

Once Upon a Scrabbulous Night...

Peace and Greetings from the Land of Vocab. Let the Word Wars begin! ☺

Alisha Menon's online alter-ego, Worddiva, rarely felt an urge to interact with her gaming opponents no matter how cleverly they asked for her asl—age, sex, location. But when she read her latest challenger's quirky opening line in the little chat-box next to the blank Scrabble board on her laptop, the word junkie within her couldn't help but grin.

An instant later, the challenger, Wordfreak, put his first word down. DIN.

Wordfreak. She liked his handle. Wait! She squinted at the screen. Was the player male? She reread the words in the chat box and decided that Wordfreak was most definitely an XY chromosome. Only a man would make a war out of an online word game or vice versa. She countered his play with ZONE and threw down her own gauntlet.

Prepare for total annihilation, Wordfreak. I am the Diva of Words, the Ruler of Vocab and the Destroyer of Freaks.

*Whoa! A fierce opponent, a formidable Word Warrior are you. *shudder**

He played MAW.

She grinned at the Yoda-esque reply, slid her gaze over her lamentable selection of letter tiles and played TAP. A sad word, she mused, rolling her neck from side to side. Sad word. Sad world. Sad client. Sad...

Stop it! Stop thinking about work, she admonished herself. There, in the post-midnight dark, on her cozy bed, she wasn't Alisha Menon, Mumbai's staunchest advocate, anymore. She was a faceless word warrior in pajamas. A nameless Scrabble player floating through the World Wide Web looking for another score, another win. And...*goodness*...she was tipsy, she realized as her head spun slowly, adjusting to its own gravity. She shouldn't have had twenty-eight sips of pink champagne to toast her 28th birthday.

Wordfreak set down TWIRL.

What do you do, Queen Diva, besides annihilating freaks?

She groaned, massaged her scalp with her fingers. Encourage a stupid conversation and personal questions invariably followed.

I'm Wordsworth, she deflected pun-fully.

It was true enough. For lawyers and their clients, words were worth everything. A wrong word hither or thither could mean a mistrial, a case lost or the worst, a life lost. She played FRAG.

**scratching head in confusion* you mean wordsmith? Or has the Queen of Vocab joined the Dead Poets Society?*

SPEWS appeared on the board as if by magic.

She laughed, entertained. Oh! Clever one, was he? She scored a low bingo with ISOLATE. As the game progressed, she felt her tense spine loosen up several notches. She wriggled her toes and her arches sighed.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep but I have promises to keep.

Her day had been inordinately long and taxing, physically and mentally, beginning very early at her law offices at Church Gate. Then straight after work, she'd been nagged out of her comfy work clothes into a sleek black cocktail dress and high heels, bundled off to Shiro's for the "un-surprise" birthday bash thrown in her honor—against her wishes—by her utterly infuriating BFF, Diya. Alisha had spent half the night dancing even though she loathed clubbing. She'd done so only because it would have seemed churlish not to have danced at her own birthday party. Now her whole body felt as if it had been spun through the washing machine along with her clothes. Who in hell had invented birthday celebrations? She wanted to go back in time and

shoot the sick bastard. Give her a good book, her therapeutic bed, a glass of *rasam* and she'd christen that a celebration.

Did you fall asleep in yon woods, Mr. Freak? she typed when he didn't play his turn for several minutes.

Patience is a virtue. A logophile cannot rush ze masterpiece.

The volley made her grin. His TITI made her giggle. Their scores made her sit up and gasp. He could beat her, she thought in shock.

Your move, Worddiva...

There was no way in hell she was losing to Wordfreak. Worthy opponents were few and far between on the Scrabbulous site but Worddiva had her Scrabble Queen reputation to uphold. No TITI-playing, quasi-French logophile was going to de-throne her, she swore on the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary. She placed DOOBIE most strategically on the board.

**smirk* The Queen of Vocab into weed? I'm impressed.*

I'm impressed that a Titi Freak knows what a doobie is.

**cough* you misunderstand. Titi is a type of monkey.*

**smirk* I misunderstood nothing. Science has proven how similar men are to monkeys. Who am I to argue?*

That's Man is to Monkey. As in Human Being to Chimp.

I choose to believe otherwise. But you're free to indulge in flawed beliefs all you want, Man.

She couldn't stop grinning as she typed. The quick banter was just too much fun. Why had she stopped chatting with her opponents? For the life of her, she couldn't understand.

Is it your belief that Nature trumps Nurture?

Hmm. A serious question in a serious tone. She frowned, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. How could she possibly deduce Wordfreak's "tone" from an online chat? Clearly, she was becoming as bad as Diya, spinning fanciful tales in her head. It must be the champagne.

No. Both depend on one another.

Yes, but surely Nature weighs heavier?

Goodness! Wordfreak was transporting her back with these questions. Back to being Alisha, divorce lawyer, product of a broken family, daughter of an alcoholic. Back to the cynical self who saw life in all its ugliness daily, and knew there wasn't a happy ending for Man. And she did not relish that. Not one bit.

Look, logophile. I'm a lexicographer, not a philosopher.

A long pause followed her curt statement, or she thought the pause was long since it hadn't been an instant reply.

Ah! Hence the Wordsworth designation ☺

A relieved breath escaped her lips as she felt his tone lighten up again. They were having fun, razzing words. Getting serious would take the kick out of it. And she didn't want serious tonight.

Wordfreak played RUN and wrote *I run every day* in the chat-box.

From what? Irate girlfriends? Naggy wife? Angry husbands? And in case you're gay, jealous boyfriends?

Lips zipped on ze personals ☹

She giggled again. He *got* her humor, matched it even. She played ENVOYS and fought down a huge yawn, blinking back the sleep from her eyes. She was revved up by this game, and by Wordfreak. She did not want to postpone the play to tomorrow. She did not want to lose this tenuous connection until a winner was declared—her.

FAVA, REEFS, CERE, HOOPS. They warred on, seamlessly.

WTH! Just checked your stats, Queen Diva, over 9000 games played and only 487 lost! Bravo!

I crowned myself Tyrannotherosaurus Lex two years ago.

Tyranno...what? ROFLMAO! That's hilarious! You're a funny one, Diva.

TU. I rarely lose. I hate to lose. I hunt down and bite the head off any opponent who dares to defeat me. Be warned.

*I wouldn't mind you hunting me down and biting my...head *slow wink**

Aha! The sly, sexual innuendo confirmed that Wordfreak was indeed male had she needed any more proof. But she would not be bested even in innuendos. Worddiva was not a shy avatar. Neither was Alisha.

You should be so lucky. It is universally accepted that I am really, frightfully good at it.

**gasp and choke* Frightfully good at...what?*

Scroll back up a line and read it again. Golden words are never repeated.

LMAO! Is that a promise???

There's a prerequisite, Wordfreak, to promises and/or hunting down aftermaths, she typed, feeling deliciously naughty. It's called WINNING!

Now, if that wasn't a fantabulous incentive to win, who knew what was?

Wordfreak, a.k.a. Aryan Rajaram Chawla, or in some circles, Architect Extraordinaire, clutched his bare stomach and rolled with laughter, nearly falling off the humungous bed that he was currently sharing with Kirk, his pug.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd flirted so outrageously online...or even offline. Sparring words with Worddiva in the middle of the night had completely lifted his spirits. His ill humor had followed him like an omnipresent, personal black cloud over his head from his home in Mumbai to the farmhouse in the Sahyadri Mountains. Until the Scrabble game.

He rolled onto his hip, came up on an elbow and pulled his Mac close. He wondered what she might look like. Where in the world she was and if she recycled? He made his move.

CHA for 20 points? That's supposed to make you come out on top?

He grinned. Jesus. She was a pistol.

Your concern towards my "coming" anywhere is so touching, he countered wickedly.

She played AXE.

I'm armed and dangerous now. I can chop off...heads.

I'm terrified.

Terrified that the game would end and he'd be alone with his nasty mood again. God! He hated October. October meant thinking of his mother, thinking of London. His father had called the other day. He should have expected the call, but he'd still been startled. He hated that the old man wouldn't leave him alone. That's all he wanted. To be left the hell alone.

Ms. Vocabbulous, last book read/reading?

He was grasping at straws now to keep her interested. To keep her online.

Call me Cal Stephanides...if you know what I mean.

Thank fuck he knew exactly what she meant. He'd read the book she referred to, and then followed a very heated discussion about *Middlesex*, gender identity and his pet peeve—Earth's deteriorating eco-system. It turned out she didn't recycle but assured him she'd consider it. Which was dandy of her, and then, she refused to answer his next question.

WTF? It's just your given name. I'm not asking for your entire history or bank account info, Worddiva.

A rose is a rose. Call me by whatever name you want, Wordfreak.

Isn't that the man's line?

You wish, Gertrude. And didn't I just confess to a sex change operation?

His jaw set stubbornly. He would get it out of her.

Look, we're past the coy stage. So effing past it that I'll fess up to being totally naked in bed. Just tell me your name, damn it.

You said naked! Gross. Sick. Ick. I'm scarred for life and you, psycho, are a candidate for jail for conversing with a minor in flagrante delicto and for using profanities.

Aryan snorted. Minor, his ass. No minor could be that well read or well-versed.

If you are a minor, I'm a bloody kid in diapers. Why are you so reluctant to give me your name?

Why are you so insistent on knowing it?

He stared at his remaining tiles and their scores—Worddiva was 70 points in the lead. Three moves, four max and *ka-boom*. He would lose. He stood up, and restlessly began to pace around the bedroom in his Calvin

Klein's. Yeah, so he'd lied about being naked. He was a guy, for Gods' sake! His humor was admittedly high school-ish.

He didn't want to sound like a stalker or a perv. He didn't want Worddiva to bear the brunt of his bad temper. But he didn't want her to leave. Not yet.

Why did she fascinate him? They'd barely met an hour ago. They were two strangers exchanging wild words instead of glances across an online game board. Two virtual ships accidentally docking at the same port for a short while. So why was his gut in a twist at the thought of ending their chat? Of never chatting with her again?

He sat back down, resumed the play. He was determined to hold the darkness at bay.

Rematch? he requested when it was clear that her next word would be the last.

Absolutely!

His gut unclenched. He let out a loud whoop that scared Kirk off the bed and yip at him excitedly. Yeah boy, yeah. She's as freaking invested. Great minds, kismet and all that jazz.

I think you're THE ONE, Worddiva.

He was an unconscionable flirt. He didn't deny it. But, he wasn't flirting just then. It was insane, what he was feeling.

Muahahaha. I'll always be the WON to your LOSER. Your move, Wordfreak!

He could imagine her crowing in her bedroom, owning her victory. His shoulders shook as laughter sucked the black out of his mood. She'd brought sunshine back into his soul and she didn't even know it. Now he really could wait to meet her face to face—his clever, funny, perfect Scrabble-mate.

Sometime over the next two hundred and forty-five games, Wordfreak made good on his assertion to meet his Sunshine. Then he dropped the Scrabble between "perfect" and "mate."

Thank you for signing up for my Newsletter. I hope you've enjoyed reading the lead up to *It's Your Move, Wordfreak!* Learn more about my books at www.falgunikothari.com

Regards,

Falguni Kothari