

Keep Me in the Dark

by Guernica

Pre-HBP AU Severus Snape/Adult!Padma Patil, with a kinky twist. A young woman under pressure from her family to marry and have children meets a stranger in a darkened club ? thus beginning a shadowy love affair of anonymous encounters conducted entirely in the dark. For a time, they are exactly what the other wants and needs. But as the intimacy ? and affection ? grows between her and her unknown lover, she begins to long for a different fate than the one her parents think is best for her... **First Runner-Up for the Multifaceted Fanfic Award for "Aphrodisia ~ The Het Smut Award."**

Part 1

Chapter 1 of 2

Pre-HBP AU Severus Snape/Adult!Padma Patil, with a kinky twist. A young woman under pressure from her family to marry and have children meets a stranger in a darkened club ? thus beginning a shadowy love affair of anonymous encounters conducted entirely in the dark. For a time, they are exactly what the other wants and needs. But as the intimacy ? and affection ? grows between her and her unknown lover, she begins to long for a different fate than the one her parents think is best for her... **First Runner-Up for the Multifaceted Fanfic Award for "Aphrodisia ~ The Het Smut Award."**

She hadn't liked the boy, though her parents thought him suitable.

She was twenty-four now, seven years out of school, and still working as a junior editor at *Witch Weekly*. Her age didn't seem old to her, but it was an embarrassment to her parents; not a day went by when she was not reminded that her mother was four years married, with two year-old daughters at her age. At the advanced age of twenty-four, one could not expect a love match like her sister's.

Marriage was destiny to her people, the high point of one's life. A good marriage, abundant in affection, wealth, and children, was a treasure beyond jewels, the best gift life could offer, the cornerstone on which their community was built. So now her parents had asked her permission to help arrange matters for her. They were asking around, chatting up their friends, pestering her to go with them to parties and dinners at their friends' homes, where she might meet a suitable boy of her own age, of good family, who was also in need of a partner for a happy marriage and beautiful children. Her parents were not pressuring her into a purely arranged marriage as some might have, they were much more progressive than that, but they were glad to do their part to help Fate along.

The British Wizard community was small, the Anglo-Indian Wizard community even smaller, and the Anglo-Indian Hindu Wizard community smaller still. As such, there was not a wide field of contenders. Her parents would not have been entirely averse to a white man, provided that she kept to her heritage and raised her children in their culture, but the husband would have to have considerable wealth, and great family, in order to make up for this deficit. Harry Potter would have been acceptable, but alas, she had not seized her opportunity when she was in school with him, even while she had been on a date with him. ("I went to the Yule Ball with his friend Ron Weasley, Mother, not with Harry Potter.") But that was all right, high standards were becoming to an unmarried girl.

We just want you to have a home, a family, her parents told her. There was nothing judgmental or cruel in them they genuinely wanted what was best for her, and were convinced that they knew what was best for her. A woman needed a husband and children to take care of; that was what a woman did. She knew her parents loved her,

She grinned his words reminded her of something she had once read, which now recurred to her verbatim with the odd mental acuity of the mildly buzzed. "*I like to have a martini, two at the very most ... after three I'm under the table, after four I'm under my host.*" she quoted.

Her knees felt completely boneless afterward; she would have stumbled if he had not been supporting her, his weight pinning her against the brick wall. She was draped

adoringly around his shoulders, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. The sound of his laboured breathing in her ear made her scalp prickle.

Dare I hope... that was good? he whispered, brushing his lips over her cheek.

Yes, she whimpered, covering the side of his unseen face with kisses. *Yesyesyesyes.*

It'll be even better next time, I promise. His tongue was delving into the silken folds of her ear.

"You want for there to be a next time?" she asked, amazed that she had gotten a coherent sentence out at all.

Yes, he replied, with another lazy thrust into her shuddering body. *I fully intend to have you again. Tell me where I can find you.*

"I'm... you can send me an owl at work," she whispered, arms still locked desperately around him. "Junior Editor's office, sixth floor, the Grogan Stump Building in Litur Alley..."

Junior Editor's office he took her hips in his hands, grinding his semi-erect cock within her as he spoke, as if to motivate her to give the correct address *Sixth floor* another long, goading thrust *the Grogan Stump Building?*

"Yes," she gasped. "Please make it soon."

Oh, I shall, he said, kissing her again those lips and that tongue were like a narcotic. *I want you again next weekend, next Saturday night. You will come to me, won't you...?*

"Yes," she said, clinging helplessly to him. "Oh, yes."

He gently lowered her to her feet. She gave a little whine of disappointment when he withdrew if he had asked, she would have waited and gone another round in a second but he only laughed softly. "Don't worry, my dear, there's more where that came from. Do you think you can stand now?"

She wobbled a bit on her feet, leaning heavily on the mural wall behind her, as he took a moment to refasten his clothes. "Yes, I think so." She clasped her arms around his neck again, kissing him ravenously, unwilling for this to end. "Send me an owl first thing on Monday. Please? Do you promise?"

"Yes, I will," he said, with another soft chuckle. "Saturday evening. I'll find somewhere private for us to meet in London." He kissed her again, long and explicitly, drawing her body close against his as if to give her a preview of what awaited her when she accepted his invitation.

"I can hardly wait," she said.

"Will you get home all right?" he asked. This small, courteous question was charming to her for the bloke who just savagely shagged her up against a wall to then be so offhandedly gallant about getting her safely home was disarming.

"Yes, I'm fine, I live close," she said, smiling fondly at his shadowed face. "Thank you for asking."

"Think nothing of it. Until Saturday then." He kissed her lips, her forehead, then her hand. "Good night, my dear. I do hope to see you again soon."

With that, he was gone, in a rustle of black broadcloth. She saw him from the back, just briefly, in the pocket of light afforded by the flickering streetlight a tall, thin, dark man in a long black coat, and then he was out of sight.

Oh, what a night this had turned out to be. It would be hours before this sense of languid satiety left her.

She reached down for the knickers that were now hanging precariously around one ankle, dusted them off, and put them back on, blushing furiously. Then she walked home, barely noticing where she was going, her senses in a fog. She couldn't wait to see him again or rather, to see him for the first time and have another knee-shakingly good fuck with him. It was so odd, that they had done everything they had, and she still hadn't really seen his face, or even asked him his name. But despite everything, she was glad she had met him, found him almost painfully attractive, was wildly infatuated. Her knees were weak; she was still trembling from the obliterating pleasure she had of him.

All five of Kama's arrows, it seemed, had found their mark that evening.

~~~~~

The sensual story of Kama and Rati, while part of the collective cosmology she had learned from childhood, was not the life model for which a good girl was encouraged to aspire. Her parents, grandparents, and the older folk seemed to assume that all young ladies would be virgins on their wedding nights, as was only right and proper for well-brought-up girls the ideal situation would be that a girl would never have had a sexual thought until she lost her virginity on her wedding night with her husband, who would also ideally impregnate her at the same time. It was expected that the very idea of a female Contraceptus Potion, or Muggle condoms, had never entered the purity of an unmarried virgin's imagination. She would pass straight from the blissful innocence of childhood to the safety of matronliness, with no interval in between. There was no time to reserve for sensuality, passion, extremes of emotion, not with the world needing to be peopled, meals to be cooked. She could get enough of that sort of thing after she was married, in novels and Bollywood movies that's what they were there for.

In truth, she had had lovers since her seventh year at school, but had never been pregnant. Poppy Pomfrey had been a rather liberal-minded sort of mediwitch, and when sixth- and seventh-year girls came to her asking for something to prevent an unwanted pregnancy, she was understanding. One dose of a certain pennyroyal-based medicinal potion created an inhospitable uterine environment for six months, with no side effects. Most of the young British witches of her age were taking it on a regular basis, and she was no different. The (decadent, Western) magazine she worked for assumed as much, running various articles on sexual health, disease prevention, and the latest Contraceptus and aphrodisiac potions on the market. That weekend she herself had edited a piece about new Contraceptus potions, one that protected against STDs and also made one's sweat smell fragrant, and others that also reduced acne and diminished the growth of unwanted hair.

However, since she had no children, had never had any reckless love affairs with any of the boys in her family's social circle, she was accepted as a "nice girl" within the community. In this modern era, the definition of *virginity* seemed to have gone from "a complete lack of carnal experience" to "never been engaged or had a notorious love affair, and had no children."

Yes, *I am a nice girl*, she thought the following evening while she visited her parents for their usual Sunday supper together. She helped her mother mix the dough for *naan*, to flavour the sauces for chicken tikka marsala.

*I am a nice girl. I am also a pleasure-seeking wanton who recently allowed a man to ravish me up against a wall in a back alley. I cannot wait for this day to be over, because he promised to send me an owl tomorrow with an offer to ravish me again. Although I probably could not pick this man out of a police lineup, if he does indeed invite me to such a ravishing, I will accept his offer as fast as humanly possible, because his mouth and his cock are that sweet.*

*That is why I seem distracted. Do forgive me.*

~~~~~

His owl was scratching at her office window when she arrived for work at nine a.m. Monday morning.

My dear ~

If you would not be averse to a repeat of the other evening's... festivities, I would be more than happy to oblige you. This time, however, let us adjourn to more comfortable surroundings. Although brick walls have their novelty value, I generally prefer pillows and mattresses.

Knock on the door of room 511 of the Elysium Hotel Saturday evening at 9 o'clock p.m. I should be happy to receive you.

Do not, however, under any circumstances light any of the lamps. Let us keep to the darkness I am finding this to be quite an interesting experiment.

Yours,

The Bloke with the Admirable Arse

~~~~~

She sent a reply with his post owl:

*Dear Admirable One,*

*I have received your invitation, and am delighted to accept.*

*Yes, indeed let us keep to the darkness. What I am now imagining would shock the light.*

*Yours in anticipation,*

*Your Dear*

~~~~~

She accepted his invitation, even as she knew that it was pure madness to keep this assignation.

He was a virtual stranger, not of her race, not of her culture, certainly of questionable moral character for what kind of man would ravish a strange young lady in an alley, even if she was the one who did the offering? What kind of man would leave the young lady he ravished behind, without so much as asking her name, or allowing her to see his face? What kind of man would want to continue the charade of the darkness, just because it was an interesting experiment?

And what sort of girl was she, she asked herself, to be so eager to undertake the experiment with him... ?

Questionable though the circumstances were, there was no denying that they excited her, that he excited her. He seemed odd and eccentric, but sane enough, even gallant, in his own way; and he spoke to everything fierce and rebellious within her. She wanted him again she was trembling at just the idea of another kiss from him.

One more of these strange little trysts couldn't hurt. If he made her at all uncomfortable, it could be the last one.

~~~~~

Saturday finally arrived. Usually, when she was going off on a date with a man, she would groom herself to be appealing to him visually, put on brightly coloured clothes, perhaps gold ribbons braided in her hair, jewellery, makeup. Now, however, she considered ways to appeal to other senses. She took a long sensuous time shaving her legs, smoothing lotion onto her skin and powdering herself with a big, soft puff, so that her skin would smell sweet, and feel smooth and soft under his hands. There was no need for makeup, but she combed a bit of scented conditioning potion into her hair, to leave it extra silky. He would not see her clothes, but he would feel them, so she put on a silk bra and panties, little kid slippers, a silk dress without beading or embroidery, and then an exquisitely soft little cashmere cardigan with a collar of black mink.

The Elysium Hotel was a pleasant small Edwardian affair with an elegant lobby done in gleaming dark wood and draped in shabby dark velvet. She made her silent way past the grey-haired desk clerk with prosperous jowls, who was deep into the sports section of the *Daily Prophet* when she arrived. As it were, even if he had spotted her, her demure, well-bred appearance would have raised few eyebrows. She made it to the stairs unquestioned and unnoticed, her heart hammering with a thrilling sense of the taboo.

The door to room 511 was slightly ajar when she arrived it swung open a few inches when she knocked.

"Come in, my dear," a voice called his voice. It never rose above a whisper, but somehow she heard every word. She stepped into the soft, welcoming darkness inside, and closed and locked the door behind her.

His hand lightly brushed her shoulder, and she reached up to clasp it in hers. With that hand to orient herself, her arms found their way around his neck, her body found its way to press against his, and from there, she raised her lips to his after a week of aching anticipation, it was just about the most luscious kiss she had ever shared with anyone. "Don't worry, don't be afraid," he whispered, his arms clasping around her waist. "I won't hurt you."

"I know," she said, and sought his lips again.

The kiss progressed and their mutual excitement was contagious. Within moments her tongue was massaging his, and his hand had slid up beneath her skirt and was gently squeezing satiny arseflesh. They said no more instead, he whisked her up and lowered her onto a bed, into what felt like a deep featherbed beneath her back, and then draped himself over her. Gods, this was good her body arched up to his, hot and starved, eager for anything.

"Wait... before this goes any further, here," he whispered, passing a tiny stoppered phial into her hand. "If you please, I would appreciate if you would drink this first."

"What is it?"

"Contraceptus Potion. One dose will last for six months."

"Yes, I know, I took some three months ago."

"Please a second dose won't hurt. It's just for my peace of mind."

"All right, I respect that," she replied. She opened the vial and drank it. Yes, lime-flavoured Wise Witch Contraceptus, with antibiotic STD protection one of the many potions her magazine had reviewed earlier. This little show of practicality and consideration was really charming; she'd never met a man willing to go into an apothecary's and request Contraceptus potion for his lover before. "Thank you."

There, the preliminaries had been properly observed. Now, all she wanted was more of the pleasure he had given her the week before, more of his mouth, his cock, his reckless tenderness.

"What would you like? How do you want me?" she whispered, as he wrapped himself around her again and lowered his lips to her neck. His fingers caressed her forehead, stroked down through her hair, lingered pleasurably on her fur collar, found the buttons of her cardigan and slid it off her shoulders. Then they were under her skirt, as

They lay comfortably silent for a long time. He had seemed to take an almost primal enjoyment in their lovemaking, in lying in her arms, as though he had long been starved for any kind of physical contact, or intimacy. She wondered why this was, even while she was glad to reap the benefits of all his frustrations.

"What does 'not in your first youth' mean?" she asked, nuzzling his forehead.

"Closer to forty than thirty is all I'll confess to," he replied. "And might I ask your age as well?"

"Twenty-four," she said.

"Yes, I figured. You come like a girl in her twenties."

"Why do you want us to keep this in the dark?" she asked, her hand curving gently around his cheek and jawline.

"Because..." His hand curved around hers; he turned slightly and put a feeling little kiss on the heel of her hand. "Because after we had each other in that alley, I left with a kind of euphoria, a physical high that I had never felt before. It was so powerful that I didn't realise until after I got home last Saturday that we didn't know each other's names and had never really seen each other. The... sensory impression you left was strong enough to completely distract me from any of that sort of nicety. But then as I continued to think about it, I considered that perhaps our encounter was that intense for both of us *because* we didn't know anything about each other. I felt no self-consciousness, no worry I was able to do something that would have been impossible otherwise. Then I thought, it doesn't matter to me if that young lady was beautiful or plain, or what her parents named her her erotic self is overpowering. And suddenly I couldn't wait to duplicate that experience, to feel that kind of freedom again."

She let those words wash over her again *Her erotic self is overpowering*. She felt strong, potent, and unashamed, like a goddess of love and sensuality.

"You're right, it was freeing," she said. "I've never acted like that before, with anyone, ever. But that night, it just seemed like I could. You just... seemed so ready for anything. I just... *liked* you, so much."

He laughed softly. "Then you'd be one of a precious few," he said and kissed her again.

She laughed too, then snuggled up to his shoulder. "So you don't mind this?" she asked softly. "It doesn't offend you?"

"Does it offend me that some brazen little hussy wants to use me for sex, is that what you're asking?" He took her hand and guided it down beneath the sheets, put that overabundance of erect cock into it again. "Does that feel like I'm offended?"

She lowered her lips to his ear and whispered, *Please... I want you inside me again*, and there was perhaps one second between asking and having.

~~~~~

The next day, and Monday at work, she was all smiles, practically jittering with excitement. She had a secret, and what a delicious secret it was. That Saturday night had been, beyond a doubt, the most satisfying sexual encounter of her life the darkness and anonymity had allowed her to make her desires known without fear or self-consciousness, and her lover had been so pleased by her frankness, happy to oblige her. He had been equally frank about his wishes so few words spoken, but their bodies had been so eloquent together, their mutual pleasure so intense. Her dark lover seemed the fulfillment of her every fantasy, a genie freed from a lamp. She adored him, whoever he was, and hoped that he was feeling the same glowing satisfaction that she was. She imagined him dreaming of her the same way she was now dreaming of him the thought made her shiver deliciously.

"What are you so happy about?" her assistant asked her over lunch, smiling. "Had a good date this weekend?"

Yes, I did have a good date. I don't know his name, I have only sketchy details of what he looks like, but he's the best lover in the world.

"No, just got to bed early for once," she replied, bending over her plate again.

~~~~~

There was a post owl scratching at her office window when she returned from lunch:

*My Dear ~*

*Thank you. Oh, thank you.*

*Please meet me again next week, same place, same room, this Saturday at 9 p.m.?*

*Yours,*

*The Admirable, Grateful One*

~~~~~

Again, she sent a reply with his post owl:

O My One Most Admirable,

I should be honoured to accept your invitation. Gratitude is not necessary when the pleasure is so mutual.

~ Your Dear

P.S. I smiled so much today that I was asked if I "had a good date" this weekend. If they only knew!

~~~~~

It seemed an excruciatingly long time until the next Saturday. She was perhaps a bit distracted at work, as now all her duties seemed to be just something she had to get through until the reward at the end of her week when she could see him again. Or rather, not see him, but feel him, taste him, listen to that wet dream of a voice, enjoy another long session of almost hallucinatory lovemaking with him.

But finally it was Saturday, and she took a long, hot bath, spent half an hour shaving her legs and oiling down her skin with catlike, self-indulgent languor. Once again, the desk clerk at the Elysium was deep into his open newspaper, and she slipped up to room 511 unchallenged. She opened the door quietly, and slipped into the darkness.

"There you are. Come here," came the enticing whisper from the direction of the bed.

She *came there* eagerly, feeling her way along the wall to her left, then slithering onto the bed and draping herself over him, finding him already bare-chested and under the covers. He lost a hand in her thick black hair, then drew her mouth down to his, kissing her ravenously the week's separation had left them hungry for each other. His other hand slid beneath her skirt, closed insistently around her rump.

He pulled away from her after several long, openmouthed minutes *Get undressed*, he whispered.

She hurried to obey somehow this fellow's voice commanded obedience just as efficiently as it conjured excitement and soon she was lying over him naked, her thighs

astride his hips, only the coverlet and sheets between them.

He sat up, one arm lifting the bedclothes, and drew her beneath them. She shivered he seemed in a mood to call the shots tonight. She remembered acutely that she was lying naked and totally accessible in bed with a man she didn't really know, and something in his voice wanted to be obeyed. It was both alarming and knee-meltingly exciting.

"What would you like, darling?" she entreated, as though to defuse his sense of disquiet with a show of complete receptivity.

He turned her onto her back, and his hand slid down between her thighs, parted them insistently. Fingertips teased in the wet cleft between them, stroking her softly. An instant later he had his first two fingers sheathed full length inside her, and the pad of his thumb was circling her clit, slicked with her own moisture.

"I'd like you to tell me something," he said and his tone was half invitation, half command.

"Yes, yes, love... what is it?" It was a tremendous effort to concentrate on what he was saying, with him touching her like that. She groaned, threw her head back on the pillow, and parted her thighs wider for him.

*That night at the club... why did you want me?* he asked, straining forward to hear her answer while at the same time making it so difficult for her to speak.

"You were... oh please yes... you were just so... I just couldn't stop staring at you. I don't know why, not really..." Her body was helplessly bucking against his caresses; she could feel herself drenching his fingers.

*Go on.* His skin was so hot, lightly slick with sweat.

"You just... you made all the others look like such children by comparison... your hands were... and I wanted to grab your arse with both hands and just..."

*And just... what? Tell me,* he insisted, his lips nearly touching hers, his breath coming in shallow little rasps. *Tell me the truth, all of it... even if it makes you sound like a perfect whore...*

"You looked just so... *hot*, that I just wanted... to fuck you," she gasped. She would have hesitated to make such an admission even to herself, but the very idea of holding anything back from him under this exquisite duress was impossible. Her skin was burning with an indescribably sweet humiliation, but it only took another instant to reach that impossible peak of excitement, and she fell back with a harsh little cry. He urged her on when he felt her orgasm beginning, felt her interior muscles clamping down on his hand, coming and coming and coming while that elegant voice purred lewd encouragement in her ear. A moment after her spasms subsided, he threw himself over her and substituted gorged flesh for his hand, thrusting savagely into the body he had just satisfied.

*Is this what you wanted?* His voice was an absolutely feral growl in her ear. Hot breath on her face, bared teeth against her neck. A lithe predatory beast lay inside her, and she was gasping *Yes-yes-please-yes* with each violent stroke. Moments earlier, he had urged her on to her own heights of pleasure, but now he took her selfishly, seeking only his own gratification, and she wanted him to have it, all he could stand.

*Yes, darling,* she breathed in his ear, *yes, give it to me, I want to feel you come..* and then she did feel it, short sharp jabs and gasps of mythic ecstasy. He lay shuddering on her breast for a long time afterward, her arms around him. Oh yes, that felt like it was good, *so* damned good, for him. Sharing her body with this man was delectable, like finding someone lost in the desert and bringing him to a banquet of the gods.

She stretched beneath him, closely moulding herself to him and luxuriating in his sweat covering her, his spendings filling her belly, the sense of all his tension shattered and replaced with limp satiety. It felt shockingly voluptuous, a bliss like a euphoric drug. Surely this was an intimacy she should only want to feel with her husband, but at this moment, she couldn't have even thought of giving him up. She supposed she would have to end this affair eventually, in the same way she would one day have to stop drinking so many Kingfishers on weekends, but that time seemed a very long way off. Now, she couldn't have done without him, because he was deviant and perverted in exactly the same way she was; his insanity was such a perfect match for hers.

*You're mad, I'm mad, we're all mad here,* she thought.

*You're incredible, I'll never get enough of you,* she breathed into his ear.

~~~~~

She arrived at her office a half-hour early on Monday, and was ecstatic to hear the rustle-flitter-scratch of a little post owl at her window.

My dear ~

This coming Saturday, do let's have some more of that. Same room, same time?

Yours,

One You Know Of

Her reply was just as direct and to the point -

Dear One I Know Of -

I'll be there. I can't bloody wait to see or, not see, but know of you again.

Yours in Anticipation,

Your Dear

~~~~~

Then, it was Saturday again, and she went through what was becoming an accustomed routine of bathing and primping in anticipation of her tryst that night. That evening, lying in the bathtub, she not only shaved her legs smooth, but impulsively trimmed her dark pubic curls to only the lightest peach fuzz of down with a Severing Charm, another pleasant tactile surprise for him to encounter in the dark.

She ran an approving eye over her own body in the mirror as she got dressed. While she had not been dieting or exercising more than usual, it seemed that her own body had somehow grown in beauty recently. Her hair seemed thicker and more lustrous, her eyes clearer, her breasts fuller and posture straighter. Her own physicality seemed richer, somehow. *Her erotic self is overpowering,* her lover had said, and somehow just remembering those words sent a shiver through her body and made warmth start between her thighs.

Again, she slid past the desk clerk, with nary a raised eyebrow, and made her way up to room 511. *Mmmm, there you are,* came the sultry whisper in the dark, and she wasted no time in throwing off her clothes and wrapping herself around him in bed. Just the feel of his slim, receptive, virile body in bed with her was a high like one too



many glasses of champagne; she was kissing him lusciously, her thighs squeezing one of his, her hands sinking beneath the bedclothes to stroke his cock. "Well well well," he murmured. "*Someone's* eager to get started tonight."

"What can I say, you're great in bed," she whispered affectionately. "Can I ask you to do something with me? Or *to* me, more like?"

"Of course you can," he breathed in her ear.

"It's a bit... on the wild side," she told him. "Would that bother you?"

*Just what do you have in mind?* he asked, in a tone that insinuated everything. She could feel the anticipation trembling in that voice.

She raised her lips to his ear, quivering, almost shy, but the darkness let her be bold. "You were so damned sexy last time, when you made me confess why I wanted you," she told him. "You're good at giving orders I've been fantasising about that all week."

*Have you*, he sighed.

"So, just for tonight... I want to be your slave," she whispered. "You give the orders, I obey."

She felt a long tremor go through him, felt him swallow hard. "That... can be arranged," he said. "Let's begin *now*, shall we?"

## Part 2

### Chapter 2 of 2

**\*\*Pre-HBP AU\*\*** Severus Snape/Adult!Padma Patil, with a kinky twist. A young woman under pressure from her family to marry and have children meets a stranger in a darkened club - thus beginning a shadowy love affair of anonymous encounters conducted entirely in the dark. For a time, they are exactly what the other wants and needs. But as the intimacy - and affection - grows between her and her unknown lover, she begins to long for a different fate than the one her parents think is best for her...

**First Runner-Up for the Multifaceted Fanfic Award for "Aphrodisia ~ The Het Smut Award."**

"What would you like?" she whispered, raising her lips to his ear. "How do you want me?"

He lifted the bedclothes back and sat up. *Slide down to the floor by the side of the bed... and then on your knees, my dear* he said.

She obeyed without question and with eagerness, sliding to her knees, listening to the rustle of sheets as he came closer and bent over her. Her right hand found first one knee then the other, and then she tasted silky flesh presented to her lips. "May I... ask something first?" she quavered.

"Yes, of course, what is it?" His fingertips stroked her cheek.

"I've... never done this before, and I want it to be so good, for you. Would you... teach me how you like it?" she asked in the coyest, most breathless voice she could, doing her best to incite him further. She had no idea where all these wanton courtesan's wiles were coming from, but here, they felt natural, thrilling and taboo. She put up her hand, lightly stroked the cock offered to her mouth, then softly and experimentally drew her tongue over its cloven tip, and felt a long shiver go through him. Then she rounded her lips, took him deeper into her mouth; his breath caught in a long, husky sigh.

He brought her hand up to clasp the base of his cock, and his hand closed around hers, showing her the way he wanted her to grip it, tighter than she would have thought. His trembling hand curved around the back of her neck *To start... just keep... doing that for awhile, start lightly, then more strongly... yes... oh yes, just keep doing... that...*

She heard his nails curling against the bed sheets, his breath coming in shallow gasps. There really didn't seem as though there was too much of an art to pleasing him in this manner, other than keeping her hand tight around the base of his cock, taking as much of it as she could in the in-stroke, and keeping her lips snug in the outslide. The feel of sucking him into her mouth was making her shiver in other places too, her nipples hardening and clit stiffening in sympathy.

*You're really enjoying this, aren't you*, he whispered, with a subtle thrill in his voice at the very idea, and she could only moan around him in answer, which provoked another deep sigh. *Then I want you to touch yourself, with your other hand...*

Had there been even the dimmest light in that room, or had this man even the slightest inkling of her name or anything of her real life, she would have been humiliated and ashamed beyond belief in such a situation, but here, with him, she could do anything, and enjoy anything. She sighed with relief as her fingers slid into the heat between her thighs, her fingertips massaging her clit as she continued to draw him rhythmically into her mouth. The pleasure only added to her excitement, her arousal feeding his, as the closer she came to orgasm, the more voraciously she drew on him and the harder he became. Finally, the tension crested, her hips jerking in the air with climax, and with a low moan of release muffled by her mouthful of his flesh.

Once the spasms began to subside, she wrapped her other hand, still slick with her own fluids, around the base of his cock. *All right, darling, your turn* her jaw had begun to ache slightly, but she didn't care, didn't want to stop, was enjoying this too much, his trembling and ragged moans it all felt so filthy and animalistic and so damn damn good. She was his slave, but he was at her mercy.

*You... had best stop now*, he gasped. Letting her know what was imminent if she continued, and too much of a gentleman to presume she wished to go that far but she only groaned, fastened on him tighter, quickening her pace. No, she wanted him, all of him

His breath seemed to hush for a second as his muscles tensed, and then he let out a long, heartfelt moan as she brought him to orgasm, heat filling the back of her throat. She clung to him to the last spasm, the last drop, until his spent organ slipped from her hands and lips and they both gasped, exhausted.

*You... shameless, beautiful, luscious...* he breathed. His voice trailed off; apparently he could think of no word superlative enough to describe her at that moment. He was shaking; his hand trembling on her hair. "Nothing can be this good I have to have dreamed you into existence, there's no other explanation for it."

She laughed softly, laid her hand over his and brought it to her lips, then put an open-mouthed kiss on his palm. "And the night's not over yet," she said wickedly and licked his knee. "*Master.*"

"So it isn't." He stood, whisked her back up into bed and into his arms. "Come to bed, slave girl. Master hasn't even begun to force his depraved desires upon you."

*Oh, good,* she breathed.

He sprawled her on her back with a single deft movement *On your back, wench. Reach up and take hold of the headboard,* he commanded. *Stay like that... don't move. Now, spread your legs,* he whispered.

She did, lying back and opening herself to the darkness. He kissed his way down her belly and nuzzled between her thighs, and then she nearly passed out when he got his tongue where he wanted it. That was the first time she had ever had a man go down on her, and the first time she had ever moaned aloud involuntarily. She might have been self-conscious with anyone else, but now she was completely frozen on his tongue, couldn't have even begun to think of anything other than what he was doing. An article that she had recently edited had stated that the female clitoris has the highest concentration of nerve endings anywhere in the human body and it seemed as though that velvety tongue was finding every one of them. Her body was a thrumming circuit between voice and clit, every stroke of his tongue drawing little cries from her. One particularly eloquent circling caress drew a sharp, high-pitched gasp out of her, so loud that she grabbed a pillow and bit down into it, lest they be overheard.

*No, I want to hear you,* he said, reaching up and pulling the pillow away from her. *Scream for me.*

*Yes, my love,* she sighed. *Oh please, please don't stop...*

He groaned, and fell to devouring her again he seemed to thoroughly enjoy this, almost as much as she did. She felt his fingertips delicately penetrating her, the smallest flickering caress just inside the opening, and then each shock of pleasure came faster, one overlapping the other, until they all coalesced, and she nearly tore the sheets from the bed. She didn't have to remember to scream for him; the credit for all the wild maenad's shrieking going on in that room went entirely to him.

Then she was being gathered up into his arms, shaking and boneless, and she could taste herself on his mouth when he kissed her. *Was that nice?* he asked. She could only huddle against him and whimper in answer.

*Now, since you've been well lessoned on how a slave pleasures her lover with her mouth..* His fingers curved around the back of her neck, pushed her head downward, slotted his stiffening sex back into her mouth, so that she was crouching on all fours beside him, naked and compliant. A second later, she gasped as she felt his hand impact with her arse cheek, a light, but stinging spank printing heat on her skin. His hand tensed in her hair, holding her head firmly in place. *Don't you dare stop,* he warned.

But now she couldn't have stopped if she tried. The swats came regularly after that, thickly covering her flesh with heat that seemed to drive directly between her legs like fire. She drew on him more and more ravenously as the arousal built within her, something primal and atavistic set loose she was a submissive creature appeasing the dominant male with a show of eager sexual receptivity, and it felt profane, delicious, natural.

Her supplications met with his approval; the spanking faltered, distracted by the pleasure her mouth was affording him. Then he simply threw her down on her back and sheathed himself deep in her shuddering body an instant later, pounding her mercilessly into the bed. All the sensations seemed to coalesce at once his lips devouring her neck while grinding himself into her painfully aroused body and sore clit, the friction of the velvet comforter on her warm, spanked arse, the suspense and delicious fear at abandoning herself to this harsh, but infinitely trustworthy master so that by the time he couldn't hold back any longer from just *taking* her, she was so primed for him that he drove her to orgasm with a few hard strokes. For a few seconds, she was obliterated and then it was subsiding, warmth spilling from his body into hers, his body collapsing heavily over her. She had been so caught up that she hadn't noticed the spasms of her own release had brought his on as well. He was breathing hard, spent, his lips brushing over her temple and she could only whimper in return.

His damp cheek nestled against hers. *I've died, and been judged worthy of heaven,* he whispered.

~~~~~

That Monday, she received an owl from her lover

My Dear Nubile Slave Girl ~

Next Saturday, I hereby order you to meet me at the same place at the same time, and then proceed to have as many orgasms as I can afford you until we both keel over from exhaustion.

Yours,

The Master

She laughed deliciously oh, he was *adorable*, just charming. She had no idea why any woman would ever have stood this man up for a date. And by all the gods, he was *amazing* in bed, and such a wit as well. She smiled dreamily, drawing his letter over her lips.

However, that Wednesday, she received another owl, this one from her sister. After some nine months and ten days of pregnancy, her sister's doctors had finally decided to induce labour and she had promised to be present at the birth with her brother-in-law.

Birth was supposed to be beautiful, wonderful, a gift from the gods instead her sister thrashed, moaned, and sweated for seven hours, as they waited for her cervix to dilate sufficiently to deliver the child. Finally, as the contractions grew stronger and her sister's moaning turned into agonised shrieks of pain, the doctors told her she was not dilating fast enough, and that vaginal childbirth was no longer an option. An emergency Caesarean section had to be performed. An epidural was swiftly administered and incisions were made as her sister clung to her husband's hands. Then, from behind the white curtains, there came a tearing sound exactly like heavy cloth violently ripping. Not long after came the cry of a newborn baby.

As the purplish, bloody child was laid in the arms of the new parents, she staggered toward one of the medical waste containers in a corner of the room and quietly voided the contents of her stomach into it, so demurely that no one ever heard her in the upheaval following the birth. She shamefacedly took one of the nurses aside and told her about the mess sometime later.

~~~~~

Her sister brought her new baby daughter home that Saturday morning. Their entire family and several close family friends were present for the joyous homecoming, a party celebrated with much feasting and revelry.

She was expected to help with the cooking and look after her sister's two-year-old son while the grandparents and new father spent the evening hovering over the recovering mother and tiny, fragile, downy-cheeked new addition to the family. As evening came on with no end to the party in sight, she reluctantly opened her notebook and penned a letter:

*My Dear One*

*Elysium Hotel*

*Room 511*

He laughed softly. "I'll try not to," he replied. "How bad was it?"

"Horrible," she replied fervently. "It looked like the most painful thing I've ever seen, I was crying and aching just watching her going through it. Seriously, I was sick in a wastebasket, I'm not kidding."

"That bad, really?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"Well, it was a C-section... just... *uhhh*." She gave an almighty shudder recalling it. "I've no idea why women do that, other than they have to. I'm really not looking forward to when I have to do it. I think I'll put it off till I'm a hundred or so."

"To when you *have* to do it?" he asked, mimicking the seriousness of her tone. "Someone is forcing you to have his children? Is that legal?"

"No, of course not, silly. I just, you know. One day I'll have to get married and have children." She shrugged.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't know. Everyone I've met plans on getting married and having children eventually," she said.

He coughed delicately. "Er... not everyone you know. I'm forty-four and I've done neither."

"You've never been married?" she asked, surprised. "Really?"

"What, you assumed I'm meeting you like this because I'm in a dysfunctional marriage of some sort?" he asked wryly.

"No, no, not at all, I just thought... I thought you must be having this affair because, well, something had ended, and circumstances made you a bit reckless afterward. There's no shame in having a relationship that didn't work out," she assured him quickly. "I just... everyone I know in their forties who isn't married is divorced, is all, and recently divorced men will sometimes go a little wild, and..."

"And do things like have wild lusty affairs with younger women?" His hand stroked down her thigh.

"Well... you know." She was blushing horribly that was exactly what she had assumed he was doing. "I'm... just going to shut up now before I put my foot in my mouth again. Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

"No, I'm not recently divorced," he said softly. "I've never been married."

"Well, you know, I thought you might have just broken up with someone who hurt you," she murmured. "You just seemed..."

"Angry?" he asked.

"Lonesome, I was going to say." She put her arms fondly around his neck, brushed her lips over his cheek. "And very, *very* randy."

"Well... I'd not been with a woman for rather a long time," he said, relaxing into her embrace. "And I'd missed it. I don't think I realised quite how much I'd missed it until a certain little minx in satin knickers decided to kiss me."

"I don't think I realised how randy I've *ever* been until you first kissed me." Her hands went to the buttons of his shirt.

He only sighed in answer.

~~~~~

"So you'd never gone down on a man before the other night," he said, when they had both put their clothes aside and were lying naked in each other's arms, the preliminary for what they both knew would come next. "Did you like it?"

"Yes, it was nice. Very sensual. And I *really* liked how much you liked it."

"I'm..." He sighed again. "... *partial* to that, I have to admit."

"Most men probably are," she said, chuckling.

"After the day I'd had at work, you can't imagine how good that felt. My work can be a bit stressful, so to then go from a tremendously frustrating situation to a dark bedroom, with a young lady whispering *I want to be your slave* into my ear was... exhilarating." He stretched luxuriously. She could almost see his shameless smirk in the darkness.

"Would you like to do that again sometime?" she asked saucily, then bent down and licked his shoulder.

He shivered. *As often as you like, my sweet*, came the silken reply.

"What was the problem at work?" she asked. She slid around behind him, brushed his hair away from his neck, and began massaging his shoulders. He leaned back into her hands.

"I have more than twenty years' experience as a wrangler of stupid people," he said, absolutely deadpan. "I have taken as my life's work the unenviable task of keeping a mob of lumpen imbeciles from killing themselves with their own ignorance which is often a task even Sisyphus would find daunting. Really, sometimes I think I'd rather endlessly push a rock up a hill in Hell than face another day of my chosen *vocation*."

She laughed and laughed. "You poor dear," she said, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. "I'm so glad I made your day better. So what's going on with the frustrating situation? The lumpen imbeciles are rioting?" His shoulders were so tight the work tension must be driving him half-mad. Ah well, he seemed to really be enjoying the massage.

"Something like that," he replied. "Don't worry though it's just a mountain of bureaucratic nonsense, and I couldn't imagine how it would interest you. It doesn't interest *me*, and I'm in the thick of it." He stretched under her hands. "You're marvellous at this, by the way."

She laughed. "Thanks. You could tell me about the work situation," she offered. "If you like, if you feel like venting. I don't care if it's sort of tiresome."

"Perhaps later," he replied. "Right now, just the fact that you offered is enough. What I would really like " he turned toward her, stroked a forefinger over her lower lip, then into her mouth, "is a bit more of your own special way of bettering my day."

As often as you like, my sweet, she crooned, then slithered down his body to put a lingering kiss on his neck, her hand slipping under the blankets to his rapidly stiffening cock.

She had never had oral sex with a man before him, but he made it so enjoyable that she had begun to crave it during their week apart as much as she craved his kisses, the touch of his cock and his mouth now, it would be a long time before she went away without giving him his weekly dose. It was intoxicating to see this worldly, cynical sensualist reduced to a quivering heap after she drained an orgasm from him. Now, he seemed to enjoy her enthusiasm for it almost as much as he did the pleasure itself

something in her adored this submission, this carnal servility, and she liked to let him know it. Before long, she would discover that she could make his heart rate spike upward simply by drawing his fingertip into her mouth, or putting a little crooning kiss anywhere south of his neck.

"That mouth is becoming a wanton. I'm almost worried by its behaviour," he murmured.

"You just taste good," she whispered, outlining one of his nipples with her tongue, then tracing her way southerly. She bent her head over him, trailing her long hair over his stomach and thighs in that manner she knew he liked, and took his upraised tip into her mouth. He moaned and threw his head back on the pillow. It went on for a long, voluptuous, dreamlike time; the fingers of his hand fanned through her hair, cradling the back of her skull and drawing her lips down onto him in the rhythm he wanted.

She raised her head after a time, stroking him gently with her hand, and whispered: *You want to know if I enjoyed the other night? I'll tell you I loved it. I still can't stop dreaming about it, about you. I want to be your pet, curled up in your lap, rubbing myself against you and purring when you stroke me, with "Property Of" on my collar. I love everything you do to me.*

Do you, he whispered, and she could hear the thrill quivering in his voice, his body. She started to lower her head back into his lap, but instead he moved her onto her back, with one lithe movement, and covered her body with his own. Her ministrations had aroused him to a state of rigidity roughly akin to that of a hornbeam wand. They moved smoothly against each other now, each knowing the other's rhythms, what he wanted, what she wanted.

So I was the first man to use your mouth, was I? came the insinuating, silken voice in her ear. Oh, that *voice*... she could come just from listening to him whisper adoring filth in her ears.

Yes, she confided. *You were the first man to go down on me, too...*

"I'm not... I'm not your first lover, am I?" he asked, suddenly concerned. "That time in the alley... wasn't your first, was it?"

"No. No, but I wish I'd been a virgin for you," she gasped, surging shamelessly up onto him, as her muscles sealed tight on the cruel, silken instrument of her pleasure. "I wish you had been my first."

I wish I had been too, he groaned. *I would have shown you no mercy. And then I would have soothed you with my tongue.*

He had no way of knowing how anticlimactic and awkward her first experience of lovemaking had been she had not experienced any real pleasure from it, largely because the seventeen-year-old boy she had been with had been far from a confident or skilled lover; he had come perhaps a minute after he had penetrated her, just as she had begun to enjoy it. Now she imagined that summer night, on vacation with her family and her then-boyfriend... only instead of her boyfriend, she had met this tall, dark, velvet-voiced stranger in a club... and he took her back to some nameless hotel and took her virginity instead... these deft hands would have undressed her, spread her legs, and then sheathed this cock deep in her achingly hot teenage body, her maidenhead nothing but a momentary obstacle... he would have taken her hard, hungrily, yet so patiently, just like he was now... *oh yes...* that voracious mouth between her legs next...

The very thought was enough to bring on a gasping, pleading, drowning orgasm; and the sound and feel of her climaxing beneath him drove her lover into his own poignant ecstasies. She moaned hoarsely, grinding herself hard against him.

Bloody hell, what have I done to deserve this, he gasped, and then his tongue was lost in her mouth again.

~~~~~

They had begun this mad little affair in spring, and in no time at all, it was autumn, leaves falling from the trees. She was surprised one night to hear her sister say that her nephew was thirty months old, when it seemed that he had just turned two yesterday. Her new little niece could now hold her head up by herself and had developed a smile and an impish little laugh.

She herself had had her twenty-fifth birthday in early July, received a favourable work review and a small raise in September. She had been on four or five first dates with potentially suitable boys, and gone to several birthday and anniversary parties and quite a few weddings that summer, where her parents pressed her to make the acquaintance of even more young men, none of whom had ever gotten a second date, or a second kiss.

The trysts with her unknown lover had continued almost every Saturday and gradually, they began to spend less time making love, and more time holding each other and talking. The sex, however, remained blissfully hot he may have been twenty years older than she was, but he was magnificent. And what he said was oftentimes as thrilling as the actual lovemaking... like the time he had whispered *Oh you I spend all week longing for you, did you know that?* during a long, slow rainy night in bed.

"So does anyone ever ask about where you disappear to on Saturday evenings?" he asked one night in mid-October, while they were lazily coiled around each other after making love.

"No, I have my own apartment near work and no one monitors what I do that closely, but now and then my parents want me to go to some party with them on Saturday nights and I have to find a way to beg off. I told my mother I'm taking a class and don't want to miss the sessions. I even had a little bit of a tiff with my mother over my refusal to compromise my Saturdays the other night," she said, with a little laugh.

"Oh, another family obligation?"

"Sort of, just a boy my parents wanted me to meet," she said, shaking her head.

"A boy your parents wanted you to meet?" he asked curiously.

"Well... in Indian families, some people still arrange marriages, or more often here in England, they actively try to help people get into marriages. Families and friends play matchmaker a lot of the time. It's great when someone makes a love match, you know, just goes out and finds someone suitable without any help, but that's not the only way to go about things for us. I mean, it's not the way it used to be with royalty in the Middle Ages here in England, where you don't get any input at all and don't know who you're marrying until a few days beforehand it's more like, the girl asks her parents to help arrange matters for her and introduce her to suitable boys. Or at least it is with the families I know."

Her lover gave a brief, somewhat disbelieving laugh. "Do forgive me, but the idea of arranging a marriage in this day and age is a bit old-fashioned even for me."

"Oh come on it's not as strange as all that. Your employer set you up on that blind date, and you went to it," she protested. "Can't you try to understand it?"

"Well... " he sighed. "That came about for several different reasons. He told me that the young lady in question was quite beautiful and intelligent, which was intriguing, because most women I know are either one or the other, or neither. Present company excepted, of course," he added, with a little kiss on the side of her face. "My employer has also always been fond of me, for some insane reason I'll never fathom, and I respected the idea that this was his way of trying to look after me. In addition, he has some excellent blackmail material on me as well, so I'm more inclined to humour these little notions of his than not."

She laughed. "Excellent *blackmail material* on you? What, did you rob Gringotts in your wild youth?"

He laughed a bit, too. "Don't trouble yourself about it, it's all ancient history. So the reasoning followed that I might get a pleasant conversation, and a look at an attractive woman, and make my employer feel virtuous, so I went along with it. Somehow to refuse would have been... unsporting."

"And then you ended up with me," she teased. "Sorry if I'm not exactly despondent that she didn't turn up."

"I've begun to feel the same way about myself. It would have been better if I had died, really, back when things were worst, found some spectacular way to give my life for the good of the others. It would have been easier for everyone around me to remember me as an all-sacrificing hero, rather than a living person who still isn't any fonder of his compatriots in that conflict than he was before. Everyone wants soldiers to come out on the other side of the crucible of war perfect, virtuous, all human frailty purged away, souls white and cleansed as a child's. I could never do that. I could never *be* that. Now, I'm a walking reminder that a great conflict takes more from some people than they can ever regain. Everyone is happy that the war is over, but no one wants to see the stump of a veteran's amputated leg, the handicap that he will have to live with forever, after the parades are over and the stars have stopped shooting from the sky. I came through it with my body more or less intact, but I think it was my heart that was

amputated."

"No," she said, holding him closer. "No, stop it. It wouldn't be at all better if you had died."

He laughed bitterly. "There's no one who would miss me. I was supposed to redeem my wretched existence with an operatic death scene that's what everyone expected. It would have made such a wonderful story. Really, it was inconsiderate of me to cheat everyone of the opportunity to tell it."

"I would miss you," she whispered. "I would miss you horribly." Her voice hoarsened and broke.

"Oh, you." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "You precious and original creature. You can't know what you're saying."

"I would," she said, her hand curving tenderly around his cheek. He laid his hand over hers, seeming to sigh gratefully into that touch. She pulled him very gently and insistently into her arms, and finally he let himself be enfolded.

*I'm so glad you're here*, she said, and kissed him tenderly.

He finally relaxed into her embrace, clinging tightly to her, and she held him very close for a long time.

"Please," she whispered, embracing him protectively, her cheek against his. "Please let me turn on one of the lamps. I want to see you."

He flinched away, shuddering in horror. "No. Don't," he said. "I shall instantly leave if you do."

"All right, all right," she said, caressing him soothingly. "I won't, I promise."

At last he allowed himself to be coaxed back into her arms, but she was struck by the vehemence of his reaction it was the most flustered and unnerved she had ever seen him. "Really, let's keep things how they are," he said. "I've become very comfortable with this. I would now find it hard to imagine us any other way."

"The war that you fought in... were you an Auror, back during You-Know-Who's time?" she asked timidly. If he needed the darkness to feel secure in this intimacy, she would let him have it, but that didn't stop her from wanting to comfort him, to be closer to him.

"Something like that," he said. His head fell wearily onto her shoulder.

She lay in bed just holding him that night, letting him hold her. He finally got up around two a.m., silently dressed, kissed her very tenderly, then made his good-byes. It was the first time they had spent an evening together without having sex, but somehow it felt like their most intimate night together yet.

~~~~~

"So, miss, what do you do for a living?"

Saturday night, a month later. She had sacrificed a Saturday evening to her parents' insistent demands and had gone out to dinner with them and another couple they knew, the Choudhurys, and their son, Anil, who was visiting from India. Her parents liked the other couple very much, and liked the young man as well they would have been ecstatic if their children had suddenly fallen in love and into happy matrimony as if struck by a bolt from above.

Unfortunately, she knew within the first five minutes that the boy was nothing special, no one interesting; he let his parents do most of the talking for him. Cheeks a little too well-fed, bad complexion, eyes too complacent, no snap, no spark. No sense of being fully engaged by her he wasted not one breath of wit or challenge in their conversation. There was just... nothing. She couldn't help comparing every suitable boy presented by her parents to her unknown lover now, and next to his whipcrack wit and cynical humour, the obsessive lust and incredible intimacy like a flash of fire between them, this demure, doughy-faced boy was a very poor second choice indeed.

The whole dinner felt like a very, very sugary job interview, for a position she didn't know if she wanted in the first place. But she could not be a maiden aunt, no, that was no kind of life at all.

~~~~~

She left the restaurant and went straight to their hotel. For a long moment, she stood outside, unable to move forward, or to leave. She checked her watch 9:15 p.m.

The experiment with the darkness and nameless anonymity had gone so far now. She had been seeing him... no, not seeing him, holding him, listening to him, making love with him in the dark for almost six months now.

The curiosity had started months ago, but now it was absolutely punishing. Why was he so reticent to let her look at him? Was he disfigured in some way? She couldn't feel anything infirm about his body, he felt nobly proportioned, healthy and robust to her. Was he blind in one eye, or did he possess a harelip, a hideous birthmark, some other flaw that left him with no hope of attracting a woman? Was he just very unattractive, but otherwise healthy?

Or was it his age? She knew he was twenty years older than she was, but that didn't matter to her in the slightest. Witches and Wizards lived longer than Muggles; when he was one hundred and she was eighty, twenty years age difference would seem insignificant.

Did he seek the darkness because he thought himself to be unattractive? Had someone made him believe that no woman would ever love him for who he was, so he now felt the need to hide his identity, so as to become someone else, someone who was worthy of the affection and intimacy he needed?

Her own parents had always told her and her sister that they were both beautiful, sweet, and lovable, and she had grown up believing it. They cuddled her and dandled her on their knees when she was little; now, as an adult, they hugged her and kissed her at greeting and parting, and when she wanted to be comforted. Her parents' affection was like a charm, a shield, always with her even when she went off to school and was parted from them for nine months at a time. From what he had told her, there had been no such affection from parents, or family, or close friends in his life. So perhaps now it was only in unknown darkness that he could allow himself to admit he needed, craved, and cared for someone else.

The hands of her watch had crept to 9:25. He was waiting for her, but she lingered outside, frightening herself with her imaginings. What if she waited till he fell asleep and lit a lamp, what would she see lying beside her? A monster? The god of love, Kama himself? Was it Kama who intuited what she had needed that night, as she gazed longingly upon an artwork glorifying him, and come to her in the form of this dark, passionate, lonely stranger? Or if she looked upon her lover's face, would she see perhaps the winged Cupid, Kama's Roman counterpart, who would then be destroyed by her distrust and curiosity? Or worst of all, would she find just an ordinary man, no one special, not attractive or in any way distinguished, and thus, would the insane, precious intensity of these couplings then be lost forever?

Worse yet, was he married? Committed to someone else? Was he famous, a public figure, who was keeping his identity and their relationship secret, lest his life be destroyed by scandal? Somehow she couldn't believe that, though there was a loneliness to him that made her believe him when he said he was a bachelor, and when he said that he had no family. The only people he ever talked about were the man he worked for, and other people who worked at the same place he did. He seemed to reserve some measure of respect and affection for his employer and the occasional co-worker, but her impression was that he led a life of emotional isolation.

She didn't even know what he really looked like, beyond tall, thin, white, and dark-haired but she knew his body very intimately by feel, scent, and taste. He was a head taller than she was, able to kiss the top of her head by inclining his a fraction toward her. Thin, spare of flesh, but hard-muscled. He had long black hair past his shoulders, halfway down his back. Smooth, fine skin, sharp cheekbones, well-defined jawline, sensual lips. Nose on the beaky side, but she didn't mind that, so was her father's, and her own nose could not be described as a button, for that matter, and she was considered quite a beauty in some quarters. Her lover had an almost hairless chest and back, long fluid muscles in his arms. And a deep, sultry, almost preternaturally expressive voice... why was it that when the boys her parents introduced to her kissed her, she felt nothing, but she could bring herself to orgasm just by a few strokes of her fingers, and remembering the devastated sound of his breath catching while he made

Whatever happened tonight, the fact remained that while she had no idea who he was, or what he looked like, he made her feel more loved and desired than she ever had in her life.

He was sleeping when she finally came in, some time later she sat for awhile beside him, just listening to his soft, regular breathing, aching to turn on a lamp, to conjure a silent *Lumos* spell... but did not. He roused quietly while she undressed and slipped into bed with him, her head coming to rest on his shoulder.

"Boring," she whispered back. "I didn't like him. I don't like any of them. I wish they'd stop setting me up to go to these things."

"I missed you while I was there," she said, after a long pause of gathering her courage. "You said that I couldn't know what I'm saying, but it's true."

"I've no idea what I've ever done to inspire such *devotion*," he said softly.

"Stop it you're wonderful to me," she protested.

"It's very easy to be kind to one's very,very accommodating young lover," he replied wryly. "Surely you realise that. I have my unmitigated way with you every time we're together. Perhaps I wouldn't be so wonderful if you were to stop that."

"But it's not like that," she said. "I'm doing exactly what I want with you. To me this feels more like I have my unmitigated way with you every time."

"Well. It's been said that the best business deals come out of situations in which both parties think that they have gotten the better of each other."

"I miss you every moment I'm not with you," she said finally.

They were lying on one pillow, his forehead resting against hers, her hand feelingly caressing his cheek. Had there been even one ray of light, she would have been gazing into the eyes of the man she loved.

"It's useless trying to find some boy to marry, when I can't stop thinking about you, every moment of every day," she whispered. "I love you. I love you so much."

The pillow rustled, and he averted his face from hers. *I know you believe that now, at this moment, but later, you're going to realise that you really don't* he said, his breath catching in his throat. *But... thank you.*

"Don't you care about me at all?" she pleaded, her voice breaking.

His hand curved around her cheek. Yes, he said finally. *Very much. I miss you dreadfully as well, when you're not with me.*

"Then let me see you," she whispered. "I want to see your face."

*Everyone is a beauty in the dark, dearest. Please don't ask this of me.*

"Then tell me your name," she said. "Or give me a false one, I don't care."

*I'm sure you've imagined a far better name than the one I've unfortunately been dowered with.*

"I want to know who you are," she pleaded.

*You already know me better than anyone else alive. Don't deprive yourself of your dreams, my dear just let yourself be with the man you're imagining, he said, in her ear, in her head. He loves you more than anything in the world.*

But she couldn't be contented, not now. She pleaded with him, till she wept with it. *I love you, I need you. You couldn't help but be beautiful to me.*

"Please don't cry," he whispered, his voice hoarsening. "I hate that I've made you cry like this."

*You love me too, she said brokenly. Don't try to deny it. I can feel it every time you touch me.*

"Then why must you do this to me?" he raged at her, exploding with a vehemence that took her breath away. "I already know I'll never have any place in your life you're so bloody tangled up in your parents' apron strings you're even allowing them to choose potential *husbands* for you. You go from sleeping with me to interviewing fathers for children you don't even want. You should hear yourself you talk about marriage and childbearing like some painful and odious *duty*, not anything you would take any sort of joy in "

*That will all stop now, she said. If you want it to. There's a place for you in my life if only you'll come and take it.*

"Why do you have to take away the only relationship I've actually enjoyed in decades? Isn't what I've already done good enough, haven't I always treated you well?" He turned hard away from her, with what might have been a stifled sob. "Why do you want to throw everything we've been to each other away, just so you can be disappointed by the sight of a deucedly undistinguished and unattractive middle-aged man?"

*I need to see you. She was begging him now. He kept his face stubbornly averted from her, but she brought his hand to her lips and kissed it. Just for the time it takes one match to burn. Please.*

"Fine," he spat. "*Fine*. Strike your bloody match, you little idiot. I knew this was temporary. Just too damned good to last. Don't say I didn't warn you."

She fumbled for the box of long-burning matches in the nightstand ashtray, finally extracted one, and managed to light it. She turned toward the silhouette of the man beside her, terrified, but still longing to see her beloved's face.

They faced each other, blinking, eyes adjusting to the light, both holding the bedclothes around their nudity almost modestly, and saw each other's faces for the first time.

To her endless surprise, she realised that she already knew those eyes, that profile. The black hair, the pale complexion... his eyes were pure black, too, she remembered. She had seen those skilled, graceful hands before, seen him in black professorial robes, bent over a cauldron...



"Professor Snape?" she whispered, thunderstruck.

Yes, she recognised him instantly, even after seven years. Severus Snape... the toughest, least forgiving professor she had ever had. Her sister Parvati had hated him, had complained endlessly about his cruelty, his sarcasm, the way he unfairly persecuted the Gryffindors. She herself hadn't had any real conflicts with him, as the studious Ravenclaws tended not to incur his wrath as much as other Houses, except for the one time she had fallen asleep in his class after a long night studying, and he hadn't let her forget it for weeks, just raking the flesh off her bones with satire. Parvati had once said to her during their seventh year that Snape had to be as much of a bastard as he was because he was compensating for a deficiency "in the manhood department." It occurred to her with a shock that she knew quite certainly that this was not the case at all.

"Miss Patil?" her lover whispered back.

A sudden feeling of self-consciousness washed over her, despite the fact that she had been this man's lover for months, that she had done nearly everything sexually possible with him, had confided everything to him, slept peacefully in his arms. Had been entirely faithful to him, as well.

Her teacher. She was lying in bed with her least favourite teacher. And he was the best lover and this the most intimate relationship she'd ever had in her life. He openly referred to all of his students as dunderheads, but when she kissed him, touched him, and licked him, he quivered.

For the space of several heartbeats, they stared at each other. The match's tiny flame trembled between them.

So dignified, so pantherish, she thought, lying in bed beside her, with his hair rumpled, in nothing but a white sheet. She thought about what her friends would say if she walked down the street holding Professor Snape's hand... then realised the impossibility of ever wanting to go anywhere holding any man's hand, if not his.

"Somehow I knew you would turn out to be a former student," he said softly. "Are you disappointed? Shocked?"

Silently, she shook her head *No*, her eyes never leaving his.

He came closer, bent over her. "You've grown up... very prettily," he murmured, tracing his fingers lightly down her cheek. "Padma."

"We're identical. How did you know?" she whispered.

"Parvati has a shrill, grating laugh you do not. And your sister was a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors are so...*conventionally* virtuous," he replied, with an eloquent little grimace.

For a long moment, she could only stare at him, all that she felt for him naked in her eyes. He bent down and kissed her, almost shyly; it might have been another couple's first.

"May I call you *Severus*?" she asked. She liked saying his name it tasted good in her mouth, like the rest of him. "It sounds like a name I'd like to scream in bed."

The black eyes glinted. *Please*, he said, with longing in his voice.

"I mean it," she whispered. "I love you."

"And I love you," he said. "We'll have to lie about how we met, you know."

Padma laughed laughed really good and hard at that. Severus smiled back at her in amusement the first time she could ever recall having seen this man smile.

She blew out the match, and fell back into his arms.

---

*Author's Notes:*

*The couplet Padma quotes when she encounters Snape in the club is by Dorothy Parker, an early 20th-century poet and writer.*

*"... we're all mad here" is a slightly paraphrased line from Alice's conversation with the Cheshire Cat, from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll.*