end of Lake Park - Grant Park, they'd renamed it now - but he stayed on the bus a little longer and went to see the Buckingham fountain. Early afternoon, fairly bright day; the park was busy enough to be safe, since the fountain was a major tourist draw.

It was an imposing sight, all that pink marble glistening under the kaleidoscopic water. And there was a lot of water, the changing wind occasionally splattering the watching crowd with freezing spray. The dramatic design didn't work so well when removed from its intended setting at Versailles, leaving it looking rather kitsch.

He walked the few blocks back to the Institute and spent a pleasant day amongst the artwork. Roughly half of the Monets were new to him 'in the flesh' - he forgot just how photos failed to capture their dramatic spirit.

At 7.45 the security staff began closing the galleries and he still hadn't seen the Asian art collection. He smiled to himself as he stepped out into the chilly dusk of Michigan Avenue; some things didn't change with a long life and he always underestimated the amount of time he’d spend in museums and galleries.

The streets were still fairly busy, Chicago residents stopping at a diner or bar after work to drink and chat, drifting home slowly rather than fight the rush hour. By the time he'd taken the bus back over the bridge it was full dark, neon lighting sapping the colour from every non-reflective surface. The bus dropped him a little past the street his hotel was on and he took a side turning, cutting back through towards the river.
And then the buzz was there, the familiar awareness clawing through his brain and shooting his system high with adrenaline. He turned, but the street remained empty behind him. Not that it was much of a street, more like an access road so the garbage trucks could get to the dumpsters behind the shops and restaurants. The lighting was poor here, the dazzling glare of the Magnificent Mile cut out by the high walls alongside.

Foster stepped into sight, striding rapidly towards him. The figure was backlit, little more than a shape of flaring coat, but he knew it was Foster. No sword. Methos stood waiting.

Foster stopped around ten feet away. "You didn't think you could avoid me that easily?" he called, a slight echo surrounding the words.

Methos tilted his head. "Oh, I don't know, it's worked before."

"Too late this time, Doctor." Foster spoke quietly, remarkably calm for someone aiming to repay a grudge he'd held for two centuries. "So many of your patients seemed to die back then and finally it's your turn."

"Here? Don't you think it's a little public?" Methos waved a hand at the bright noise of Michigan Avenue less than a hundred yards away.

"Would you follow me somewhere quieter?"

Methos just smiled.

"Then it'll have to be here." Foster reached inside his coat.

Unless the man had changed a lot since he'd known him, and the Watcher records suggested that he hadn't, Methos knew he could rely on Foster to fight fair. He drew his own sword unhurriedly, positioning himself with as much manoeuvring space as he could in the confines of the narrow street. Foster edged confidently around his perimeter, judging the angle of attack.

"This is crazy, James. I really don't want to fight you." He spoke softly - one last try for diplomacy, for the colleague he'd once been.

"Then you can die, if you'd rather." And Foster stepped in, the initial strokes fast and light. Methos parried instinctively, easily, his own heavier blade absorbing the blows without much strain. Those first exchanges weren't intended to damage, probing style and skill for weaknesses. They broke apart several times, one or other backing off to readjust, reconsider strategy in light of discoveries. Methos began to feel a little more on edge after these first few flurries - for someone who rarely fought, Foster hadn't let his training lapse. For the first time he found himself considering Foster as a genuine threat rather than an inconvenience.

He felt the change in intent through the sword - it hadn't shown on Foster's face, but he was through with testing now. The strokes came at him with more weight and purpose, though no less rapidly. The kinetic energy from the blows shot along his blade to his wrists and shoulders, the quick style of Foster's lighter weapon leaving him little time to adjust between contacts and no chance of an opening. On the upside, the weight of his broadsword had to be telling more on Foster, and any strike he did manage would be more disabling.

Foster's attack was relentless, Methos finding himself retreating slow step by slow step as he struggled to swing his sword to match Foster's pace. He was aware of the dumpster that would be getting closer behind him, his mental map of the fighting arena setting off alarms. He drew Foster in towards him, parrying closer to his body then lashing out with one foot to catch his opponent
just above the groin. Foster fell back, giving him his opportunity to reposition, circling away from the dumpster.

The stalking began again, both men breathing a little harder. Methos could convince himself that Foster seemed a little warier, but maybe that was wishful thinking. "We can drop this any time you like, James. Let it go, we can both just walk away."

Foster's sword lowered slightly and Methos almost began to think he'd got through. But it was only an instant's illusion, James staring at him with emotionless eyes. "I swore it to Isabelle," he stated simply. And he attacked again.

Methos was relieved to find the strokes came a little slower this time, the feints not so well disguised. Foster must be starting to tire; you could only keep up that sort of blinding speed for so long. Or maybe Foster had deliberately slowed to lull him into just that fatal kind of thinking. Damn, it really was risky getting into a fight when you knew nothing about your opponent's tricks. Since Foster fought so rarely, the Watcher records hadn't been of any use.

Foster abruptly raised his game again, a couple of wickedly disguised little sideswipes blocked far too late for Methos' comfort. Definitely time for a change of strategy - the next chance he got to break away, he was going for his other blade and bugger fair play. He leaped sideways and back, but the landing was awkward, his back foot slithering out from under him, off balance and going down. And Foster's sword ran straight through him, almost painless.

He was kneeling in the dirt, frozen, with Foster's sword in his chest. Foster gave the hilt a slight twist and pulled - and then the pain was there like fire, paralysing mind and movement, always so, so much worse than he could ever remember it being. He felt the sucking of his own flesh, clinging to Foster's sword as it left his body, scraping unbearably against ribs with a vibration he could almost hear. Hurting so fucking much that there was no air in him to cry out.

He pitched forward onto the street as the sword finally pulled free.

Someone screamed further along the street, high and drawn-out. When the screaming stopped, he heard the sirens. And he couldn't see the road he lay on and the noise faded.

*****

He snapped his eyes open, disorientated and adrenaline-hyped, face down in something slimy and rotting. Something that had nearly cost him his life.

No Immortal in range.

Sirens - too bloody loud, too close. Ah, shit, it hurt so much to move, but he had to get the hell out of here. He dragged himself to his knees, hunching over the relentless pain of his healing flesh. A sharp gasp from one side as he moved - a woman standing above him, wide-eyed and pale. Damn, he could do without all this. Ignoring her, he cast his eyes around for his sword; there, gleaming in the half-light.

He hauled himself to his feet as the agony receded, the woman staring at him in genuine fear as he reclaimed his broadsword. "Great stunt, isn't it?" He smiled at her as he sheathed his sword. "Filmed from above, camera on the roof up there." Poor, but the best he could manage right now. Her eyes followed his finger up to the towering buildings.

He ran through the remaining pain, full speed away from the approaching howl of the sirens.

*****
Methos unbuttoned his coat, shrugging it to the floor and collapsing gratefully across his bed. Damn, it had been a long time since he'd had to run like that. The last of the ache faded rapidly from overworked muscles.

He wrinkled his nose at the way he smelled - blood, rotting vegetation; amazing he'd made it past the doorman in this state, though the coat at least concealed the worst of it from sight. He pulled himself wearily upright, peeling off the ruined sweater and T-shirt and dropping them on the bathroom floor. He'd bag them up later and drop them in the next garbage can he passed - he didn't dare leave them in the hotel trash.

It was far from his first close call over the years, but he still found himself shivering slightly in reaction as he finally stepped into the shower. He'd always thought of James as just a minor nuisance, uncertain even if the man would really kill him if he got the chance. Not much doubt about that now, he thought dryly, scrubbing the sticky blood from his chest. So much for old friends.

The Game tended to do that to Immortals, he reflected bitterly - when a relationship turned sour, you ended up fighting for your life instead of just going your separate ways like two sensible people would. Yet another good reason for avoiding Immortal lovers - they'd come after your head sooner or later. And it was shitty enough killing friends. Hell, even the self-righteous Duncan MacLeod had a poor track record in that department.

He wondered sourly how long before he and Mac ended up killing one another, or if someone else would get to them first.

He finished showering and dried himself off rapidly, pulled his backpack out of the cupboard and began stuffing his clothes into it. Where to go next? he thought idly as he packed. Singapore might be pleasant for a change in climate; the wettest season was over now. Maybe Foster's information network was weaker in Asia. He'd been in the States a long time, might not have contacts elsewhere.

The clothes that had gone into his bag easily enough a few days ago wouldn't fit back in now, despite there being one sweater less. He thumped the top of the pile several times, to little effect, then pulled half of them out again and flung them across the bed.

Shit.

How long was he going to run for this time anyway? Foster knew that he spent time with Duncan - running would leave Mac, Amanda and Joe's bar all off limits until someone cut off James Foster's stupid, irrational head. Which might take a few centuries, given the man's current survival record. It wasn't as if Methos had a whole lot of friends scattered around the globe, and living alone grew tedious after a decade or two.

One friend from the past turned would-be killer weighed against three friends in the here-and-now. One of them a very mortal, temporary friend. Sometimes he hated the decisions his life threw at him. He sat on the bed amongst his crumpled clothes and made the only choice he could.

He knew Foster's style now, he knew the tricks to beat him.

This time they were going to fight on his terms.

*****

Methos spent a big chunk of Wednesday at Chicago's central library, a rather revolting neo-
classical monstrosity. At least Foster wouldn't think anything odd of him browsing the day away with old books. He didn't feel a thing on his way there, but he knew that somebody would be tailing on him Foster's behalf. Fine, let them. They were going to have a dull day, whoever they were.

With the help of the local map room and a couple of hours on the Internet, he had all the information he needed by mid-afternoon. He arranged a hire car with one of the large rental chains for the following day and then headed back to the hotel. He took the slightly longer walk from the bus stop that kept him to major roads with plenty of people. Foster never came within range.

Bored of the limited room service menu, he ate in one of the Sheraton's restaurants, savouring a long evening of good food with no time constraints. He sipped leisurely at his wine, wondering vaguely whether Foster's tail was still watching him. He scanned a casual eye over the other diners, but he wasn't interested enough to make a real effort in spotting them.

Despite his best efforts, it still wasn't all that late when he got back to his room. He was in no hurry to get up the next morning, so he lounged across the bed, munching gradually through a large bag of pretzels as he watched more bad movies on cable. He abandoned the TV only when yet another heroine knocked out her pursuer with a vase to the head then failed to either tie him up or finish him off. Besides, it was hardly 'Psycho.'

He slept erratically, waking from dreams he couldn't remember, sheets twisted around his limbs, confining. It was late morning before he finally gave up and ordered food, 2pm by the time he went to collect the car. It looked exactly like thousands of others on the roads in Illinois on any given day. He headed west out of the downtown area. It was only a three-mile trip, but he'd made major allowances for city traffic and taking one or two wrong turnings, which he inevitably did, before he made it to North Lawndale. A pleasant-sounding name for a truly awful place.

He drove around the area for an hour or so, checking out possibilities. As promised by his research, there were various abandoned industrial buildings, even a few burned-out shells still standing from riots in the sixties. Eventually he settled on a derelict factory among a similar group of empty shells. He left the hire car in a nearby street, hoping it wouldn't be vandalised by the time he got back. He'd hate to lose his deposit.

Inside the factory, he hauled himself up to sit on a bit of dusty machinery and waited.

The light started to dim slightly as time passed, dusk threatening to come early with such heavy cloud cover obscuring the sky. There were going to be no respectable passers-by here, only the possibility of criminals or the more desperate of the local junkies. He could certainly deal with those if he needed to.

He began to feel slightly uncomfortable as an hour passed, the light quality growing borderline, black patches of shadow encroaching upon areas of the factory floor between the junk. If Foster didn't show in another fifteen minutes, he'd give it up for tonight, irritating as the thought was. Now he'd decided he was going to fight, he just wanted to get the damn thing over with.

And then it was there, the warning in his head, seconds before Foster stepped through the empty doorway. Methos slipped down from his seat and drew his sword. Anticipatory spikes danced along every nerve in his body, the old familiar heat charging his system. "You took your time," he called as the man strode across the darkening concrete towards him. "Wasn't my invitation clear enough?"

Foster slowed as he came closer, pausing to pull his own sword from concealment. "Maybe I just found it hard to believe you've finally decided to fight."
Methos smiled ruefully. "That's your choice, James, not mine." He watched as Foster eased sideways to approach him from a less restricted angle, adjusting his own position to compensate.

Foster came in cautiously - no room here among the abandoned machinery to circle widely as they had in the alley. Methos allowed him to creep just a little nearer before lunging forwards, throwing his weight behind the initial sword-thrust. He had no intention of letting Foster take the offensive this time. Foster parried his swing as he'd expected, but he was also forced back a step so as not to take too much strain to his wrist. Methos twisted his blade around, starting that second stroke before Foster could switch to an attack.

There was no time for finesse in this style of fighting, no cunning placement of strokes, no feinting. Methos was swinging at Foster as fast as Foster could make those defensive parries, relying on the weight of his Ivanhoe to tire his opponent. But Foster was just a little more prepared each time; the parries becoming that bit more carefully positioned so it was less of a reach to stop Methos' next attack. Methos could feel the increasing ease of Foster's defence at every stroke, the way that lighter blade was placed to block his strikes milliseconds earlier. A few more exchanges and Foster would be way ahead of him.

Abruptly he broke away, slipping behind an obsolete cutting assembly, denying Foster the chance to press that advantage. He could win this fight fairly as long as Foster couldn't surround him with those endless light, airy swings.

Foster didn't pursue him, smiling coldly into his eyes across the machinery. "So you are still a coward, after all."

"Always, James." Methos gave a twisted grin, rejecting the obvious attempt to bait him. He eased himself between two more bits of derelict junk, keeping careful watch on Foster's reactions. His opponent slipped off to one side, clearly hoping to circle around him and trap him in the open space by the doorway. Methos simply kept pace, holding a parallel course between the obstacles. Foster continued to stalk him through the factory, but Methos always flitted slightly out of range, relaxed and confident. James wouldn't be able to keep up the cat-and-mouse game for long; he was driven, obsessive, incapable of doing the sensible thing and walking away.

When Foster abandoned the useless manoeuvring and took the direct approach once more, Methos was ready to resume the attack. Foster anticipated the tactic and stepped away that half second sooner, the parry easy, the slim blade scything around to catch Methos' hip. The cut was superficial - Foster hadn't time to put any force behind the blow, Methos knew, it was an opportunistic slice designed to distract. He ignored the slight pain and pressed on with his assault, swinging at Foster from the opposite side. Foster had to twist his sword right back around, the blade only barely deflecting Methos' in time. With Foster once again off balance and struggling to defend, Methos felt relaxed and in control. But the control was illusory, and soon enough it was slipping away again, Foster's faster fighting style regaining the initiative.

Methos felt it happening and retreated sooner than strictly necessary, drawing Foster on, carefully backing between two adjoining machines. Both men found their swings restricted, but Foster would pay the price since his lighter weapon needed more momentum to really injure an opponent. And after only a few exchanges, Foster recognised the trap - Methos saw the change in him, felt the disturbance to his opponent's rhythm as he tried abruptly to disengage. Methos lunged forward after him, pressing hard while Foster remained confined, Foster parrying desperately, awkwardly. And his opening was there, Methos twisting the Ivanhoe to catch Foster's blade, ripping it away. His sword swung around easily, slicing deep through the muscles of Foster's thigh.

Foster fell backwards, sprawling across the damp concrete of the open space behind him. He stared
up, panting harshly, as Methos approached cautiously. Methos still felt it unlikely that James would cheat, but he didn't want any unpleasant surprises at this stage. But Foster made no moves for any other weapon, half-lying on the shadowy floor as Methos stood above him.

Methos raised his sword.

Foster laughed, face flushed with exertion and adrenaline. "No hesitation for an old friend?" He looked down into eyes that glared hate at him, eyes that said Foster had been right about him all along. He remembered how those eyes used to look - how they used to look at Isabelle as they sat watching by her bedside.

"No." Methos swung.

*****

He forced himself to walk normally as he left the now even more dilapidated factory. It seemed a hell of a lot further to the rental car than when he left it - all he really wanted to do was sleep. At least this time he didn't look as bad as he felt - if he'd turned up at the Sheraton stinking of rubbish again, they might have kicked him out in spite of the money, he thought ruefully.

He discovered gratefully that the car still had all its wheels and drove it precisely at the speed limit through the night streets back to the downtown area. He left it parked in a street half a block from the hotel rather than be seen arriving in it.

Back in his room once more, he peeled off his clothes and flopped rubber-limbed across the bed. He couldn't even summon the energy for a shower, and he'd only fall asleep in the bath and wake to find himself spluttering in cold water. He briefly considered calling Seacouver, filling Mac in on the outcome, but decided it would be a wasted effort. Foster's Watcher would already be putting the report in, and it would be on Joe's desk within an hour. He really didn't feel like answering questions right now anyway.

James had been one of the good guys once, one of the few you could always trust. He supposed that from anyone's perspective but his own, Foster still had been.

He thumped his pillow, beating it into shape. Right now, he needed to get some sleep.

He curled round on his side, staring at the small table by his bed.
Chapter 3

The report from the uniforms who'd secured the crime scene hit Vecchio's desk later that same afternoon. They'd pulled three bullets out of a building by the intersection - no sign of a fourth. And Vecchio knew damn well he'd heard four shots. Could someone else in the crowd have been winged? He had to concede it was a possibility in the chaos, but they hadn't come forward screaming bloody murder like most people would if they got shot in the street on their lunch break.

Maybe Pierson was right and someone else had been the target. But he was still getting strange vibes about Pierson.

He called by the Sheraton to do some digging.

Pierson had holed up in his room for two days on arrival, ordering expensive food and good beer through room service at various hours of the day and night, but not much in the mornings. Jet lag? Pierson hadn't said where he'd flown in from this time. He asked the hotel staff about all the Chicago tourist traps, and the maid had seen various tickets in the trash from his room. And a couple of nights ago he'd apparently come in looking like he'd slept in a pile of garbage - not something the doorman was going to forget in a hurry. He'd had his coat dry-cleaned on the one-hour service the next day.

Nothing seemed to match up with him saying that he was here on business. And while lying about that wasn't a criminal offence, it left the question of just what the hell was Adam Pierson really doing in Chicago? And what was he hiding?

Satisfied that he'd pumped all he could from the staff, he thought briefly about going home, then decided with a smile to himself to make another call first.

*****

"Hey, Huey!" His friend was at the far end of the bar poring over papers with some guy he didn't know. "Any chance of a drink around here?"

"Vecchio! Grab yourself a seat and I'll be with you in ten." Huey waved at a passing waitress and pointed her in Vecchio's direction. Vecchio sat at a table not far from the bar and placed his order with the waitress, who gave him a genuine smile. Friend-of-the-boss syndrome. His drinks always arrived fast in Huey's place.

The club was still fairly empty this early in the evening, not yet polluted with the smoky haze that was a feature by nine-thirty. He sipped at his beer, only half-listening to the kid telling bad cannabis jokes on stage. The tension slowly leached out of him as his cop-brain switched off and Adam Pierson became only a slight itch right at the back of his thoughts.

Huey joined him in just over the promised ten minutes, pulling out a chair that scraped unpleasantly across the floor. "So where you been the last couple of weeks? You'd better not tell me you've been drinking somewhere else." This last was said with a big grin and a light slap on the shoulder.

"Nah." Vecchio saluted him with his bottle. "Just stuff going on, you know, the usual."

Huey nodded. "How's the family doing?"

Vecchio rolled his eyes. "Frannie's got this crazy idea she wants to follow Elaine into the academy."
"How the hell's she gonna do that when she's got a kid at home?"

"You think they'd take her if she does apply?"

Vecchio considered that. "Few years ago I'd've said no way in hell," he finally said with a slight smile. "But she's not the same since I got back. I think she finally grew up."

"Damn right she did," Huey replied, the fondness evident in his voice. "She could do it, I think."

Vecchio sighed. "Maybe. But I don't think she'd stand the life. I just keep hoping she's gonna change her mind when she has the kid."

"How much longer's she got now?"

"Another couple of months." Vecchio took another sip of beer. "I still can't believe my kid sister's having a baby," he said musingly.

"Your Mom cool with it now?" Huey asked slowly.

"Sure. Was never gonna be a problem really, just the shock, you know? She got used to all the divorces, and nothing wins Ma round like a baby."

"So Frannie's staying at your place."

"Yeah - one more kid round the house won't make a difference."

The largely ignored comedian on stage was winding up and Huey checked his watch. "Just gimme a minute, OK? Be right back with you."

"Sure." Vecchio watched as Huey stood and quickly disappeared behind the curtains backstage. It was always like this at the club - he rarely got more than ten or twenty minutes to catch up before something dragged Huey away. Hazard of running a new business with hardly any staff.

Sometimes Vecchio found himself drinking alone for most of the evening and wondering why the hell he was there, but this time Huey was back after only five or ten minutes. Vecchio grinned, relieved. "So when are you gonna get a manager in, take some of the workload off?"

Huey shrugged. "When we're making enough to pay one. Not yet. And not ever if we're relying on you," he added, looking significantly at Vecchio's beer, still his first one.

"Not the typical cop, huh?" Vecchio admitted. He waved a hand in the general direction of the stage, where the second young hopeful was failing to raise a laugh. "Anyway, you wanna make some cash, you gotta find yourself some more talent."

"You looking for a new career, Vecchio?" Huey's teeth glinted in the dim lights.

"Not working for you, that's for sure!" Vecchio pointedly emptied his beer glass, then lapsed back into a more reflective mood. "You ever regret it, Jack?" he asked quietly.

"Leaving the force? Never," Huey replied firmly. "I'd been looking for a way out for a while. Just needed the right dream to chase."

Vecchio nodded, understanding. The job had never been the same for Huey after Gardino died, everybody had seen it. "Huh?" Huey had said something else and he'd missed it completely. "Don't you ever wanna get out, Ray?" Huey repeated.

Vecchio shook his head. " Tried that and blew it."
"Just 'cos things didn't work out with Stella, don't mean retiring was a bad idea," Huey insisted. "What do you really wanna do? Here in Chicago, anyplace?"

Vecchio didn't have an answer to that question. He wasn't making any plans, avoided thinking about the long-term future. He went to work because that's what he always did. "Guess I'm just always gonna be a cop, Jack. I was getting bored down in Florida."

Huey sat back in his seat, conceding the point. "So how's things at the Two-Seven, anyway?"

"Same old stuff." Vecchio's reply carried no enthusiasm. "'Cept every year someone thinks up twenty new forms we gotta fill in, in triplicate. You know how it goes."

"Oh, yeah," Huey said with a sympathetic grimace. "How's Welsh?"

"No change there," Vecchio replied, the affection softening his voice. "Think they'll have to drag him out from behind that desk one of these days." And Vecchio wondered what the hell he would do then - when some new Lieutenant, probably younger than he was, came marching in and wanted him to do everything by the book. He was already starting to feel something of a dinosaur, working with a bunch of kids who thought he was out of touch.

"Damn right they will." Huey waved at the waitress. "You want another?"

"No, gotta drive."

Huey ordered another bourbon for himself, then added a beer just as the waitress turned to leave. Vecchio looked through the increasing number of customers and spotted Tom Dewey on his way over to join them. He barely knew Dewey, meeting him only once or twice here with Jack. Dewey had a habit of talking about that Stanley guy and never quit calling him Vecchio. It didn't exactly endear him to the real thing.

The conversation revolved around cop talk for the next hour or so, talking over old friends, old cases. Huey and Dewey lapsed into reminiscing about their shared experiences now and then, which Vecchio knew nothing about. The smoke started to build in the atmosphere and Vecchio found himself feeling more and more like an outsider here, remembering now why he hadn't called by the club so often since he got back. As Huey laughed once more over some remembered incident with Dewey, Vecchio made his excuses and walked through the bitter neon-lit night to the Riv.

He still felt that sense of isolation that had surrounded him when he returned to the Two-Seven and found that everything had changed while he was gone. His old house and possessions destroyed, the life he'd come back to reclaim just wasn't there. Most of the familiar faces were gone too; no Elaine, Huey leaving, his sister a mature young woman who no longer needed his protection. And Benny - Benny, secure and confident in a friendship and a life that he now had no part in, their own relationship weakened by time and distance. Hell, he wasn't the same person anymore either, a revelation that had shaken him deeply within hours of waking up from surgery. And sometimes, that crushing sense of loss returned to him in its full force. No wonder he'd jumped headlong into the first crazy relationship that offered itself, looking for something to anchor him back into normal life. He shook his head now at his own stupid naivety.

The Riv was a welcoming presence through the darkness, the one unchanging thing over all these years. He settled himself into the seat, running his hands along the steering wheel and listening to the raindrops on the roof.

*****
Methos was looking forward to a peaceful day exploring the SuHu galleries. He liked Chicago - the city held a lot of good memories for him overall, and despite the massive changes that time had wrought, the place still felt the same. Still welcoming, still a loud, forceful personality of a city that pushed hard to be the best. He was unlikely to be back this way for a while - it wouldn't matter if he delayed his return to Seacouver by a week or two.

And he definitely didn't feel like reporting in to that irritating cop, asking his permission to leave Chicago.

The walk from the hotel to Michigan Avenue was familiar now, relaxing. East North Water Street was busy as usual, the early season tourists milling between the more business-like workers and shoppers. It was a typical grey April morning, the chill reminding him why he preferred to stay in bed a little longer most days.

He spotted him hanging back in the crowd, peering disinterestedly into the shops. Methos crossed the street at the next intersection and then took a couple of side streets to confirm his suspicions. Vecchio was definitely tailing him.

Wasn't he going to get any bloody peace in this city?

He took another side street, circling back towards his original heading, and waited just around the corner. His honed sense of timing allowed him to step out directly in front of the cop, wickedly delighted by the startled reaction he got. Vecchio did look clueless standing there with his mouth open like that. Methos made a grab for the cop's hand, checking his wrist - and suddenly found himself looking at a very obviously not standard police issue .45 semi-auto in Vecchio's other hand. Very twitchy guy, this Vecchio. Fast recovery, though. Methos found himself developing a hint of respect for the cop.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Vecchio's attitude was all in-your-face aggression, not a hint that he wasn't ready to blow him away anywhere in the body language.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Methos said mildly, releasing the cop. The bare wrist was almost a disappointment - it might have been amusing if the Watchers had decided to change their tactics after all this time. Adaptation was probably a little much to expect, though, from an organisation so steeped in rigid tradition. And maybe cops as Watchers really would have been going too far. "Is it normal for the police to tail innocent civilians in Illinois?"

Vecchio relaxed slightly, but the gun was still there. He smiled - he'd obviously had practice at the intimidating smile. "Well, see, that's where you and me disagree. 'Cos you lied to me about the business thing, and that makes me suspicious - I'm guessing any business you're into ain't legit."

If the detective expected a reaction to his macho display, he was going to be disappointed. Methos smiled with all the charm he had available while irritated, and replied in the same easy tone he'd used before. "Oh, you've been doing some research? Looking into my life's likely to be very boring, you know." Damn. This cop was going to keep digging; he knew it, and he couldn't think of anything right now that would reliably put him off. Methos studied Vecchio more intently, wondering where the weakness lay.

"Yeah, and I can see just why I should believe you." Vecchio was replacing his gun as he spoke, but he didn't take his eyes off Methos and much of the tension was still visible in his frame. "You wanna tell me why you fed me that bullshit, then?"

Methos gave what he hoped was a self-effacing grin, and prayed he wasn't overdoing it too much. "I just don't like giving information to the authorities if I don't have to." He looked around the
street at the other pedestrians and lowered his voice. "There's a Government plan, you know. They'll have every last one of us tagged and monitored twenty-four-seven within a decade if you let them." The last of his annoyance was disappearing beneath the urge to burst out laughing at Vecchio's expression.

"Yeah, right." Vecchio was openly sceptical of this explanation, but the wired apprehension had evaporated. "Next?" He hugged his coat closer around him, protection against the Chicago wind. And Methos suddenly realised one of those little things that had been bothering him - the suit underneath that coat was way too good. He may go for the casual look in this time period, but he'd worn enough quality in the past to know it when he saw it. Vecchio wasn't paying for those clothes on a cop's salary. So either someone in the family had money and the police thing was a hobby on the side, or Vecchio was on the take.

Useful to find out which.

"Really, I just don't like having to explain myself on forms. Civil liberties issues. I'm doing the tourist bit and that's all."

"Why the hell should I buy anything you tell me?" The words were still aggressive, but the tone was more of a frustrated whine - Vecchio had clearly given up on a reasonable answer and was going through the motions out of principle. Methos decided this was probably something close to the cop's usual manner.

"Come with me if you don't believe me." Methos ratcheted up to full good-natured charm. If there was anything he could dig up on Vecchio to give him an edge in the knowledge stakes, he had to start somewhere. And besides, since the Council had probably assigned Foster's ex-Watcher to him, maybe Vecchio could help spot him. If the cop was any good.

He rapidly revised his plans for the day - the gallery wasn't a place for casual chat. "I was going up to Lincoln Park."

"What the hell for in this weather?"

"I'm going to the zoo." Methos was enjoying himself again by now. This guy was great fun to bait; Vecchio obviously wasn't completely sure it was deliberate.

"The zoo." Vecchio sounded disgusted.

"What's wrong with the zoo?"

"Zoos are for kids."

"Oh, so when was the last time you were there?"

"That was different," Vecchio defended himself. "I was with my sister's kids, they wanted to go."

Methos suppressed his smirk and shrugged. "Whatever. Look, I'm going to the zoo, and if you're going to follow me anyway, I thought we might as well talk on the way." He turned and started to walk away, wondering just how far he was going to get.

"Hey, Pierson," Vecchio called after him. "You're going the wrong way."

Methos turned to look back at him. "Bus 151 straight up Michigan, right?"

"Forget the bus." Vecchio looked as if he'd suggested eating cat food. "The car's this way."
Methos strode back towards the cop and fell into step beside him. "The bus stops right outside the gate. If we drive, who knows where we'll have to park?" he pointed out reasonably.

"No problem, I'll find somewhere," Vecchio replied with certainty, heading back towards the Sheraton. Methos chattered on about the environmental impact of inner city congestion as they rejoined the busier shopping streets, trying to watch Vecchio as unobtrusively as he could. The cop's shoes went with the suits - expensive and well looked after. Thin gold chain around his neck that disappeared beneath his shirt - crucifix probably, he was almost certainly Catholic. Vecchio didn't relax in a crowd, his eyes moving through the people, scanning, checking. His gaze seemed to linger for a few seconds on tall men with short dark hair. Interesting. And when Methos slowed a couple of times to allow Vecchio to get slightly ahead, the cop slowed too, keeping him alongside, throwing him a quizzical look. Vecchio might be unsure what to make of him, but there wasn't much trust on show. Another point in the cop's favour, he thought with a quick grin.

The car turned out to be a seventies throwback, heavily polished with only a bare hint of Chicago rainwater beading on the paintwork. Methos considered it just adequately powered for its size and, with a turning circle like the Queen Mary, a bizarre choice of vehicle for a cop. But Vecchio was clearly enamoured of it, and proceeded to explain all its wondrous features during the journey. It became apparent that this wasn't the first vehicle of its type Vecchio had owned, and also that he didn't want to talk about what happened to the others. Methos’s interest in cars stopped at having one large enough to fit all his gear in the back for a fast exit, but he made the appreciative noises that would keep him in Vecchio's good books. He decided it would be prudent not to comment on Vecchio's driving style either.

Methos was right about the parking, inevitably. The situation wasn't helped by Vecchio's refusal to consider anywhere that left them with more than a five-minute walk or required payment, so the nearby car parks were out. They circled around for a good ten minutes before Vecchio finally finished cursing Chicago and parked in a restricted zone near the zoo's north entrance.

Since they were passing the Conservatory anyway, Methos took the opportunity to warm up inside. There had been great improvements in the design of car heaters since the 1970s and Methos considered the Buick's to be barely adequate. Vecchio had flatly refused to consider adding a non-original feature to his car when he'd mentioned it.

To Chicago residents the Conservatory was an old landmark, an unchanging feature that pre-dated the century. It hadn't been built when Methos was last here. It resembled a number of other large Victorian tropical houses he'd seen around the world, a three-acre expanse of metal and glass containing huge palms that soared right up to the girders. Hot and humid, a pleasant respite all round. After ten minutes inside, Methos added botany to the rapidly-growing list of subjects in which Vecchio showed no interest and resigned himself to the sapping Chicago wind again. He was already regretting his choice of the zoo for the day's outing, but he'd been unable to think of anywhere else on the spot.

He'd have to enjoy it, if only to annoy Vecchio, he thought with a private smile.

*****

"So, where do you wanna go first? Bears and elephants are closest." Vecchio gave in to his job as zoo tour guide, still wondering why the hell he'd agreed to this. He wasn't gonna learn anything Pierson didn't want him to know. But that was true once he'd been spotted anyway, he was forced to admit, and at least this way was less boring than tailing him all day.

"Bears - I've always liked them."
"This way." Vecchio led the way round the paths to the outside bear habitats with their grey rock walls. He only half-listened while Pierson read the information boards and chattered away about the differences between spectacled bears and sun bears. He couldn't reconcile the crazy conspiracy theorist who never stopped talking with the guy he'd met at the intersection, annoyed at being shot at but without any of the expected terror. And what was with that grabbing his hand thing? What was the guy trying to do, read his palm? Cops met every kind of weirdo, but Pierson just didn't fit the mould. Didn't fit any mould as far as Vecchio could tell.

He turned to look at Pierson, trying to figure out what he was getting from this day at the zoo. He had the uneasy feeling that Pierson was watching him, but he could never catch him staring. "You seen enough?"

"What's next?" Pierson met his gaze and seemed enthusiastic enough. Maybe he really had wanted to come to the zoo.

"Elephants." Vecchio let his mental grin seep through into a friendly smile, which Pierson returned.

"Elephants have been domesticated for over four thousand years, did you know that?" Pierson was off on another lecture already; it was worse than coming here with the kids. "That's the Asian elephants, of course. Which do they have here?"

"African. They drink twenty-two gallons of water a day." He surprised himself by remembering some of the trivia from previous visits - he wasn't going to let Pierson get away with playing the know-it-all if he could help it.

"US or UK gallons?"

Vecchio blinked, having never really thought about the difference. Was Pierson deliberately needling him or was he really that anal that he felt it mattered? He thought about Fraser and decided to give Pierson the benefit of the doubt. "Don't really know. US, I guess."

They reached the edge of the elephant enclosure, Vecchio propping himself casually against a section of railing away from the information notices. He made a show of watching the giant beasts pad around, one at the back throwing sand over itself half-heartedly, while keeping a careful half-eye on Pierson beside him. Just beyond, a kid in a green dress was ignoring the signs not to feed them and throwing half her lunch through the railings to the nearest elephant. Its trunk sneaked across the concrete to collect each portion of sandwich, quickly stuffing the bits into its endlessly chewing mouth.

The kid seemed to run out of food and pestered the small boy with her until he dug out his own lunch. She broke off a piece and tossed it into the enclosure where it was eagerly snatched up. One chew, though, and the elephant spat it out. Something about its eyes clearly said pissed-off elephant. It reached casually sideways with its trunk and flung a large chunk of dung straight at her, hard and accurate.

Pierson jumped sideways and back with a surprised yelp, almost falling over Vecchio as he avoided the rebounding spatters. Vecchio took one look at his face and doubled over in laughter, barely registering the sudden shocked wail from the targeted kid.

"You knew that was going to happen!"

He straightened up at Pierson's accusing voice, still choking to breathe through his own helpless giggles. "Should have read the signs." Vecchio pointed to the notice. It stated in large capitals
"How tactfully phrased." Pierson's voice was pure acid. "And I suppose you would have thought it just perfect if that had been me."

"Would have laughed myself sick," Vecchio pointed out truthfully, grinning just at the thought. Pierson looked so damn innocent with that offended look welded to his face. He struggled not to burst out laughing again. This guy would just hate that. He watched with amusement as Pierson visibly struggled to regain his composure.

"I think I'd prefer some safer animals," Pierson said finally with a wry smile - obviously he did have a sense of humour buried somewhere. He peered at the map over Vecchio's shoulder. "Seabirds next?"

"It's cold in there."

"At least it's out of the wind."

"Yeah, great swap," Vecchio groused, but he was already heading along the path to the round building.

"Noisy things," Pierson commented as Vecchio hauled the door open. The sound of a large number of chattering seabirds echoed around the interior.

Vecchio looked at him, surprised. "You're not gonna say you've never seen penguins before."

"Only outside. I've never seen a penguin pool like this one."

"It's only been like this a few years." Vecchio had to admit it was quite impressive, the air kept chill enough to maintain the ice around the deep, clear pool. Penguins hopped in and out on what looked almost like a rota system, gliding elegantly through the freezing water. He pulled his collar closer around his neck.

"It's very artificial." Pierson said, looking more closely at the birds. "The natural range of rockhoppers doesn't overlap with the kings and the chinstraps."

Vecchio turned one of his milder glares on his companion. "Is there anything you don't know about?"

"The behaviour of the Chicago zoo elephants for one," Pierson admitted with a grin. "You're not the first person to find it annoying."

"No shit. C'mon." Vecchio walked round to the other pool, his breath hanging frosted in the air before him. "So you're gonna tell me this is all wrong too, huh?" he asked when Pierson arrived beside him.

"Looks quite accurate to me," Pierson replied seriously, studying the rocky landscaping. "Puffins and razorbills naturally nest in the same areas. Puffins dig tunnels in the soil at the top there."

Pierson's tone was as keen as ever, but Vecchio saw his shoulders hunch up around his neck and smiled. "Admit it, Pierson, you don't wanna be in here any more than I do."

"Oh, I never admit anything if I can help it," Pierson said lightly. "But I've seen enough in here for now. Wolves next, is it?"
So much for his good mood. Pierson could obviously remember a map just as well as all that other garbage in his head. "I'll pass," Vecchio replied, making an effort at casual. "Meet you round in the bird house."

Pierson looked at him questioningly.

"Hey, I've been cold enough for one day," he snapped. Way too defensive - he knew the second he said it. Shit, he wasn't that guy, not any more. Didn't have to lie and cover for every goddamn thing. Didn't used to swear at myself every other thought either, he added ruefully. He forced himself to smile, filling it with challenge. "But I can stand it if you can." He pointedly tugged his hat down further over his ears.

Pierson returned his smile, that odd look disappearing fast, but Vecchio knew when he'd been seen through.

They made their way round to the wolf enclosure, leaning on the railings and staring across the gap in silence. The expanse of rock and small shrubs seemed empty at first, and Vecchio couldn't shake the relief he felt. Then he spotted the pile of fur beneath one low bush, varying in shade from sandy to dark reddish-brown. From the bits he could see, black legs and white tails, maybe four wolves asleep in a heap. That chilling wind parted their fur in ripples. At least the damn things weren't looking at him. Last time he was here, the way they looked at him really freaked him out - staring yellow predators' eyes, imprisoned, waiting. He knew that feeling.

"So what have you got against wolves?" Pierson finally asked, propping his hip against the metal bar as he turned to face him.

"More a thing for them." Vecchio watched the animals across the abyss, responding automatically to the honest curiosity in Pierson's voice. "Don't like seeing them all cooped up like this. Do you know that a wolf pack can have a home range up to four hundred square miles?" He remembered Fraser telling him that. So much of Benny seemed to have stuck with him in little ways.

"Says here maned wolves up to eleven square miles." Pierson was reading from the information board bolted to the rail.

"Different kinda wolves," Vecchio said. "Don't matter. They shouldn't be stuck in there like that, you know? They look… trapped." Vecchio almost shivered as he said the word.

"You could say the same thing for the elephants," Pierson pointed out reasonably.

"Yeah, OK, I'm biased," Vecchio admitted, smiling slightly. "I knew a wolf couple of years back. Not like these; a real wolf, you know, more hair." He wondered what the hell he was doing pouring out his life story to his sort-of-suspect, but he was finding it harder and harder to remember that this guy wasn't kosher. Something about Pierson seemed to be drawing out the person he'd been a couple of years back; not more trusting, hell no, he'd never been that; but less - cold. Less lonely. And anything was better than the paranoia that hounded him most times.

"You knew a wolf?" The tone said it all, really. Pierson wasn't buying this. Funny how being around Benny for so long had made him accept the weirdest things as normal.

"Long story," Vecchio said with a shrug. He gave one last look at the oblivious sleeping wolves and turned to his companion for the day. "I'm hungry, let's go eat."

*****

They ate at a snack bar not far from the zoo's main entrance. Methos couldn't contain his curiosity
much past the first few sips of warming coffee. He clutched his mug between chilled fingers. "So what's this story with the wolf, then?" he asked, letting his voice show his genuine interest.

"Belonged to a friend of mine," Vecchio elaborated, talking around his hot dog. "Or maybe it was the other way around. Dief sure seemed to think so sometimes," he added with a grin.

"Your friend had a wolf?" Methos found this tale slightly unusual, to say the least. "Where was this?"

"Right here in Chicago." The cop was still chewing unconcernedly.

Methos couldn't really decide whether he should believe this or not. In the end, he was inclined to buy Vecchio's tale, if only because he couldn't see what he could possibly hope to gain from making it up. And something about the cop's attitude changed when he spoke about the wolf. Or was it the friend? "Get a lot of people keeping wolves in the city, do you?"

"Fraser's Canadian." Vecchio's matter-of-fact tone suggested that was supposed to explain everything.

"The man or the wolf?" Methos asked, straight-faced.

"Both," Vecchio pouted. "And quit with that innocent shit on me, I know better, remember?"

"Ah, yes, of course," Methos replied in theatrical offence. "I'm the master criminal who's stupid enough to get shot at in the street and not have any sort of cover story ready."

That got another smile out of the cop. "You gonna confess, then?"

"Not just yet." Methos reached for his coffee cup, somewhat ruefully sacrificing the rest of his drink as he knocked it flying. The dark liquid spattered across the table top in Vecchio's direction. The cop jumped away from his chair, staring at Methos with narrowed eyes.

"What the fuck?"

"Sorry." Methos feigned apology, slightly disconcerted by the cop's reaction. He'd been expecting something more along the lines of a strangled yelp. He picked up a paper napkin and held it out towards his annoyed lunch companion.

Another second and Vecchio's glare was gone. "It's okay," he said, looking down at himself and wiping ineffectually at the coffee stains on his jacket. "Just wish you'd missed the suit. You got any idea how much it costs to get these things dry-cleaned?"

So Vecchio's family didn't have money, Methos thought, unless the guy was one of those frugal rich types, but that seemed unlikely. Sod it, he may as well just ask - he was as likely to get some idea of the truth that way as any other. "What is it with you and those clothes anyway? I didn't see anyone else at the police station dressed quite like you."

"Perk of the job," he said, with another of those quick grins. "Did some undercover stuff for the Feds not long ago. Had to look the part, classy. I said I'd do the job if I got to keep the suits afterwards."

"Ah, of course. Get the priorities right."

Vecchio made a face at him. "Hey, what were the Feds gonna do with a whole load of hand-made threads specially tailored to fit me? Be a crime to let anyone else wear them." He looked Methos up
and down obviously, eyeing his faded jeans and loose sweater. "Or maybe you wouldn't get that."

Methos bristled slightly at the slur. "I'm comfortable this way. I can brush up with the best of them when I want to."

"Oh, yeah, now that I'd like to see." Vecchio's voice oozed with sarcasm. "Can't believe they let you in the door at the Sheraton looking like that."

"Your days are gone, my friend," Methos replied placidly, going for the rise. "Hadn't you heard? The money says so much more than the clothes in the computer age."

He didn't get the amusing reaction he'd expected. "Yeah, well, just don't try getting in at the Drake." Vecchio looked resigned and perhaps slightly uncomfortable, something about his body language prompting Methos to try to get the humour back.

"Promise I'll stick to the faceless chains. Wouldn't want to cause a scene, would I?"

Vecchio rolled his eyes dramatically. "I really shouldn't give you any ideas."

"Why not? It's more fun that way," Methos said wickedly. He finished the last of his burger and licked his fingers, ignoring Vecchio's glare - it was one of the ones he didn't mean. "Let's see the rest of this zoo of yours."

*****

The afternoon proved to be more entertaining than Methos had expected. Vecchio opened up a bit, more willing to chat instead of all those glowering silences. Methos was relieved that he didn't have to keep gabbling away to fill the gaps, but more unexpectedly he found he actually liked the conversation.

The wind dropped a little, too, so it was less of a sufferance standing around watching the animals. They were both in agreement to pass on the swan pond and waterfowl lagoon, sticking with the more compelling species.

It really had been quite a while since Methos had visited a zoo, and he was surprised by how much he genuinely enjoyed it. He'd always considered zoos to be thoroughly depressing places, but that was in the days of solitary creatures pacing behind steel bars. He could still sympathise with Vecchio's views on the wolves, but it was a huge improvement.

They returned to the car after several hours to be greeted by the cheerful colours of a parking ticket on the windscreen. Vecchio grabbed it with a muttered "Aw, shit."

"Police parking illegally sets a very bad example," Methos couldn't resist commenting as he wriggled into the passenger seat, automatically adjusting his coat before he reached for the seatbelt. Vecchio shot him a filthy look. "Dunno what you're feeling so smug about," he said, tossing the offending bit of paper into Methos' lap. "You get to pay."

"Me? Oh, no, I don't think so," Methos protested immediately.

"Course you are." Vecchio smiled irritationally. "I had no plans to go the zoo today. This is your fault, you pay the ticket."

"And I was planning on catching the bus. You're not blaming me because you Americans can't stand to walk a few hundred yards." Methos took the ticket and stuffed it decisively into the pocket of Vecchio's coat where it hung over the edge of his seat.
"Hey, enough with the racial slurs. We got laws against that, I could arrest you."

"Just try it," Methos grinned.

"Bug me once more today and I will," Vecchio glowered. He thrust a hand inside his pocket and made as if to throw the docket back at Methos. "Aw, hell," he said, screwing it up into a ball and shoving it back into his coat. "I'll get Jackie at traffic to sort it." He gave Methos a sideways glance as he fired up the engine. "An' I never said that."

Methos held up his hands. "Didn't hear a thing," he smiled innocently.

He couldn't help thinking it was a good thing that entrance to the zoo was free. An argument at the kiosks would have been a poor start to the day.

"Where do you wanna go, back to the hotel?" Vecchio asked as he fired up that huge engine. "Or I could drop you someplace else."

"How about Boston?" Methos suggested.

"Very funny."

"What did you expect me to say? The nearest drug den?"

"You could try 'Thanks for the ride',' Vecchio groused, pulling out into the evening traffic.

Methos laughed. "You're just mad that I can spot you fishing a mile off."

"Maybe I was just being polite," Vecchio suggested with a quick glare, before returning his eyes to the busy lanes.

"Oh, of course, how silly of me."

"Don't you ever quit?"

"And let you get away with such obvious bullshit?" Methos prodded, smiling.

"I'll get subtle on you next time," Vecchio warned amiably enough.

"Go ahead and try," Methos responded.

"Where the hell are we going anyway?" Vecchio demanded as they approached an intersection.

"The hotel's fine."

"Finally a straight answer," Vecchio said over-dramatically. "Guess I gotta start believing in miracles again."

"Only small ones," he grinned. "Ask the wrong question and you'll be back to guessing."

"That I know." Vecchio spoke with no animosity at all, just resignation.

"Ah, so you have learned something today," Methos laughed. "It hasn't been a total washout for you."

Vecchio slanted his eyes sideways at him. "Not even close," he said lightly.

The traffic was growing heavier as they headed deeper into the downtown area, and Methos called
a halt to the bickering to let Vecchio concentrate on driving. At first glance Vecchio's driving style seemed sloppy and casual, missed signals and eyes regularly wandering away from the road, but as Methos paid more attention it became clear that the cop saw everything and reacted to what was going on around him so early that it hardly seemed a reaction at all. It was a display of effortless skill that Methos enjoyed watching, trying to match the observation of the road ahead and anticipate Vecchio's moves.

Vecchio turned his head to glare at him. "What's with the staring?"

"Just checking up on your driving," Methos replied innocently.

"Well quit it," Vecchio complained. "I don't need you checking up on my anything."

Methos smiled to himself at the predictable response, but did as requested and spent the last few minutes of the journey admiring Chicago instead.

The Riv, as Vecchio so quaintly called it, slid to a graceful halt outside the Sheraton. Methos looked across at the cop as he opened the door. "Thanks for the ride," he said on cue.

"No problem."

"Oh, and don't bother hanging around," Methos added cheerfully. "I'm not going anywhere else tonight, just food and bed."

"Right, like I can take your word for it." But the cop was almost smiling as he spoke.

Methos hesitated for a second on the verge of climbing out of the car. Today had been fun in an odd sort of way, between baiting Vecchio and the challenge of trying to work him out. The man was a mass of contradictions, switching from apparently clueless idiot to the genuinely threatening persona that showed fleetingly under stress. "Will you be following me again tomorrow?"

Vecchio made a face. "Nah, got to work."

Methos let his surprise show. "This is what you do on your days off?"

Vecchio shrugged. "When I've got something to pin on you, then I can get the department to pay me to tail you."

At least he looked a bit embarrassed about it, Methos thought grudgingly. "And meanwhile you've got nothing better to do?"

Vecchio shifted in his seat. "You bugged me, OK? I couldn't figure you out and it was driving me crazy."

Methos almost smiled at that - nice to know the feeling was mutual. "So what have you decided?"

Vecchio gave him a cool look. "I'll let you know," he announced grudgingly.

"I won't hold my breath," Methos laughed. "Look, what time do you get off tomorrow?"

"Three. I'm on the early shift."

"Lucky you," he said, with genuine distaste. "But since I'm more of an evening person, you can follow me after you finish."

"I'll pick you up three-fifteen," Vecchio said casually as Methos slid out of the car. He pulled away
as soon as Methos closed the door.

Methos made his way up the stairs to his room, ignoring the strange looks Americans gave anyone who didn't take the lifts, and feeling somewhat bemused. The cop was a potentially serious pain in the arse - and he couldn't help liking him.

Vecchio swung rapidly between being an amusing companion and an extremely irritating one. He was tenacious, rude, sarcastic, arrogant and generally didn't seem to give a damn what people thought of him - all traits which Methos could admire, albeit rather more easily in himself than in others. He hadn't managed to find out anything useful, other than that Vecchio wasn't above quashing a parking ticket, and he suspected that applied to half the Chicago PD. But it worked both ways - what was Vecchio going to find out about him? No Immortal would cause trouble in front of mortals, especially not police. And sightseeing was definitely less fun as a solo activity.

He swiped his key-card with a smile, finding that he was looking forward to tomorrow.

*****

"Ray, hi!"

Vecchio wasn't entirely sure why he'd gone to the club, and Huey looked just as surprised to see him. Surprised, but pleased - that big grin was genuinely welcoming. "Didn't think you'd be back here again so soon!"

"Neither did I," Vecchio confessed, returning the smile in full. "You'd better gimme another one of your lousy beers."

"Any more cracks like that an' you'll be kicked right back out again. Come on, we've got a table free over here."

The club was busier tonight, and Vecchio followed Huey through the maze of chairs to a small corner table well away from the main stage. It was still noisy back here and they had to lean in a little across the table to talk.

"So what brings you back here already?" Huey always was direct - that hadn't changed.

Vecchio made a face. "Took your hint about spending money with a friend," he offered.

"Right," Huey laughed. "You never did manage to bullshit me, Vecchio."

"No, guess I didn't," Vecchio agreed. "I just wanted to do some thinking, and that's not gonna happen at home," he explained. "Not much chance of it here, neither," he added a bit louder than needed over the chatter, producing another grin from Huey.

"No complaints from me when the money's coming in. So, come on, Vecchio spill - what's eating you?"

Vecchio took a pull at his beer and told Huey about his strange meetings with Adam Pierson. He'd drunk his way through the bottle before he finished. A waitress brought another and whispered something to Huey, but he waved her away. Towards the end of the story, Vecchio noticed Huey was really staring at him. "What is it?"

Huey shook his head. "Ah, nothing much. It's just you never talk about the job. Old cases, sure, Fraser stuff, but not what you're doing now."
Vecchio thought about that for a second. "Guess not, huh? Just didn't wanna bore you crazy, you wanted out of all that shit."

"Yeah, but I still wanna know what my friends get up to." Huey spoke seriously, Vecchio touched by that flash of warmth.

"Sure, I'll keep you clued in." He fed the friendship back with a genuine smile. "Hey, it's not even as if this is a real case - I mean, I've got nothing on the guy."

"You really think he's a slimeball?"

"No - maybe. I dunno." Vecchio shook his head, confused. "He reminds me a little of all those mob guys, you know? All civilised on the surface, desperate to fit in, but you can spot them a mile off. Thing is, those guys scared the shit out of me and Pierson doesn't."

"So what's giving you the vibes?"

Vecchio didn't answer immediately, gathering together his own reasoning. "He talks all the time - comes out with all kinds of crap that you don't expect your average perp to know. But he's fast, and he doesn't miss a damn thing, Huey. You don't get to be like that unless you work on it, and most people got no reason to."

"Sounds like Fraser to me," Huey suggested.

"Oh, hell, no," Vecchio laughed. "Not a bit like Fraser, trust me."

"So, he could be anything - ex-military, cop even."

"Turned wacko conspiracy theorist?" Vecchio was still on the edge of laughter. The image in his head of an immaculate, buttoned-up Benny being compared with Pierson was way too funny.

"You wanna get serious a minute here?"

Vecchio fought down his humour and considered Huey's suggestions. "Nah - army discipline and Pierson wouldn't go within a million miles of each another. And he just doesn't look the cop type."

"And you do?" Huey shot back with a grin, before amending. "Okay, maybe you do now. But a few years back, in your crazy shirt phase?"

"You have to remind me of that?" Vecchio shook his head at the memory of his old wardrobe, long since gone to Goodwill.

"Every time I get the chance."

"Now I remember why I don't come here," Vecchio groused, as Huey continued to chuckle at his expense. He checked his watch. "Hey, I gotta get going, I'll be late for dinner. That's the biggest sin on Ma's list," he said, rolling his eyes a little.

"She'll kick you outta the house," Huey agreed. "Listen, Ray, call back again soon, okay?"

"Yeah, I will," Vecchio said, and he actually meant it for once.

It wasn't until he got back to the Riv that he realised Huey had sat talking with him for well over an hour without once ditching him to take care of the club.
Methos was waiting in the Sheraton lobby when Vecchio's car pulled up outside, a couple of minutes late. The passenger window wound down as he walked through the door to meet him. "You ever been to an IMAX cinema?" Vecchio called across to him.

"No."

"Me neither. Figure it's about time I did. Jump in."

Methos opened his door and climbed in, Vecchio already driving away before he'd reached for his seatbelt. "The Navy Pier, right?"

"Yeah." Vecchio threw him a quick sideways glance. "You seem to know a lot about Chicago for someone who's never been here before."

"Back to the third degree again?" Methos queried amicably. "You're reverting to type."

Vecchio looked almost apologetic. "Hey, I'm naturally nosey. You just seem to know a lot about a lot of things."

"I asked about all the tourist spots at the hotel." Methos smiled pleasantly at the detective. "The Sheraton staff are very eager to help with information, but then I'm sure you already know that."

This time Vecchio just shrugged. "Yeah, yeah, we both know where we stand."

Do we? wondered Methos. He couldn't decide whether Vecchio was still out to stick him with something or not. All this seemed a little cosy for a normal cop-suspect relationship.

Sod it. If Vecchio could admit to being nosey, so could he. "Were you officially working when you met me?"

"Yeah." A simple answer, almost certainly the truth.

"So what does your partner think of you socialising with suspects?"

"Don't have one." Vecchio's reply was short.

"Isn't that unusual?"

"What the fuck is this?" Vecchio was suddenly a very edgy guy. Methos wished he'd stop staring him out and concentrate on the road again. "You want my entire fucking life story now?"

"I'm just making conversation." Methos was surprised yet again by Vecchio's sudden mood swings, and used his most innocent expression.

Vecchio breathed deeply and seemed to gather himself together. Methos stayed silent, waiting. "Hey, sorry. Guess I'm a bit touchy today." Methos could tell how much of an effort it was for Vecchio to spit out those words. He suspected Vecchio didn't bother apologising much. "I'm used to working alone, you know?"

"Undercover cop?" Methos smiled.

Vecchio relaxed visibly in his seat. "Aw, the department dump a partner on me sometimes. I hate
their way of doing shit and they hate mine." The cop somehow smiled back. "Believe me, they never last long."

Methos laughed. "Your boss must just love that."

"Oh, yeah," Vecchio replied, that deadpan sense of humour back completely now, Methos noted with relief. "Damn good thing he's used to me being a pain in the ass."

"Now why can't I ever find a boss like that?" Methos said lightly.

"Cos you're way more trouble than you're worth," Vecchio responded instantly, turning into one of the pier parking lots. It was only a short distance from the Sheraton and at this time of day traffic flowed fairly well.

"I see the car parks are in favour today." Methos couldn't resist laying on the sarcasm.

"There's a reason for that," Vecchio grinned. "You don't know everything, Pierson." He lowered his window and reached for the ticket from the machine.

"Never said I did," Methos replied wide-eyed.

"Oh, Jesus, not that look again," Vecchio said in mock disgust. "Just find us a goddamn space, will you?"

"There," Methos said, spotting a gap among the rows of metal. "Over in the next row."

Vecchio got the whale-sized car parked with remarkable efficiency and Methos followed him in the direction of the main pier. The IMAX cinema was part of a complex near the street, so it wasn't far to walk. Vecchio bought tickets for the next film showing, paying for both of them. Methos resisted the urge to comment, suspecting there’d be a kick-back later.

They were handed 3D headsets with lenses and inbuilt headphones - rather different from the old cardboard specs Methos remembered from the 50's. The film turned out to be a nature documentary on the Californian coast kelp beds. Methos was genuinely impressed by the technological advances, but had to suppress his laughter at the subject matter, which was sure to bore Vecchio silly. The cop surprised him once again, though, by turning out to be something of a techno-geek, at least as far as watching went. He had no desire whatsoever to know how things worked, but raved happily over the impressive visuals as they left the cinema. This led, somewhat inevitably, to an argument over which films boasted the best effects. Methos was happy to talk films for hours and had no intention of letting Vecchio have the last word, so it was down to Vecchio to break the impasse as dusk encroached upon them.

"Don't you ever let yourself lose an argument?" Vecchio sounded somehow both exasperated and admiring.

"Not often," Methos acknowledged with a grin. "Are you conceding?"

"No way," Vecchio responded instantly. "But I'll go with a half time break. You hungry?"

"Always."

"Me too. You really don't wanna try the crap they call food at the station."

Methos wrinkled his nose. "I think I can guess. So where do we eat?"
"What's more important, the food or the beer?"

"Beer," Methos responded instantly.

"Good call," Vecchio smiled. "Come on."

Methos found himself once again trailing after Vecchio, pushing their way through the crowds along the pier to something called Charlie's Ale House. The place was fairly crowded, but they got a table after only a few minutes' wait. "You like American beer?" Vecchio asked as they sat down.

Methos decided it might be worth having a little fun. "Not much," he replied succinctly, as he eyed the list of beers. "I'll stick with the Franziskaner."

Vecchio snorted. "If you're a stout guy, you should try the Samuel Adams."

"So I've been told," Methos said, laying on the sour attitude fairly thickly. "And I've been bitten by American so-called beers before."

"No, this one really is good," Vecchio urged. "You gotta try it." Methos didn't bother to reply and Vecchio's eyes narrowed. "Tell you what - if you hate it, I'm paying."

It seemed like a win-win situation. "How do you know I won't lie?" he asked, fully intending to do just that.

"I'm betting you will," Vecchio said. "But I'll know if you do."

Methos grinned cheerfully. "Now there's a challenge I can't resist. But what if I'm telling the truth and you don't believe me?"

"Won't happen," Vecchio replied instantly. "I can always tell whether somebody's lying or not."

Methos looked sceptical.

"Hey, I'm a cop, aren't I? It's my job to know these things."

"You want me to believe you're infallible?"


The bickering continued enthusiastically throughout the meal, and in the end neither of them were quite sure whether the bet had been formally agreed to or not. Which rendered the whole point about the beer somewhat moot, but gave them another subject to disagree over. Methos did confess to liking the stout, and paid their bill - which he'd always intended to do anyway, but it was more fun this way.

He only discovered his mistake when they returned to the car park and Vecchio demanded the receipt. The cost of the parking, which together with the IMAX was Vecchio's end of the deal, suddenly fell from the outrageously expensive to the downright reasonable when the receipt was shown to the attendant. Vecchio didn't explain this until after Methos handed it over, of course, which gave him something to complain about as they drove back to the hotel.

As Methos got out of the car, Vecchio was still snorting with laughter from telling him that he whined like a gnat, which Vecchio seemed to think was the height of humour.

The hotel beckoned once again. Another evening with his TV and his memories, alone with the ghosts in a sterile, empty room. Sometimes that seemed to be the greater part of his life.
Methos turned back on impulse and spoke through the still-open door. "Hey, do you want to come in? We can raid the mini-bar and argue over what film to watch on cable."

Vecchio shook his head. "Sorry. Gotta do the early shift again tomorrow, and I got too old to stay up late drinking before," he admitted looking rueful. "But I'll see you tomorrow afternoon unless you got plans?"

"Sure," Methos grinned. "I get to choose what we do, though."

"One condition," Vecchio agreed sourly. "It's gotta be indoors. I'm not spending another day freezing my ass off at the zoo."

"Done," Methos replied instantly. "But make it a little later - say six. I'll take us somewhere in Chicago I'll bet you've never been before."

"Oh, God," Vecchio replied, "I'm hating it already. Shut that damn door, will you, you're letting all the heat out."

"You're complaining again. Don't you ever stop?"

"Anyone'd bitch around you," Vecchio retorted. "Now get lost."

Methos shut the door just a little too hard, enough to provoke a squawk of protest audible through the glass. He gave Vecchio a cheerful wave as the car pulled away.

 Vecchio brought the Riv to a halt outside the Sheraton and found Pierson already waiting for him. He looked his passenger up and down pointedly once he'd got settled. This was definitely an improvement in the clothes department - he would have approved, but right now he was too suspicious. "So where we going?"

"Down to the hotel car park to start with. I've signed you in for my slot."

"I'm not gonna catch a bus," Vecchio hadn't been on a bus by choice since the one that ended up in the lake - there was a principle at stake here.

"No, you're going to walk."

Vecchio snorted. "How far?"

"About half a mile."

That wasn't too bad. Vecchio swung the Riv around and into the underground parking. "You never said where we're going."

"It's a surprise," Pierson replied, smiling.

"That means I'm gonna hate it," Vecchio interpreted.

"You always think so badly of me."

"I'm really gonna hate it."

Pierson's eyes crinkled. "I'll just have to try and convince you otherwise."
Vecchio sighed loudly and got out of the car.

They headed onto Michigan as Vecchio had expected and started North, then west along Ohio. Vecchio tried to figure out where they might be going as they walked. This area was a large entertainment district with no shortage of clubs, theatres and some very nice restaurants. Vecchio was becoming unpleasantly hot and wrestled himself out of his coat. The weather had changed this afternoon, suddenly giving Chicago one of its unseasonably warm spring days with only a slight breeze. He threw his coat over one arm, wondering why the hell he'd brought it. But if he hadn't, he'd freeze after dark. For now, the rays of the low sun blinded him as well as cooking him. He'd left his shades in the car.

Vecchio was a little more surprised when Pierson turned north again onto Wells and became more suspicious the further they went. "Hey, I thought you said we only going half a mile," he finally protested, well aware they'd already passed that.

"I lied," Pierson replied sweetly. "It's more like a mile."

"OK, that's it," Vecchio declared, stopping dead on the sidewalk. "I'm not going any further till I know where we're headed."

Pierson turned back to look at him. "Would you have come if I'd told you how far it was?"

Vecchio thought about that one. "Probably," he admitted grudgingly.

"No problem, then," Pierson replied, sounding altogether too reasonable for Vecchio's liking. He'd already turned away and started walking again.

Vecchio caught him up within a few strides. "But I would've made you get us a cab," he added.

"God save me from lazy Americans," Pierson announced dramatically. "How do you ever pass the police fitness tests?"

"I just don't like walking when driving gets you there quicker," Vecchio sulked. "I can run when it counts. You would've seen me in action a few days ago if you hadn't been rolling in the gutter at the time," he added, with more than a hint of smugness.

That got him a glare from Pierson. Vecchio swapped his coat onto his other arm and marched off before realising he still didn't know where he was going. He slowed until Pierson drew alongside again.

Pierson was taking him still further north, and when he crossed to the west side of Wells, Vecchio's suspicions solidified. "You're dragging me to the goddamn art galleries, aren't you?"

"No complaints," Pierson replied mildly. "Inside, like you said."

"You couldn't have picked a bar instead?"

"I picked the zoo instead," Pierson grinned. "You didn't seem to like that either. This time we're going to the gallery."

"So you were really coming here the other day, huh?"

"Well, actually, I was planning on looking around various galleries. Today we're only going to one."
"One too many," Vecchio protested.

Pierson laughed. "Don't worry, it won't be as bad you think." He turned into the doorway of the Gwenda Jay gallery, where a young woman stood clutching a file. Pierson smiled brightly at her. "Good evening. Adam Pierson. I phoned earlier today." Vecchio watched sourly as the girl reacted to the voice and the smile, wondering why it was he never managed to befriend any ordinary, plain-looking strangers. At least Pierson had a nose on his own scale.

The girl's smile widened further as she looked up from her list. "Have a good evening, sir," she said, standing aside to let them pass. "Good evening," she said again to Vecchio, her eyes meeting his briefly before sliding again to Pierson's departing rear view.

Inside, they were greeted again, this time by a man offering them glasses of wine and snacks. "It's a preview evening for some of Dan Addington's paintings," Pierson whispered to Vecchio as the man left. "These things are usually worth a quick visit."

Vecchio had to admit it wasn't the worst reason to go to an art gallery. The wine was pretty good and the food was excellent, even if he couldn't really eat as much of it as he would've liked. And all he had to do in return was fake a minimal interest in the strange, twisted paintings on every wall.

Pierson did seem genuinely interested in the art, wandering round the gallery studying the weird, often religious-based imagery. Vecchio trailed after him, working his way down his glass of wine a bit too quickly and grabbing another from a passing tray. He handed Pierson another glass too, since he'd finished his without really seeming to notice while engrossed in the paintings.

"You lost your bet, by the way," he mentioned casually, as Pierson took the offered wine. Pierson just looked confused. "You said you were gonna take me somewhere I hadn't been," he reminded.

"And you're going to tell me you've been here before."

Vecchio had expected the disbelief, and just nodded smugly. "With Stella. So what do you owe me for the bet?"

Pierson suddenly looked interested. "Who's Stella? Anyone I should know about?"

"Nah, old history." Pierson's eyes asked the question. "Ex-wife," Vecchio elaborated.

"You were married?"

"Well, don't look so damn surprised. Why shouldn't I have been married?"

"I suppose it is the American cop cliché," Pierson laughed.

"More than you think," Vecchio admitted. "Two divorces." It surprised him a little how easy it was to say now. The pain over Angie had faded with the years, leaving him with only the dull ache of guilt. He could've done so much more to hold them together; but that was a knowledge that came with age and hindsight. Stella - well, Stella had never been real in the first place, he'd admitted that soon after they were married. She’d been a distraction, a fantasy.

Pierson studied him for a moment. "I would say that I'm sorry," he said finally. "But twice divorced seems less like bad luck and more like a pattern of errors."

The words should have stung, but Pierson's light tone took all the offence out of them. Vecchio smiled ruefully. "You know, I guess you're right." He looked around the gallery for the guy with
the food tray, wanting to put an end to this topic. There were a fair number of people milling around the paintings or just chatting in corners, but it wasn't so crowded as to obstruct his view. "How come you don't get more people at these things, anyway? I would've thought the free booze and food would be popular."

"The galleries aren't stupid, that's why," Pierson replied dryly. "You have to get yourself invited."

He was studying one of the paintings on the wall beside them and not obviously paying Vecchio much attention as he spoke.

Vecchio looked at Pierson with unconcealed curiosity. "And you can get yourself on the list just like that with a phone call?"

Pierson shrugged. "I've bought a few paintings recently." He turned to Vecchio and must have spotted the look. "Nothing really expensive, no Van Goghs or anything, just work in a similar style. Word gets around in the art world. Besides," he added, leaning in and whispering. "Never underestimate the influence of where you're calling from."

"A good hotel helps, huh?"

"Every time," Pierson smiled.

They left the gallery after another hour and a couple more glasses of wine. The freebies could only keep Vecchio from complaining for so long.

"So, where are the good bars around here? Anywhere with decent music? Blues, jazz?" Pierson asked.

"If you want live bands, back down Wells," Vecchio suggested. The evening had cooled considerably and he wriggled back into his coat as they walked.

"Was Stella the first or the second?"

The question was totally out of the blue, but Vecchio had learned by now not to expect tact or subtlety from Pierson, not in conversation at least. "Second," he replied shortly, hoping to get away from the wives thing. Should never have mentioned her name, he thought - bit late for that now.

"So how long have you been divorced?"

Vecchio almost snapped at him to shut the fuck up, but held back. He'd bitten the guy's head off only yesterday over some innocent remark and then regretted it. Pierson managed to ask his questions in a way that didn't seem like probing - a combination of honest curiosity and friendly concern. "Three months, officially. We split three before that." He wouldn't normally chat casually about his personal life with someone he'd only known a few days, but while he was far from drunk, the wine had taken some of the edginess out of him. And besides, it felt good to let his guard drop a little, forget some of the paranoia that clutched at him. Somehow Pierson did that to him. He felt more like an old friend now than some people he'd known for years.

"Were you together long?"

"Nah. About six months, start to finish." It was almost painless - dead, no feelings about her one way or the other. Just the guilt, waiting for him as ever, telling him he'd used her, hurt her, to try and patch his own broken life together.

Pierson made a noise that might have been a disguised chuckle. "I'd say you were right about it
being a mistake, then." The voice was as casual as ever.

"Oh, yeah." Vecchio rolled his eyes, grateful for Pierson's light-heartedness dragging him back from the gloom. "A real crazy mistake." He turned to glare at Pierson and thought he saw someone vaguely familiar further down the street. He looked more closely, but couldn't catch sight of them again.

He almost talked himself into ignoring it.

"So what went wrong?" Pierson seemed to cast a half-glance over his shoulder - disguised as just a scratch at his neck, but Vecchio wasn't convinced that was all. The old fear only too happy to come haunt him again.

Vecchio pulled his practised mask into place and gave Pierson a wide grin. "Hey, it was a whirlwind romance thing, you know? All lust and no idea we didn't get on till it was too late. This way." He grabbed the man's arm and guided him down a left turn.

Pierson laughed. "You really don't seem the type."

"I don't do I?" Vecchio retained his grin and quickened the pace just a fraction, keeping talking the whole time, spitting the words out in an effort to hide his tension. "Aw, hell, it was a case of bad timing. I'd just finished an undercover job and I was looking for a way to lighten up. She was it." He looked around - there, and walking a bit faster too. Damn it - he could live without this shit right now. He crossed the street, still hanging onto Pierson's arm and took the right at the next intersection.

He stopped a little way around the corner and looked at Pierson. "We're being followed."

"We are?" Pierson's eyes widened.

"No bullshit, not now, I know you saw her." Adrenaline had kicked in, making Vecchio's tone sharper than he'd intended.

Pierson sighed and dropped the act. "I suspected, but I wasn't sure."

"It's her, isn't it? That bitch that shot at you?"

"I don't know. I only saw her for a second, remember? And I didn't exactly get a good look at her just now, either."

Vecchio stared closely at Pierson and figured he was telling the truth. "Yeah, well, I'm not a hundred percent sure neither. So let's have a closer look." He pulled his gun out of his jacket.

"Oh, no," Pierson protested, pulling away from Vecchio's grip. "I'm not hanging around to be shot at. You can play the hero if you like, but I know when to leave." And Pierson was off, striding along the street without looking back. Vecchio made no moves to stop him - he'd intended to tuck him out of the way in a doorway anyway. Getting civilians shot didn't look good on a cop's record.

Vecchio turned his attention back to the intersection; she should show up any minute now. He kept his gun at his side in the shadows. There were people around in groups, but no real crowds like the other day. Still, he hoped like hell he wasn't about to get himself into a shooting match - it was a bad idea after a few drinks. And the captain would be pissed at him again.

Aw, shit where was she? Surely she should be reaching the junction by now. Unless she knew she'd been spotted; maybe she'd gone. It was tempting to take a quick glance around the corner, but
he held back. Damn, he hated waiting.

And then she stepped into sight, eyes searching along the length of the street. "Police, freeze!" She nearly jumped out of her skin, huge eyes locked onto his extended pistol. And goddamn it, it was her. Same short, greying hair, same nose. "Face down on the ground, now!" She complied instantly, lowering herself to the ground with visibly shaking legs. She hardly seemed the usual psycho killer type, he reflected as he walked over, still keeping the gun trained on her.

"Lady, I'm arresting you for any number of weapons offences, starting with reckless endangerment and working right up to attempted murder." He cuffed her and hauled her to her feet as he read her rights to her. A group of drunks further down the street who'd been watching let out a loud cheer. The woman was trembling, staring at him with huge, dilated eyes.

"Me?" Her voice cracked on that one word and she tried again. "You must have the wrong person, I haven't done anything."

No way - it was her. He grabbed her bag from the street and opened it up to see the gun inside.

"Once we've checked the bullets we found against this, we'll know for sure," he said casually. He replaced his own pistol in its holster and reached for his cell to call for a ride.

And then she went totally crazy on him.

She lashed out hard with one foot, catching him viciously on the knee. With her hands cuffed, she couldn't balance and crashed to the sidewalk. She rolled towards him, kicking out with her feet again, but he jumped away. He circled round her head and pinned her shoulders down, then swung around to sit on her legs before she could kick back at him.

"You know what he is!" she yelled up at him. "You know!"

"Jesus, lady, I don't know what the hell you're on, but you just added assaulting a police officer to the list of charges." He looked around for his cell, which he'd dropped when she kicked him. It was out of reach unless he let go of her, and he wasn't planning on doing that again.

"I saw it!" she hissed now, no longer struggling, staring up at him with eyes suddenly remarkably calm. "I saw him die! He stabbed him right through with a sword and then he just got up and ran off!" She met his eyes, the normal-seeming, slightly scared woman he'd first arrested once again. "I know what I saw."

Vecchio jumped at the footsteps close behind him, reaching for his gun once more as he whipped his head around. "Oh, it's you." Pierson had come creeping back now that the danger was over.

"You okay?" Pierson asked, offering a hand to help him up.

And then that damned woman was screeching again at the sound of Pierson's voice, glaring at Vecchio with vicious eyes. "I shot him! I shot him in front of all those people and nothing! Nothing in the papers, nothing at all! You were there! You must have seen!"

He ignored her completely. "I'm good," he said to Pierson, "but I think I'll stay where I am for now."

"Probably wise." Pierson stared down at the woman, openly curious.

"You recognise her, right? She's the one."
"Yes," Pierson replied, no doubt in his voice this time. "She is."

"Good. Pass me my cell, will you? It's over there."

Luckily it was still working, and only a couple of minutes later the blue-and-white arrived.

*****

Methos remained unconvinced that a police station was the best place to spend a few hours. He'd given his statement earlier, only too happy to cooperate in getting that woman securely locked away. For the rest of the time, he'd sat here at Vecchio's desk, fiddling with a range of executive toy type gadgets that he found in a drawer.

He also decided that he'd avoid art galleries for the rest of his stay in Chicago. They weren't bringing him luck.

Vecchio finally returned from the interview room just as he was considering making his own way back to the hotel. The cop wasn't looking his best, but it was after midnight and Methos didn't want to think about what time he must have been up this morning. Scuffles in the street weren't good for the suit either.

"So what's the verdict?" Methos asked lightly, still sprawled across the chair.

"The psych guy's in there with her now, but I don't think there's much doubt she's a loon."

Vecchio slumped into the chair opposite and started playing with a squishy stress ball. "Her name's Jenny Stamford - mean anything to you?"

Methos shook his head. "Sorry, not a thing."

Vecchio sighed. "Just trying to figure out why she picked on you. Bad luck, I guess. Who knows how these crazies think?"

"As long as she's out of my hair, I couldn't care less."

Vecchio smiled. "Can't blame you for that."

"Hey, Vecchio!" a woman's voice called from across the room. "Let's go."

Methos looked the question at Vecchio.

"I got us a lift back to the hotel so's I can pick up the Riv," he explained. "C'mon."

It wasn't such a long drive from the 27th to the Sheraton, so Methos didn't have to make too much small talk with the female cop. Vecchio was no help conversationally - he looked like he was half-asleep in his seat.

She dropped them at the entrance to the underground parking garage, driving off again with a cheery wave and a big smile at Methos. Methos walked with Vecchio to the car in silence. Vecchio unlocked the door, then hesitated, leaning casually against the metal. "Look, why don't we eat round at my place tomorrow night? I mean, my family are there, and Ma won't mind cooking for one more." He grinned then, and added, "I'll warn you now, though, my kid sister'll eat you alive if you give her the chance."

Methos didn't think that an evening with someone else's family was the best option he had, but he supposed this was Vecchio's way of saying that he no longer harboured suspicions about him.
Sometimes it paid off to do the polite thing. "Fine - and thanks for the warning." Vecchio's smile widened. "Pick you up at six. And I promise you no loony gunwomen."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next few days followed much the same routine as the previous few - when Vecchio wasn't working, he hung out with Pierson. The guy had a quick, slightly caustic sense of humour that fit well with his own. And now that the question marks over Pierson's attacker were settled, he found it easy to enjoy the relaxed sense of friendship that had troubled him before.

Ma decided that Adam needed feeding up, of course, and was keen to invite him round again.

Frannie had been besotted, as expected, but she behaved herself better than she used to and didn’t cause their guest too much embarrassment.

Mostly, though, they alternated between sightseeing and just eating in Vecchio's favourite restaurants, arguing their way amicably through meals. Vecchio, like many city residents, had never really done many of the tourist things, not since he was a kid, so he wasn't overly bored by the likes of the river boat trips and the Sears tower. He only refused the Shakespeare theatre, telling Pierson that if he wanted to go he’d have to pay a visit while Vecchio was at work.

Something was still niggling at Vecchio, though; he could feel it itching at the back of his mind, something tied in with what the Stamford woman had said to him. It would go away for hours while he was out haring round the city with Pierson, then return to haunt him at night in bed, and in quieter moments at the Two-Seven. He reread his own report on the arrest, but whatever it was wasn't there.

By the fifth day, he was being driven crazy by it.

He picked a shift when he was supposed to be catching up on paperwork for the DA and pulled the transcript of Stamford's interview with the shrink. There it was - ranting about how she'd seen Pierson stabbed with a sword; that was what had been bugging him. He just had to put it together with something else, another piece that was buried somewhere in his head –

Last week. In the canteen. He'd overheard two uniforms giggling over a crank call, something about swords.

That report took a little longer to find, since he didn't really know what he was after or exactly when. He did a lot of asking around among the uniforms, leaving them all believing he'd gone nuts, chasing around after hoaxes. It was nothing new to find himself at the butt end of others' jokes, and he ignored the not-too-subtle whispers that it'd be UFOs next. He didn't give a damn; he just wanted answers.

When he tracked it down, it was a logged 911 call reporting two men fighting with swords off Michigan. When uniform got there, there was some blood but nothing else. No complaint had been made from a victim, and it had been left open as a probable assault. It was generally assumed that the bit about the swords was an exaggeration, more likely a thug with a knife.

He checked with his earlier notes from the Sheraton. That was the same night the doorman said that Pierson had come in looking like something that crawled out of the sewers.

Then he started to get pissed at himself. What the fuck was he doing, anyway? Sure, Stamford had said she saw Pierson get stabbed with a sword. She'd also said she saw him rise from the dead, and
that sure as hell hadn't happened. Why should he give any weight to anything she said?

He felt like a real dirtbag, investigating his friend after the case was closed. But in the end he was a cop, and he couldn't let it go without knowing for sure.

He collected Pierson from the hotel as usual that evening, working to maintain his usual chatty, prickly front as they drove.

It was the last Bulls game of the season and he really wasn't enjoying it. Pierson wasn't a fanatical basketball follower, something Vecchio considered close to sacrilege, but he was happy enough to go and was able to talk knowledgeably about the game and the teams. Vecchio kept up his end of the conversation, leaping to his feet at all the right moments. He knew he was good enough at undercover not to let his new misgivings show, at least for a while, and he used this opportunity to watch Pierson, only maybe twenty percent of his concentration on the match.

Pierson behaved just like any normal person at a basketball game. He ate hot dogs. He got more and more involved in the match as it went along, laughing and cheering, commenting on the players' tactics. He had a good time.

Vecchio felt like a complete shit. But he couldn't help thinking about the way Pierson arranged his coat so carefully before he sat down, when he didn't give a damn about clothes. And how Pierson didn't take his coat off in the heat.

If he hadn't been watching so closely, he probably would’ve missed Pierson change. It was only there for a second, that expression of tension and dread, before it was quickly masked. Pierson turned to him with a wide smile. "I'm going for another hot dog, do you want one?"

"It's only half an hour to the end of the match," Vecchio pointed out.

"And then everybody will want one and I'll have to fight the queue. You stay here, enjoy the game."

Vecchio made a face. "Fine. But it's a sin against basketball."

"Do you want one or not?" Adam's grin was definitely convincing. Vecchio wouldn't have suspected a thing under normal circumstances.

"Yeah, go on. They're my tickets, I gotta get as much as I can out of you in food." He turned back to the match as Pierson made his way out of the stand. As soon as he was clear, he started out after him. The crowd rose to their feet with a roar, blocking his progress along the row. By the time he reached the door, he had no idea which way Adam had gone.

*****

Methos wandered out of the main arena, doing his best to look casual rather than like a man in a hurry. It was a big stadium - with over twenty thousand people, there was a good chance that whoever it was was simply there to watch the game. But it was safer to be out of range. The relief was almost tangible as he left the buzz behind.

He made his way out to the vast parking lots, intending to meet Vecchio back at the Buick. He could explain away why he didn't return to the match easily enough. He kept a careful watch as he passed through row after row of cars, but saw no sign he was being followed. The lots were floodlit, but there were darker areas of shadow where the lighting didn't quite overlap that he avoided. He cursed the system of parking attendants that had directed them to this distant section of the grounds. There was the green Riviera, shining darkly in the artificial glow. He sat on the hood,
looking back the way he had come, scanning for any movement between the cars. Even so, the
buzz hit him unexpectedly, tingling through every nerve ending in his body like ice. "Oh, shit," he
muttered, sliding off the hood and ducking away along the row.

"Too late, I'm afraid."

The other Immortal was watching him go, mild amusement in his voice. Methos stood fully
upright, trying to drag his dignity back together. "Do I know you?" The only good thing about this
was the lack of a sword on show - so far.

"No, I don't think you do. Louis Anglade, if it makes any difference."

"Not much, no," Methos answered truthfully. "I'm not looking for trouble."

"So I gathered," Anglade replied dryly.

"Fine." Methos smiled, hoping it came off as genuine. "So I can be on my way and you can head
off in the other direction."

"James Forell was my friend."

There didn't seem to be a lot he could say to that. 'I'm sorry' wasn't really appropriate, since he was
no such thing.

"I did try to talk him out of it, by the way," Anglade continued.

"You should have tried harder." Methos kept his voice low, but a slight sarcastic edge crept in.

Anglade shook his head. "He wouldn't be persuaded."

"I noticed that." Methos couldn't decide where this encounter was heading. "I take it you have
some reason for telling me all this?"

"A long time ago," Anglade said slowly, "I made Forell a promise - if he died first, I would try to
avenge him."

"You don't agree with what he did. All I did was defend myself." Hopefully, this man would be a
little more open to reason than James had been.

"I know." Anglade seemed somehow a little sad. "But I made a promise."

"Oh, wonderful." Methos let his anger and frustration show through fully. "Another idiot keeping
promises to the dead. I really don't think the dead care one way or the other."

"Perhaps not," Anglade admitted. "I care, though." He slowly withdrew his sword from his coat as
he spoke.

Methos unsheathed his own sword in wary response, but kept it pointed at the floor for now. "I
really don't want to kill you." How often had he trotted out that line? And how often had it actually
made a difference?

"Nor I you," the other man replied. "Ironic, isn't it? But it is what we do." And with that, he
launched his attack.

That first charge was reckless, undisciplined, betraying his opponent's lack of skill. Methos parried
effortlessly, backing away along the row of cars as Anglade pushed on brashly. Could this be some
kind of act? He was wary of taking one of those many tempting openings, wondering if he would find a trap slamming shut across his neck.

His Ivanhoe glinted in the spotlights from the fence, flashing back and forth with simple grace. Anglade continued to attack with speed and bravery, completely untempered by any real skill or forethought.

Methos dodged around the side of a Plymouth, keeping the car between them as Anglade tried to follow. "How old are you?" he demanded.

Anglade gave him a cold smile. "Old enough to know how to kill."

"Only if you're very lucky," Methos remarked, continuing to circle around his metal shield. "Were you his student?"

Anglade came at him, leaping over the hood of the Plymouth and leaving his legs totally exposed in the process. Methos didn't take the strike, retreating again instead as he thought. What were the possibilities here? There was no cover to run to, nowhere to disappear, and he wasn't in the mood for a lengthy chase across Chicago. But he could hold this kid off indefinitely until they were disturbed. "I could have killed you half a dozen times already. Don't be such a bloody fool."

Anglade was panting with the tension and the effort it took to maintain those erratic swings. He drew back, golden sweat glowing in droplets on his forehead. "How long are you going to keep running away?"

"As long as it takes," Methos replied mildly. He casually defended against Anglade's sudden rush. If this idiot thought he'd be distracted, he was very wrong. He sliced his blade deeply across the man's forearm for good measure. Maybe he'd have second thoughts.

Anglade dropped his sword with a cry, wrist hanging limp without tendons. He clutched at his arm with his other hand. "Like you did with Forell? You're the coward he always said you were."

Genuine anger was coming from the young Immortal now - response to the fight or to being patronised? Methos honestly didn't care.

"You can think what you like. You're entitled to your opinion."

Anglade reached for his fallen weapon and straightened up again as the crackling energy inside him did its work. "I'll keep coming, always, like Forell did. I'll make you fight."

A point worth considering, Methos thought as he blocked the latest frenzy of blows Anglade launched at him. He couldn't help recalling his own words to Mac on the subject.

The sound of running footsteps echoed across the lot. He didn't dare risk a glance sideways while Anglade was attacking with such ferocity. The kid had to notice it soon, and then he'd pull back.

"Police! Freeze!"

Oh, shit. Vecchio.

Anglade, hesitated, distracted, looking away to the source of the voice. Methos looked too - Vecchio was staring fixedly at Anglade, the gun pointing that way as well. "Drop the sword!"

There was no surprise on Vecchio's face, none of the shock you'd expect at finding a friend sword-fighting outside the United Center. Damn - Vecchio already knew then; he knew far too much.

Anglade made a move with his sword - to resume the attack or to sheathe it? Methos was never
entirely sure and in the end it didn't matter.

"Freeze, or I'll shoot!"

He ignored Vecchio's voice. He wasn't prepared to be hunted again. He clashed blades with Anglade once, then ended it simply and cleanly.

He looked down at the fallen body by his feet. He felt regret, but not really for Anglade; Immortality wasted on a fool when so many far more deserving withered away at the end of a short life.

He looked over to where Vecchio stood frozen, eyes huge.

And then the force of the Quickening racked him, lancing his body with arrows of pure, molten heat that poured along his stretched nerves. It overrode all his own signals to his muscles, leaving him in a ball of convulsions on the floor and greying his vision with the whirling mists of energy. Dimly he heard the crack of exploding glass through the roar of the wind as the nearby cars submitted to the unbearable strain of the Quickening.

He staggered to his feet as the last of the fire finally ebbed into calm in his body. Damn, two in little more than a week was too much. He looked again towards Vecchio, nearer now, staring at him with a very odd expression. Holding that .45 semi in both hands. Pointing it at him.

And Vecchio pulled the trigger.

*****

He woke up gradually, dizzily, lying on the cold concrete floor. No sudden adrenaline-driven start, so he'd been unconscious, not dead. He shifted his hand to push himself up and felt the glass fragments dig sharply into his palm. His chest and his head hurt like hell. He sat up slowly, looking around.

Vecchio stood watching about ten feet away, looking openly relieved. He still held the gun.

"You shot me, you bastard!" He was more shocked than really angry - he'd been shot many times before, even by friends, but he hadn't expected the betrayal from this man.

Vecchio wasn't showing any signs of guilt, cold voice carrying across the lot. "You lied to me. If you'd told me the truth, I wouldn't've had to do it."

Methos tried to bring his legs round beneath him and moaned. "Do you have any idea how much that hurts?"

"Yeah, I do." Vecchio spoke the words softly now. "Hurts like a bitch. But I'm guessing yours won't hurt as long as mine did, right?"

He nodded, then wished he hadn't as the pain pulsed through his head. He must have given it quite a whack when he went down. He indicated the gun still tight in Vecchio's hand. "Are you planning on shooting me again?" he asked wryly.

"No."

"Then do you mind putting that away?"

Vecchio's expression was almost wary and he hesitated before he answered. "If someone with a
sword cut your head off while you were lying there, I wouldn't be talking to you now, right?"

"No," Methos admitted. Vecchio nodded. "So until you're back on your feet, I keep hold of the gun."

Methos tried his legs again and managed to get himself upright this time, breathing already a lot less painful. "Thanks." It came out only half-sarcasm. Vecchio was still looking at him like he was some kind of bug. "Anything else you haven't worked out yet?" he asked pointedly, more genuine anger leaking through as the surprise and the pain faded.

"Plenty. I'm just not sure I wanna know." Vecchio reached down to the floor and then handed him his sword. "I'll bet you're not even Adam Pierson, are you?"

Methos sheathed his sword in his coat lining with the easy grace of long practice. "Not really. But it's as good a name as any other. And a lot less trouble than the original one."

Vecchio holstered his gun in silence.

Methos had had enough of the cold treatment; yet another one rushing to pass judgement on his life. Well Vecchio would just have to join the bloody queue. "What? You've seen how I live now and you don't like it?" he asked viciously. "Well you can't blame me for that! I told you to keep the hell away from my business, but you just couldn't let it go, could you?" He shook his head. "And you wonder why I didn't tell you the truth," he added in disgust.

Amazingly, Vecchio didn't respond in kind, speaking slowly, eyes closed. "That woman. She was telling the truth."

"Not my problem. I'm not responsible for what happened to her." He heard the defensiveness in his own voice and detested it.

This time Vecchio did let go. "She was right about the whole damn lot of it and you let me lock her away with the loons! That's a fucking lousy thing to happen to somebody!"

"She deserved it! She bloody well shot me!" What the hell was Vecchio thinking, defending her? In just a few short moments Methos had become the demon of the piece, the automatic mortal reaction to stick together against the unknown on display once again.

"So did I, just now," Vecchio pointed out, voice sharp, accusing. "So what are you gonna do to me, huh?"

The question froze Methos for a moment, bitterness subduing the fury. "She shot me in a street full of people," he said, closer to his normal tone. "It was malicious, calculated; she wanted to expose me. You do have some idea of what would happen to me if people knew?"

Vecchio didn't reply, watching him intently, studying. The certainty drained from his face, leaving only confusion and doubt.

"I think I've had enough accusations for one day." Methos spoke the words carefully, glacial tones disguising the turmoil that seethed beneath. Why the bloody hell had he expected anything different? The reaction was all too predictable, no matter who the friend. "I'm going to the hotel to get cleaned up." He strode away towards the gates, fully healed now and able to make a dignified exit.

"Hey, Adam." Vecchio's voice stopped him after a few steps. He turned to face the cop. "What are
you gonna do if I tell people about you?"

Methos stared at him for long seconds, but his face was blank, unrevealing. "Are you planning to?"
he asked finally.

Vecchio seemed to consider that, tilting his head to one side. "I guess not," he admitted. "I don't think I'd be believed, any more than Jenny Stamford was."

Methos smiled sadly at him. "Then it doesn't come up, does it?" He headed for the gate before turning back a second time. "Would you have believed me? If I'd told you the truth, that everything she said was real?"

Vecchio shook his head slowly. "I doubt it."

"Then it didn't change anything."

"Yeah, I know."

Now Vecchio just looked defeated. Methos studied the cop with some sympathy. Been there, done the guilt thing. "Why don't you come back to the hotel? We can have a couple of beers, watch a really bad movie. Maybe we can come up with a way to persuade her to keep quiet, get her out of the hospital."

Vecchio visibly snapped himself out of the melancholia, that deceptively intelligent mind making a typically fast decision. "No - I'll figure something out. You were right. I'm not getting any deeper into whatever the hell goes on in your life. I don't wanna deal with any more days like this." He waved a hand vaguely at the devastated vehicles, the headless corpse on the floor.

"Okay." Methos saw no reason to argue with his decision. "I suggest you don't hang around here too much longer, people will have seen the light show."

He gave the cop a last, genuine smile and jogged away.

It was a long taxi ride back to the Sheraton.

*****

Vecchio fell straight back into the usual work routine - the occasional bouts of action and one hell of a lot of paperwork. Welsh dumped yet another new partner on him. This one might even work out, he thought grudgingly after a few days. She knew when to keep her damn mouth shut and didn't spend half her life lecturing him on procedure.

Frannie pissed him off, kept bugging him about when he was going to bring Adam round again. He told her that he'd left town and wouldn't be back. She wanted to know where he'd gone and whether he'd stay in touch. He swore at her and then felt bad about it, bought her some flowers.

He really wanted to talk to Fraser; he missed him like hell. But it might take days for a message to reach him, wherever he was in that frozen desert, and a phone call wasn't going to cut it.

Not that he'd talk to him anyway, not about this, he admitted ruefully. He'd always been good at not saying what was on his mind around Benny. But sometimes it sure helped to have a friend around to not talk about that kind of stuff with.

He called round at Huey's club later that week - he'd promised he would and it kept Frannie out of his hair for an evening. So to speak. He wasn't the world's best conversationalist, though, and it
didn't take Huey long to pick up on it.

"Let's have it, Vecchio. What went on with the Pierson guy?"

"Whaddaya mean?" Vecchio didn't feel up to this conversation.

"I mean the last time you were here you couldn't shut up about him, and now you won't say more
than two words about anything." Huey gave him a piercing look. "You had to arrest him, didn't
you?"

"Nah, nothing like that." Vecchio pulled at his beer.

"Ray, you're not getting out of here till you tell me, so just give in gracefully," Huey grinned.

Vecchio smirked. "Since when did I ever do that?"

"Never," Huey acknowledged brightly. "So I'm ready to sit here all night."

"Hell, you would too," he accused.

"Damn straight."

He sighed. "Nothing much to tell," he said, putting all the conviction he could muster into the lie.
"I was right, there was something a bit weird about him."

"Weird like what? You're not gonna get away with half an answer." Huey seemed genuinely
intrigued - Vecchio guessed a cop's brain never stopped being nosey, even after you got out of the
force.

"Aw, he was just too paranoid, you know? All that shit about the phones and the government
conspiracies got a bit much after a while." Vecchio elaborated on the tale grudgingly - he hated
lying to Huey, but the truth wasn’t going to happen.

"He creeped you out, huh?"

"No, not creeped, exactly. More confused." Vecchio somehow felt the need to defend Pierson, not
wanting to leave Huey thinking he was a complete freak. Which, of course, he was, he thought
wryly, just not in that way.

"But you liked him anyway?" Huey prompted.

"Yeah, I guess I did," he admitted.

"And he isn't a criminal?"

"No more than you and me." That was close to the truth so far as he knew - what he'd seen sure as
hell looked like self-defence. There was the small matter of not reporting the body to the
authorities, but since the police were already there in the form of himself, that was a technicality.
And he hadn't exactly been truthful about the night's events in his own report.

"So what's your problem?" Huey interrupted his reverie.

"Huh?"

"You got friends I don't know about?"
Vecchio shook his head and swallowed another mouthful of cheap beer.

"Vecchio, not many people at the Two-Seven could've spent two years with Fraser without strangling him," Huey smiled. "I would've figured you could deal with any amount of weird."

"Not this time, Huey. You're just gonna have to trust me on that." Vecchio couldn't stop thinking about what he'd seen. And what he'd done.

Faced with the impossible, he'd been totally unable to deal - he'd pulled the cloak of the Bookman tight around him and he'd shot Adam Pierson. Shot to wound rather than kill, but he'd shot him because he needed to know the truth, because Adam would never tell him.

And then he'd stood in horror as another friend lay on the ground, pooling blood on the concrete. He'd been about to call 911 when he'd seen it change, blood flow stopping as the flesh closed over. He'd been damn sure it was going to happen, else he wouldn't have shot him - but that didn't change the way it felt to have done it.

He'd lashed out at Pierson then, hating him for putting him in that situation in the first place. But not half so much as he terrified himself for letting it happen.

*****

Vecchio pulled back fast from the window, suddenly feeling very exposed.

The tip off had been anonymous, vague, low priority. He was rarely grateful for his paranoia hangover, but it made him treat every situation as highly suspect, and right now he was convinced that was the only reason he hadn't died yet today.

"Laura?" he hissed. Back to the wall, he scanned the empty dockside - no sign of movement, just a hundred places to snipe from. "Laura?" Just a little louder. "Where the hell are you, kid?"

"Here." His partner crept round the corner of the warehouse, keeping her voice as low as his.

Vecchio's tension lessened just marginally. "C'mon, we've gotta get the hell outta here." Where to was another question, he thought as he considered the expanses of concrete and square warehouses. Back to the car might prove unhealthy.

"What's going on?" Laura demanded, keeping her own body pressed against the building.

"That's Alex Carpenter in there." She turned to look at him then, eyes widening. He shook his head at his own stupidity. "Christ, I can't believe we got this far without getting shot."

"Cover round the corner," Laura suggested. "Old fishing net. Smells a bit fishy, but – "

"Good idea." He managed to dredge up a smile.

They crept round the side of the warehouse at a sort of crouching jog. Too fast and they'd make loud, echoing footsteps, but every second exposed was another chance of being spotted by one of the lookouts. They had to be around somewhere. They always were.

He reached the abandoned netting with profound relief and wriggled under one edge, drawing it over them as Laura joined him. Only then did he swap his gun for his cell and call for back-up. They sat in terse silence, breathing.

Laura looked at him. "I thought you'd want to go in," she whispered.
Vecchio gave her a baleful glare. "You don't wanna believe everything you hear about me."

"Like what?"

And damn it if that innocent look wasn't just like Pierson's. He glared harder, but she wouldn't be intimidated.

He sighed. "Hell, kid, I know I got a reputation. Half of 'em think I'm crazy, the ones that don't just hate me for doing things my own way."

"You forgot the bit about hating partners and always going it alone," she suggested helpfully.

"Yeah, that too," he conceded. "But I'd have to be nuts to go in there."

"Glad you think so," she muttered to him. "I was wondering what the hell Welsh had landed me with."

"Don't get too confident," he groused. "Now shut the fuck up."

It was only a few very long minutes before he heard the sound of chopper blades. The cars would be on their way too, no sirens, sealing everything off before the drug deal was disturbed.

The sound of automatic weapon fire exploded from somewhere over to the left. Someone found one of the lookouts then, he thought wryly. He peered out from under the nets as the cars rolled up nearby.

"Time to go."

Laura crawled out after him, following him towards the nearest blue-and-white. Vecchio waved his badge at the cops and stayed to watch the mopping up, but didn't get involved in the actual arrests. That was best left to the cops who were wearing vests. When he first came back to the job after getting shot, it had been tempting to wear one full time, but he resisted - that way was a long slide down.

The mood back at the station was jubilant - they had Carpenter, over half the names on his 'known associates' list and seven kilos of H. No amount of follow-up paperwork could dampen that. When the shift got off, many of them headed for a bar just down the street from the Two-Seven.

It was a typical cop celebration - noisy, becoming downright silly, helped along by large quantities of booze. Less than two hours before the singing started - getting close to the record there, Vecchio noted. He was a long way from drunk, but a few beers had loosened up the knots in his guts for the first time in a week. Enough so that Laura noticed, said laughingly that she liked him better this way.

As the impromptu party began to break up, Laura went home to her husband.

Vecchio could only go back home to his mother and sisters; forty years old and that's all he had to show for his life. There seemed to be a hell of a lot missing.

Huey, of course, was a godsend - strange given how they'd started out hating each other. That changed relationship was another of Fraser's footprints on his life. But Huey had the club, and in the end was far closer to Dewey, who drove Vecchio nuts.

And Huey was right. He'd clicked with Pierson in that same fast, simple way he had with Fraser. The way that had made him discharge himself from hospital and follow Fraser to Canada into an
ambush of homicidal thugs when he'd only known him three days. Despite the fact that Fraser was the weirdest cop on the planet, or so he'd thought until he met Turnbull.

He contacted the Sheraton from his desk at the Two-Seven, but wasn't surprised to find that Pierson had checked out. He hadn't left an address. Vecchio replaced the phone with a resigned clunk. He could always double check that Washington state driver's license - but everything else on it was a lie, why believe the address? Hell, he didn't even know if the license was genuine; if he started asking questions about a license that didn't officially exist, Adam would find himself in some deep shit the next time he met a traffic cop.

He ought to be relieved. He'd decided Pierson was bad news.

Anyway, if the guy had left Chicago, what was the point? It didn't matter how much you connected with someone if they moved to the other end of the continent, he reflected bitterly.

He ought to be relieved.

So how come he just felt like he'd thrown away another friend?

Chapter End Notes

I always thought I'd come back to this universe at some point and write a sequel where Methos returned and they could piece their friendship back together. It just never happened. But I love Ray Vecchio and I love Methos, and writing them together was a delight.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!