

Hemakshi hated some holidays. This was one of them. He knew it was supposed to be important for couples or whatever but he really didn't have it in him to profess any kind of love or sappy feelings he has toward Anjay. Sure Anjay knew he loved them, they've had this discussion already despite only being together for little over a year but the pressure of the first real Valentine's together was mounting.

He sat down at the kitchen table, reaching for a piece of paper and poured over his notes. Already he had scrawled a few notes and ideas but most of them were already crossed out.

"Museum? No, we usually go there to research....Coffee? Too casual. Dinner? Happens all the time...." Hemakshi mumbled to himself as he sipped his leftover tea. "Well maybe after something special, I can make that work." He knew how much Anjay enjoyed when they did those nights, he could do that. Add a few candles, maybe a nice bouquet, some dessert - he catches himself as he thinks that and shakes his head. This is too much, too fast. He's gotta balance it out with something more....Anjay. Something with adventure, and thought, and-. He looked at his paper again and smiled to himself. He's got an idea.

Anjay woke up to an alarm. Not his alarm, but an alarm of some kind. He squinted at the noise. It was a cuckoo clock? Anjay reached for his glasses to double check and yep, that was just a cuckoo clock a foot away from his face. He groaned as he hauled himself up from his bed, trying to turn the damn thing off.

After a few minutes Anjay was left with a silent clock, a growing headache, and a small mockingbird in his hand. He turned it over a few times and found a tiny note rolled up and tucked under its wing.

"I don't play well with others, nor do I swim, but you can find me defending my roost here."

He recognized that handwriting. Nisus only has so many different styles and at this point Anjay knows them as well as his own forgery fonts. But why leave such a note? He fiddled with the paper, twisting it in his hand as he spun the words in his head. It had to be the bar, there were only so many places around town that had Mockingbirds so heavily featured. Location figured out, Anjay got up.

Anjay got up, pulling on some comfy clothes. As he passed the door he looked at the calendar hanging on the wall. A small twinge of sadness pulled at Anjay. It was Valentine's and he'd been so excited to spend it with his boyfriend in a more official capacity this year, but the big brute had to cancel on him for some dumb 'last minute thing.' He understood, really, Hemakshi had been busy lately with picking up a few odd jobs here and there to help the group pull funds for their equipment. It just sucked.

Nisus must have done this to help take his mind off his boyfriend being gone. It's not like he *needed* such a sappy holiday with Hemakshi, but he *did* want the excuse to spend more time together and be at least a *little* sappier than usual. He'll just have to plan a make-up day for them to go on a date.

By the time he got to the bar, his spirits had lifted with the different scenarios he was planning in his head. He would drag Hemakshi to the park for a picnic, then a little detour to the Pirate Courts for some entertainment, then end the night at one of the fancy cafes downtown, the ones with the dishes so fancy there wasn't enough food on the plate and it was a terrible guessing game of what was even edible. Sure they'd leave hungry but he wanted to hear Hemakshi insult each dish while they guessed each dish based on name alone.

The pool table was the only thing lit up inside the hole-in-the-wall and Anjay headed right towards it. Instinctively he walked to the corner he usually stood in when they came to hustle on the crew's nights off. Circling the table he dragged his fingers along the green surface. No swimming at this pool indeed. He gave the table a once-over and sure enough, inside the pocket was another little trinket. Anjay grinned as he pulled it out of its hiding spot. He couldn't resist a good scavenger hunt and this was starting to pull him in.

Anjay spent a good chunk of the day hopping from place to place in the city, occasionally looking like a fool trying to climb a lamppost for a clue, or digging around the hotdog cart he rarely frequented while sober. Eventually after leaving the museum, a little exhausted from the long excursion, Anjay wondered briefly if he was nearing the end of the hunt. Surely Nisus wouldn't keep him all night, this was more than enough entertainment to keep his mind busy. He'll see it through and then likely post up at the bar for some pool with whoever's there.

He'd ask anyone else in the crew to join but Cecaire was likely busy with their thoughts of Devon, Kyrielle was nearly allergic to the idea of being out in town with all the couples starting to emerge for their own dates, and there was NO way he could ask Salem without it getting weird. He didn't need to try and explain to anyone else that no it was NOT a date they would be on, more of a pity invite. Besides, he didn't want to leave Angel or Orev out of it. He settled on the bar as his backup plan. Get some money from hustling and get a bouquet for Hemakshi when he comes back.

No bar until he finishes his hunt first though; Anjay will not leave this unsolved. Just 2 more clues later and Anjay's standing outside of the liquor store with a new bottle of his favorite wine in hand and a look of utter confusion on his face. The cashier had simply handed him the bottle when he walked in, before he could even ask a question. Puzzled by the easiest task he's had all day, he stood in the middle of the entrance staring at the bottle. There was a simple bow tied around the bottle's sleek neck and wait - there was a key dangling from the center of the bow.

Slowly, Anjay thumbed the key, turning it over and noting the bit of paint on the backside of it. This was *his* key. Well his copy of Hemakshi's apartment key. The blob of paint was hastily added after he lost track of which was which after a long night of breaking-and-entering a few months back. Before he even registered it, his feet began taking him right to the key's destination, heart beating just a little faster.

The apartment looked normal upon arrival. No note, trinket, or anything around the door or under the mat to show anything was off. Anjay felt a little weird breaking into Hemakshi's place, but the puzzle called and he had to know. He took a steadying breath before sliding

the key into the lock. It turned smoothly and unlocked without fanfare; slowly Anjay turned the knob and pushed the door open a crack.

The smell hit him before he could register anything in the dim light. Was that the chicken curry he'd been craving all winter? Hemakshi must have made some to take with him. His stomach growled in the silence of the apartment.

"Shush" he glanced down at the offending organ before he looked back at his surroundings. The apartment wasn't all dark, instead lit by the soft glow of candles placed on nearly every surface around the small living room. His eyes gravitated to the table near the back of the small dwelling, lit up a little brighter than the rest by an elaborate candelabra in the center of it. There were empty wine glasses on either end, and plates, and oh no.

Anjay blinked a few times. This was a dinner setting. It was all set up and ready for a meal. It was just missing the food and the- oh my god he was so dumb. Anjay's brain caught up to itself and he felt the blood rush to his face in embarrassment and a mix of excitement and frustration.

"This better not be you by now Nisus or I swear-:"

"Ouch, no credit?" Hemakshi emerged from his bedroom, holding a hand to his chest in false-pain. "After setting up an entire day catered to my boyfriend?"

Anjay didn't think he could turn more red but he does.

"Wait, don't tell me -" he strides up to the taller man, pointing a finger in conjecture, -"you left me alone all day thinking you were gone? Unbelievable."

Before he could fully pout, Hemakshi wrapped his arms around Anjay's frame, careful not to crush the wine bottle between them. "Yes but I wanted to have enough time to prep dinner without you getting too impatient or bored while I cooked."

"I could *never* be bored hanging around you." Anjay mumbled into Hemakshi's shoulder.

"No but you *are* quite distracting and I didn't want to burn anything." Hemakshi mused. He placed a gentle kiss to the top of Anjay's head before letting the smaller man go.

"Thank you for picking up my grocery order by the way, saved me the trip."

"I-" Anjay sputtered. "You're welcome, but also this is my favorite, so thank you."

The two split apart and Hemakshi guided Anjay towards the table, taking the bottle of wine from his hands. A jolt of nervousness hit Anjay as he sat down.

"So, uh... you managed to do all this?" Anjay gestured at the fancy table settings in front of him. "And all the stuff before? Just for my sake?"

Hemakshi grumbled as he turned around. Anjay couldn't help a small laugh at just how

grumpy he looked at that moment. "I had to call in some assistance from your dearest brother-" his voice took on a sarcastic tone with the acknowledgement, "- to make sure all the smaller details were in place, but yes." He removed the cork with gentle 'pop.' "He had to write the clues as well. You know how bad my forgery can be." A slight blush tinged his cheeks as he admitted that last part.

"Yeah, remind me to teach you some of the basics at the very least" Anjay noted, back in business mode. "You're not very good with your dexterity on those details."

"My hands are perfectly dextrous, thank you." Hemakshi retorted. "I can demonstrate later if you'd like."

Anjay didn't think he could turn a deeper shade of red even if he'd tried. He sputtered and hid behind his wine glass, taking a sip as he mumbled some kind of acquiescence.

"Anyway, I hope it was challenging enough for you. I know how much you've been itching for more adventures lately with jobs being slow." Hemakshi admitted as he dug into the dish, now that he'd served them both. "Besides, it felt too forward to just have you over for dinner like this. Too romantic and cheesy for us." His cheeks heated up a little. He really had been hanging around Anjay long enough to get his bad habit of rambling.

"Hemakshi, I think you're more nervous than me right now," Anjay chuckled. He reached a hand out and placed it atop Hemakshi's hand. It turned up, seeking Anjay's hand to hold in return. "It was a perfect day and the best part was seeing you. Even if you tricked me for it!" His hand left Hemakshi's and any of the nerves left in Hemakshi's stomach left as Anjay held an accusatory finger against him. "Can't believe you told me you had plans! You know what I was almost about to do? Get desperate enough to ask someone else to hang out - ask Salem!" He tossed his hands up. "Unbelievable"

Hemakshi erupted in a short laugh and listened carefully as Anjay relayed the day, gave notes on the riddles, and ultimately chatted away their entire meal. After tidying up from the meal, Hemakshi approached Anjay once more, tucking a small strand of blue behind Anjay's ear.

"Happy Valentine's Day." He mumbled, giving Anjay a gentle kiss. He pulled back for a split second before smirking and leaning in towards Anjay's ear. Forget subtle romance, he was always better at being direct. "Now do you want the cake before or after your real dessert?"