

Mix Sprint - Jamal's Route 'Afrodesia'

Afternoon - Desia's Shop

Word Count: 1467

Desia: How about cherry blossom heart notes?

Jamal: Overdone. How 'bout rose?

Desia: And you think *cherry blossom* is overdone?

Jamal: It's classic.

Desia: As is cherry blossom!

Desia: Ugh, we're not getting anywhere with this. We keep going in circles.

Jamal: Maybe we should take a break?

Desia: We've only been at this for twenty minutes...

Jamal: Truth.

He stands and begins to pace the length of the space in thought. My eyes trail him back and forth until he stops short with a snap of his fingers.

Jamal: Ay, I got it! How bout we do a mix sprint?

Desia: I haven't done one of those since we graduated from the Academy.

I shudder when I think of all the pairs of Mary-Janes I've scuffed because Professor Boredelon insisted we actually *sprint* to each station for those quick mix labs.

Jamal: Me either, but like diamonds, sometimes the best things surface from pressure.

Desia: You've got a point.

Desia: Alright then, let's give it a shot.

Gathering beakers, pipettes, sample atomizers, Jamal sets up our stations while I arrange every alcohol, absolut, and other fragrance ingredients on another table.

It's quiet out front, so we enlist Marcellus's help in judging our little sprint.

Marcellus: So what exactly do I have to do?

Desia: Just think of a random prompt - could be a word, a phrase, or a vibe. We get three minutes to create a fragrance blend to match it, and you decide the winner each round.

Jamal: Let's go best of five.

Desia: Fine by me. Winner dictates creative direction?

Jamal: Bet.

Marcellus: I've got a prompt if you two are ready?

Desia: Ready to lose, Jamal?

My eyes lock with Jamal's and the spark of competition ignites the room. He meets my challenging grin with one of his own.

Jamal: Shawty, you *wish*.

Marcellus: Alright, first prompt is 'cottage core'. The clock is set. On your mark, get set, go!

Jamal and I both make a mad dash toward the ingredient table, scouring it for the perfect notes.

Desia: *He'll probably go for the obvious woody elements. I need to find a different angle...*

After rifling through a few bottles, the Vanilla Absolut catches my eye.

Desia: *That's it! I'll capture the homestead aspect!*

Grabbing a few more gourmand and spice components, I race back to my station to whip up my new fragrance.

Marcellus: And time! Pipettes down.

He strides over to us as we spray our test strips for him. Grabbing Jamal's, he closes his eyes and waves the test strip a few inches in front of his face a few times.

Marcellus: Jamal, tell me a bit about what you came up with.

Jamal: Aight, boom. When I think cottage core, I picture frolickin in wildflower fields, bees buzzin, birds chirpin, tall grass swayin in the breeze and shit.

Marcellus: That translates well through the honey, cedar, and green leaf heart notes and...Is that dew drop I smell?

Jamal: Damn right. That and the bellflower tie it all together.

Marcellus: A strong contender for the first round.

Marcellus resets his nose with the open bag of coffee beans then reaches for my test strip.

Marcellus: What has my sweet princess cooked up?

Immune to his nicknames by now, I don't even deign to roll my eyes.

Desia: Cottagecore isn't all just frolicking through the Forest singing *The Hills Are Alive*. I went with a different approach to evoke the feeling of homesteading.

Marcellus: The vanilla, cinnamon, and clove make a striking first impression, but the juicy blueberry and something unexpected follows them up like a soft whisper.

Desia: It's leather. Reminds me of the short, vintage, lace-up boots the cottage core girlies on Cliptok always wear.

Marcellus nods seemingly impressed. He grabs the coffee beans to reset his nose, then smells each of our strips a few more times.

The confident smirk slides back onto Jamal's face as Marcellus sniffs his strip a few more times than mine.

Marcellus: I believe we have a clear winner.

Marcellus: Round one goes to...Desia!

Desia: Yes!

Jamal: Bro, you biased as hell!

Marcellus shrugs at him while I move my shoulders in a little victory dance.

Desia: Better luck next time.

Jamal: Oh, aight. I got you.

Marcellus: And I've got the next prompt. On to the next round.

We go for three more rounds, but end up tied 2-2!

Jamal: C'mon Marcel, hit us with the tiebreaker.

Marcellus: I'm all out of prompts.

Desia: We can't end in a tie! You've got to have one more in you.

Marcellus I gave all the best ones already. Although...

Desia & Jamal: Although?

Marcellus: I did have one idea, but you may not like it.

Jamal and I give him expectant looks.

Marcellus: *You* are each other's prompts.

We pause, look at each other, then back at him before bursting into laughter.

Desia: *That's* the big idea?

Jamal: Damn bro, you had me thinkin this would be challengin.

Desia: It's almost too easy.

The tingle of the shop door lets us know a few customers are trickling in out front.

Marcellus: Then you won't have a problem judging without me. Duty calls.

Leaving us to our own devices, we each whip up a fragrance based on the other.

Desia: I'm ready when you are.

Jamal: Ladies first.

I pump a few spritzes onto a test strip and hand it to him. He glances at me cautiously before waving it in front of his nose.

Jamal: Wow this...

He inhales again, closing his eyes to sharpen his sense of smell.

Desia: Dragon's blood is my star ingredient, but I threw in a bit of star anise, nag champa, amber and myrrh for more depth.

Jamal: Damn, this right here? This is it.

Desia: Though you've got a fiery personality, you can be hard to read. I aimed to encapsulate the former while rounding it out with a suggestion of mystery and an air of sophistication all in this smokey scent.

Jamal: O-oh, that what you really think of me?

For someone who is usually so sure of himself, it's a little surprising to see him subtle over his words. Kind of refreshing, actually.

Desia: Well, yeah. That's how you present yourself, at least.

Jamal: I half-expected you to make somethin objectively foul.

Desia: Maybe I should've...

Jamal: Say what?

Desia: Nothing! So, what'd you cook up for me?
I hold out my hand expecting a test strip. Instead, he gently places a hand under my wrist, test atomizer poised in the other.

Jamal: May I?

Desia: Go for it.

He reveals his blend as he spritzes a few pumps onto my wrist.

Jamal: I went for Lily of the Valley as the anchor. It reminds me of those full skirts you love wearin. Plus, it's sweet in a sharp way, sorta like you.

Despite myself, I feel heat creeping up my cheeks.

Jamal: I backed it with green apple, driftwood, bamboo, coconut, and a splash of citrus to mimic that bright, fresh, and breezy attitude you show everyone but me.

Desia (thinking): *Is he...flirting with me?*

Desia (thinking): *Noooo, it can't be it. He's just complimenting me like I did for him.*

My heart gives one loud thump when he brings my wrist to his nose and inhales.

Jamal: Mmh. Smells just like I thought it would.

Still holding my wrist, his stare pins me to the spot. The glint of challenge that occupied his eyes earlier is replaced with something entirely different.

Something that makes me swallow thickly and blush a little harder.

Marcellus: Hey, did you decide win-

Marcellus' abrupt return forces us apart immediately.

Marcellus: Am I *interrupting* something?

Jamal: Nah, bro. Nothin at all.

Desia: R-right. Nothing.

Marcellus: What a shame.

Jamal: You could stand to sound a lil less gleeful, damn.

The soft *beep beep* sounds from Jamal's watch.

Jamal: I gotta head out soon anyway.

Desia: But wait. Who won the tiebreaker?

Jamal: I guess I'll let you win, since you bottled my swag perfectly.

Desia: Are you kidding? It was definitely you this time. You even managed to capture the nostalgia of my hometown, Stonewater.

Jamal: I guess we'll have to call it another tie.

Desia: I guess we will.

Our eyes connect and we share another inexplicably charged moment, until Marcellus purposefully clears his throat as loudly as he possibly can.

Jamal: Guess that's my cue. I'll see you around, shawty.

Desia: Yeah.

With that, he saunters out of the room, leaving Marcellus and I to clear the lab.

I smile when I notice that he pocketed the fragrance that I made for him, and left the one for me behind.