

Sarcophagus

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Sarcophagus

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Summary

dark, dark story, pre series (by a long way). Methos is trying to find himself, instead Kronos finds him. Oh, and did I mention the violence?

Sarcophagus
Kitty Fisher

There was silence in the room, the deep silence of night. Far away, he could hear the lush whisper of waves breaking on the shore, and close-by, cicadas sang softly in the rough desert grasses that bordered the house. Here, within the walls of his retreat, his hiding place, nothing moved. Quite still, he leaned on his desk, fingers curled around parchment, eyes blind to the guttering lamp, while a shard of disquiet spiked into his thoughts.

For, without any doubt, Kronos would find him soon.

Days would pass and he would know something approaching contentment, then a dark shadow would fall over his world, the shadow of a man he had loved, obeyed, killed for, betrayed. Even here in Alexandria where he was a man of culture, of means, fear followed like a carrion bird scenting blood.

Methos pushed the scroll away and stood up, despising himself. Was it right to want so badly to live? A brave man would have stood up to Kronos, and died. He had chosen the cowards' way and run, again and again, finding each time a measure of hope in the distance he gained from the Horsemen and what he had become, only to have the hope - the pride - taken from him as each time he was tracked down, found, and each time he went back to the world of darkness and destruction.

Kronos always found him, sooner if not later. And this time - for that was what Kronos had promised, and for all his faults Kronos was a man who kept his own word at least to himself - Methos knew he would die.

Such simplicity.

Hell, he'd died often enough; understood the pain of being reborn, the heady, seductive quality of knowing death was only a thin step away from life. Except this time, he might truly be dead - head severed from his neck, quickening taken, finished. Kronos had warned him, told him quite clearly what the consequences would be. Yet he had still left them, run from them, from himself, from what he had become under Kronos' darkly persuasive aegis. At the time there had seemed to be little choice in the matter in his own mind. Now all he had to do was live with the fear, and wait.

Methos took a long, uneven breath, nostrils pinching, then walked slowly over to the unshuttered window, his arms wrapping around his body despite the oppressively dry heat that filled the room and pricked sweat onto his skin. He stared into the night, listening, waiting.

One of the servants had heard reports of barbarians in the city. Rich, painted barbarians.

Methos could almost hear the soft laughter that presaged pain. They were close. Kronos was close. The thought ran a shiver of awareness up his spine, skin tightening as if the very tip of a knife had been placed carefully against his back. Kronos. Beautiful, subtle, vicious, with all the serpentine guile of a man untouched by conscience. A man who held the keys to Methos' soul, and didn't seem inclined to return them.

Unlocking his arms, Methos leaned on the cool plaster and tried to remember that he needed to escape, to be free. And he did. There was little enough left of himself as it was. Sometimes it seemed that they were so bound together that even if he lived alone for a thousand years, he doubted that he'd ever be truly himself again. Or maybe ever want to be. Even if he could even find the person he had been before, even if he could stop wanting Kronos and all he stood for in the way poppy drinkers craved their precious drug.

The only cure was abstinence. Methos was quite certain of that. He smiled to himself, the movement of his face a subtle shifting of muscles that could almost have been grief. Then he straightened, calling himself a thousand names for fool, and stared at the city he had grown to love.

He had chosen this house because of its isolation, and because he loved being able to hear the sea. Egypt was still a place of mystery and learning, despite the Romans and their ruthless brand of cultural imperialism. He had travelled the Nile many times, over many centuries and never grown tired of the civilisation that thrived around its fertile banks. The Egyptians were so like him: pragmatic, cruel. He had been easy here, despite it being far away from any place he might truly have called home.

Of course, the Horsemen had been his only home for a very long time. Though he wanted their comfort no longer. Or so he told himself. He didn't want Kronos any more: Kronos, with his dark intensity and charismatic brutality. They had ridden, and slaughtered and grown rich on the misery of a hundred different races, the four of them at home only with each other.

Now it was all done, ended. By his own decision.

Methos ran a hand through his cropped hair, cut in Roman fashion to go with the Roman tunic and sandals he wore. He had left the barbarian he had been behind in the wastes of Tashkent, wiped the paint from his face and used his gold to buy respectability. Of a kind, though his dislike of owning slaves made him an object of curiosity; speculation as to the size of his fortune rife at such a sign of eccentricity. His money bought status, a house that was like a palace, fine food, wine, clothing, servants. He bought no flesh though, of any kind. And of everything his money could purchase, the one commodity he desired most of all he was as powerless to buy as any beggar - freedom from looking over his shoulder.

He stared at the distant, beautiful city, seeing the faint glow of torches in the streets around the temples, the far brightness of the Pharos. He had watched Alexander ride into an unprepossessing settlement at the edge of the desert and with a word decree a city would be built. Yet now Alexander was gone, his body dust in a stone tomb, and staid Rome's star was in the ascendant.

For now. Everything would change in time, that was one lesson among many that time had taught him. Sometimes he felt very old, and sometimes he wondered if perhaps, after all, death would be easier than this warped, attenuated life.

Though not any death that Kronos had a hand in devising, that was certain.

A breeze drifted across his face, and he tilted his head, closing his eyes and breathing in the night-scents, the dust and heat, the faint tang of citrus from the lemon grove that bordered his garden, all of it layered with the pervasive salt of the sea. He laughed softly at himself and knew beyond any doubt that he would live, and would do whatever was needed to preserve this life that he loved so intensely. Whatever was needed. All the humour drained from his face and he slipped his arms around himself once more.

A distant, muffled noise lifted his head.

So much for hoping for time...

A door opened, accompanied by an unmistakable awareness. Fear shivered through him, then was gone. He heard soft footsteps walk unerringly towards him. He turned, almost glad the waiting was over. Proud as a god, he nodded at the man who walked into the wide, elegant room as if he owned the world and everything that lived upon it.

"Kronos..."

"You never hide yourself very well."

"I think you'd find me wherever I went."

"True."

Methos stared at the other man, seeing a compact body wrapped in black desert robes, long hair bound at his neck, sword and dagger at his waist. There was no paint on his face, the thin scar that crossed his eye stark even against his sun-browned skin. In another world, he had loved this man, done everything he desired, and more.

Another world? Yes it had to be. What had been was done, finished...

Kronos smiled, the knife suddenly in his hand, tossed lightly upwards just once, the blade turning on itself before being caught surely, plucked from the air by conjuror's fingers.

"Why do you do it, brother?"

"You know why - because I want more than chaos."

"There is nothing else!"

"Maybe, maybe not." Methos shrugged, head averted, refusing to meet the intense gaze. "But I need to try and..."

Kronos made an impatient gesture for silence. After a moment he spoke softly, his voice all beguilement despite the words. "You'll have to be punished, you know that."

"Yes." Methos gave a half shrug that almost spoke of disinterest. Then he looked up. "Though I thought you were going to just kill me?"

"Oh, if that's what you want..."

And just before the blade was thrown, Methos saw the smile and shivered with sudden, fierce arousal, flesh hardening beneath his tunic as the knife took him in the heart, turning the world to blood and darkness.

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Death seemed to last a mere moment, and then life surged through him, burning his lungs, searing his mind with the knowledge of being alive. Opening his eyes he knew everything, remembered everything, and with a strange sense of homecoming, was glad, almost at peace now he was to die. Sprawled on the floor, Methos blinked up and saw Kronos smiling at him.

"Hello, brother."

"Kronos..."

He continued talking as if there had been no break in their conversation. "You covered your trail well, yet you must have known it would not be enough."

"I knew."

"Good. Though it was an excellent idea to hide in plain sight here in the city, we came near to missing you, going on to Thebes, but Silas tracked you down, didn't you Silas?"

Methos pushed himself up until he was sitting propped against the wall and rubbed his chest. He looked at Silas standing by one of the Greek statues, a huge barbarian in bear-skins, axe strapped to his back, leaning negligently on a marble effigy of Aphrodite stepping from her bath. The image of him here, standing in this room with its scrolls and paintings and silks and statues, made Methos smile. Astonishingly, Silas smiled in return, his whole demeanour lightening, as if he'd been given some sort of pardon.

"Where's Caspian?" He would be somewhere close. Butcher that he was, he was loyal, never straying far from Kronos' side.

"Killing your servants."

Methos closed his eyes, then opened them wearily. "Was that necessary?"

"Not really." Kronos shrugged. "But what did it matter to me? And besides, as he liked the girl in the kitchen he might be going to take his time."

"She's a child."

"That's never stopped any of us, has it? And the longer he takes with her, the longer you have with just us. He wants you badly, Methos. You really shouldn't have left him to die like that." Kronos tutted. "I had to promise you to him, it was only right."

Methos looked away.

"Fair's fair."

Suddenly too close to the ground, Methos climbed unsteadily to his feet, happier when he could meet Kronos' gaze levelly. Of all the things he had imagined, being given to Caspian was not one of them. When he'd imagined this, it had always been Kronos who wielded the whip, the knife, the final blade, not Caspian. He fought a sudden sense of betrayal and flinched, knowing he'd carelessly let Kronos see the emotion in his face.

Eyes as cold as Northern seas smiled at him. "I won't let him kill you, not permanently."

As if that made it all better. "Why, are you going to save that for yourself?"

"Of course." Kronos walked across the room, away from his prisoner, unwrapping his voluminous djellabah and dropping it to the floor. In a simple cotton robe, belted at the waist with the strap that held his throwing-knives, he sprawled on one of the couches, and smiled happily. "Well, now that we're here, the four of us back together, what are we going to do?"

Kronos stared around the wide room, seeing the luxury, the care with which everything had been chosen. His lip curled. What did a Horseman want with all this? His temper soured, anger running fast into his veins and without thought he was across the room, a backhanded blow rocking Methos on his feet. "You traitor!" A punch crashed Methos into the wall and he slid to the floor. Kronos crouched suddenly at Methos' side, his hand curved possessively around the pale, dazed face. "I do not want to kill you."

Methos swallowed blood, and hesitantly looked up under his eyelids. "Then don't."

"So, you'd come back to me?"

"No."

"So certain."

"I'm tired of it, Kronos, I want something else from my life other than pain and the suffering of other people."

"What about me, can't you come back to me?"

Kronos was rubbing his thumb gently across his skin. Methos turned his head slightly, almost moving into the warmth of the cupping hand, then he shivered away. "Don't make me..."

"Really?" Taking hold of the stubborn chin, Kronos forced the face back, waited until the narrowed eyes met his. "I thought that was exactly what you wanted, I thought maybe I'd been neglecting you and that was why you ran away."

"No..." Everything was so much simpler when Kronos wasn't around, wasn't touching him, wasn't seeing into his soul. Then he could think, reason, where as now... He gathered himself and answered firmly. "No."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you excited by me? I can smell your lust, Methos, you want me like a bitch on heat."

"No!"

A hand went to his groin, and Methos suddenly was fighting, punching hard, fist impacting with the grin spreading itself over that complacent face. Not that he wanted to... But he wouldn't be given as a toy for Caspian, couldn't allow Kronos to understand him so appallingly well...

Hatred that was absolute sent his fingers gouging for the surprise in Kronos eyes. The two men rolled on the cold marble floor, fighting as they had fought so often, with vicious jabs and wicked moves. Methos, taller, with far more to lose, found a hold, twisted hard, smiling as a sound of pain crammed through Kronos' tight lips. The small moment of triumph was his last, for something collided hard with the back of his head and, stunned, he collapsed to one side, falling brokenly, all fight spent.

He heard them talking above his body. "Thank you, Silas."

"Brother."

Methos heard the smile of genuine pleasure in Silas' voice and could have wept. The big man was an ally, but only where Kronos wasn't the enemy. He tried to open his eyes, but a kick curled him onto his side coughing breathlessly. "And as for you..." Another kick cracked into his ribs and pain flowered all the way to his fingertips. "Caspian can do what he wants. Silas, find a room he can't escape from."

"Yes, brother."

"And find out what Caspian's up to!"

This last was shouted. Methos stirred listlessly, opening his eyes to see Kronos crouched at his side, one of the straight, wicked knives he favoured held lightly in his hand, while his eyes travelled the length of the long body spread at his feet. His inspection made Methos flush.

"You look good with short hair - thoroughly tamed!"

"I..."

"Be quiet." Suddenly the blade was at Methos' throat and Kronos was leaning over him, fury in the depths of his eyes. "Why do you do this? Why can't you be like the others?"

Flinching, Methos lifted his chin away from the knife, feeling it sharp against his skin. "You wanted me because I was different."

"Yes! But I wanted you at my side!"

"Kronos, let me go..."

"Never. I want you back, I want the Horsemen to be whole again."

World-weary, Methos answered, his voice dully without inflection, "Kill me, Kronos, I would rather be dead."

"You sound so certain." A wide smile devoured the fury. "I wonder..." Without warning the knife-edge gently broke skin, and Kronos leant forward as Methos arched backwards, his breath suddenly almost not there, the awareness between them as fine and pervasive as mist rising from volcanic seas.

"Don't..."

"Don't what? Slice your head off? I could you know, it would be easy enough. Or would you rather I fucked you. You're such a greedy whore, Methos, you'd love it! This knife at your throat, my cock stuffed up your arse. See?" He shifted, and with his other hand cupped unmistakable arousal, holding the spear of flesh so gently that Methos moaned aloud, every sense he possessed captured by the power Kronos wielded so effortlessly. When Kronos closed the last small distance and kissed him, he opened his mouth; hating himself, hating the world, but somehow needing this more than any single emotion he had ever experienced.

The kiss was anything but what he had expected, there was no violence, no fight for domination, Kronos simply let his tongue slide through the hesitantly opening lips and lapped. He made soft noises in the back of his throat and tasted every part of the offered mouth, the teeth, the tongue, delving deep as he could reach as Methos opened wider, sighing, and the knife spilled hot threads of blood down the long, straining neck. Arousal shivered in the air, need coalescing around them.

When he raised his head, Kronos was breathing hard. "Why can't you accept that? Accept what we are?"

"I can." Methos was whispering. "It is everything else..."

"Fool."

"I'm sorry."

Kronos shook his head sorrowfully, staring deep into eyes darkened by the seemingly unbearable weight of Methos' own desires. "You'll change your mind."

"I can't."

"You'll come to me again, I know you too well."

"I don't want..."

"Methos, this isn't about what you want! Is it?"

"Yes."

Kronos gave a short barking laugh. "Still arrogant. Gods, you make me hard faster than anyone I've ever met. Even when you were a slave you could make me want you by a simple arrogant turn of your head." Suddenly he shifted back, and quickly sliced through the thin fabric of Methos' tunic, leaving him almost naked, clothed only in rags of unbleached linen. "Do you want this to be rape?"

Staring at him, Methos paused, then shook his head. "No."

"Then turn over. I want you before Caspian takes you, I want you to be slick with my juices when he rapes you, for I promise you, rape that will certainly be."

"Kronos..."

"Yes?"

Methos hesitated, then spoke softly, "I tried to stay."

"Did you?"

"Yes." The word was closer to a breath.

"Next time try harder."

"There will not be a next time."

"Stubborn, stubborn... Turn over, or I'll kill you and fuck your dead body."

Methos blinked at the sudden command, then slowly obeyed. He pulled the last of his clothing away and turned, pressing his body to the cold floor, wondering how he had ever believed escape from Kronos would be simple. He knew Kronos was stripping, heard the knife-harness fall with a clatter to the floor, then his legs were pushed apart and a body settled between them. There was a sound of spitting, then warm skin pressed against his own.

Methos closed his eyes, and found that was worse, taking back to other times, other places where had been powerless, used. He opened his eyes again, tried fixing them on the beauty of a carved wooden screen, tracing the pattern of lotus flowers, deliberately remembering watching it being made. The air that day had smelled of honey and lemons, the Nile had been blue as the sky...

Blunt, abrupt, the penetration was sudden and the memory fractured apart. He stiffened as Kronos forced his way into resilience, the pain acute, terrifyingly good. This was how they had coupled a thousand times, maybe more; hard and fast, utterly devastating. The darkness in his self that answered to Kronos howled, and he was hard, his ignored cock slicking semen onto marble, shuddering in delight. Methos moaned aloud, and hated himself utterly.

"Remember this when Caspian is killing you." The cock pulled out, almost all the way, then slid home, long and hard and solid, breaking a way for itself until it could go no further. "Remember..." A flex of muscle and Methos cried out, hands clawing at the floor, back rippling as he fought through pain and need. "Remember..." Hands gripped his sides. The cock seemed, impossibly, to be growing even harder, lengthening. Methos gasped as it pushed deep, withdrew, then filled him again, possessed him again, took what little self-control he owned and burned it into nothing. "Remember..." Kronos shuddered, fingers digging deep, cock digging deeper. "Remember..." Sweat stinging his eyes, Methos cried out and came, the seed spilling from his body in great racking gouts as if torn from his soul. He buried his face in his arm and let his body take the storm of Kronos' passion. Bruised and battered by it, he pressed his eyes closed and tried not to think, tried not to understand, but when Kronos shuddered, and heat spilled into his gut, Methos let his tears fall, hiding them in the curve of his own body.

Kronos pulled out without ceremony and stood. He was still hard, his cock curving thick and long away from his slim, hard-muscled body. Picking up a rag of torn fabric off the floor he wiped himself clean and only then did his shaft begin to soften. He glanced at where Methos lay unmoving. An expression compounded of a hundred needs shimmered across his face. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again, still silent, and found his black robe, pulling it on though not bothering with any fastening.

Turning, he saw Silas. He snapped, "What?"

"Caspian's on his way, and I found a cellar."

"Good." Kronos slowly went to Methos' side, watching as he climbed unsteadily off the floor to lean against a pillar. Finally the lean, harrowed face lifted. It was a mask, wiped clean of all emotion but lingering pain.

Blinking once into the curious eyes, Methos finally found a degree of indifference and straightened, his stare holding quite firm, cold in answer to heat, sure and self-possessed. Until Kronos smiled, then all at once he looked uncertainly away.

They both turned as footsteps sounded on the floor. Caspian was approaching, grinning wildly, face flushed, the tattooed skin of his shaved skull gleaming with sweat. Blood was bright on his hands and smeared around his mouth. Methos looked at him, and couldn't help the disdain that showed on his face. "Did she put up a good fight, that girl, brother?"

"She didn't fight, she loved it!"

"Did she?" Methos narrowed his eyes in disbelief. He showed no fear, but his spine stiffened as Caspian came closer.

"Her last word was my name."

"Devotion indeed, I'm surprised you didn't wed her."

"She was sweet-fleshed. And I'm surprised you hadn't tasted her for yourself, brother. She was your servant, or have you become a eunuch, given up the pleasures of the flesh as well as

everything else?"

"She was only a child."

"All the sweeter."

"You're disgusting."

Caspian came closer. He was dressed in leather, stank of sweat and death, and the darkness of his eyes was lit by the fires of insanity. "I'm alive."

Methos didn't even try pretending he didn't understand. One shoulder leaning negligently against stone he shrugged. "You wouldn't have died, not permanently."

"Thanks to you I died twenty times, more, before Kronos found me. I dreamed of finding you, hurting you, inventing ways to make you crawl, to make you beg..." He took a deep breath, nodding in deep satisfaction. "And now you are mine."

"You can't take his head."

Kronos' voice made them both turn.

Caspian shrugged. "No matter, I'm going to make him wish he were dead anyway."

Kronos nodded. "There's a room Silas found, take him there. It's below ground so noise won't be a problem. Not that it would be anyway - thank you for choosing a house so resplendent in its own grounds, brother."

"Yes, I'd hate to keep the neighbours awake with your screams..."

"Caspian, you're so thoughtful." Methos sneered, though the expression lasted only long enough for Caspian to see it, then a huge hand fastened itself across his face. The fingers dug deep, while a knife, taken from nowhere to be at his throat stilled retaliation. Grinning again, Caspian shoved hard, sending Methos sprawling to the floor, crashing hard into another of the pillars that bisected the room. He followed behind, crouching with his knife held tight to the vulnerably naked groin. He was stripping off his breeches.

"You know, the problem with fucking children, is that they are over too soon. You get warmed up and then it is done, finished." He freed himself with a grunt, his cock, already hard, stabbing thick and brutal into the air. "Lucky for me I've got you, brother."

Methos, dry-mouthed, was finally afraid. Looking away he found Kronos eyes with his own. If he pleaded at all, it was silently, and to no avail, for Kronos shook his head, denying any help, denying anything other than the voyeuristic delight that showed in the heat of his gaze and the arousal that filled his flesh where he held himself lightly to his own belly.

The knife at his groin cut into skin, and Methos arched in pain, a soft, incoherent sound bleeding from his lips. He watched Kronos reaction, saw the pleasure, the lust that glazed his eyes, and knew that whatever was to be done, he would be allowed no privacy; brothers shared everything, Kronos had often declared, even each others' pain.

Blinking, Methos looked to Silas, but the big man wouldn't meet his eyes, just turned away and began to sharpen his axe.

"No one will help you, Methos. You are mine... Though I might let Kronos share you. Though you'd like that too much, wouldn't you?"

"No."

"Liar!"

A fist crashed Methos head into marble and pain speared into his groin, immediately followed by heat. For a moment he thought his bladder had loosened, then he realised Caspian had cut deep into the thin skin high on his leg, and the heat was blood spilling fast from his body.

Tossing the knife to one side, Caspian was laughing, watching the appalled awareness on his victim's face. "A quick death this time, for I want you spasming on my cock as you die. But don't worry, next time I'll be more patient..." And he rolled Methos over, careless of the pooling blood that made the naked body slippery, easily containing the sudden, desperately panicked fight by taking the flailing hands and twisting them into the arching spine. The room was filled with the hot-metal stench of a slaughterhouse, blood crept silently across the white marble, while Caspian roared his triumph and shoved himself into the dying body.

Watching, breathing fast, Kronos gently squeezed his fist around his own arousal. Part of him wanted to push Caspian away, to take such unwilling submission himself. The rest of him wanted to watch, wanted to see the muscles twisting in Methos' long back as pain shuddered through him, wanted to see as spectator the way the bones and tendons caged in his neck pushed stark against thin skin, the way he shuddered under the brutal assault. Kronos groaned aloud. As always, Caspian raped without finesse, his heavily muscled body giving no respite. That the victim was Methos... Kronos shuddered, lost, his cock pulsing seed hotly over his fingers onto the blood-stained floor, his eyes locked with the glazed, close to sightless eyes that had somehow found his and never let go.

Sated, Caspian grunted, and freed himself from the tightness that gripped his flesh. He stood, and turned to stare at Kronos, seeing his hand still cupped around his groin, seeing the last vestiges of arousal. Caspian smiled, a conspirator, and licked blood off his fingers. "Want to watch next time as well?"

"Maybe."

"How long can I have him?"

"Two days."

"I was in that pit for a month!"

Kronos uncurled his fingers, and pulled the black robe around his body. He tore his gaze away and looked up, iron in his eyes. "Two days, and I want him sane."

Caspian's lip curled, but he nodded.

"And whole..."

"You'll get your toy back! Though what you see in him..." Caspian stopped talking and backed away as Kronos walked forwards. Wide, pitiless eyes held his own.

"Don't try thinking, Caspian. Exist for the moment as you always have done. If you start thinking, I might have to do something about you - permanently."

"I wasn't..."

"Good."

"I was just..." Caspian broke off, swallowing.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Good... Now go and take your revenge, then when it is done, swear your brotherhood afresh, for he will come back."

"Come back to the Horsemen?"

"Oh, yes, didn't I make that clear? I'm not going to kill him, because he will be one of us again."

"But I thought..."

"Caspian." Kronos' voice was sweet reason itself, the inflexibility of his purpose showing only in his eyes. "What did I tell you?"

"I'm sorry."

"Good. Now take him away, I want some food, though I suppose you killed all the servants?"

Caspian nodded.

"Oh, well. Silas can buy slaves tomorrow. In the meantime there must be something edible in the house." He caught the smile on Caspian's face. "Apart from human flesh!" And he turned away, as close to disgust as he ever allowed himself to get.

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Early the next morning, Silas dragged two slaves back from the market, each laden with foodstuffs. He set them to work, one cleaning the blood from the floor, the other cooking. The woman he used to sate the needs of his body as carelessly as another would use his own hand, the man he ignored.

Still clad in all his barbaric splendour he prowled around the house, seeing the elegance, recognising it for what it was but marvelling that a man as steeped in blood as Methos could have any need for it. A place to sleep, food, women, and the space to swing his axe, were all Silas required from life. But then Methos had always been a mystery to him. He liked the aloof Immortal, found pleasure in his company and a certain comfort in his presence. But Methos could read, and he enjoyed doing so. Strange indeed. He had run, too, tried to leave the tight-knit band of four that they had become. The reasoning behind that was incomprehensible. Silas even hated the months they spent apart, and the thought of leaving his brothers forever was the closest he ever came to feeling fear.

Methos was different. Something Silas tried to respect.

He hummed to himself as he cleaned his axe. At this moment, most likely, Methos was suffering under Caspian's hands. A faint eddy of disquiet disturbed his contentment. Then he shrugged it away. It wasn't as if Caspian was going to kill Methos. And he had been tortured before. Besides, this was simply punishment, and Caspian was merely taking the vengeance that was his by rights.

In a few days it would be over. Methos would be well, and he would be back riding with them, the Horsemen four once again. That made Silas smile; Death back where he belonged. Silas loved being Famine, it made him grin every time he thought of it. In his own way, Methos loved being Death, he was austere enough for the role, as Caspian was careless enough for Plague and Kronos calculating enough for War. The years they had ridden together had been good, though the world was changing, a frightening thought. What was civilisation to the Horsemen? Something to destroy...if they got the chance.

With a sigh, Silas put his axe down, then turned, the hairs rising on the nape of his neck as a scream threaded distantly into the air. Momentarily he wondered what Caspian could have done, to make Methos scream so. Disquiet churned in his belly. Then there was silence, and he breathed again, happy to convince himself that the sound had merely been the breeze whistling through closed shutters.

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Kronos heard the sound as well. He stepped from the bath and frowned. He had no doubt as to the scream's source, and didn't even try to persuade himself otherwise. Quite still, he listened a long time after, but heard nothing more. He sighed, and slipped on one of Methos' Roman style tunics, belting it at the waist with a plait of leather. His hair was wet, and he let it fall loose down his back, wondering about cutting it all off, wondering if he would appear as tame as Methos is he also clipped his hair into the Roman style. Unlikely. The scar that had almost cost him an eye would always make his face less than civilised. Not that he cared. He touched the raised skin, and smiled, remembering Methos' interest in it, in that and in the other scars that marked his body from the time before. Whatever Methos said with his mouth, the truth was always available if you know the right way to find it.

Perhaps he should pay Caspian and his victim a visit. It would be interesting to see what was happening, to know quite how much Caspian was making Methos suffer.

He took a deep, steadying breath, the grinned at himself. With any luck Caspian would be finished for the time being. Kronos quite fancied taking his erstwhile lover again, with the

sort of punishment Methos enjoyed all too well, when inflicted by the right hand, of course - it was unlikely he was enjoying anything that Caspian was doing.

Barefoot, customising himself to the light, short tunic that was so different from what he usually wore, Kronos made his way down through the house. In the vast main room he paused to watch a slave cleaning dried blood from the floor. The slave didn't look up, though he was trembling as his new master passed by.

Walking through the house, Kronos found the steps that led from close to the kitchens down into the cellar. He walked slowly down into flame-lit shadows. There was a vast underground storeroom with several doors leading off. Only one was closed. Standing with his hand poised at the door he stood quite still, then a scream sounded again, this time cut off abruptly. Anticipation made his heart beat faster and he licked his lips. He was about to push on the thick door, only to step back as it opened before him.

"He's dead again." Caspian spat out the disgusted words, and stomped up the stairs. "I'm going to get some food and some sleep." he paused momentarily at the door.

"How many times have you killed him?"

Caspian grinned suddenly. "I lost count! Enjoy yourself - and tell him I'll be back soon..." and with a friendly squeeze of Kronos' shoulder he was gone.

Kronos listened as the footsteps receded, and Caspian's voice began to shout for food. He lifted his head, shrewd mouth pursed in contemplation, then he pushed open the door and went inside.

Methos was hanging from a hook looped over one of the bare ceiling joists, his feet only just touching the floor. He was naked and quite still, head hanging down between his abused shoulders. Kronos pulled the door to behind himself, and walked into what might once have been a storeroom, but was now simply the space for a man to be tortured in. Light came from torches hung on the walls, and a brazier which glowed sullenly by the far wall. It was only when Kronos approached the hanging man closely that he realised, with a certain sense of distress, that Methos wasn't tied; there were no ropes, instead the hook had been pushed straight through the crossed wrists.

Careless of whatever Caspian might want, Kronos was at Methos' side, awkwardly lifting him free, lowering his body, hook and all, to the floor. Blood had streamed down his arms, clotted blackly around the open, gaping wounds. Kronos touched the sharp points that protruded so obscenely, let his fingers dip into the dark scarlet warmth of flesh - and realised Methos was still alive. He was breathing, though shallowly, and the death that Caspian had so hastily anticipated was evidently close. Bending his head, Kronos brought their mouths close, he breathed for a moment, then placed a soft kiss on the dry and bitten lips. The supine body shifted, a moan sounding softly, then Methos' eyes opened, to look straight into Kronos' face, whatever he saw there enough to make him shiver.

"What, not pleased to see me, Methos?"

"Should I be?" He was having trouble focusing and his voice was a thread of pain.

"I think you should be, I lifted you down..."

Methos took a deep breath that caught as pain snagged at him unawares.

"Where are you hurt?"

"Everywhere!"

"I can see..." Kronos laughed softly. "I meant where particularly." There was no answer but a slight flinching of skin around the bruised eyes. "Do you want me to take the hook out."

Kronos took the indifferent silence as assent. Methos kept the silence while Kronos moved, and began to wrench the metal from the jealous embrace of his body, pulling the hook free with difficulty and what he knew had to be distress. Methos might as well have been dead, though when it was finally done, and Kronos shifted back to look into his eyes, they were damp with the tears he had refused Caspian any pleasure in seeing. Unsettled, Kronos took hold of the leaden arms and lowered them to Methos' sides. It seemed to bring a flowering of pain and clumsily Methos curled on himself, his eyes tight closed, his mouth a bitter line.

He held still, waiting almost without breath for the succour of healing. But strong arms came around him first. A soft, incoherent protest came to his lips, but it was all too much effort and he let Kronos lift his shoulders, let the strong arms curl around him, hold him. It was solace, while the world shuddered around him, flickers of agony darkening his vision until, with a sigh, the worst of the pain whispered away.

"Better?" For some reason Kronos was still there, holding him, sure hands stroking untold comfort into his skin.

"Yes."

"What did he do to you?"

"Ask him!" The answer was a laugh, bitter edged.

"I will." Gently letting go, Kronos stood up. He walked away, returning with a beaker of water in his hand. "Here..."

Pushing himself up until he was sitting, Methos stared into guileless eyes. Then, very cautiously, he reached up, surprised when Kronos let him take the cup. Greedily, he brought the water to his lips and drank, wiping his mouth afterwards on the back of an unsteady hand. "Thank you."

"Your manners always could have graced a king's court." Kronos was smiling affectionately. He settled down next to Methos, facing him. "He's gone to eat and sleep, you'll be safe for a while." He watched a fine tremor run down the still bloodied back. "I won't hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of being hurt!"

"I know. You're afraid of enjoying it, aren't you?"

"No!"

Kronos sighed softly. "Not with Caspian. But what if I had done to you what he has just done - with less brutality perhaps. What if this was a different place and I had pushed that hook through your skin for my pleasure, then taken you, fucked you, fisted you, taken you in any way I wanted... What would you have felt then?"

"Pain." Methos nodded, though his eyes were dark with more than just the hours of suffering, his throat working as he swallowed.

"Certainly, but what else?"

"Nothing."

"You deceive yourself so easily, no wonder you lie to others with such skill." There was a pause. Then, "Kiss me."

The quick command was startling, bringing Methos' eyes up to lock with mysterious, fathomless blue.

Kronos tilted his head invitingly. "Come..." The scar across his eye puckered as he almost smiled.

Shivering as a hand touched his face, Methos ran his tongue across his lips. After the hours of seemingly endless pain to be touched like this was close to impossible. "Kronos..."

"I won't hurt you..."

"But..."

Any other words disappeared as their mouths joined. Methos moaned softly, only partly in denial, then he leaned into the offered embrace with all the hunger of a man starved of touch. The hand was stroking through his hair, careless that it was matted with blood, smoothing his neck, caressing so lightly that goose-flesh swept his arms. Reaching up a reluctant hand, he touched in turn, finding a shoulder, a strong, supple back, sleek with the long twist of drying hair that fell almost to the narrow waist. The kiss deepened as passion swirled headily through each of them, then abruptly Methos broke away, his face starkly white.

"Methos!" Concern sharpened Kronos' voice.

"I'm fine..."

"Look at me!"

Methos felt his chin being held, and somehow forced his eyes open to meet the searching gaze. "I'm fine, just tired..."

"And not fully healed. I should have known he would have damaged you badly."

Shaking his head, Methos pushed away, moving until the wall stopped any further escape. He pressed his spine against it and leant his head back, eyes tight-closed as if to escape the light. Kronos watched him, saw the dark bruise-like shadows under his eyes, the pallor of his face. Light as a cat he was crouched at his side, a finger gently held to chilled skin.

"Methos, come back to me and I'll tell Caspian he's done enough."

The sound that emerged from Methos was close to a laugh. "He won't agree."

"Maybe not, but he'll obey me."

Methos squeezed his eyes tight. It was true, Caspian would do whatever Kronos wanted, eventually, after a certain amount of argument. Even this. The idea was so tempting, to be freed from Caspian; to leave this place that stank of his own fear and pain... But at what cost?

Methos shivered as a warm body came close, and an arm curled around him. A tongue licked his throat, mouthing softly at the sensitive skin... "Don't!"

"No?" The word was a breath against his neck.

"Kronos..."

"I want you..." A kiss. "With me..." A gentle bite, teeth barely scraping skin that had so recently been seared with burns. "Want you..."

Temptation was never so seductive.

A hand brushed against one of Methos' nipples, the skin pinching immediately into a tight bud of arousal. To be wanted like this... To be this needed... Where else would he find such pleasure? No one, for all his protestations, understood him like Kronos.

"Methos..."

His name was breathed against his cheek. Methos turned his head slowly and opened his lips as they met skin. He felt the smile, but cared nothing, all he wanted was Kronos' mouth to open and their bodies to be joined. The kiss was there, immediate, a salve for all the hurts he had suffered, for all the indecision. He moaned gently as the hand against his nipple again and sensation ran shockingly through his body, almost obliterating the memory of what had gone before. Somehow he was lying on the floor, Kronos kneeling over him, that wicked smile like Greek Fire in his eyes.

"You belong to me, Methos, whatever happens."

A knowing hand slid between his thighs, pressing upwards, pressing hard until he stiffened abruptly, arousal running fast through his veins.

"All mine..." And Kronos, graceful as ever, dipped down and took the heat into his mouth, sucking it down with such skill that Methos arched high and called out as if in pain. A hand came to his mouth, fingers filling the emptiness so sweetly he licked at them, stretched his lips wide and took them as deep into his mouth as Kronos was taking his own flesh. The heat

surrounding him was exquisite; tight, wet friction that swallowed him down then pulled away, only to repeat the same unbelievable delight all again. This was one skill none could better, this mastery that commanded his body without pain or dominance. Methos bit down on the flesh that had been pushed into his mouth and came hard, body fucked and fucking, penetrated and penetrating, everything cascading into shattering pleasure that sparked white-light behind his eyes.

Afterwards, he curled sideways and let Kronos hold him. Pleasure still sang in his blood, the pleasure almost unbearable after what had gone before. A hand was trailing through his hair; comfort in an idle touch.

When he began to think again he realised that it had all been one-sided, and he shifted uncomfortably, lifting his head to look at his brother's face. "You didn't come..." He began to move, to bend himself to the same task Kronos had just completed, sure that it would be required of him, far from unwilling.

He was reaching for the tunic's hem when a hand stilled his arm. "No, it is no matter."

He paused, uncertain. "Why?"

"I want you, but not in a cell. Come back to us - to me - and I will wash your body, lay you on my bed, let you sleep, then make love to you until the dawn."

Methos took a long breath. Then he answered, quite firmly for all the hesitation, "No."

"What!"

"I can't..."

"But you love me!"

Methos shivered. Then winced as Kronos stood up, the embrace abandoned seemingly without an instant of regret. Hurriedly he followed, picking himself up off the floor, awkwardly standing though it felt as if all his muscles had turned to water and his mind was disintegrating into fragments of incoherency. There was a thread of reason behind all this, there was... He wiped a hand over his face and from somewhere found an argument. "Why can't you accept that what we were is finished, that time has caught up with us and there are other pleasures in life apart from violence!"

"Power is all that matters."

"Then take it through other means than bloodshed."

"Why? Become lily-livered as you?"

"No. Because soon all the world will be tamed, and you and your kind will have nothing. They will kill you, somehow. You thought Alexander a danger? What about Rome? You think they'll care about some petty, barbarian war-lord while they are conquering the world?"

Kronos turned back on his heel, ignoring the scorn. "There will always be a place in the world for people like me - always." He closed the distance between them and pressed close to the naked body. "Before Rome or after, it doesn't matter, I will be there." He smiled suddenly, a wolf's smile. "And you will always crave being at my side!" He tilted his head and stole a savage kiss, hands bruisingly tight around Methos' arms. When he backed away there was blood on his lips.

Deprived of the support, Methos stood quite still, then slowly sank to his heels. He struggled with himself, then gestured impotently before wrapping his arms around his body, bowing his head as if in grief. "Go away, send Caspian back."

"Really?"

"Yes. Let him finish taking his revenge, then you can take my head." He looked up and his face was quite calm. "I don't care."

"Fool."

The muscles around Methos' eyes flinched. "Maybe."

Kronos watched him for a long time, held the steady gaze that reflected only pinpoints of torch-light. Then he nodded, and left the room.

Alone, Methos cursed softly into the shadows. Then he curled onto his side, for all the world as if going to sleep, though his eyes remained open, reflecting dull light back into the unreceptive shadows.

**

The wide room, so elegant it could have entertained Pharaoh himself, was quite empty. Kronos, anger simmering like a drug in his body, paced across the cold floor. Halting by a statue of a young man he reached out and touched its smooth surface, seeing the darkness of dried blood on his own hand as stark contrast to the unstained marble. The face was beautiful, quite imperious, though without expression, as if the sculptor thought any emotion would have sullied the image. He ran his fingers across the perfect lips, the arching bow the inviting curves. Methos had lips like this... with a start he realised that the image was of Methos, taken from life. Kronos snorted in derision. What vanity, to be carved naked for all the world to see. And not even life-size. "Cold day, was it?" He patted the statue, then frowned into the sculpted eyes. The smooth stone was beautiful, but then so was the man. He licked his finger, smoothed it over the cold lips, and shivered.

There had to be a way to bring him back, the Horsemen had to be four. "I'll win, you know. I always win..."

He smiled once, bitterly, then called out-loud, "Slave!"

After a moment footsteps hurrying towards him saved his voice another effort. "Master..."

Eyeing the fawning slave with a jaundiced eye, Kronos said, "I want some food."

"Yes, master, it is prepared, master." The man's voice was unsteady, his eyes held fast to the floor in fear.

"Where is it then!"

"This way, master..."

The slave backed away, almost tripping over his own feet in his hurry. Kronos followed for a few steps then slapped him hard. "Hurry up, can't you!"

A nod, and the slave was almost running the length of the long, brightly decorated hall, halting by wide, open doors and bowing. Kronos pushed past, finding himself in a dining hall, a low table spread with food in its centre, couches arranged around. On one lay Silas, the carcass of some water-fowl in one huge hand the other twisted through the curls of a slave who knelt on the floor by his side, her face buried in his groin, though he showed no sign of interest in anything but the mountain of food on his plate.

"Greetings, brother! Come and eat..."

"I will. You look happy enough." Kronos went to the table and picked up a chicken leg, biting into it, almost surprised to find it taste so good. Finding a plate he piled it with bread, meat and some cheese, settling down on one of the couches. "This is good!"

"I was hungry."

"So am I." Kronos shrugged, then asked off-handedly, "Has Caspian eaten?"

"He ate his fill, though he was in a hurry."

"Of course."

"Brother, do you want wine or beer?"

"Wine."

He was about to reach for it, but Silas cuffed the busy head at his groin and demanded, "Pour us more wine, slave!"

She pulled her mouth away, and Kronos saw that Silas was soft, unaroused, as if her mouth had simply been there for comfort. The slave hurriedly tucked Silas' penis back into his breeches, then scurried to obey. "You have her well trained already, brother."

"Ay." Silas grunted with his mouth full.

Kronos watched the woman briefly, without much curiosity. As soon as his glass was full he forgot her and drank deep, the alcohol acting almost immediately on the tension that strung his muscles tight. He finished the glass and sighed.

"Would you like her, brother?" Silas gestured to the woman.

Kronos blinked, then shook his head. "Thank you for the offer, but no."

"Saving yourself for Methos."

Such perspicacity was unusual in the big man. Kronos stared at him and simply nodded.

"Thought so."

Curious, Kronos asked, "Don't you want him too?"

Now the surprise was on Silas' wide, open face. "No, he wouldn't like me to."

"He's being punished, brother, this isn't about what he likes, but about what we like."

Silas shook his head though. "No, I've got what I want." He gestured to the woman who knelt immediately and bared his groin, bending her head, making him grunt in appreciation.

Kronos watched for a while, then asked, "Is she good?"

"Good enough."

"You don't want much out of life, do you Silas?"

He opened his eyes and asked, "What should I want, other than what I already have?"

"That's what I mean."

The big man belched delicately behind one hand, then shook his head. "You and Methos, half the time I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Don't worry." Kronos sighed. "Sometimes I don't understand either."

"No?"

"Not the least idea."

"Have some food, it always works for me." He grinned. "That or a good fight."

"Not a good fuck?"

"Only after the fight."

"And before the food?"

Silas laughed out loud, pleased. "That's right, brother, how well you know me!"

There was silence while they ate for a while, then Kronos asked casually, "Do you know where Caspian is now?"

"He was going back to Methos."

"I thought he wanted some sleep?"

"I think the food revived him..."

In a pool of silence the both stilled as a muted scream shivered into the room. After a moment Kronos swallowed; though the food in his mouth seemed to have turned to ashes. "So it has."

Silas looked at him, and Kronos wondered if there was accusation in the stolid countenance, or if his own imagination had drawn it there. Another scream, this one seemingly full of anger that became words - shouting - only to be broken off. He listened, beginning to picture everything appalling he had ever done, ever experienced, happening to Methos in the darkness of that room, then his mind shuddered away, lust and horror equally undeniable.

He pushed his plate back onto the table. Silas was eating again, and Kronos looked away. His immediate impulse was to go down to the cellar, to find out for himself what the reality was. Instead he stayed still, his ears listening while his mind lurched around the possibilities.

Caspian had invited him to watch. He took a deep breath as his body reacted to the thought. But the idea was to punish Methos, then bring him back to the Horsemen, not alienate him forever. Caspian had to finish what he doing, it had to be settled, the matter between them. Then, and only then would it be the time to begin bending Methos back to his will.

**

Despite his best intentions to wait until Caspian was finished - however long that took - Kronos lasted only the hour or so it took until Silas fell asleep, his deep, wet snores filling the room, the slave curled at his feet.

Tension prickling through the muscles of his neck and back, Kronos stood and went back through the silent house, his progress watched only by incurious stone eyes. He walked down into the shadows slowly, eager but curbing his own impatience, making himself go slowly, his feet whispering against the dusty steps. At the foot of the stairs he paused to listen, but there was only silence. The door was slightly ajar, and he pushed it open to stand transfixed, breath stolen quite away.

The cellar was starkly shadowed. The torches were burning down, and the brazier glowed with dull malevolence. Methos, his skin sleek with nameless fluids, knelt on the floor, eyes masked by a blindfold, arms bound cruelly tight behind his body, nipples pierced with long slivers of bloody metal. His whole frame was arced backwards, his mouth open and crammed full of Caspian's erect cock, his own genitals bound by strips of narrow leather.

Incapable of movement, Kronos swallowed, uncertain for a moment if he was going to come there, where he stood, or step forward and kill Caspian for what he was doing.

Both men were utterly oblivious to his presence, Methos because he had no choice, Caspian because he was so intent on the unequal coupling. Motionless as if carved from stone, Kronos watched, desire dark in his eyes, jealousy twisting in the pit of his belly.

His gaze travelled up the length of the long, painfully arched body, expertly gauging the abuse it had taken and he shivered lightly. Caspian was taking his pleasure without care, simply using the open mouth, legs braced either side of the tilted head he rammed home, then pulled almost free, allowing his victim a moment to snatch a breath, then pushing back in a long movement, pressing deep until Kronos could almost see the blunt shape of Caspian's cock-head as it fucked into the long throat. Bent to such hard usage, Methos seemed hardly human, his breathing raw, uneven, each hard-won breath lifting the straining ribs, painting shadows onto raw skin with every shaky inhalation.

Of everything Kronos had imagined, from the most vile torture to the keenest humiliation, nothing in his mind had been quite so absolutely sexual. This was the arena of his own pleasures, his own intricate relationship with Methos. He had stood where Caspian stood, had pleased himself in such a way, though then the victim had been willing and the pleasure a dark thread that wove them together.

Here though, Methos' body was nothing but a study in torture, every sinew silently protesting what was being forced upon it. Unseen in the shadows, Kronos swallowed on a moment of absolute truth, and felt his arousal disappear. Yes, he could step into the cellar, smile, and Caspian would let him do whatever he wanted. He could slip his cock into that throat, or fuck him until he bled, hurt him, kill him - any or all of these things were possible. Yet... Kronos leant on the door frame, hesitating for maybe the first time in his life, as he saw clearly the difference between what he wanted and what he needed. For if he were to do all those things, there would be nothing left of Methos when they were finished, nothing left of the Methos he wanted to share his bed, his pleasures, the Methos he wanted to ride at his side wreaking havoc and destruction across the undeserving mortal world.

Quite still, if he had moved at all it would have been to walk into something he could so easily regret, his eyes slid up to Caspian's dark, arrogant face, seeing it slack-mouthed with lust. As he watched, large hands curved around Methos' throat, apparently seeking and finding the press of their own flesh beneath taut skin. A choking sound was forced into the air as he flexed his hips, pulled his cock almost free, the length seeming to wetly glide forever from the open mouth, the heavy flesh thickly veined, ugly, before shoving back again.

Kronos found himself backing away. When Caspian reached down and took vicious hold of one metal pierced nipple, making the body jump and try to arch inwards, the movement impossible because of the cock down its throat, Kronos shivered. When the blood-dark fingers twisted the metal he turned, almost running back up the stairs.

In the cool hallway he paused and wiped the sweat from his face. Cursing softly, cursing himself, his brothers, all the gods he had ever known, Kronos leant against the wall and slid to his haunches. He could hear ugly sounds, terrible for all their muted softness, and he closed his eyes as if masking out the world would make his knowledge less.

He waited. After a while at last there was silence.

Patience held him still, his heart beating loud in his own ears. Then taking a deep breath he stood, wiped a hand over his sweating face, and slipped behind an open door, waiting unseen until Caspian emerged at the top of the stairs, dressed once more in his dust-black clothes, the cotton and wool simply layered over the blood that must mask his body. As he walked

Caspian wiped his hands over his face, then across his shaved parts of his skull, flicking the ends of his hair away. He rounded a corner and disappeared.

In the small hallway Kronos listened. After a moment he could hear the sound of his brothers arguing, and a squeal from one of the slaves. No one was going to bother him now, not for a while at least.

Stepping from his hiding place he ran lightly down the steps and walked into the underground chamber, pulling the door shut behind him. It was very close in the room, the air heavy with the stink of blood and sweat, of lust and despair, all of it layered with the sharp tang of fear. In one corner, with all the ungainly abandon of the recently dead, lay Methos.

A few paces took Kronos to his side. Crouching down, touching a hand to the still face, he ran his fingers across both closed eyes, the hollow cheeks, down to the long throat. He fingered the bruises; the skin slick, slightly gritty against his touch. Kronos held quite still, breathing deliberately, carefully. He wasn't quite sure where to begin. His wide, acute gaze seemed to falter as it ran across the still form. Then, sliding his dagger free, Kronos carefully eased Methos onto his side and sliced through the bindings that had pulled both shoulders out of joint. Breathing carefully, certain that he wanted this done while Methos was unfeeling, he lifted first one arm, and then the other, twisting each joint back into place with strong, sure movements, the ugly sound of success loud in the windowless place.

Kronos wiped the sweat from his face and pushed the heavy, awkward body back. He stared at the other bindings, then picking up his knife, cut with cold, impersonal competence through the leather, peeling away the deeply embedded strands one at a time.

There was little else he could do. He eased the blindfold off, and gently pulled out the metal piercing each nipple, then picking up a beaker of water, settled down cross-legged at the dead man's side, hands folded into his lap, face quite impassive, every emotion carefully guarded.

Time passed. Eventually Methos moaned softly, and Kronos' eyes regained their focus and he reached out, touching the cold skin of one arm. "Hello, Methos."

In reply the dazed eyes merely blinked owlishly at him.

"Caspian won't be back yet." Kronos dipped his fingers into the water, then reached forward and delicately let his fingers slide over the dry lips, waited until Methos moved very slightly into the offered caress, his tongue sliding out to lick at the moisture.

After a moment, Kronos held the beaker up, one hand under thin shoulders in support, letting Methos drink his fill until he fell back gasping for breath.

"Kronos..." The word was a mockery, the voice cracked and broken.

"Caspian's more inventive than I would have believed."

A shiver ran through Methos' body, and he closed his eyes. "Do you have to sound so admiring?"

Kronos touched a finger to the underneath of the stubbled chin and pushed gently until the eyes opened. "I don't admire him."

"No?"

"No.

"What then?"

"Envy, maybe."

Methos shuddered, then slowly and painfully levered himself upwards until he was sitting opposite his brother. With every breath his nostrils flared slightly, and his face was grey, skin pulled tight over sharp bones. "What do you want?"

Kronos smiled.

Closing his eyes, Methos lowered his head into his cupped hands. Every line of his body reflected weariness beyond belief, his spirit worn to the nub by the long hours he had survived. After a moment he asked again, his voice muffled, soft. "What do you want of me?"

Kronos sighed, titling his head back, peering at the cracked and smoke-blackened ceiling. He didn't answer.

Curling his hands around his arms, Methos lifted his head, and seemed to close his eyes momentarily, as if in sudden pain. Then he spoke quietly, almost evenly, with all the assurance of a man walking on brittle glass. "Are you going to continue where he finished?"

"No."

Methos seemed to hold quite still, then a tremor ran through his limbs. He looked up slowly, as if not quite believing. "Then tell me why you are here!"

His face unclouded by feeling, Kronos took a long breath, then shrugged. "Perhaps I just wanted to see you."

"Are you mocking me?" Methos asked suspiciously.

"No."

The intent gaze was quite discomfiting. Instead of meeting it Methos forced himself to stand, the process as painful to watch as it was to endure. "Go away Kronos, he'll be back for the rest of me soon."

"No he won't."

Methos laughed, the sound short-lived and harsh, then he held quite still, one hand resting against the rough wall, hope a flame burning in his face. He breathed in tightly, then let the breath go as he asked, "Has it been the two days?"

"He won't be back."

"Don't tell me the two days are up, I can't have been here that long - though the gods know it has felt more like a thousand years." Methos leaned heavily on the wall, his voice trailing off to almost nothing.

"Caspian has done with you."

Confused, Methos could only ask again, the unsteady fingers of one hand pressed to his temple, "But, are the two days over?"

"Not in time as measured by the sun, but by my own reckoning, yes."

"But..."

"Would you rather stay here?" Kronos gestured around the room, his hand lingering on the instruments of pain, the blood that splattered the walls and floor.

Methos straightened, the answer quite simple regardless of whatever Kronos was planning; anything was better than this. "No."

"Then trust me."

Eyes narrowing, Methos stared at his companion, a frown digging deep between his eyebrows. "Trust you?"

"Is that such a strange concept?"

Methos shivered.

"I could leave you here." Kronos came to his feet and paced lightly towards the naked man. "I could stay, fuck you along with Caspian, hurt you - I could do that in ways he could never even dream of..." He reached out and skimmed his fingers down a tense arm, bringing his fingers over to touch where blood still marked where the nipple had been pierced. "I could do so much that you would hate. I could make you hate me. Or I could wash your body, let you sleep, then when you wake kiss you, slide my body into yours and make you come calling out my name in delight." He smiled, the softness in his eyes a lie. "Is there really a choice, Methos?"

"Would I be allowed one anyway?"

The smile again, iron in the steady gaze.

Methos looked around the dark room, remembering degradation, remembering the misery Caspian had inflicted with such a lack of grace. Was there a choice? Not really, not with sanity as an aspiration. "I can bathe?"

"I'd rather you did - though the bed-linen is yours, so if you'd prefer to sleep as you are..."

"No."

"Come along." Kronos turned, moving to the door and opening it wide. "After you..."

"What about Caspian?"

"I'll deal with him while you sleep. Come on!"

Methos straightened his shoulders, then pushed away from the wall, his bare feet silent on the earthen floor. Without glancing aside, he stepped past Kronos and walked towards the stairs, his strange sense of self-betrayal quite hidden from the world.

**

They walked through the house together, the pace slow as Methos refused any assistance. His own rooms were at the top of wide, elegant stairs and he entered them feeling as if finding refuge. But the room was full of Kronos' belongings, his clothes piled in corners, his spare knives by the bed. Hesitating for only a moment, Methos paused, then went across to the shuttered window, sitting himself down on the wide ledge that ran before it. Immediately his thoughts began to drift.

Still at the door, Kronos watched him through discerning eyes. He watched the thin body lean back against stone and blood-dark fingers begin to rub at the skin of one thigh. "I'll go and arrange hot water." There was no response, the sharp profile as still as if he hadn't spoken at all. Frowning slightly, he turned away, saying, "I won't be long."

Kronos left the bed-chamber and hurried down the stairs, shouting for one of the slaves. A man appeared looking flustered. "I want hot water enough for a bath - how soon can it be ready?"

"There's some ready, master, though..."

"What?" Kronos snapped.

"It is already spoken for..."

"Not now it isn't. Fill the bath in the largest room, I'll talk to the others."

The slave bowed quickly, then scurried off. With a faint glare of impatience Kronos went to find his brothers. They were playing knuckle-bones on the mosaic floor of Methos' library. Both heads looked up as he entered.

"Which of you wanted the water?"

"I did." Caspian grinned, it was clear he was winning.

"You'll have to wait until more is heated."

"Why?" A frown of anger wasn't allowed to become real.

"Because I need it for Methos."

"For Methos!" Caspian was on his feet. "I haven't done with him yet - my two days are not finished!"

"Yes they are."

"Why?"

"Because I say so." Kronos paced slowly to one side, his eyes fixed on Caspian's. "And because you were bored with him, weren't you?"

"Bored?" Caspian's frown deepened.

"Very bored. You had your fun, your revenge. He died often enough and you used him to slake your lust." Kronos walked on, circling Caspian, his eyes forcing the other man to keep the eye-contact, to turn in a circle. "You don't need him any more, any more would be an effort, and you want to go into the city, to visit the whore-houses, don't you."

"I want to go whoring..."

"And have you finished with Methos?"

"He'd become a bore, I couldn't even make him beg..."

"Go to the whores, take Silas." The circle was done, and Kronos stood still, waiting a heart-beat of time with his eyes still locked with Caspian, then he turned to Silas. The big man was studying his fingers intently. "Silas?"

After a moment he looked up, a soft smile on his face. "I haven't had a good whore in a while. We'll be gone most of the night, maybe all of it." There was a sort of question in his voice.

"Good. Maybe you will need tomorrow as well." Kronos smiled at him and nodded, then he clapped Caspian on the shoulder. "Brothers! Have a good time in the city!"

Caspian blinked, then gave a wide grin. "The city! Come on Silas, lets see what the Egyptian women taste like..."

"Don't kill anyone that can be traced to you." The warning was quietly spoken, but Caspian nodded. "We don't want to have to leave here yet, understand?"

Caspian nodded, and laughing, no thought of Methos in his head, put his arm around Silas' shoulders and led him out of the room.

Alone, Kronos breathed deep, then gave a small sigh, before retracing his steps to the one who mattered most.

**

In the bed-chamber, Methos still sat in the window, his form as motionless as one of the statues he seemed to love so well. Kronos walked softly into the room, seeing the wide, low bed with its soft draperies, the torches unlit in their sconces, the carved couches and painted

table with its array of scrolls and pens and wide comfortable chair that would be easy to sit in to read or write. Part of him looked at these trappings of civilisation and scorned them, part of him wondered what it would be like to live here and feel at home in the way that Methos so clearly did.

He walked across the inlaid floor and halted at his brother's side. "Methos..."

No reaction.

"Methos." Slightly louder. This time the angular profile turned and darkly clouded eyes looked up at him. "There'll be hot water soon."

A nod in answer. Kronos let his mind rant, but he only crouched by the bare, filthy legs and rested his hand on one strong thigh.

The eyes focused as if seeing him for the first time. "Kronos?"

"You'll be better after you're clean." Kronos smoothed his fingers over skin and made a face as he realised it was chilled to his touch. "And warm." Yet the day was hot. It was long past noon, yet the shutters were closed to keep out the heat, leaving the room in muted light.

"Maybe."

"You will." Kronos lifted a hand and stroked Methos' face. "I'll bathe you, then..."

"No!"

"Why no?" Kronos smiled. "I promise I won't take advantage..."

"Kronos...I can't..." the rough voice broke off and Methos shook his head.

"Can't what?"

Methos swallowed, then took hold of the hand cupping his face. He seemed to consider, almost beginning to say something, then at the last minute changing his mind and answering quite differently. "You don't have to do this."

"I want to! And you know I always do what I want."

A nod.

About to say something, Kronos stood abruptly as a soft knock sounded at the door. He stood, putting himself in front of the seated man. "Yes?"

The slave never looked up off the floor. He came as far as the doorway, then bowed low. "The water is ready, master."

"Good. Prepare some food and bring it here, then stay below stairs for the rest of the night."

"Yes, sir..." It sounded as if the order was a relief. The slave backed away then was gone.

"Come on." Kronos turned back. "I'm a good body-slave!"

Methos turned on him a glance of total disbelief that didn't fade even when Kronos looked affronted. "You've never served anyone in your life, Kronos!"

An expansive shrug. "No. But I've been served often enough, I'm sure I know what to do." He grinned suddenly. "I bet you're glad this is such a decadent city - a cold bath wouldn't be much fun."

Methos gave a small snort of something close to amusement. "No." He walked away, aware that Kronos was following him into the adjoining room. The bath was raised on small feet by the wall, it was full of water and steam curled gently into the air. Methos sighed, and felt his muscles begin to relax at the mere sight of it.

"Stand still." Kronos was holding a jar of oil. "I'll clean you off first..."

Methos closed his eyes for a moment, bracing himself. There was no way he'd get rid of Kronos, not when he was this determined. And it would be good to be clean again... He caught Kronos' smile, and shivered slightly as he approached. He stood quite still, utterly wearied, every muscle aching, his thoughts a whirl of confusion. The oil was warm against his skin, poured lightly across his shoulders to drip down his back and arms. Then Kronos walked around and repeated the process, the oil trickling down his chest, snagging in the dark hair clustering at his groin. Methos looked at his brother through narrowed eyes, seeing the pleasure he was finding in the task, somehow seeing the person Kronos might have been, once, a very long time ago. Then the startling blue eyes met his, all the self-contained, casual intensity levelled at him. Methos tried to breathe, but found his next breath trapped somewhere under his ribs.

Strong, elegant hands touched him, rubbing the oil into his skin with long, smooth strokes. Methos closed his eyes and found the darkness helped him breathe. More oil warmed his skin. The hands eased it over him, their touch firm, easy, down his back, buttocks, thighs. At a soft command he lifted his arms, then turned, then turned back. After a while every inch of his skin glistened, the oil pooling between his toes.

"Lie on the bench..."

Methos blinked open his eyes and obeyed, lying down carefully, pressing his face into his folded arms, the darkness sparkling behind his eyes as Kronos scraped the oil and filth from his body, his skill with the sand and strigil as adept as he had promised it would be. Methos turned when told, then lay still as an anointed corpse whilst Kronos laboured.

His face was left till last, the sure fingers light against his skin, easing along the muscles, massaging temples, jaw, cleaning the delicate grooves around his nose and eyes. Kronos went away for a moment, then returned with a flat-bladed knife. He held it loosely in his hand, showing no threat. "I'll shave you, if you want?"

Methos narrowed his eyes to focus. Then he nodded.

The blade was cold against his skin, rasping the fine stubble away in long, smooth strokes. Kronos hands were warm though, warm and certain; they tilted his head this way then that as he worked, his breath soft against Methos' forehead as he bent to his task.

With a last touch it was done. Then warm water cleaned his hair, rinsed his skin. Finally he was allowed to stand, though his legs were unsteady as a new-born colt's. He was still capable of thought, though there was little worth thinking about other than the man who touched him so easily, who led him like a child to the water and helped him climb into the great tub. Methos eased into the water, the pleasure making him sigh softly.

Through almost closed eyes he watched his companion potter around the room. Steam curled up from the water and caught on his lashes, making him blink. There was such safety in knowing Kronos was there. Safety and contentment.

To have come from Caspian to this. It was almost impossible to comprehend. He sank an inch further into the water, feeling residual pain finally easing away. Kronos was still there, his contained movements utterly sure as he moved around, his face as serene, as enigmatic as a god's effigy.

Water lapping around his neck, Methos watched a man he knew to be a butcher, a man who killed for pleasure, who loved chaos above all else, and finally, irrevocably, identified the emotion he'd struggled against for so long.

It couldn't be so...

Methos held still, as utterly unmoving as if hunted through open desert.

How was it possible to love such a man? How?

Yet he did...

Cold clutched sharply at his heart

...loved him and somehow, unknowingly - but that really made no difference at all - had run away from him only to leave a trail so clear that a child could have followed it, let alone this man. The realisation was acute and absolutely certain. Some part of him, some hidden, shameless part, had wanted - needed - Kronos so badly that he had fooled himself and everyone else with consummate ease.

For whatever reason, he had wanted Kronos to find him. Had made sure he would.

His body chilling despite the water's warmth, Methos struggled with his own double-edged desires, and knew quite clearly that he despised himself. A laugh bubbled inside him. It explained so much, this seeing of the truth. The laugh was strangling inside him, and all at once he knew it wasn't amusement at his own stupidity that turned his insides into knots, it was aching grief.

He closed burning eyes, moisture squeezing free to trickle down his cheek, catching on the line of his jaw. He didn't want to go to pieces now, not here in front of Kronos...but a sound

slipped from his lips before he could trap it inside.

A hand touched his shoulder, warm and sure, stroking where the joint had so recently been dislocated then healed. The light, beautiful voice was full of what sounded so like concern, "Are you all right?"

Methos nodded, but the emotions tearing him apart couldn't be tucked away or concealed. He groaned, the sound seemingly ripped from his body.

"Methos!"

"Don't..." With a surge of water Methos tried to turn from the offered comfort, but strong hands held him still. Breathing hard, almost lost, he peered up through water-spiked lashes and saw Kronos leaning over him, sitting on the edge of the bath, his eyes full of something as close to compassion as they ever had been.

A sob stole away the last of his composure. Pulling his hands over his face Methos gave way to the horror, and curling forward wept as if his soul was tearing free from his body.

Dimly he felt hands slide under his arms and lever him up, even managing to add a degree of effort of his own. He stepped from the bath and almost fell, though Kronos was there and a large towel wrapped around his body. There was no more weeping, there was nothing.

Sightless he went, led to the wide bed. Urged to lie upon it he curled onto his side, his eyes open, seeing only shadows. The towel was taken away, replaced by covers, then a warm body settled close and arms came around him.

After a while the shivering abated. As if shaken too hard by realisation his mind was clear of any thought at all. He blinked wearily, the weight of absolute exhaustion pressing him down, then closing his eyes on nausea, lying isolated in the curve of Kronos arm, he fell heavily into something like sleep.

**

The dream came out of nowhere. He was naked, bound, in a strange place of tall green trees and wide open skies; mountains sheered up to one side, and fell away to a distant sea on the other. It was cold. The light breeze swirled against his skin and tugged at the skirts of the woman waiting for him in the clearing.

Cassandra.

He knew her, for all that she was different here. In her hand she held a sword and she was waiting for him to come to her.

The grass was damp under his feet as he walked, it bit roughly into his knees as he knelt before her.

Panic made his sleeping body twist, but his dream self was utterly calm, prepared in a way that was frightening, for this was death. He fought to scream. But silence held.

Then the sword was cold at his throat.

He didn't want to die. Not here, wherever here was. He didn't... A scream ripped from his chest, but no sound emerged, the absolute silence remaining unbroken. His dream self held still, calm, waiting as the blade rose slowly, lifting in readiness for the death-blow...

Then it all changed.

He turned his face to one side, turning to watch the blade's flashing descent, but instead of Cassandra there was Kronos and he was smiling as the sword in his hands came down.

Pain cracked across his face and Methos woke, his own scream still shockingly loud in the air.

"Methos!"

A gasping breath, the world reasserting its solidity, and Methos shuddered into awareness. He was sitting on the wide bed of his own room, Kronos was knelt before him.

"Methos?"

A nod was all he could manage. His cheek ached. With an unsteady hand he touched it.

"I had to wake you somehow."

Another nod.

"What was it?"

Methos shuddered, then wiped both hands over his face. He was sweating. "I was about to be beheaded."

"Ah."

"By Cassandra..."

"The whore. I know." Kronos nodded to himself. "You called out her name."

A sharp breath of remembrance. "Did I?"

In sudden irritation Kronos leant forward. "I thought we had settled that matter long since?"

"We did." Methos finally looked up, his eyes meeting his inquisitor's seemingly without qualm. Yes, they had settled the matter of the slave-girl he had grown fond of - Kronos had tried to take her for himself, but she had knifed him and run, leaving Methos to take her punishment. Fair was fair. And it had settled the matter. Though maybe it had begun the process of his own dissatisfaction with the Horsemen. Methos shrugged, "I don't know why she should be the one..."

"You feel guilt at the oddest things, brother!" Kronos uncurled his legs, took a long look at Methos' white face, then stepped off the bed, returning in a moment with a beaker of water. "I told you - it's far easier not to feel any at all."

"I'm sure!"

Offering the water, Kronos commanded, "Drink."

Methos reached out, his long fingers curling around both cup and hand, sliding against Kronos skin. He blinked, then the beaker was firmly in his grasp and the contact was lost.

Hating himself and everything he felt, every dark emotion that this man inspired, Methos drank, wishing in the most secret recesses of his heart that Kronos would simply push him back on the bed and...

Arousal caught his breath. The dream still lingered, the feel of the sword against his neck, Kronos smiling...

He swallowed despair, mouth dry despite the water. Kronos was naked, walking back across the room, his body lit in extremes of light and shadow by the lamps. With a start, Methos realised it must be dark, night having fallen while he slept. He ignored his body's craving and asked quite normally, "How long did I sleep?"

"A few hours. There's food here, want some?"

His stomach rumbled.

"I shall take that as a yes." Kronos grinned over his shoulder, amused, though his eyes reflected more conflicted desires. He piled a dish with various foodstuffs, then took them to the bed. "Here..."

Sitting down, Kronos watched as Methos took the plate and began to eat. Strong, elegant fingers picked at the meat, the bread, the spiced and stuffed small birds that Silas liked to eat in one mouthful. Oil from the roasted lamb glistened on lips that opened to show white teeth biting delicately at a bone. Methos licked his lips, then pushed the plate onto the floor, bending sideways, his back a ripple of muscle as he straightened.

Without any comment, Kronos passed him a cloth, and watched as he wiped his hands, his mouth.

"Enough?"

"For now." Methos wiped his mouth once more, then sat quite still. He seemed to stare into nothing, his eyes unfocused, his breathing shallow, uneven. Then, quite suddenly, he stood up.

"Where are you going?" Kronos asked before he had taken a single pace.

"To take a piss."

Kronos nodded at the muttered answer, then lay back on the bed, anticipating.

In the next room, alone, even if only for a moment, Methos leant on the cold plaster wall and shivered. The sleep had healed his body, though he still felt tired, but his mind felt raw, as if

scoured by the emotions that fought within him. How could he not, when everything he wanted, everything he hated and feared, lay sprawled on his bed awaiting his return. And what was worse, he wanted to go back so badly he could feel his muscles running with fine tremors of need.

Addict.

Coward.

He closed his eyes and yearned for a strength he couldn't even envisage.

The strength to take Kronos' head.

But the mere thought made him nauseous. Kill his brother? May as well take a knife to his own throat and beg some stranger to cut.

Yet he had to get away. He had to, for his sanity's sake as much as anything. Yes he could ride with the Horsemen, go back to the killing, go back and let loose the wildness within himself, for it was there, and Kronos could call it to hand as easily as he could his favourite hound. To go back to a life he had once loved but now saw as nothing other than a thousand years of carnage, all of it nothing more than a tomb for other peoples hopes... To go back and fall under Kronos' potent spell again... He would become worse than Caspian - and be mad within the year. Of that he was certain. If he was sane now, which was something he wasn't at all sure of.

Somehow he had to persuade Kronos to leave him alone. That way at least there was a chance he might be able to find some measure of balance, some thread of lucidity that would let him become the person he wanted to be.

Did that seem possible? Or easy?

Not at all.

So what then?

Then with a fast rush of realisation, he knew how it could be done. Straightening slightly, one hand pressed to the wall as the room spun around him, he could almost have smiled.

If Kronos could track him anywhere - aided by his own pathetic desire to be found - then he had to stop Kronos from looking for him. He had to die. Not in reality, but Kronos had to believe he was dead.

Could he do that, could he make it work? Somehow...

"Methos?"

He flinched as his name was called, suddenly breathless in the shadows as if Kronos could know what he was plotting. But he couldn't, he had powers but he could not hear another's thoughts. The gods be thanked for small mercies.

"I'm nearly done..." Hurriedly he used the pot, the pressure in his bladder quite real.

To die.

It would mean he had a finite amount of time with Kronos, then it would be over forever. He stilled, pain piercing his gut. It would be like walking from one life into another, or from one death into another; the sepulchre that was his life merely dragged from one place to another.

But he would be sane. Wouldn't he?

"Methos!"

Shuddering gently, he shook himself off and went back into the bedroom.

He stilled by the door, watching. Kronos was lying on the bed, his hands linked behind his head. At the sound of Methos' soft footsteps he turned, his supple body easing onto its side, head propped on one bent arm. He was aroused, his cock curving up from the dark hair that shadowed his groin.

"I was thinking of you..."

"Were you."

"Mmm. Remember when you were being fucked by Caspian..."

"I'd rather not, thanks all the same." Methos shrugged and walked across to the pitcher of water that stood on one table. He poured himself a cupful and drank, as naturally as if he wasn't aware of the intense gaze blistering into his back, as if his thoughts weren't tied in knots that rivalled the ones twisting in his belly.

"I watched for a while. Neither of you knew."

"Really." There was nowhere to go except the bed, so Methos turned. "Did you enjoy yourself?" His voice was breathy, a rasp marring its smooth timbre.

"I didn't know if I wanted to be him, or to kill him for what he was doing. I won't let you go again, Methos. I don't think I can even let Caspian have you any more. I think you have bewitched me..."

"Kronos, if there is a witch here, it is you not me."

Methos smiled as Kronos laughed.

"Maybe. I sent Caspian off to the whore-houses. He is so very easy to persuade." A slight shrug of dismissal, then Kronos sat up, his legs crossed before him. "You though, you I can't influence, can I?"

"Kronos..." Methos shook his head. "You influence me just by being."

"Do I make you want me?"

"Yes."

"Even now?"

"Yes - even though I don't want to."

"Good. Come here."

"Kronos..."

"I thought you wanted me?"

"I could hate you..."

"Or love me... Methos, come here?"

Methos shuddered delicately at Kronos' smile. In a second the lithe body was off the bed and at his side. "That's it, isn't it, you want to be asked."

"No." There that was better, definite irritation.

"You're lying again." Kronos reached out and took hold of the sharp-boned face. "Try and tell me you don't want me." With his free hand he skimmed over one nipple, smiling as the skin of Methos' chest rippled with goose-flesh. "That you don't want this..." He closed the distance between them and kissed, his fingers digging into muscle until the lips parted under the caress.

It was soft and gentle, and the pain of it made Methos shudder. He opened his mouth under the expert coercion and moaned softly as the tongue delicately flicked its way around his lips before twisting slowly inside. Kronos' body was warm against him, his skin sleek, scented of oil and arousal, the faint sweetness of sweat enough to make Methos' cock lift eagerly.

Kronos backed away slightly, a hand still on one tense shoulder. "Go and lie on the bed."

Nodding before he even knew what his reaction would be, Methos turned, one hand flexing in a slow rhythm at his side. At the bed he paused, head bowed, shoulders so tight they must be cramped. Then he looked back.

"Kronos..."

His brother was watching him.

"Kronos, I..."

"Tell me."

The distance was closed, another body was near enough for Methos to feel its warmth.

"What do you want of me, Methos?"

A pause, Methos' eyes averted, then he lifted his head and demanded softly. "Hit me."

Kronos hesitated only for a second, then drawing back his arm he slapped one side of Methos' face, quite hard, making him gasp. "Like that?"

A nod.

This time the blow knocked Methos back onto the bed, his body curling sideways as he fell, blood beginning to trickle from his lips. All at once Kronos was there, kissing the blood away, licking the drops that had spattered his jaw, before joining their mouths in earnest, the kiss hard and demanding and without any idea of mercy. Mouths wide they devoured each other, Kronos' hands cupping Methos' face, holding it tight, tilting it to find the sweetest angle for his lips and tongue, feeling the muscles moving under his palms, the bones shift in desperation as he gave his mouth to Kronos' pleasure.

They were both breathing hard when the kiss was broken. Kronos searched his face, then climbed off the bed, only to return before Methos could object his leaving.

A knife glittered sullenly in his hand.

"Do you want this?"

Methos closed his eyes in pain, then forced his swollen lips to answer with the ragged remains of truth. "Yes."

"How much?"

"However much you want." He stiffened as the cold knife was held against his neck, making him angle his head back as the edge caught on his skin, breath tangling in his lungs.

Kronos was slit-eyed, desire dark in their depths, his own breathing far from steady. "Gods, you are so beautiful..." He snicked the knife into skin, smiling softly as Methos bit back a moan. Then he bent his mouth to the cut and licked, trailing the tip of his tongue along the path of the wound, sipping the blood as if it were nectar, until the healing darted through it, the energy making his own skin tingle. With a trail of gentle bites he closed their mouths again, and took another long, languorous kiss, sucking the full lower lip into his mouth, biting it with sharp, careful teeth.

He raised his head: a smear of blood ran across his cheek. Seeing it Methos snarled one hand in the long, dark hair, and pulling him back down licked it away. His skin was smooth, soft under his tongue, tasting slightly of the oil he must have used to shave. Cheek to cheek, he held still, then whispered into the fall of amber-scented hair. "Do whatever you want, I want you to..."

Then he released Kronos and closed his eyes, waiting for the punishment to begin.

Punishment?

The thought almost made him laugh out loud. He was so skilled at fooling himself... Soon he would have to leave this place, this comfort, this man, and if he lived to be ten thousand he might never find another who understood him so well. This was more than punishment, it

was going to be delight. To find both in one place... He shivered; punishment and pleasure, guilt-free desire, all here for the taking.

In another world he might almost have been happy. Here, he was simply aroused almost to the point of release, all the despair and all the misery tightly secured behind a wall of need.

He moaned softly as Kronos moved off him.

"Kneel."

The command was soft, almost a whisper. Methos obeyed, scrabbling onto all-fours, finding the centre of the bed and kneeling. Partly he wondered what Kronos would do, mostly he was without any thought at all. They had played so many variations of this theme, at so many times. The bed, the room, the lack of sand, were all just luxuries, they would have done the same in a cave, a tent, a forest clearing. There were some places he would never be able to visit again. Not once he had left, once Kronos believed he was dead and all the world held was the prospect of hiding forever.

Methos pushed the thought away.

This was now. This pleasure.

Now.

As long as he was with Kronos he would belong to Kronos. As he always had. Maybe always would, however far they were apart in either time or distance.

He shivered as Kronos came to kneel at his side.

"Spread your legs wide apart, I want to feel you."

Sliding his hands behind his back in a gesture of submission, crossing them there, holding them tight against each other, Methos spread apart his knees until the muscles of his thighs protested. The hands that touched him were warm, the knife abandoned for the moment. One touched his chest, the other his back, palms held flat to flesh, smoothing gently, as if feeling the skeleton beneath the thin skin.

As one they dipped, one to cup his tight-drawn balls, the other to slide between his buttocks, finger delving almost into him but not quite, just toying with the puckered skin, making him arch in slow appreciation. Then both hands moved on, almost meeting, pressing up behind his scrotum as one thumb was pushed slowly inside his arse.

This time he moaned aloud.

"Methos..."

He turned and found a kiss, wet and wide-mouthed, absolutely commanding. The thumb began to fuck him and his moans were trapped in the heat of Kronos mouth.

"Do you want me to have you?"

Methos nodded, sweat beading on his forehead, trickling down his temples to be trapped in the close-cropped ends of his hair.

"Soon..." The hand at his front skimmed up and pinched one nipple hard as the thumb slipped from his body's grasping embrace. "Kiss me again."

It was a simple command to obey, he loved the taste of the man, sharp and mysterious, unlike anything else he had ever encountered. His eyes were closed, his breath slow as Kronos broke away, he didn't see the hand that hit hard enough to knock him off balance.

Dazed, the world spinning around him, Methos knew that Kronos had moved. He opened his mouth as soon as he felt the soft cock-head nudge against his lips. It slid in deep as Kronos moved to straddle his shoulders; deep and without respite until Kronos sighed.

He also placed the knife against Methos' cheek.

"You're my slave, Methos. You always have been. Slave to my skill with this," he tilted his hips down making the struggling man choke. "And this," he snicked skin with the blade's edge. "Whose are you?"

Methos looked up, his eyes watery with distress. There was no way he could answer, but he blinked, something Kronos willingly took as assent.

"Mine." He sighed deeply, beginning to fuck the open throat as he would any other available orifice, pulling almost free, his heavy cock glistening with saliva, before pushing home, using the weight of his body to tunnel deep, his scrotum pressing tight against Methos' chin with every lunge. After a moment Kronos shuddered and let himself fall free of the still searching mouth. "You're too good, slave, I might have come..."

Slave. Methos knew the word for truth. He crawled after the hard evidence of Kronos arousal, his mouth eager, but earned a hard slap for his pains. Dimly, he remembered that this was meant to be unwilling. The idea made him laugh, though only the faintest smile reached his face. He pressed his heated cheek to the bed-covers, and waited. A shiver ran through him once.

Kronos climbed off the bed, went away then returned, placing something down on the table by the side, though he stayed standing on the floor a hand resting lightly on the dip in Methos' back. He stroked the palm up, then down, curving his fingers around fullness. The body under his hand was tense, seemingly oblivious to anything but the touch of skin against skin, the eyes unfocused as a seer lost in divination.

He slapped skin hard, the sound loud after such silence, the pale skin reddening immediately. "Turn over and move to the edge of the bed."

The slap shocked Methos from his dream state. He hurriedly obeyed, settling by Kronos, his arse on the edge of the bed, his back flat.

"Open your legs." Kronos nodded, then stood between them, taking hold under each knee and lifting until the legs were hooked over his shoulders and his cock butted against the lifting

curve of arse. He shifted slightly, bending Methos further over.

There was no sign at all of any feeling on Kronos' face; he was utterly intent, seemingly without passion or lust. He watched Methos with the care of a hunting cat, his gaze absorbing every detail. The tension was still there in the waiting body, a slight edge of fear - real or imagined - tinting the dilated eyes.

After a moment he leant forward and put his fingers to Methos' mouth. "Suck."

Methos sucked the fingers in, Kronos reminded immediately of how delightfully skilled the man was with his tongue. It slipped between his fingers, licking industriously, avidly, the feeling as sensuous as anything he had ever encountered. There were a thousand reasons why Methos could never be allowed to leave his side, and this was one, the simple ability he had to make Kronos remember he was alive by the simplest of means.

Finesse instead of crude violence.

Pain tempered by delicacy.

All at once he smiled: that smile. Freeing his hand he smeared the saliva that coated it onto his cock and holding himself tight pushed into Methos' body in one sure, sudden movement. He watched the lightly fleshed, blade-thin body arch against the intrusion, watched as the patrician face fractured into pain and desire. He backed away, then pushed home again, flexing his hips in little jabs until he was driving in deep and Methos was moaning softly, one wrist held to his mouth, teeth biting whitely into skin.

Closing his eyes Kronos sighed. He held still, feeling the tightness around his cock, feeling the flex of muscles around him. Absolutely in control, through his lashes he peered at Methos, seeing him lost again, his breathing completely erratic, his skin sheened beautifully with sweat.

Careful not to lose the depth of penetration, he reached sideways and picked something off the table just by his side. It glimmered in the lamp-light as he placed it on the sheet. He shifted again, muscles rippling as he eased Methos legs higher, then he bent forward, the movement driving him deeper as at the same time he pinched each nipple. Methos convulsed as if struck by lightning, the tendons in his neck straining as he arched back, the bones stark under the skin.

"Enough?"

The answer was a rough cry of denial, a hoarsely whispered, "No!"

Kronos rolled the tight points of flesh between finger and thumb, pulling hard, then pinched each one viciously with his nails. The whole of Methos' chest flushed dark red and his cock jumped where it was pressed tight to his own belly by the weight of Kronos body.

"Don't come!"

Dazed, Methos shuddered, but took a deep breath. After a moment he calmed enough to lick his bitten lips.

"Look at me..."

Blinking against the light, Methos looked up, meeting Kronos eyes, and only belatedly seeing what he held in his hand.

His indrawn breath echoed in the quiet room.

"Caspian used these, didn't he?"

Methos could only nod, his eyes fixed on the long slivers of metal.

"So will I."

Methos shivered, sweat trickling down his face.

"But where?" He lay the point against skin and began tracing patterns, a fine red line charting the metal point's path. "Your nipples - or your cock..." He straightened slightly and placed the metal flat against Methos' dark glans. And grinned as the hard spear of flesh pulsed. "Or your balls..." He traced down, bending back, pressing down and gently just piercing the skin.

Slyly he looked up, watched Methos biting his own lips ragged. "No..." And he was leaning forward again, regaining the deep contact that made Methos squirm, taking hold of one nipple in his fingers, pulling it tight. Without warning he pushed the metal spike through the skin.

Methos' body tightened so hard around him that he gasped, something like a moan whispering under his breath. Just contained enough to still know what he was doing he forced his fingers to continue, until the metal protruded from each side of Methos' tight-drawn nipple. Kronos breathed deeply, then reaching to one side he repeated the process with the other, his hands close to unsteady as they drove the point through the skin, making Methos call out, his body arching away from the bed, his hands clutching hard at the sheet that lay sweat-soaked under his body.

There was hardly any blood, but what there was Kronos bent and licked away. Each time his mouth came in contact with the metal the body underneath him shuddered delicately. A hand touched his head, fingering through the long strands, pressing him close.

A shift of muscles that almost bent Methos' supple body double and they were kissing again, wildly, joined by passion and need, the taste of Methos' blood sweet in both their mouths, his pain goading them both to a place where no one else in the entire world existed.

Kronos pulled away from the kiss, for the first time his face showed the depth of his emotions, his pale eyes darkened by a need he admitted to no one, the scar running down his skin livid. Supported on his arms he stared at Methos as if he wanted to consume him. "You'll never leave me."

A groan bled from Methos' lips, his hands holding tight to the strength of Kronos shoulders.

"The only way you will leave me will be if you are dead." Kronos shuddered, his eyes glazing. "You are mine, mine..." And he began to fuck the bowed body, the rhythm hard and fast, utterly without mercy to either of them. "Mine..."

Gods, it was true. Methos arched and twisted, forcing his body onto Kronos cock as if it was life itself. He would be Kronos' until Kronos thought he was dead. And after that he would still belong to this contrary, complicated man, and all the years alone would be worth while, for he had been here, he had owned this pleasure, for this moment. Until the day someone took his head.

Sorrow and grief darkened the world, then Kronos was kissing him again, and he reached up into the caress, his arms twisting round the strong neck, his body shuddering as the cock inside him spat fire into his belly, and his own pleasure peaked, sweat like tears damp on his face.

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Caspian and Silas returned from the brothels in a good mood, they were laughing together as they walked into the wide elegant room they had first found Methos in. They both slowed as they entered, for Methos was there now, dressed, lounging on one couch as Kronos sat on another.

"Brothers! Was it good?"

Silas grinned roundly, though his eyes hardly left the austere features before him, his mind wondering at the distance he saw in the cold, narrowed eyes. "It was fun..."

"And we didn't kill anyone..."

Their words tumbled over each other to tell the story of their whoring: the girls; the boys; the new and exciting delights this city of the world had to offer a rich man. Kronos laughed with them, Methos smiled once, lazily, almost as if at some private joke.

When Caspian settled on a painted chair, making the wood creak, Methos stood up and went to him. Dressed in his usual leathers, he looked strange with the newly short hair, but Caspian hardly noticed, he was too busy feeling uneasy under the levelled stare.

Then Methos smiled, and Caspian breathed.

Methos held out his hand. "No more quarrels, brother?"

Caspian nodded, and held out his arm. "None."

They clasped hands, the moment held only as long as it took for the truth to be accepted. Then Methos stepped back, returning to his couch, his eyes glancing over Kronos as he walked.

But Kronos was on his feet. "Brothers, I told you Methos would return to us, and he has."

Silas pounded his axe handle on the floor, grinning as Methos looked back at him, the hard face softening for a brief moment.

"Come, form the circle of our brotherhood, and remember our vows." Kronos stood still. Silas was there first, on his feet and ambling across the floor. He nodded happily as Kronos clasped his arm. After a second, Caspian followed, holding out his arm, grunting as Silas' great hand grabbed him.

Methos was last. He walked towards the circle of his past without expression, his body graceful, his mind locked inside its own sarcophagus of grief. He curled his fingers around the hard muscles of Kronos arm, felt Caspian complete the circle.

He smiled.

END

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