

Prologue

In the flickering light of a hundred oil lamps, Balquees stood in her bath, trying to conceal her anxiety from the servant girls washing her. She had journeyed long across the desert to this strange kingdom where people worshipped an invisible god. She had brought gold and jewels and rare spices from her dominions in Sheba. Solomon had received them graciously and inquired with great interest about her land. Three days she and her entourage had occupied a wing of his palace. Three nights she and the king had dined before dancers, musicians, wild beasts brought to heel. But not once had Solomon invited her to his bed.

Balquees glanced down at herself. Just twenty-three years of age, she was still slender, her legs and stomach firm, her breasts full. What about her did not appeal to a king renowned for his love of women?

There could be only one explanation. She dismissed the girls and, still dripping, turned to her vizier. "He has seven hundred wives."

"And three hundred concubines, my queen." The vizier, her most trusted minister, spoke softly, his aged face radiating confidence. "Yet had he ten thousand, all would envy you. Your skin is as dark and flawless as the night, your beauty like the sunrise."

"Still he rejects me." Balquees bit her cheek. She needed a son, a successor as wise and strong as Solomon himself, or her empire would be in danger of collapse. But time's sands were slipping through her fingers. According to the moon, tonight would be her last opportunity to conceive this month.

"We have come prepared, my queen." Stepping forward, the vizier produced a golden flask from his robes. "Provided you are willing to endure a rapture so powerful it could consume both of you in its fire."

"I am willing."

He hesitated. "Are you certain?"

Balquees held out her hand. "Give me the fragrance."

CHAPTER 1

In the lab where students mixed ingredients for their perfumes, Eric Foster proudly unstopped his latest creation, a fragrance that, once perfected, could catapult him into stardom. Brimming with excitement, he turned to Durand. “What do you think of aphrodisiacs?”

“An absurdity. The unachievable goal of perfumers on a fool’s errand.” Jacques Durand cocked a bushy white eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to make one. A reconstruction of the fragrance the Queen of Sheba wore to seduce King Solomon.” Eric proffered the vial. “I call it Balquees.”

Ignoring the vial, Durand frowned. “Why do you waste your time? Why do you waste *my* time, on a Sunday morning?”

Uh-oh. Apparently Durand was in one of his testy moods, perhaps because of the cold drizzle outside. For a seventy-year-old man accustomed to his villa on Cap d’Ail, Versailles in early April could be a dreary place.

It was dreary for Eric, too. Just this morning, on his three-mile run, he’d gone off the sidewalk to avoid a young girl dressed for church and stepped right into a mud puddle. But Eric had to be here. He was stuck in Versailles until graduation next month when, at age twenty-five, he would finally start working for a major perfume house.

At least he and Durand had the institute to themselves. Durand, who refused to join the faculty but taught an occasional master class, hated the groveling students who foisted their creations on him whenever he showed up. But Sundays were safe — no students, no staff, the labs spotlessly clean, the air cleansed of experiments by the filtration system humming softly overhead — the ideal day for their fortnightly meetings. And now Eric had stupidly provoked his mentor’s scorn.

Deciding Durand could smell Balquees when his mood improved, Eric replaced the stopper and attempted to justify his so-called waste of time. “I’ve finished all the requirements, except the final examination. So I have a few weeks to indulge in other interests.”

“And this is how you indulge? Butterflying after fantasies?” Durand unbuttoned the jacket of his suit, Armani of course, which he wore over a thin turtleneck the same pigeon-gray as his wavy hair. Seating himself on the adjacent lab stool, he said, “Eric, you have an excellent mind and the finest nose of anybody I know. But more important, you have extraordinary talent. I would take no interest in you if you did not. You should be spending your time on serious creations.”

Eric opened the bottom drawer at his station in the lab and withdrew a brown, screw-capped vial. “I finished this last week. For my graduation project.”

Durand gave him that skeptical squint that could crush reputations, then selected a *mouillette* from a beaker on the tiled countertop. He dipped the thin strip of white filter paper into Eric’s offering, sniffed, and his eyes widened.

“This is good.” He waved the *mouillette* in the air, to evaporate some of the top note, and smelled again. “I might even say excellent. But you used real bergamot.”

“I know it’s been claimed to cause cancer in rats. But almost any organic compound can do that if you rub it on full-strength for several months. My perfume has only a tiny percentage, and it doesn’t smell the same with a synthetic.”

“Synthetics never smell the same. Cheaper, more consistent quality. But none of the nuances of the natural. Still, there is strong resistance to certain naturals, especially in Europe and America. You have a risk that this could never go to market without one of those infantile health warnings your government loves.”

Eric’s ego deflated. “Never go to market” from a man who’d made his fortune and reputation as a master perfumer was tantamount to the kiss of death.

“However,” Durand said, dropping the *mouillette* in the waste jar, “this is so good that the synthetic will not injure it. Congratulations.”

Relief swelled in Eric’s chest, a physical sensation that made him straighten his posture. Durand had a habit of doing that to you, crippling you one moment, then lifting you back up. Similar to Eric’s father, who could grimace at your soufflé or rip apart your sauce, then smile and show you how to fix it. Eric loved them both. But his future lay in perfumery, not *haute cuisine*.

So, synthetic bergamot. Eric’s station, like all the others in this lab, had an electronic balance for weighing fractions of grams plus four shelves of deep-sided plastic trays, each tray filled with brown glass vials of extracts, essential oils, and cold-pressed tinctures. The vials were fitted with screw-cap eye droppers, one drop being one-twentieth of a milliliter. He pulled down tray B from the top shelf and picked out *Bergamot synthétique*. “I’ll try it again.”

“More than try. You will succeed.”

Encouraged by his mentor’s confidence and apparently improved mood, Eric returned to his original subject, the whole reason he’d been itching to see Durand today. “Would you smell Balquees now?”

“Were you not listening to me?”

Eric clamped his jaw to keep from swearing. What was wrong with the man? Durand could be stubborn, but never before had he dismissed one of Eric’s creations without even giving it a sniff. And this fragrance was possibly the most important in Eric’s life. He yearned to be great, to create something that would leave a lasting mark in the world of perfumes. Durand’s saying an aphrodisiac was “unachievable” only fired Eric’s own belief that Balquees would make that mark. Surely Durand could see Eric’s enthusiasm. And just as surely he should be curious, or at least willing, to smell the fragrance that inspired it.

Eric changed tack in hopes of pricking Durand’s interest. “I’ve used an ingredient that’s extremely rare. The same one the Queen of Sheba is said to have used. It comes from—”

“I do not care where it comes from. You chase a mirage.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

Durand shook his head slowly, as though it should be obvious to a student of perfumes. “Because men have tried for centuries. Spanish fly, the crushed powder of a beetle that inflames sensitive tissue, is nothing more than an irritant. Vanilla, sweet amber. Possibly they worked in an earlier age, because women thought they were *supposed* to. But today’s woman is more sophisticated.”

“What about androsterone?” Eric said, playing along for the moment. “Male perspiration.”

Durand blew out a dismissive breath in that manner unique to the French. “For some women, perhaps. For some women, the sight of a man in tight trousers is stimulus enough. Do you wish to cater to such women?”

Spoken with the unwitting arrogance of a man who'd spent his life creating specifically for sophisticates. "But smells can generate so many emotions. So many physical reactions. Why not desire?"

"Eric, you do not strike me as a fellow who needs assistance attracting women."

"It's not for *me*." Eric racked his brain for a different approach but couldn't come up with one. "Would you just smell it? One time, that's all I ask."

Durand stood from his stool. "Come with me."

Exasperated, Eric followed him out of the lab and to the office of Jean Kerléo, founder of the Osmothèque. Billed as the "living perfume museum," the Osmothèque shared quarters with ISIPCA, *l'Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l'Aromatique alimentaire*, the world's top school for perfumes, cosmetics, and flavorings. There were roughly a hundred students in each curriculum, and among the perfume students, Eric suffered the segregation of being best — and American.

Durand opened the door and knelt in front of a small safe behind Kerléo's desk. With long, delicate fingers, he turned the combination dial.

Eric stopped at the threshold. Durand never missed a chance to extol the honor of perfumers. Yet here he was, opening the private safe of a man who, for thirty years, had been the master perfumer for Jean Patou and who dwelled among the gods of perfumery just as surely as Durand himself did.

When his mentor withdrew a set of keys from the safe, Eric could hardly believe it. "*Monsieur*, are you sure this is okay?"

"Jean is a close friend. He would lend me these if he were here."

Hoping that was true, Eric again followed Durand, this time down the stairs and out of the laboratory wing into one of the two pink-and-white chateaux that were the public face of ISIPCA. Inside the chateau, Durand unlocked a door, flipped on a light switch, and headed down the stairs into the basement. At a steel door labeled 27, he selected a four-sided, high-security key from Kerléo's ring and opened the lock.

This was the vault, the heart of the Osmothèque's unique collection. Eric hadn't been here since the orientation tour for new students, nearly two years ago. In fact, few people in the world even knew it existed, and fewer still ever got inside.

The temperature of the room was a frigid fifty degrees Fahrenheit to counteract one of the three great enemies of perfume — heat. Of the other two enemies, light was easy to control. The room was kept dark, except when Kerléo was here. Durand switched on the fluorescent lights.

A tile-topped table attached to the far wall provided the room's only workplace. Aside from the table and a small area around it, floor-to-ceiling metal shelves occupied nearly every available space, and bottles of perfume filled the shelves almost to capacity. Several thousand bottles, ranging in size from five milliliters to two liters. Roughly half of the bottles were glass, the other half aluminum.

Nobody except Jean Kerléo ever took a sample from any bottle, and Kerléo only did so after one hell of a good reason had been presented to him. When he did withdraw a sample, he topped off the headspace with argon from a gas cylinder, for the final great enemy of perfumes was oxygen. No bottle in this room contained any air. In all cases, what looked like air above the liquid was argon.

"Eric, you are standing among the greatest perfumes ever created. Some of them no longer exist outside this room." Durand leveled his gray eyes. "Not one of them is an aphrodisiac."

“But that doesn’t mean an aphrodisiac couldn’t join them.”

“Never!” As though embarrassed at his outburst, Durand ran a hand through his hair. “I say never because an aphrodisiac, even if possible, would be dishonorable. Great perfumes like these create a mood, an impression. They do not drive a person to sexual liaison against that person’s will.”

“But something that arouses desire could augment that mood. It doesn’t have to be against the person’s will. A person might *want* it.”

“It would be dishonest.”

“Don’t you think it depends on intent?” Although it felt like he was getting nowhere, Eric had to keep trying. “If you know the person well, if you’re in a committed—”

“Eric, please.” Durand picked up a binder from the work table and started flipping through pages of computer printout. “Look at these. Jicky, Mitsouko, Number Five, Joy, Ma Griffe, L’Air du Temps. Here, Sublime by our own Kerléo. All masterpieces. These are the fragrances you should study.”

“I *have* studied them.” At the mention of their names, Eric could recall exactly how each one smelled. He could summon the fragrance in his mind and discern the ingredients, even the relatively uncommon ones like the opopanax in Jicky and the styrax in Ma Griffe. For a moment, he was tempted to remind Durand that Jicky, Mitsouko, and L’Air du Temps all contained real bergamot. But he held his tongue.

“And if you wish to indulge in re-creations ...” Durand flipped through a few more pages. “... consider something useful like this.” He tapped one of his manicured nails on an entry that read *Crêpe de chine (1925, Millot) par Jean de Pres*. “Of the original perfume, there is no more. We have it here only because Kerléo recreated it. We know it is perfect because the owner of the formula allowed him to copy it. That formula, and at least two hundred others, he keeps in a safe deposit box. People have given them to him because they trust him to keep them secret. They know he is honorable.”

Not very creative, Eric thought. The creativity came when you figured out the ingredients yourself.

“Honor, Eric. You are about to enter the most honorable profession on earth. When you have gained the trust of your colleagues and proved your ability to create fine fragrances, then you will have the right to venture into the realm of recreating lost perfumes.”

As usual, Durand had taken the long way around to make a point, going so far as to bring him down here to the *sanctum sanctorum* to do it. But honor wasn’t the issue. The issue was having the freedom to create something revolutionary without naysayers throwing up roadblocks every step of the way. And in the case of Balquees, having the freedom to bring the wisdom of the ancients into the Twenty-first Century. If that shattered the mindset of what was “achievable,” then so much the better.

“So,” Durand said, “you will now concentrate on the important things. Yes?”

Eric nodded with conviction. “Yes, sir, I will.”

CHAPTER 2

At the Palace of Versailles, an hour's walk from ISIPCA, Eric's favorite place was the Gallery of Mirrors. He liked the grandeur and sheer decadence, the long row of twenty-foot-high windows, the duplicate row of equally large mirrors on the opposite wall, the crystal chandeliers that must have weighed half a ton each. A monument to excess, in gold and glass.

But Abby, he knew, saw its gilded statues of women raising candelabras in honor of the Sun King as a disgusting tribute to male narcissism and female servitude. To her, the best part of the palace grounds was this thatch-roofed village called the Hamlet, a folly built for the queen where she could make believe she was just plain folk.

Never mind the overcast sky and threat of more rain. If Abby wanted to come here, fine. All he wanted was to get his mind off the heartbreak of Durand's rejection. And nothing took his mind off other things like Abby Han.

As the two of them approached the Watermill Cottage, a cold wind rippled the nearby pond and wafted scents of rosemary, thyme, and dead lavender from last year's plantings. Eric stopped, turned up the collar of his leather jacket, and said to Abby, "I bet I know why you like this place. You picture Marie Antoinette cavorting with her serving maids. Pretending to be farm girls, milking cows, hoisting skirts and dancing jigs until they fall into the hay and have to loosen each others' bodices."

"Jealous?" Abby gave him a sly grin, her beautiful Chinese eyes laughing in that impish way that always charmed him. Slim and graceful, with chin-length black hair streaked red today, she came closer to the French concept of *félinité* than any other woman he'd ever met.

He returned the grin. "Only if there was a man-servant in there with them."

"Dreamer."

She had that right. He dreamed of *her*, a dream only partially fulfilled in reality. For besides being his best friend and the only other American at ISIPCA, Abby was his occasional lover.

Too bad she was also, as she put it, "mostly lesbian."

Taking her hand, he walked her along the path to the stone-and-timber cottage. "What's wrong with dreaming?"

"Mental jacking off," she said with the accent and bluntness of her native New York City.

"Gee, thanks for the image."

She leaned closer and pecked him on the cheek.

Just like her. Crude one minute, cuddly the next. Always toying with him, except when she wanted him in bed. He'd once asked her why, why him since she generally preferred women. She'd answered in a rare tone of true affection, "I like that you adore me. And you don't let up after my first orgasm."

The memory gave him an idea. At the front door of the cottage he jiggled the latch, knowing it would be locked. One evening, when he'd misplaced his keys, she'd opened his apartment for him with her Swiss Army knife. "Maybe you could pick the lock, and we could see if they've spread fresh hay."

"Durand must have put you in a frisky mood. So it went well with him this morning?"

Eric looked aside, then back at her. "About as well as ice water in the shower. I've been trying to reconstruct an old aphrodisiac, and he dumped all over it. Not just *my* effort but the whole idea of aphrodisiacs."

"You mean like rhino horn or tiger's balls?" She squinched up her face. "Frankly, I'm

with him. I'd rather see those parts still attached to the animal."

"No. I'm talking about a perfume. And he wouldn't even smell it. Not one damn sniff."

"My love, who needs an aphrodisiac?" Turning to face him, she drifted a hand down one thigh of his jeans and back up the other. Then she cupped him through the denim and smiled. "See?"

Unfortunately, another couple chose just that time to come strolling down the path in their direction. But it didn't stop Abby. She tugged at his zipper.

Indecision quickened his pulse. Should he let her continue and risk being seen? Abby would love that. And there were times he might, also. But this wasn't one of them, not here.

To stop her hand, he wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her tightly. "Why don't we continue this behind the cottage?"

"Because I'm only making a point." She pushed away and shot a glance around his shoulder as crunching footsteps on the gravel path announced the arrival of the other couple. "*Bonjour.*"

"*Bonjour,*" the couple sing-songed before turning to Eric's left to peer into the cottage's windows.

Irrked that she'd just been teasing, Eric pulled up his zipper and steered Abby to the right, down the steps to where an old wooden waterwheel stood motionless in the sluice. The breeze down here seemed colder, the scents it carried dominated by the odor of duck droppings and the chlorophyll smell of algae growing at the pond's edge.

"It doesn't matter," he told her, "that some people get turned on easily. It's about the whole idea of perfumes. Attraction and romance. Only this one would go a step further and create sensations that inspired passion."

"Love Potion Number Nine?"

"I'm being serious."

"You're always serious. You should lighten up a little."

"Dammit, this could make my reputation."

"More dreaming." She took hold of his hand. "In case you haven't noticed, good sex is in the mind. Granted, you can create a perfume that might enhance the mood. But if one person or the other doesn't want to get laid, it ain't gonna happen."

"Don't be so sure." According to the ancient texts Eric had found translated on the Internet, King Solomon had been reluctant to lie with the Queen of Sheba until her fragrance enchanted him. "This thing I'm working on, it started partly as a whim and partly because the only specified ingredient was something I'd never heard of before."

"Oh, my God, there's something you never heard of? You must be mortal, after all."

Eric strained to control his temper. When she got like this, it reminded him of the French students who hated his guts. Normally he'd walk away, but he needed her to believe him.

"As I was saying, the only specified ingredient is the heartwood of a tree that grows on Socotra."

"Socotra?"

"A Yemeni island in the Gulf of Aden. It turns out ISIPCA has a sample of the wood, but they wouldn't let me use any of it. Too rare. Which pissed me off. So I—"

"Now I see." Abby flashed one of her "Aha" smiles. "Someone said no, and you said, 'Just watch me.' That's so typical of you."

"Would you just listen for a second?" Eric clenched a fist. If she wasn't going to take his mind off Durand, the least she could do was stop interrupting. "What I have so far really works. At least on me."

“Sweetheart, I think you’re succumbing to the power of your own suggestion.” In a mocking tone, she said, “I want this stuff to turn me on. Oh my, look, it’s turning me on.”

“You’re wrong.” Was there no way he could convince her, short of giving her Balquees, which wasn’t quite ready? Maybe her specialty. He should have thought of that before. Abby was, after all, the star pupil in ISIPCA’s flavor curriculum. He switched to foods. “How about oysters, dark chocolate, saffron?”

“Give me a break. Have you ever gotten a hard-on eating oysters?”

“Okay, forget it.” First Durand, now her. Why was everyone who counted so negative? Never mind. He’d prove them both wrong eventually. “Let’s cash out of here and go to that bistro you like.”

“You didn’t have lunch with Durand?”

“He said he needed to hit the road for a hunting trip in the Pyrenees.”

“Well, I’m not very hungry, but I’ll have a glass of wine while you eat.”

Wine. That gave him an idea. Instead of lunch, he could use the afternoon killing two birds with one stone. He’d show her that scents really can arouse and, in the process, he could try out some additional ingredients for Balquees. “Do you still have that birthday present I gave you? *Le Nez du Vin*?”

“Of course. I love it.”

“Then let’s go to your place.”

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“I want to blindfold you,” Eric said in Abby’s bedroom.

“Ooh, kinky.” She gave him a soft kiss, then went to her dresser and removed a black silk scarf from the second drawer. “Will this do?”

“Nicely.” Her apartment lent itself to dark, almost Gothic fantasies — two rooms in a 19th-century mansion with wooden shutters, plank floors, and bare stone showing through the plasterwork. Her furnishings were all black, right down to the sheets and bedspread. “Matches my personality,” she’d told him. As did the bed itself, a four-poster in heavy oak, positioned like a sacrificial altar in the center of the room. But if she wanted kinky, it would have to wait until later.

He shed his jacket, then unbuttoned her wool coat and slid it from her shoulders. Beneath the coat she wore a cashmere sweater the same blood-red as a Ferrari. Her nipples stood out against the soft fabric. “God, you’re beautiful.”

She closed her eyes. “Say it again.”

Abby, reared by a father who’d treated her like trash, didn’t consider herself pretty. Eric never tired of trying to convince her otherwise. “You are beautiful.”

As though the words were magic, she opened her eyes and smiled. “And now?”

“And now ...” Glancing around, he spotted *Le Nez du Vin*, The Nose of Wine, on a shelf of the bookcase in one corner. He walked over and pulled out the bright red box, roughly the size and weight of an encyclopedia volume.

“You were serious about a bunch of wine smells?” She gave him a very French pout. “I thought we were ...”

“You’ll like it.” He laid the box on her bed and flipped it open. Inside were fifty-four small bottles of scents common to wines. The collection was intended for connoisseurs who wanted to hone their appreciation of these subtleties, or impress their friends with how many they could detect. Several of the scents were different from what he had in the lab, and he’d

judge from her response whether any of them might work well in Balquees.

When he looked back at her, Abby was gazing up at him with a “take me” expression, her eyes beckoning, her lips moist and slightly parted.

A pang of desire bit him hard. In his palms, he could almost feel the perfect smoothness of her face, the silky softness of her hair.

But not yet. He needed to concentrate on Balquees, take advantage of this chance to flesh it out.

He turned Abby and tied the scarf around her head. As he did, he couldn't help inhaling the fragrance rising from her warm skin, like cream laced with a hint of violet, that uniquely Abby fragrance he loved. From behind her, he kissed her neck.

“Mmm,” she cooed, “that's better.”

He removed her boots and his own shoes and socks, leaving them both otherwise clothed. Then he climbed onto the bed with his back to the headboard and guided her into a position so that she sat between his legs with her back against his chest.

“Unless you're a contortionist,” she said, “I don't know how we can do it like this.”

“Just relax.” Looking down at the box of scents, he selected peach for the fruit's resemblance to labia, a similarity many cultures associated with sex. He passed the bottle under her nose. “What do you smell?”

“Peaches.”

He drew a fingertip across her mouth. “Peaches and lips.”

“Is that supposed to be innuendo?”

Not if he had to tell her. But maybe something similar. He opened the bottle of apricot. “And this?”

“Apricots. Same innuendo. Eric, if I wanted a woman, I'd have one.”

Abby's nipples had become barely discernable under her sweater, the exact opposite of what he was trying to achieve. Frustrated, he surveyed the bottles of other fruit aromas, equivalent to top notes in perfumery. Various citruses and berries, apple, cherry, banana, quince. Prune! That was a possibility, darker and richer than the lighter fruits, closer to a perfume heart note. And this time he'd use a combination, instead of a single fragrance.

To the prune, he added blackcurrant and walnut for their earthiness. Holding the three bottles together, he passed them under her nose. “How about this?”

She sniffed, then sniffed again. “Prunes stewed in armagnac. How did you do that?”

Another failure. With a sinking feeling, he wondered if he could actually do this, use food smells to arouse a woman whose specialty was food flavorings. But he needed to try.

Sticking to heart notes, he selected butter for its warmth, peppercorns for their impression of soil, and cut hay for its slight similarity to the smell of semen.

When he waved them under her nose, her body stiffened for a second. Then she tilted her head up toward him. “Now you're being naughty. Where did you get that boy-girl smell?”

Beneath the sweater, her nipples were more prominent. Finally he was making progress.

Refocusing on the bottles, he decided to keep the cut hay. The oud in Balquees contained a note that was even more similar to semen, closer to Bisquick dough or diluted bleach. But there was nothing like bleach in this collection, and the closest to dough was yeast. He chose the yeast to enhance the “boy” note and added truffle, a scent that reminded him of nuzzling between her legs.

When he waved the combination in front of her, Abby's toes curled. “How do you do that?”

“I'm just trying to conjure images in your head.”

“You’re doing a pretty good job of it.”

She didn’t have to tell him. Her heightened arousal was obvious in the sharp scent of apocrine perspiration coming through her slacks, a scent that was having the same effect on him.

But there was still the realm of perfume base notes. Shifting position so she wouldn’t notice the bulge rising against her back, he kept the cut hay, replaced truffle with musk, and added dark chocolate. He held the four together under her nose.

Abby’s stomach quaked. She grabbed the cord that tied the front of her slacks and started unlacing it. “Can we just have sex now?”

God, he wanted to. But there was one last thing he had to try. Hands fumbling with the bottles, he substituted truffle for the yeast.

One whiff of the combination and Abby ripped off her blindfold. She twisted to face him, her eyes ablaze.

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As evening darkened her bedroom, Eric cradled Abby in his arms, her soft breath feathering his wrist. He could lie with her like this forever.

With a contented, “Mmm,” she uncoiled from his embrace. “That was nice.”

For him, more. All of her flavors still lingered on his tongue, her textures on his fingertips. The aromas of her body were so firmly embedded in his memory he could recapture every moment of their lovemaking. And the events leading up to it.

Propping himself on an elbow, he said, “What’s your opinion of aphrodisiacs now?”

“They’re in the mind.”

“What?” He sat upright, incredulous that she could say that. “I took you through a whole progression of fragrances and never touched you. And pretty soon you’re practically tearing my clothes off.”

She smiled benevolently. “I got hot for you at the palace. You blindfolded me. Nice touch, by the way. Then you put me between your legs. What was a girl to do?”

“You’re saying the fragrances had no effect on you?” That hurt. Really hurt, physically in the middle of his chest.

Abby pushed herself up and sat back against the headboard. “You want me to say they helped? Okay, they helped. But they wouldn’t have made me want you if I didn’t already.”

Eric swung his feet out of bed and stood up.

“Oh, great,” she said. “What are you, angry at me?”

Yes! “No, just frustrated.” And now more determined than ever to show her what a true aphrodisiac could do. When Balquees was ready, he’d prove— Wait a second. How could he have forgotten? “Before Durand left, he gave me four passes to a perfume launch in Paris this Friday, at the Panthéon. He can’t attend, and wouldn’t anyway. I’d like you to come with me.”

Her eyes widened. “Which house?”

“Styx.”

“Wow. They’re big time. A new perfume from them should be sensational. Who are you giving the other passes to?”

“I’m thinking Diego and Marie-Claire.” The only other students he considered friends. “I’d like all of you” ... *especially you* ... “to help me test this new perfume I’m working on.”

“Your aphrodisiac, so-called?”

“Just wait.” If he crafted it right, Balquees would make his friends the center of attention, completely eclipsing whatever Styx had to offer.