

Her Scents

By Rowan Elizabeth
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"You're Poison. I can smell it."

"Excuse me?"

"Dior's Poison," says Mira. "It's the perfect perfume for you. You have a warm natural scent, and I can tell by the way you carry yourself, you're assertive. Poison. Definitely."

Wrapping her customer's purchase, Mira smiles. Poison loves how she smells and she sniffs her wrists, eyes closed. She is a referral from the stuffy Burberry woman. "So Burberry and Poison are friends? Funny," thinks Mira.

Mira collects a perfume for every occasion. Particular fragrances frame different parts of her life. Times with a past lover are Chanel's Coco. It is refined and softly, elegantly oriental. She can't stand smelling it anymore. Too many potent memories. When her customers ask for Coco, she directs them towards Coco Mademoiselle. Its scent is different enough not to dredge up any unpleasant memories.

Gucci Rush is reserved for the occasions when she feels most wild and open to abandon. She shares it with only her most decadent customers. These are women she calls friends and she also knows can carry off the perfume. Its spicy, floral scent reminds her of dancing and late nights. She has smelled Rush as the sun came up on a very long night.

Rush is what she wears to the warm Mediterranean restaurant, Mezza Luna, where she meets her new friend Claudia who always smells of deep musk oil. Earthy and raw.

Warm scents of olive oil and garlic hang in the air of Mezza Luna, swept by the ancient ceiling fans. Combined with the women's perfumes, the scent of the restaurant becomes their tonic for the duller routines of life.

Exotic aromas thrive in the restaurant. The eclectic atmosphere is thick with heavy thoughts and unusual patrons. The floors, deep brown and ochre slate, are surrounded by stucco and worn brick walls. The room is warmed by a massive fireplace.

Of all the diners, Claudia is holding the heaviest thoughts of all.

"It's Ingrid. She's adding to her collection." Claudia's Dutch-Indonesian lover, Ingrid, is detached and consumed by the acquisition of new lovers. "We say, 'always love me, never leave me,' but what does that mean after four affairs?"

"Why do you stay with her?" Mira asks.

Claudia sits straighter. "She thinks she saved me from a life of waitressing. My white knight. At the time, maybe I thought she could." She is brutally honest about her deficient relationship. "Ingrid is always promising we'll get pregnant. I want a baby. I'll carry it. But 'not now,' she tells me."

They have an arrangement for living. Ingrid offers Claudia the excitement of her ancestry. Trips to Europe, family in Holland. Ingrid believes she supports Claudia as a kept woman. But it is Claudia who provides the support Ingrid needs to feel secure in her daily world. Claudia is solid ground when Ingrid prefers to play in quicksand.

"I often wonder if I'm a rebuttal to Ingrid's infidelities," says Mira.

Claudia squeezes her hand and her face lights up with mischief. "You can be whatever you want."

"Vincent!"

Claudia gets their favorite bartender's attention. "We need you to fill up these glasses. Hup, hup man."

"I think this should be the last round for you two. How on earth are you getting home?"

"We're walking," Claudia tells him. "I live just a few blocks south." Her attitude changes. "Anyway, it doesn't matter when I get home. Ingrid won't be there."

Mira, happily buzzed, kisses Claudia. "Enough of her shit. We're here now."

Vincent doles out the Cabernet.

Claudia stares at Mira over her glass. Keeping eye contact, she reaches her hand towards Mira's thigh. The contact shakes Mira. *What's happening? I should stop her. I don't want to stop her.*

Mira sets her glass down and raises a hand to stroke Claudia's face, to brush the hair out of her eyes. A moment's nervousness comes over them.

Mira breaks the tension. "Vincent? Would you take a picture of us?" She fishes through her bottomless bag for her camera.

The first picture is standard and plain. Two women smiling at an unseen audience. Mira shifts her barstool towards Claudia. "One more."

As Vincent lines up the shot, Mira grabs Claudia's head with both hands and plants an open mouth kiss for the world to see. The women laugh.

"You were going to bite me!"

"I was not. I was just smiling too much. Let's try it again."

This time the kiss connects.

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Summer comes, allowing the women long evenings under the patio awning of Mezza Luna. Cars rush by as they drink pungent wine. Deep scents of indecency hang in the air.

Mira meets Ingrid on a warm July evening. Tall and slender with a river of long, dark hair, Ingrid regards the women casually as she speaks.

Without sitting, she says, "So, how long will the two of you be camped out here?"

"I'm not sure. Is there something you need?" asks Claudia.

"No. I thought I would bring Stacy here. But you're here." She is off to meet her most recent lover, a very pedestrian woman with flat features and flat thoughts.

"Now, you are...?" asks Ingrid.

"Mira."

"Ah, yes, Claudia's latest orphan. She's a dear for taking in the lost." Ingrid glances without interest at Mira. "Now, Claude, I plan to entertain this evening and tonight. Could you make yourself scarce?"

"Fine. Of course," replies Claudia. "I'll be home late anyway. I'll head for the guest room."

"Good."

Claudia offers Ingrid her cheek as she leaves. There Ingrid places the driest brush of a kiss and slips off.

Mira knows Claudia is affected by the encounter, but will not say. The boisterous woman falls silent and sullen.

Mira calls the waitress, a bohemian beauty with big, dark eyes, and pays her in full. She takes Claudia's hand and walks to her car. The women hold hands in a silence they rarely experience. Mira drives towards her apartment near downtown.

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They arrive at Mira's third floor walk-up. Mira lets Claudia into her home for the first time. Her cats gather at their feet.

"Don't mind them. They just want to be loved."

A medley of expensive perfumes clings to every surface of the apartment. Mira brings home samples of many fragrances. The scent she cultivates is the divine mixture of each perfume that speaks to her.

Mira leads Claudia to the sofa and makes her comfortable.

"Let me help you," she says. Claudia lifts her close-set eyes in a plea for compassion.

Mira wants to do nothing but soothe the woman she has come to adore. She wants to be a bandage for the open wound into which Claudia's lover pours salt. Mira lights a fire in the ancient grate, gives Claudia a full glass of wine, and sets to her task.

She chooses not to turn on the lamps. The glare of the green sign on the Chinese take-out restaurant across the street is enough to light the small space.

The cast iron bathtub is tucked under the eaves. A small, square window looks out into a world that Mira hopes to dislodge from Claudia's mind.

Mira runs a bath in the old tub, filling it with sweet-flower oils and salts. Steam rolls off the water, carrying the floral note throughout the tiny apartment.

Claudia sits curled on the sofa, stroking the long fur of her black cat.

"Come with me." Mira takes Claudia's hand, helps her rise from the couch and leads her to the bathroom. She pulls Claudia's white cotton top over her head and removes her jeans and panties. She gives Claudia balance and guides her into the water.

She bathes Claudia's long, lean limbs with a washcloth, soft with soap. The cotton square slips down her arms, across her belly and down her legs. Kneeling next to the bath, Mira worships each part of her, carefully lifting an arm or a foot to attend. The large nipples of Claudia's small breasts are each washed with

tenderness. Mira then turns her attention to her full sex, parts her with her fingers and washes the deepest folds.

How can Ingrid betray this?

Claudia sits quietly as Mira washes her hair, a wide, blonde stripe down her back. She allows her body to slip down the slope of the tub, letting herself sink under the water. For a moment she is the drowning princess, floating just below the surface. Mira watches as she opens her eyes. It seems as though she makes the conscious decision to come up for air. Mira catches the blank stare that speaks of pain and regret, leans forward and kisses Claudia's slick shoulder.

"Let me rinse you."

Claudia stands in the deep tub, staring at a speck on the wall.

Mira rinses the lean woman's body, takes her long fingers and helps her into a waiting towel. She dries her with the same attention to detail with which she bathed each sinewy curve.

In front of the small fireplace, Mira brushes through Claudia's hair. She stands naked in the heat of the flames and Mira rubs the Prada lotion into Claudia's flesh. It is a new cream and a new scent that will remind them of nothing from the past.

A fierce determination crosses Claudia's elegant features. With it, Mira knows she will help Claudia prove that she is not her lover's possession. They will give meaning to the new, shared scent.

Mira spreads the light confection over the slopes of Claudia's breasts, over her ribs and down the roundness of her belly.

The calmness of Mira's touch is left behind as she presses Claudia's flesh.

She pulls Claudia down to the rug on the old, worn wood floor. They kiss in the way they have so recently wanted to in public.

The women brutally grasp one another before Claudia flips Mira onto her back. Straddling Mira's hips, Claudia lifts her head high in beautiful arrogance. She is going to fuck away the hurt that Mira had not been able to wash away.

"You have to be naked too."

Claudia tears at Mira's clothes. Popping the buttons from her blouse, scratching her skin, she yanks her jeans over her hips.

Mira looks at the feral goddess above her.

Leaning down, Claudia sets her mouth to Mira's breast, her strong hands tear at the soft flesh. Her ferocity is met with Mira's panting cries. Claudia pushes Mira's legs apart and slides down her body to her aching cunt. Her fingers press apart Mira's folds and stretch her opening. With the sharp first suck on her clit, Mira arches her back and plunges her hands into Claudia's still wet hair. Claudia's long fingers snake into her, pressing on the inner seat of her desire.

Mira's legs straighten and flex to the point of pain as she encourages the surging orgasm. Claudia sucks all of her body's energy to the uproar centered in her cunt. Mira's arms tighten and press Claudia's face further into her need. Mira's climax tears through her body.

Claudia brings Mira to orgasm time after time, but does not allow her to reciprocate.

"You served me quite enough for now. It's my turn."

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Lying in the glow of the dying fire, their heated bodies give life to the new scent. The fragrance, full of Claudia's musk and Mira's rich scent, gives promise of things to come.

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