

Things Never Fall into Place Easily

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Things Never Fall into Place Easily

by [EtoileGarden](#)

Summary

A fic about what might have happened upon arriving in Roa. Explicit Costis/Kamet.

Notes

(I haven't written fanfiction in seven years but apparently Thick as Thieves whisked me into a fic frenzy)

Thank you to ewokshootsfirst for being such a sweet beta.

Things never fall into place easily, or quickly. People work very hard to look as if they're immediately comfortable with new surroundings and situations, so as not to appear weak. Even slaves, or maybe slaves especially, knew this, so Kamet knew this.

If your master came to you and told you that you were to trek with him across the oceans into a strange barbarous land, you would smile and bow your head. You would say, 'of course master'.

Because if you didn't maybe then your master would see your fear of the unknown, your unwillingness to do as commanded, and he wouldn't see that he had the upper hand (Although he always had the upper hand). He would see that you were willful enough to consider, even for a moment, not doing as you were told. He never cared if you were scared. Maybe he would put his hand on your shoulder, heavy with inflection, would say, 'I know I can trust you, Kamet.'

If your master asked you to ingratiate yourself with a barbarian court, mingle covertly with people who didn't appreciate your witty comments, ignore the stares and whispers, you would smile and bow your head. You would say, 'of course master'.

Because when you did, then maybe your master would smile back at you, would put his hand heavily on your shoulder, would say, 'I knew I could trust you, Kamet'. Your master wouldn't see your fear of the unknown, or your unwillingness to do as commanded. He would see a man (not a man, are slaves men?) who is bold, and confident. You always want to seem bold and confident in new and strange situations, this is how you earn praise for your level-headedness, this is how you avoid being taken advantage of.

Things never fall into place easily, or quickly. But in Roa, it felt different.

There had been a place waiting for them.

Near enough to the temples that it was an easy matter walking there and back without wasting too much daylight.

Far enough away that when Kamet returned in the early evenings, with light still shifting easily across the rocky land, he could feel like he was separate from his work.

No one would wake him in the middle of the night, shaking him out of his warm dreams, to do some extra work, to write another paragraph, consider another line.

Once he was home for the evening, he was home.

He wondered if Eugenides had thought of that when he had chosen the house for them, or if it were mere coincidence.

There had been a job waiting for him.

A large room, full of light and paper, bustling with people who laughed at his considered quips, who raised their eyebrows in appreciation at his knowledge, who wrote beautifully, who praised him for his attention to detail in his translations.

No one asked about his past, or seemed to care of it. The only past they cared about was that of which they were transcribing. Anyway, they were more interested in his present- could he

teach them that trick he had with his nibs, would he like a sweet roll from the kitchens, who was that soldier he was living with?

There had been a job waiting for Costis as well.

Several actually. Some days he would go through the town, out into the fields where he would train a group of gangly children, pushing their way into adulthood, how to hold a sword, how not to drop the point in third, and how to whistle with grass.

Other days he would go with Kamet into the temples where there was some disrepair, and would join the workforce there. Though he would always leave them at lunch to sit and eat with Kamet, who would complain about the fine dust Costis would inevitably shake off onto Kamet's scrolls.

When the weather was fine, and he didn't feel compelled to shift stone or correct adolescents, he would trek up the hills surrounding the town, draw up hasty maps on scraps of paper Kamet threw out, find odd rocks, and sketch out strange bugs.

So, with these readymade roles for them to slip into, with the relative familiarity of being surrounded by paper and words all day, with a companion who asked nothing of him but the occasional story, it certainly felt like things had simply fallen into place.

Or at least, Kamet knew that he wasn't feeling caught unaware, wasn't being pushed along by the urge to smile, to bow, to say, 'of course master'.

It took him a while, far too long, to realise this. To realise that he was not anxious for the dawn of each new day, that he was comfortable with his surroundings. To begin wondering if maybe he ought not to have settled into place so quickly.

Not that he wanted to leave, but more that he was uncertain why he wanted to stay. Why it was so easy to stay.

Of course, it seemed like a simple answer - safety, work, not too much work though, all the stories he could read, no caggi for dinner, no Namreen chasing him (but for his dreams). But Kamet knew, he was suspicious by nature. He was cautious by nature. He did not settle into place easily or quickly.

"Costis." he said slowly to his feet, as they walked side by side down the sandy road.

They were returning from their separate days of work, both coming from opposite sides of the town, but meeting at the beginning of the road to walk each other home.

It was a ritual, or as much as a ritual can be when it is barely a month old.

They would meet each other by the large sprawling oak at the cross roads just outside the walls. Costis would insist on taking Kamet's shoulder bag, heavy and awkward with scrolls and books he was taking home to look over before the next day. In return he'd hand Kamet his shoulder bag. If it had been a day working at the temple or the fields, it would be empty but for his water gourd, and some cloth wrappings from his lunch. If he had been wandering the hills, it would be light, but full of snips of paper, of rocks that Costis would insist on showing Kamet properly once they were home, holding it just so so that you could see the crystal in it, or the shape of it. Sometimes there would be a still warm loaf in it, or a cloth of small cakes, maybe a flagon of wine.

Costis insisted on the swapping of bags because, apparently shifting large chunks of rock around and fighting off several over exuberant children wasn't exercise enough and he had

to, 'stay in shape somehow'.

Kamet always complained, knowing that Costis was lying, but always handed his bag over with a smile, because it was a ritual, of sorts, and one he looked forward to daily.

"Kamet," Costis replied easily, not looking at his walking partner but instead at the horizon, filled with swooping birds and the sea.

"Are you glad to be here?"

"Glad to be here on this road, here in Roa, here in this world?" Costis asked, annoyingly not answering his question, turning now to smile at Kamet.

"You know I meant in Roa." Kamet scowled.

"Well I thought I did, but sometimes I feel I ought to check before I answer, in case I've misunderstood the question and end up telling you superfluous information."

Kamet continued scowling and Costis relented.

"I am glad to be here," he said simply, and Kamet wished he had asked something which would have received a more complex answer. Maybe something which would have answered his own doubts without having to voice them. Before he could decide how to do that, Costis spoke again, throwing the question back at him.

"Are you glad to be here, Kamet?"

Kamet sighed.

"I am glad to be here," he echoed.

Costis stayed silent.

Kamet glanced up at him to find Costis looking down at him questioningly.

They walked a short way further before Costis' silence became too loud, too obviously a question.

"But," Kamet said, speaking again to the ground at his feet, "I am... uneasy." he paused, uncertain how to expand on that, unsure if he needed to, because Costis was nodding.

"I half expect Namreen to jump out at us behind every tree," Costis admitted with a wry smile, "I have not been in the habit, lately, of being able to pass my afternoons without worrying too much about monarchs and their politics. Spending an entire day without even a glimpse of it is almost unbelievable."

"So, so, so." Kamet shrugged, both relieved, and further confused.

"But," Costis shifted Kamet's bag from one shoulder to the other, and shrugged as well.

"-that didn't answer the question you didn't ask, did it?"

Exhaling loudly, Kamet rolled his eyes, both amused and exasperated at Costis' talent of seemingly reading his mind. He wished he wouldn't. Or rather, he wished he wasn't so open to him. Some things ought to remain hidden.

"I am sure I don't know which question that would be, the one I didn't ask," he replied pointedly and Costis laughed and conceded the point.

They walked back to their small house the rest of the way in comfortable silence, broken only when they arrived at the door and Costis said,

"If we still have foccacia, I think I'll make us a soup to go with it."

They still had foccacia, so Costis made a thick soup with chunks of non caggi meat, and lentils. They ate without the aid of lamps, the sky still lit, and with little speaking, save for, 'pass the bread', and 's'good'.

Kamet had been taking advantage of the very last bit of the light by sitting on a short stool in their small garden, a scroll open on his lap, his finger trailing along word by scrawled word as he read.

His finger had been still for a while now, his hand relaxed on the paper as he stared off into the distance, mind no longer on ancient texts and bad handwriting.

"Wine for your thoughts?" Costis interrupted, causing Kamet to jump in shock, his hand scrunching the paper.

"Gods damn it, Costis," he hissed, hastily smoothing the paper, then rolling it back up. How a man so ... large was able to walk so quietly was truly a thing of mystery. Costis was chuckling, still holding out a goblet of watered wine for Kamet to take.

Kamet glared at him a moment, then took the goblet with a begrudging mumble of thanks as Costis crouched down to sit on the dry earth beside the stool.

He sat inelegantly, his own goblet perched on his knee, his face upturned towards the sky, eyes closed. He seemed content to be sitting in silence, silence apart from the creaking of insects and the low song of evening birds, so Kamet returned to his gaze into the distance, goblet at his lips.

Once he'd swallowed, Costis spoke,

"There's the wine, where's the thoughts?"

Kamet rolled his eyes, then his neck, still stiff from a day of bending over a desk.

"I was just thinking that this place would almost be peaceful if it weren't for some of the inhabitants."

"Ah," Costis was grinning, Kamet could hear it in his voice. "I am of course, assuming that you're speaking of the cicadas."

"Is it so boring here that you feel the need to interrupt my readings with bad jokes?"

Costis was quiet for a moment again, taking a mouthful from his goblet. He held the wine in his mouth, seemingly mulling over both what he wanted to say as well as the taste. Finally he swallowed and ignored Kamet's not-question.

“On the road today-” he began slowly, then seemed to change his mind.

“You aren’t uneasy about the Namreen finding us, or the sudden pace of our lives from political intrigue to island life. Are you?”

It was a funny habit of Costis’, to make a statement about someone, and then add quickly on to the end of it so that it came away as a question. Giving his subject a chance to deny it more easily.

“Of course I am,” Kamet denied, easily.

Costis looked at him sideways through his lashes, took another sip.

“It’s a very unsettling thing,” Kamet protested.

Costis nodded.

“It’s not what keeps me awake at night, no.” Kamet relented.

Costis didn’t reply, only waited.

“I’m not -” Kamet sighed in irritation, this is where Costis would find out just how ridiculous he was, if he hadn’t figured it out already that is.

“I’m not worried about anything,” he waved his free hand out at the world around them,

“Unless I’m asleep, I don’t give a second thought to the Namreen, I’m not worried about someone here finding out who I am and ratting me out, or about being taken away I-”

He scowled.

“I feel safe,” he spat, “But I shouldn’t. War is brewing, my ma- Nahuseresh will be plotting revenge. On me and your king. Anyone here could see me and you together and realise that we are the famous duo from the posters all through Medea. Our safety is an illusion, yet I am so content to forget about it all and be happy writing pretty words and eating bread you bake, and I-”

Costis’ hand on his leg quiets him almost immediately.

“You don’t sound very content about it,” he pointed out.

Kamet stares at Costis’ hand on his leg as he shakes his head slowly.

He had bought a ring of Miras for Costis, once he had some spare money, as a replacement for the one sold to buy freeman’s clothes, and it was on Costis’ hand now, glinting in the steadily fading light.

“Well I’m not now, but I was. I didn’t even realise I was doing it. I shouldn’t forget the dangers, just because I am glad to be here.”

“No,” Costis agreed steadily, “You shouldn’t forget the dangers, but-” he squeezed Kamet’s thigh gently, “Neither should you let it rule you.”

“Easier said than done,” Kamet mumbled, lifting his goblet to take a gulp, and frowning up at the dim sky, stars appearing slowly above them, wishing on each one that Costis would stop. Would understand. Would move his hand. Would never move his hand.

“So,” Costis nodded.

It seemed that that would be the end of it, that Costis had run out of words, having used so many in one evening.

They sat there as the last of the pinks in the sky faded, only moving when Kamet, still perched on his stool, shivered in a suddenly cold breeze.

Costis nodded as if Kamet had spoke, then stood easily, using Kamet’s thigh as a counterbalance, then reached back down to offer Kamet a hand.

Kamet pressed his empty wine cup into the outstretched hand, and stood without assistance, clutching his scroll in his hand.

They moved easily in the dark, an unspoken agreement that they would need no lamp tonight to simply lead them to their separate beds. The dark was not the kind which smothered you into believing you were always about to stub your toes, rather the kind which falls softly like a veil. Leaving shapes obscured and fuzzy, but obviously recognisable.

“Kamet,” Costis said, voice too soft.

Kamet stopped, his hand on his door, “Costis.”

He could see Costis watching him, but under the veil of darkness he couldn’t make out his expression.

“You’re allowed to feel safe,” Costis said, and Kamet closed his eyes, opened his mouth to reply, but Costis got there first.

“You’re allowed to feel safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Kamet laughed, pushed on his door.

“Your king doesn’t need me anymore, you don’t have to get me anywhere safely, you can relax Costis, you’re not on guard duty anymore.”

He intended to go into his room then, but Costis spoke again in the dark.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Lying in bed, Kamet listened to the faint clinking of Costis straightening up in the kitchen, then listened as Costis too, went to bed, soft hushing noises of clothes, then a creak of the bed and silence.

He lay in bed and ignored the thoughts whirling around in his head. Ignored the fact that he listened still for noises of Costis despite the fact he knew it would be silent until he woke. Ignored the fact that he could still feel the hot weight of Costis’ hand on his thigh.

When he woke, Costis was gone.

This was not unusual, he often left before Kamet appeared, wanting to walk in the cool breeze before confining himself to a dusty temple all day, or go for a run before standing still

in sword practice.

There was a covered bowl of porridge waiting for him, still warm when he got to it, and a bowl of freshly picked berries, still damp from the night dew.

Kamet carefully ignored the warmth in his chest as he ate.

He continued ignoring it as he walked to work, slow with the weight of his books and papers. Thoughts jumbled in his head like squalling gulls in the sky, and he was glad when he arrived at his tidy desk, to be able to squash them down with ancient words.

In between copying paragraphs his mind said, 'you knew that already'.

In between dipping his nib his mind said, 'you know why you feel safe'.

In between breaths his mind said, 'you've never felt safe before'.

Under his breath, between shakes of his head he said, "Yes I have."

He said, "Don't be a fool,"

He said, "It's not for me."

From the other side of the room Clea said, "Kamet, stop hissing, you're putting me off my writing."

When Costis joined him on the balcony for lunch, shedding grit with every step he took, the light breeze wafting dust from him onto Kamet's clean tunic and soft cheese, he didn't complain.

He nodded in greeting, and bit into his now dusty bread and cheese.

Costis sat heavily beside him, eyed him up. His overly relaxed posture, his book open on his knee, pages fluttering, dust catching on the pages.

"You're in a sour mood today," Costis observed, taking a bite of his lunch, "You didn't whine even a little about how dirty I am."

Kamet pursed his lips and looked Costis directly in the face so he could take in the full eye roll.

"I was absorbed in my book," he said tersely, "but I can complain if you like."

He glared down at his bread and then up at Costis, "It's on my cheese!"

Then he returned to his book.

Costis grunted, unconvinced, took another bite, then leaned closer to Kamet.

"There's a really dirty spot on your shirt as well," he said helpfully and Kamet looked down quickly, saw nothing and frowned at Costis.

"I don't see anything,"

Costis reached out with one gritty finger and touched Kamet's chest, leaving a dark mark.

"Just there."

Kamet slammed his book shut. Stared down at the mark, stared up at Costis, whose face was a moving picture of uncertainty somehow mixed with confidence.

"Well now I am in a sour mood," Kamet hissed, grabbing at his shirt and looking at the mark angrily, "I hope that was your intention."

Costis was still while Kamet plucked furiously at his shirt, then he sighed.

“I am sorry,” he said and Kamet froze, eyes narrowed.

“That was a fool thing to do, It’s something that would have cheered someone else up, but not you. I will wash the mark out for you, I promise. If it won’t move I’ll buy you a new one. But please,” He shook his head, “Kamet, was it something I said?”

How was he supposed to be angry now? Costis was watching him with eyes that begged forgiveness, was offering to fix all the wrongs he’d done, was wanting to help.

“It was nothing you said.” he said stiffly, giving up fussing over his shirt in favour of staring down at his knees as he continued.

“I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to trouble you. I’m just... tired is all. I’ll try to be better company.”

Costis returned to his lunch. With his mouth full he said,

“I don’t want you to be better company, I want you to be happy.”

Kamet had no answer to that, so they passed the rest of their break in silence.

Over his writing his mind hissed, ‘It’s only his duty’.

Over the ink blots his mind hissed, ‘don’t mistake friendship’.

Over the paper strewn desk his mind hissed, ‘you don’t deserve it anyway’.

And it was true. It was. It was true.

On their walk home that evening, they were accompanied by another of the temple workers walking the same way. He and Costis chatted easily. Kamet walked mulishly a few steps behind the two of them. Costis had taken his bag as usual, and the man, Haset, or Hasat or something, had made some teasing remark about the frailty of scholars. Nothing overly cruel but Kamet’s face had burned and he’d wanted to insist to Costis that they carry their own bags, that he was perfectly capable of it. He had started to tell the man that in fact he carried the bag to the temple every morning so obviously he wasn’t some weak old man, but he had been ignored.

Costis had shot him a sympathetic look, but seemed content to let this intruder continue to monopolise the air with his stupid voice.

When they reached the turn-off to their house, the man left them with an easy wave, and a carrying remark of,

“By the way, Kay, there’s a mark on your shirt-”

Kamet stared after him, then pushed past Costis and headed, fuming, down the path.

He could feel waves of chagrin following him, accompanied by Costis’ heavy sighs. Once they reached the door, he dropped Costis’ mostly empty bag in the dirt, and yanked his shirt sharply up and over his head, getting angrier still as he was momentarily tangled in it before throwing it onto the ground as well.

Anger fueling him, he rounded on Costis who had stepped closer to help when he had been stuck in his shirt.

“What was that?” he snapped, “another foolish trick you thought would cheer me up? I’m not your damned king, I don’t find being insulted and dirtied amusing. I have no interest in being condescended to, and I wish you would stop looking at me like I’m the one wounding you.”

Costis looked as if he’d been slapped and Kamet desperately wanted to shut his mouth. Maybe open it a little to apologise, but rage pushed him on.

“Didn’t you say just the other night that you wouldn’t let anything happen to me? I suppose it doesn’t count as ‘anything’ when you’re the one doing it? I thought - I thought that maybe you said that because you and I - because you and I were friends. Obviously I was wrong about that, you don’t know me at all. I don’t know what I’m still worth to your king for you to still be here pretending but-”

He blinked angry tears out of his eyes and took a step back as Costis moved closer to him, pushing down the fear that he was going to get hit, pushing down the fear that he was going to be proved right.

Costis reached out, and despite his plans on bravery, Kamet flinched away, but Costis only cupped the back of his head and tugged him gently forwards. He wrapped his other arm firmly around Kamet’s shoulders and held him close.

Kamet pressed his face into Costis’ chest, breathed deep against the fabric of his shirt, jaw working furiously.

“Kamet,” Costis said quietly above his head, then stopped as if he hadn’t known what he was going to say yet. His hand slid from the back of Kamet’s head down his neck, then down to rest at the base of his spine.

“I’m still angry at you” Kamet sniffed, though the words seemed stupid when they were said so softly into the shirt of the man you were angry at.

“Ok,” Costis’s breath was ruffling Kamet’s hair, “that’s ok. You should be angry at me. I shouldn’t have let Hesat speak so freely. I didn’t want to step on your toes by defending you, but I see now that I should have. I know that I have been misreading you, I’ve never had a friend like you...And Kamet, I am your friend. I am not here because I was ordered to be here, I’m here because I wanted to be here and my king gave me the opportunity. I want you safe and happy because you are my dear friend.”

It was a lot to say as well as a lot to take in, and they both stood silently after Costis had finished speaking.

Kamet’s arms had been hanging loose by his sides, but now he reached up, twisted his fingers in the material of Costis’ shirt, and held tightly to him.

His mind whispered in the breeze, ‘Say nothing, say nothing, say nothing. ‘

His mind sang with the birds, ‘you are nothing, nothing, nothing.’

His mind thudded with his heart, ‘speak, speak, speak. ‘

“I am your friend,” Kamet nodded, “And I am afraid to be your friend.”

Costis said nothing, so Kamet listened instead to the even thumping of his heart, the movement of his lungs, until he heard the inhale that preempted speech.

“I think I understand,” he said slowly, “I want to understand.”

He pulled away from Kamet slightly so that he could look down at his face.

“I can live with not understanding until you are ready to tell me more.”

Searching Costis’ face, Kamet looked for impatience, for anger, for disgust, and when he found none, he nodded.

The tears still lingering in his eyes from his rage, suddenly heavy, spilling onto his cheeks, he reached down for his shirt to wipe his face, and remembered it crumpled instead on the dirt.

Costis laughed, pulled at his own shirt, and wiped away the tears himself.

“I suppose I had better make good of my promise then,” he said lightly, “and wash your shirt.”

When Costis came back inside from washing Kamet’s shirt, as well as a few other things Kamet threw at him that needed washing as well, and then hanging them all to dry, Kamet was sitting at his small desk under the window. He was wrapped in a robe, and hunched over a letter, and Costis paused in the doorway to watch him.

The hard as rock, hot and painful as lava feeling, squeezing inside his chest hadn’t abated even while he’d puttered around outside, calming himself with mundanity. Seeing Kamet, clutching his robe around himself, and frowning at the letter in front of him, Costis knew he was doing the same, though he couldn’t tell if Kamet was more successful than himself.

With soldiers Costis knew what to do. If someone was upset, it was the easiest thing in the world to sit down next to them, elbow them gently, ask them what was wrong. Usually it was pretty simple. They had spent all night up on patrol and were cranky. They missed their family and felt like no one else could understand homesickness. They wanted a sweetheart but thought it impossible in the army. They had a sweetheart but had left them behind. All things you can fix with some light hearted story telling and a couple of drinks. Maybe a short hug.

When he was upset, he liked to keep it to himself. Aris didn’t like him to keep it to himself though, and would always pry it out of him with a firm hand and a meaningful look. It was easy as drinking to complain to Aris because Aris liked to keep things simple, and blunt. If Aris was here now, Costis could imagine things being a lot easier, rather than continually putting his foot in his mouth with Kamet, he could have taken his worries to Aris, and Aris would have given him one of his long suffering looks, hit him on the back of the head, and shook his head.

Aris would have told him, using very small words simply to irritate Costis, exactly what he was doing wrong.

But Aris wasn't here, and Costis had no intentions of telling his new friends his woes just yet. Partly because he didn't want to burden them, partly because it was embarrassing.

"You're blocking the light," Kamet was saying to him, and Costis blinked at him for a few seconds before stepping to the side.

"Sorry," he said, tossing a quick smile, and heading towards the cooking area. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," Kamet said.

That evening, they lit the lamps when the dark closed in, Costis, sitting tentatively close to Kamet on their small couch, looked him over as he huddled, still under his robe, reading, squinting at, a scroll.

"Will you tell me a story?" he asked and Kamet looked up at him, brows raised as if to say, 'I'm in the middle of telling myself one.' He didn't say that though, instead, he rolled his scroll up, placed it carefully to the side and looked down at his hands.

"What do you want to hear?"

Costis paused, did not want to risk sounding too poetic, too full of himself. Risked it anyway.

"I want to hear a story of Immakuk and Ennikar fighting. Surely not all the stories of them have them working in perfect unison."

Kamet got the point, but did not comment, instead, he tapped his lip and nodded.

"I have the one," he said, and began.

In the night, Kamet dreamt of the Namreen.

They were lions at first, angry, but easily dealt with, until the cave they were hiding in filled with water, and it didn't matter that the lions were dead because he was going to drown anyway.

The Namreen returned as grasping hands above the water, pulling at his shirt, ripping it as they pulled him away from one death to another.

Then Costis appeared, first as a lion, both terrifying and fantastic, leaping on the Namreen, pulling them away from Kamet, who immediately curled into a ball.

The Namreen reappeared, larger than ever and Kamet reached out for the lion that was Costis but found that he had been replaced by a Caggi who shrieked in terror and ran leaving Kamet to the Namreen, who took him by an ear each and dragged him across rocky deserts, through salty seas, choking coughing, drowning, until they arrived back in Ianna Ir, in the palace, in his master's chambers.

His master lay lifeless on his bed, face tinged green, hands folded, and Kamet knew he was dead.

His stomach twisted in revolt and he tried to run away but found himself sucked towards the bed like he was caught in a current in a river, until he was standing over his master's body.

Nahuseresh opened his eyes and grabbed him round the wrist, fingers biting into his skin with

familiarity.

‘I know I can trust you,’ he hissed, ‘To betray me unto death.’

Shaking his head, Kamet tried to loosen his grip, but found that each time he tried, the grip grew tighter and tighter like a vice.

‘I have told you, time and again, Kamet,’ Nahuseresh was speaking lightly now, his tone amused, ‘You are of little use to anyone and anything but to me and the work I put you to.’ With each word he spoke, they sank together, the bed, Nahuseresh, Kamet, down into the gray waters of the underworld, down into the murky depths, where the ground is coated in those who tried to jump out of the boat like Immakuk but whose legs were not strong enough. The breath trickling out of his lungs, Kamet watched his master slowly dissolve in front of him, leaving nothing but a red mark, a blood trail round Kamet’s wrist, and he kicked off of the bottom, flailing in the water, straining to reach the light he can dimly see. But it is no use. Even in dreams, Kamet cannot swim, even in dreams he cannot escape his master, even in dreams -

He awakes frantic, a cry on his lips, twisted in blankets, eyes wide, but air in his lungs and a hand on his shoulder.

“Kamet,”

Kamet blinks in the hazy light of dawn until Costis’ face becomes clear through the film of tears clinging to his lashes, and then he closes his eyes because Costis’ face is too filled with worry and care to look at so closely.

He turns his face against the pillow, exhales loudly, then inhales wetly and wishes that Costis would go back to his own room so he could cry in peace. Wishes that Costis would lie down next to him and not say a word, but take him in his arms. Wishes that even in dreams he did not think of Nahuseresh as his master and his fate.

“Kamet,” Costis says again, gentle, but firm, and Kamet opens his eyes to stare at the wall.

“I’m sorry for waking you,” he says. Doesn’t want to say anything more, doesn’t want to think anymore, but Costis reaches over and catches his face in his hand, rubs his thumb across his cheek, through the trail of tears.

“Do you need anything?” he asks, his voice even, his hand calming.

Kamet shakes his head minutely, turns his face until his lips brush Costis’ palm, listens as Costis inhales.

“Do you want me to go?” Costis offers like a blessing, and Kamet is both pleased and upset. He wants Costis to go so that he won’t worry about speaking his mind, or his heart. He wants Costis to go so he can cry by himself and not all over him. He doesn’t want the choice to send Costis away, because if he sends him away, then Costis won’t pull him towards his chest, won’t rub the tears from his cheek, won’t rest his hands on the small of his back, or his thigh.

He breathes against Costis’ palm and wishes for a moment that he was back in his master’s apartments where he knew without a doubt what to do in situations like this.

Firstly, don't get into situations like this because, secondly, you can't form friendships like this as a slave, and, thirdly, Nahuseresh would not allow it.

The moment passes and Kamet shakes his head again, struggles against the blanket to free his hand, reaches out to Costis.

His hand brushes against bare skin, not the night shirt he was expecting to grab onto, so he runs his hand up Costis' chest until he reaches his shoulder, then pulls him, knowing that Costis will only come if he wants.

Moving slowly, Costis shifts until he's lying down on his side next to Kamet, head by his shoulder, hand still on his cheek. The bed groans with the weight, then settles. Kamet closes his eyes, breathes in and out, then says,

"I don't want to talk about it,"

Costis nods against his shoulder.

"And I want you to stay."

Another nod.

"Is that ok?" Kamet whispers, and Costis moves his hand to rest on Kamet's chest.

"Of course," he says, "I don't want to leave you."

It's uncomfortable. The bed is too narrow, Kamet is caught under the blankets by Costis lying on top of them, and he's too warm. Costis is pressed fully along Kamet's body, his feet hanging off the end because his head is too far down.

But Costis' hand is resting on Kamet's chest, the weight calming, and, exhausted by several near encounters with dream drowning and altogether too many emotions, Kamet falls asleep.

He wakes to sunlight pouring in his small window, navigating its way directly into his eyes, and groans his discomfort only to be met with a reply grumble from the mass of curls in his face.

Kamet does not have a wide knowledge of waking with someone else in his bed. Some might say that he in fact, has no knowledge of waking with someone else in his bed. However, there are several parts of him that tell him he has plenty of knowledge of waking with someone else in his bed.

"For someone so small," Costis mumbles into Kamet's armpit, "You take up a lot of bed. Has anyone told you this before?"

Kamet considers lying.

"No."

It's true, there's enough room on the other side of Kamet for someone else of his size to lie there, but spatial reasoning had not been his strong point when he was last awake.

Costis had levered himself up on his side, resting on his elbow, to look down at Kamet, suddenly awake and alert and apparently entirely unabashed at being in his bed.

"How are you?" he asks and Kamet shakes his head and sits up to swing his legs out of bed.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

He stands and crosses the room to peer out the window. He looks back at Costis with a guilty expression on his face.

"I'm fine, but we're both late."

Kamet cannot concentrate. He stares blankly at his parchment, then he stares blankly at the scroll he is copying from.

Costis was in his bed last night.

Clea speaks to him, Kamet nods, Clea talks more, Kamet nods more, Clea rolls his eyes and leaves him to his navel gazing.

If he concentrates hard enough, he can imagine Costis' hand on his face, his palm rough against his lips.

If he concentrates hard enough, he can forget about the Namreen, forget about Nahuseresh, forget about drowning in the land of the dead.

If he concentrates hard enough, he can pretend that what he wants is something he can have.

Costis has a cake.

Not a small cloth of round cakes.

A big cake. Stuffed with nuts and fruit.

He looks a bit embarrassed about it as he offers it to Kamet to carry at their Oak tree, and Kamet takes it, bemused,

"Cake?" He asks, relinquishing his heavy bag happily.

Costis shrugged one shoulder eloquently, as he lifts the bag onto it.

"I told the baker on the main street that I had done something stupid and needed to apologise to someone beautifully. She gave it to me on the cheap."

Kamet stared at the cake he was carrying. He thought that Costis had already apologised beautifully to him. He'd calmed him, washed his clothes, fed him, indulged his vanity in storytelling, then held him all night.

He looked up at Costis to find him watching him anxiously.

"Your stupidity was out-lapped several times by mine," Kamet told him, "But I am perfectly happy to be the one being lavished."

Costis smiled.

Kamet cooked that night. He wasn't a very good cook, but he felt it hardly fair that Costis be the one who fed them all the time, so he tried to cook at least once a week, and Costis, to his credit, never complained.

Over an almost passable meal, Kamet says,

"Do you miss Attolia?"

Costis is either thinking about it carefully, or having trouble swallowing a particularly tough bit of meat.

"I do," he said eventually, "But I'm used to leaving things behind. I miss my friends, but I know I will see them again, so it doesn't overly trouble me. I am sure it must be harder for you to have traveled so far, and with little chance of returning home."

His words were apologetic, but Kamet waved them away.

"Costis." He said, raising his eyebrows, "Maybe the Empire was where I grew up, where I thought I belonged, but I don't think it could ever truly be my home. Nothing there belonged to me. The friends I had - you don't have friends as a slave. You have people you trust more than the others, but you still don't trust them entirely, because that gets you into trouble like believing that your master is dead."

Costis smiled at his plate.

"I'm sure," Kamet continued, "Had I stayed with Nahuseresh, had I lived out my life as his slave, and then as the next emperor's slave, I would have told myself that it was my home. That if I left it I would always miss it. I would have been wrong. I miss parts of it, the songs I liked, certain murals in the palace, certainty of my place in the world. But I never want to go back."

"Is there no one left in Medea you would see again?" Costis asked, fiddling with the cloth on the small table.

Shrugging, Kamet pushed his food around on his plate.

"I would see Laela again, maybe," he admitted, "But there is so much...debt there, I'm not sure I would feel comfortable. Sometimes I think I want to see Nahuseresh again. But that is a fleeting fancy."

He hadn't noticed Costis reaching across the table until his hand was being held, and he blinked up at Costis.

"I swear," Costis said, "That I will hold no debts against you."

And Kamet understood.

"Oh," he said carefully, staring at their clasped hands.

"I always feel like I am talking out of my ass when I think I've realised things," Costis continued, "But if my life so far has taught me anything, it's that sometimes you have to take a leap of faith."

Kamet resisted the urge to tell him that he always sounds like he's talking out of his ass.

"If what you are afraid of is loyalty, to a master, to a king, removing trust between two people," Costis said awkwardly, "I want you to know, when I do something for you, I don't expect you to pay me back, and I'm not doing it to pay you back. I'm doing it because I like you, and I trust you, and I want to show you that through actions."

Kamet stared at him, feeling at once as if the earth below their feet was crumbling, as if the world around them was settling into place. He thought of the cake.

"I am. Afraid," he could not meet Costis' eyes. "Afraid that you are here for your king, not me. Afraid that I will always be a slave, even if only in my mind. Afraid that if I let myself be fully happy the charade will be over and I will be returned. Afraid that if I tell you what I want it will be too much, with or without debts to pay."

He is gripping Costis' hand so hard he can feel his nails digging in, but can't bear to relinquish his grip even slightly.

Costis does not complain.

It's not something he does.

"I understand," he's nodding, Kamet can tell without lifting his head to look at him.

"I know fear can be crippling. Causes you to lash out, to pull away, to doubt what you see in front of you,"

He's talking calmly, but there's an undertone that Kamet can't quite put his finger on. He's not sure if he wants to hear this. He desperately wants to hear this.

"I have spent so many days of my life caught in fear, often over idle stupid things. Walking around in circles because I can't see the answer through it all."

He's pulling their hands closer towards him, and Kamet watches, the voice in his head loud.

"Fear is good for you, it stops you doing stupid things, but only if you can tell which ones are the stupid ones and which are the hard ones."

'You should run', says his mind, loud, loud, loud.

“This is one of the hard ones,” Costis says firmly.

Kamet does not run. He stands up slowly, does not let go of Costis’ hand, does not look him in the eye.

When he pulls gently on Costis’ hand, he knows that he will only stand if he wants to, and he does.

“You already know what I want,” Kamet said to their joined hands, “you already know that it scares me half to death.” He shut his eyes and shook his head.

“But I have to trust, that even if I do die of fright like a stupid scared caggi, that you will come, like Immakuk, and rescue me.”

This is when he realises that Costis is too tall to simply lean forward and kiss, so he opens his eyes and lifts his head to look up at him.

“I will always come for you,” Costis says, frowning down at him and Kamet reaches up to take his chin between his thumb and forefinger, and tugs his head down.

He has kissed before. Or, he has been kissed before. That does not prepare him for this.

It’s chaste.

Their mouths are shut against each other’s.

Costis’ lip is chapped, rough against Kamet’s.

They let go of each other’s hands as Costis lifts his to hold Kamet’s face between his palms as they pull apart from the kiss.

Costis lifts his head slightly to kiss Kamet’s forehead, then his cheeks, the left, then the right, then once more quick on the lips.

Kamet wills him to kiss them again, but Costis pulls back further again to look at Kamet properly, and Kamet sighs.

“You are not dead,” Costis smiled, “And I was not speaking out of my ass after all.”

“You always speak out of your ass,” Kamet mumbled, not scared anymore, but suddenly awkward, his cheeks burning under Costis’ hands.

Rolling his eyes at the comment, Costis shook his head slowly, “You and I, then?” he asked.

It reminded him of Costis’ comment before they boarded their boat to Roa.

‘Immakuk and Ennikar’.

He wondered at the implications when it had been said, and wondered about it again now as he carefully slowed his breathing and met Costis’ gaze.

“You and I,” he nodded.

In favour of not overwhelming an already delicate situation, they finish their dinner, hands to themselves but knees jostling under the table.

Costis cut the cake, poured them the last of their wine, unwatered tonight.

He hands Kamet his goblet, then crosses to sit on their couch facing the open door and the warm night.

He sits and watches Kamet stand still by the table, waits patiently for him to gather himself to join the couch. Closes his eyes to wait, goblet heavy in his hand, cake crumbling on his knee, smiles when the couch dips and Kamet settles close to him.

He thinks to himself,

‘This shouldn’t be so hard’

‘I’ve already kissed him once’

‘It’s the easiest thing in the world to lean closer’

Kamet places his hand cautiously on Costis’ knee, and Costis’ eyes snap open.

“For all your fine words of bravery,” Kamet says, his face bright with a smile, and Costis finds himself laughing, leaning down to kiss his Kamet, lips wet with wine.

It’s awkward, but only because they are both holding goblets, balancing crumbling cake, twisting awkwardly to meet each other.

Costis thinks to himself,

‘This is the easiest thing in the world’

‘Easier than drinking,’

‘Better than sunlight,’

Opens his mouth against Kamet’s, pulls him closer with his free hand at the nape of his neck, spills wine on his pants.

Kamet is laughing, breathless, and pulling away, much to Costis’ disappointment.

“Is that my fault?” Kamet asks, plucking at the wet fabric, peering into Costis’ wine cup to make sure he still had some.

“No, mine.” Costis says easily, lifting his goblet to take a mouthful, ignoring his damp pants.

They don’t kiss again that night. Costis understands, he does. It’s one thing to let your want be seen, another to feel comfortable with it in the open.

They sit, sides pressed together, talking about mundane things - Kamet’s shirt with the mark washed out, Costis’ pants which wouldn’t show any mark, Relius’ latest letter, a child in Costis’ class, Clea from the temple.

In many ways it is just like most other nights in their small house, the two of them relaxed on the couch, stomachs full, sharing their day to day lives.

Usually not with Kamet leaning so heavily against Costis though, complaining when the wine damp pants press against his own, transferring the wetness, but not moving away.
Usually not with Costis' arm around Kamet, his hand tucked in the angle of his hip.

Despite the casual conversation, Costis can feel Kamet's heart pounding through his body, feels it in his limbs, hears it in his voice, knows that his heart is loud too but doesn't care.

It is agony, he decides eventually, to both know what the other wants but to hold back for the sake of caution.

When Kamet stretches, moving out of the circle of Costis' arm, it is late, the shadows outside the door have deepened, and they both stand together to clear away their goblets, the cake, close the door. They follow their usual evening ritual, not faltering until they both stand outside their bedroom doors, turning to look at one another in the dark.

"Were you uncomfortable last night?" Kamet asks. Through the dark and his own poor eyes, he can't see Costis' face to read his expression.

"Not at all," Costis replied, and Kamet, trusting that Costis' eyes are much better than his own, holds his hand out to him.

This time, Kamet measures the bed carefully with his eyes, settles on the far side, pulls the blanket down as an invitation to Costis.

It's still a squish, but certainly a more organised squish than the previous night, with Costis pinning the blankets down as well as being balanced precariously. He tugs at Costis' arm, pulling it out so he can lie curled against his side.

To his surprise, he's comfortable. He thinks dozily of his anger at feeling safe so readily in Roa, knows what he knew then. It's not the safety he was scared of accepting so much as the comfort of being so close to Costis without being able to pin it on circumstance. It's humiliating to think of his ridiculous emotions of the past week, wrapped in Costis' arms without even a single sign of judgement.

Kamet dreams of the Namreen that night.

They are scattered around his feet, blood staining his sandals.

Costis is holding him tightly, too tightly, not tightly enough.

All the Namreen's faces are Nahuseresh.

All the Namreen's faces are Costis.

It is Nahuseresh who is holding him tightly, too tightly, too tightly.

The blood is rising like flood water, creeping up over his knees, his hips, his chest.

He desperately doesn't want to get Costis' blood in his mouth.

Kamet is the lion. He thrashes in Nahuseresh's arms, knocking him down into the red flood.

He is a lion, he can swim.

He wants to leave, swim for high ground, but Costis is still down there.

He dives and now he is just Kamet again, Kamet with blood in his mouth, Kamet with blood in his lungs, Kamet with Costis in his hands, in his arms.

Kamet wakes.

The moonlight is a bright square on the wall, the air is heavy and still, and Costis is asleep, his head on Kamet's pillow, his mouth open.

Kamet shuffles himself closer, wraps Costis' arm tighter around him, presses his face into his bare chest so he can hear his steady heart.

He knows Costis is awake, his breathing changed just slightly, his arms cinched just a bit tighter.

He doesn't know if he wants Costis to say anything, doesn't know if he wants comfort, needs comfort other than what he's already taken.

He does not cry.

He closes his eyes and Costis rubs his hand up and down his back, does not speak.

When he wakes again, Costis is not there.

He lies in his empty bed, listens for Costis. The sun is not shining into his room, not glaring in his face, so it's still early. He wonders if Costis has returned to his own bed. He wonders if he could have dreamt the feel of skin on skin. He wonders if he will come back, and there is a knock on his door.

For half a moment he thinks he ought to pull the blanket up to cover his bare chest, as ridiculous as that sounds, but then Costis comes in, shouldering the door open because he has a cup of steaming tea in each hand, his chest bare and his hair messy.

He smiles when he sees Kamet awake, and perches on the edge of the bed to hand him his cup.

Sitting up slowly, Kamet doesn't ignore the warmth in his chest, but rather, embraces it. He does ignore the cups in Costis' hands instead, as he leans forwards past them to embrace him. Hands full, Costis bends his neck, kisses Kamet's forehead, and Kamet cannot believe the tenderness.

Lips against Costis' neck, Kamet admits in a whisper,
"When I woke and you were gone, I feared the worst."

Costis reaches one arm out to place a cup on the low table by the bed, then brings his arm around Kamet's waist to take the other cup from his far hand and does the same with it, before he wraps his arms around Kamet and shakes his head.

"Until you ask me to leave, I am staying."

"And if I never ask you to leave?"

"Then I will stay forever."

He speaks so simply, as if commenting on the weather, as if he is saying, 'the sun is out,' as if he were saying, 'the day has dawned,' as if he were saying, 'There will always be a tomorrow.'

The tea is too sweet, the way Kamet likes it, and he drinks it in Costis' room, watching as he dresses for the day. Kamet does not want him to dress for the day. He wants him to stop, to unbuckle his belt, take his rough worker pants off, pull his tunic off over his head, and to come sit with Kamet on his bed. To take his hands in his and say, 'Let's not go out today.' Although, Kamet thinks to himself, closing his eyes at this thought, if Costis were to do this, he was certain that his cheeks would pinken quickly, that he would stand, spilling his tea in his haste, mumble something ridiculous about needing to finish a scroll.

If he lets himself believe what Costis says, they have all the time in the world. He has no need to scare himself into action. There is no reason to not go into the temple today and work as usual, no reason to worry that as soon as Costis is out of arms reach everything will revert back, no reason at all. This is what he tells himself as he sits in the temple, glaring at his papers and worrying that once Costis reaches the fields to train his students he will suddenly realise his mistakes.

Clea is hovering, and Kamet shifts his glare from his paper to direct it at him instead.

"Kay," Clea says awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot as the glare hits him, "Is there something bothering you? It's just you have been very quiet the last few days, and of a ... uh, foul mood."

Kamet shuts his eyes, rubs his face to wipe away the glare not truly intended for Clea, and shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, Clea," He says truthfully, "I admit I've been less than good company lately. I've just been... anxious. I don't settle easily in new places, and that anxiety has been ruining my mood."

He fidgets with the scrolls, shuffles his papers, "I hope you can forgive me, my friend." He chances a glance up to find Clea smiling.

"Of course," Clea nods, claps Kamet's shoulder and grips it tightly. "I was simply worried for you."

Clea returns to his own desk, and Kamet stares down at his hands for a few moments before saying, "Have you a lover?"

Clea spills his ink all over his shirt, and Kamet hurries over, apologetic and amused, grabbing a cloth they keep nearby for occasions such as this. While he dabs at Clea, Clea stares up at him.

"No I don't. Why do you ask?"

Kamet huffs, having already regretted asking, but shrugs, keeping his eyes fixed on the ink now staining his hands in spider web patterns.

"I ask because I have had no real experience of having one before, and I... I don't want to do anything wrong."

It was much easier to speak about this without Costis in the room. Not because he didn't want Costis to know about his inexperience. Maybe because he didn't want Costis to know about his inexperience. Mostly because he didn't want Costis to feel like he had to look after Kamet.

Clea was still staring at him, an expression of consternation on his face, and Kamet stepped back.

"Kay," Clea was saying slowly, and Kamet nodded at him, and then suddenly shook his head at him wildly, realising how his words had been mistaken.

"Oh. Clea. No, I'm sorry, that was not - I was speaking of my... my lover, not of you."

Clea looked both relieved, and almost disappointed.

"I was wondering if I had accidentally mislead you," Clea admitted, he grinned awkwardly at him, and they agreed to talk of it no more.

When they meet again at the oak, Costis takes his bag, and hands him a flagon of sweet wine, more expensive than their usual, and Kamet raises his eyebrows at him.

"Are we celebrating?" he asks, and Costis grins at the ground.

He wants to take Costis' hand in his, wants to pull him to a stop and reach up to kiss him, but he doesn't like the idea of the town walls watching them.

Wants to be away from other people's opinions before he does anything so obvious, so instead he lets his hand rest a moment on Costis' arm. The action reminds him of Clea, and he lets his gaze fall to the ground as well. He was amused by what had happened, but was still unsure whether or not Costis would find it as funny.

"I was talking to Clea today," he began, and Costis grunted to let him know he was listening.

"And I somehow let my words come out so awkwardly that he thought that I was asking him to be my lover, or that I thought we were lovers. He looked at me in such confusion,"

He glanced quickly at Costis' face and was relieved to find him grinning.

"I had to quickly tell him that he wasn't the lover I was speaking of, and then we couldn't talk the rest of the afternoon," Kamet continued, smiling now himself and Costis laughed out loud, but then reached out to stop Kamet with just a touch of his hand.

"I am your lover then?" Costis asked, still smiling, but his voice serious, and Kamet could have laughed at his idiocy for thinking himself the only one uncertain in this relationship.

He glances behind them quickly, sees that they are shielded by trees, and steps close to pull Costis in for a short kiss, just a bump of the lips.

"I want that very much," he replied.

He didn't dare kiss him again on the road, he didn't trust enough people here yet to risk being seen so vulnerable, but stole glances up at him every few moments, only for his gaze to be returned, Costis' eyes burning with intent.

The echo of the other evening was obvious as Kamet led the way down the path to their doorway and stops before entering through it. He wants to drop the flagon, pull his shirt off, be gathered tightly in Costis' arms, but forgo the yelling and crying that had accompanied the first instance.

Instead, Costis steps closer, crowding Kamet up against the hard door, takes the flagon from his hands and places it carefully down on the bench by the door. He shrugs Kamet's bag off of his shoulder, and stands, not on the doorstep with Kamet, but on the ground so as to even out their height difference just a little before he leans in.

He does not kiss him straight away, instead, runs his hands through Kamet's hair. Short still, but long enough now that it catches in Costis' fingers.

He lets his hands fall from Kamet's head, to his shoulders, where his thumbs rub small circles against bone, then down his chest, fingers hooking in the lacing of Kamet's shirt. He pulls the loose knots out easily, tugging the laces until the shirt falls open.

Every time his fingers brush against Kamet's skin, it burns, and Kamet closes his eyes, leans against the door, fists his hands in the fabric of Costis' shirt.

Wants more.

Costis' body is hard and solid against him, like a wall of heat pressing into his skin, his hands trailing across the flat slide of his stomach, his fingers firm against his hips, holding him tightly to him as he leans down finally to press his open mouth against Kamet's.

Kamet will always deny moaning into the kiss.

He moans into the kiss, opens his mouth to bite down on Costis' lower lip, scrabbles with his hands to yank at Costis' shirt, overstaying it's welcome on Costis' body.

The door handle is digging into the small of his back and he presses back on it harder as he pulls Costis closer to him, wanting no air between them, until Costis has him pinned against the wood, their bodies' flush together.

It's almost humiliating how much he wants this.

Wants to touch.

To be touched.

He would be overly self conscious about his own desire being so obvious if it wasn't for the fact that he could taste it in Costis' mouth. Could feel it pressed against him, overwhelming until he turns his head, gasping for air, cheeks flushed.

Costis kisses down his neck, speaks into his skin.

"We should go inside."

Inside, as there often is after a pause in such intensity, there is a moment of awkwardness. Kamet crosses the room to put down the flagon, Costis deposits Kamet's bag on his desk, smiles softly at him from across the room - such a difference from the looks he had been giving him moments before.

Kamet loves it.

He sits at their table and leans down to undo the buckles of his sandals, but stops as Costis comes to stand in front of him, then drops heavily to his knees at his feet, and begins to unbuckle them for him.

If Kamet had been asked a few weeks earlier if someone else removing his shoes would have caused the tips of his ears to burn in unison with the pit of his stomach, he would have replied with confusion.

Now, he stared down, mouth half open, as Costis slowly undoes his straps, touching altogether far too much of his leg than he needs to take a shoe off, fingers lingering at his ankle, on the arch of his foot. When the shoe is removed, he lifts the leg just slightly, kisses the ankle visible below the cuff of his trousers, and moves on to the next foot.

He wants to protest, surely his ankles taste like dust and the road, but he is too busy revelling in the feeling of Costis at his feet, between his legs.

Instead, he exhales slowly, reaches out for Costis, tugs on his curls, waits as Costis kisses his other ankle then raises his head to look him in the eye. His hands are curled round Kamet's ankles, slowly rubbing up his legs.

"What do you want?" Costis asks him, and Kamet can only swallow heat, shake his head mutely in reply.

Costis' hands still, unwilling to move further without a more verbal sign of Kamet's wants, and his voice grows soft.

"Kamet," he breathes, looking up at him, willing him to understand that he could have anything he wanted, as much and as little. Willing him to understand that he would have no debt to pay. Willing him to look down at him and understand just how much he was loved.

Kamet blinks at him, thinks he could cry from pure joy, from pure lust, from the pure love in Costis' eyes.

"I want," he begins, clears his throat, "I want you to not stop," he says firmly. "I want you."

At his words, Costis drops his head, kisses Kamet's thigh through the fabric of his trousers, breath hot on his skin, and moves his hands up to rub patterns with his thumbs up the rest of Kamet's legs until he reaches the sharp curve of his hips, the high band of his trousers, the buckle of his belt. He pauses again, feeling Kamet tremble under his hands, and looks up to gauge his expression.

Kamet's eyes are closed and he shakes his head as Costis stops.

"I want you not to stop," he repeats quietly, his voice shakes.

"Ok," Costis says, lifts his hands to cup his lover's face, "I want you to be able to tell me that you want me to go on."

At this, Kamet opens his eyes slowly, Costis' hands are cool on his face, but hot on his body and he knows he is flushing ridiculously. The face staring up at him is so simply earnest, so honest that again Kamet feels as if he could cry, but he doesn't want to scare him, so instead he swallows again, reaches out to touch Costis' face.

“I promise you,” Kamet says, speaking slowly both so that Costis can hear him clearly, and so he can still the shiver in his voice. “I want you to go on. I want you to unbuckle my belt, to kiss me, to touch me and hold me, and I swear that if I want you to stop, I will tell you.”

This was enough for Costis, and he nods before leaning up and forwards to press a soft kiss to Kamet’s hot face before returning his hands to the belt buckle.

He undoes it swiftly, then undoes the buttons underneath, hands steady, and tugs at the trousers. He could, with his extra muscle and bulk, have easily just pulled them off, or lifted Kamet to release the trousers, but he waited patiently as Kamet lifted his hips, his hands on Costis’ shoulders, then eased the trousers down.

Kamet doesn’t want to watch Costis’ face as he looks at him. Kamet wants to watch his face as he looks at him, as he hooks his fingers over his small clothes, bends down, kisses him still through damp fabric. When he finally removes the smalls, Kamet thinks he is going to die. Costis looks so pleased, so awed, his cheeks are bright with colour and his breath hitches audibly. Kamet does not think that this is the right response to being faced with his cock, but seeing as no one else had been in Costis’ position before, he couldn’t say for sure.

When Costis leans forwards, Kamet thinks he is going to start sucking him immediately, like Kamet had done many times for his master, but Costis does not even touch his cock, instead, kisses his upper thigh. His fingers press into Kamet’s thigh muscles as he presses his legs further apart, exposing more skin to kiss and bite, startlingly close but still too far from his cock.

It’s not until Costis has lavished attention and soft caresses seemingly everywhere but his cock, and Kamet is all but whimpering, trembling under each kiss and dragging at Costis’ hair, does he finally relent and touch him properly.

He must have been able to easily see how on edge Kamet was, and took him firmly with one hand at the base of his cock before he licked, from base to head, and then took him in his mouth.

The only coherent thought in Kamet’s mind is that he is glad that their house is somewhat removed, no one, save for the small animals and birds, would hear his half-swallowed cry.

Kamet thinks – ‘I am going to dissolve in his mouth,’

Kamet thinks – ‘I am going to drown under his touch,’

Kamet thinks – ‘I am going to-’

He comes, far too quickly, sweaty, messy, and panting. His body aching with it, too overwhelmed to be embarrassed at how fast he had finished.

Costis has rocked back on the ball of his feet, watches Kamet as he tries to compose himself. His hands still grip Kamet tightly by the hips.

“You ok?” He asks gently.

As if there were any doubt, Kamet thought, after the way he had cried out through it all, like a man desperate. He nodded fervently in reply, looks down at Costis and feels guilty because

he hadn't been touched even once yet. He doesn't look frustrated though, in fact, he looks quite content to be crouching at Kamet's feet while Kamet caught his breath.

"Are you?" Kamet asks, a beat late, and Costis beams up at him.

"I'm great," Costis says sincerely, then, "You are so ... gorgeous."

Kamet had been called many things, sometimes even sweet things, but never this, never while he was so undone and breathless.

He wants to slide off his chair into a puddle on Costis' lap. Wants to kiss him silly and touch him softly. Wants to forget all the other times he has touched someone so that he can take him in hand without thinking of anyone else.

Instead, Costis is standing, offering Kamet his hand, and Kamet takes it, feeling utterly exposed standing in the darkening room with no trousers on and his shirt unlaced and loose. Costis is still entirely dressed, something Kamet is thoroughly disapproving of, and once he is standing he starts to tug immediately at Costis' shirt. Determined that it be finally removed. Costis helps him, loosens his own laces and then stretches his arms up and bends down so Kamet can pull it over his head.

Kamet drops it unceremoniously on the floor and reaches up to kiss him, hard, hands smoothing down Costis' sides and up his back, rugged with muscle.

"Come to bed?" Costis suggests and Kamet nods, still trying to kiss him even as he speaks. He had thought, briefly, that maybe Costis had bought the wine in an attempt to loosen both their insecurities enough to get them into bed, but it was obvious that was not necessary.

They end up in Costis' room. Kamet sitting on the bed, pulling off his shirt and throwing it on the floor as Costis takes off his sandals first, then his belt, then his trousers.

Kamet watches, wide eyed, half wanting to go to him, still his hands and undress him himself, half content to sit and watch Costis slowly reveal himself to him.

It wasn't as if they hadn't seen each other naked before. They'd washed in front of each other quite often, changed clothes in the same room, but you weren't allowed to stare in situations like that. You weren't filled with the knowledge that every piece of skin you see, you will be allowed to touch, to kiss.

He's not sure where he wants to touch first, or even how he ought to touch, in some small way he's not sure if he should even touch at all.

He still has no idea when Costis steps over to him, stoops to kiss him, soft then hard. His hand on his chest, his knee up, resting on the bed between Kamet's legs.

It's in between kisses when Costis asks again, "What do you want?"

And Kamet looks up at him in confusion.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" He asks, very conscious of his still soft cock, still more conscious of Costis' hard one, pressing against him.

Costis shrugs, apparently unconcerned, kisses him again, then pulls away to reposition himself so he's actually sitting on the bed, rather than leaning against it.

Kamet narrows his eyes and shuffles over on the bed so he's kneeling by Costis' side, then pushes against his chest gently. Costis lies down obediently, head propped up on his pillow, watching him.

Kamet licks his lips and tries again, throwing Costis' words back at him. "What do you want?"

"Anything you are willing to give me," Costis replies, unhelpful, and Kamet huffs his discontent loudly.

He wants to be told what to do. He's very good at following orders. He knows how to do that, but guessing at where to touch, how hard, how soft, how fast, he wasn't so certain.

Some of his thoughts must have shown on his face, because Costis props himself up on an elbow and reaches to him with his other hand to rest it against his stomach.

"I would enjoy anything you do to me," He expanded, "And I would enjoy it more knowing that you don't feel obliged to be doing it."

Kamet reddened, frowned.

"You don't need to be so gentle with me," he said, voice sharp, "I'm not some naïve child."

Costis shook his head in agreement, did not move his hand.

"I know that," he said, "I would not have sucked you off if you were some naïve child."

Kamet blushes more, wishes he could stop it.

"So then why?" He asks plaintively, "If you don't think I am naïve, why do you touch me as if I'm blown glass?"

It's Costis who is blushing now.

"Because I fear that no one else ever has," he stumbles over his words, "When I touch you I want you to know how much I adore you, how precious you are to me." The delicate words were awkward in his mouth, but he stared steadily at Kamet as he spoke.

"I am afraid," he admits, "Of touching you badly. Of miss-stepping as I do so often. Of reminding you of things you might not want to think about."

Kamet wished that Costis was not so good at reading him. He wished that he were a different man so that Costis would not feel so burdened with him. He wished that he could laugh away Costis' worries, and deny them truthfully.

He draws back slightly, and Costis' face drops.

"It's true," Kamet says eventually, breaking a silence so achingly tense, and Costis blinks at him. "No one else ever has touched me the way you do," he nods stiffly. "I'm not speaking just of your soft touches here, but of the way you bump shoulders with me while we walk, or

sling your arm around my waist to hug me, put your hand on my leg to calm me.” He had been staring down at Costis’ hand, no longer on his stomach once he’d moved, but lying on the bed between them. Now he looked up to Costis’ face. His open, worried, beautiful face.

“I already knew, before you kissed me, before you undressed me, that your touch was different to what I was...used to. I already knew that you didn’t touch me for your own benefit, Costis. You don’t need to try so hard to keep proving it to me. I know.”

He moved back into the gap between them he had created, lifted his leg to straddle Costis’ lap, brushed the curls out of Costis’ eyes, and continues, voice low.

“Maybe sometimes you will say something stupid, touch me in a way that scares me, but the more you touch me the less scared I am.”

He leans in, kisses Costis softly, chaste, closed mouth, then, kisses Costis hard, dirty, open mouth.

Costis kisses him back, kisses him back, kisses him back, then pulls away to stare up at him carefully.

“I love you,” he says firmly, as if daring Kamet to deny it.

Kamet does not deny it. Nor does he say, ‘are you sure?’ like his mind tells him he ought to. He pushes aside the idea that Godekker had tried to plant in his head of Costis taking advantage of him.

He nods, “I know,” he says.

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