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by kellychambliss

It's 1894, the dawn of a new age, and Severus Snape, shipping clerk, wants a bit more magic in his world. But few know better than he that life is always a big question mark. Steampunk AU.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 7

It's 1894, the dawn of a new age, and Severus Snape, shipping clerk, wants a bit more magic in his world. But few know better than he that life is always a big question mark. Steampunk AU.

Author's Note: This story was written a couple of years ago for a fest; the prompt asked for steampunk, corsets, and "the dawn of a new age." The prompter offered a choice of characters Severus, Minerva, Tom Riddle, Narcissa, Nagini -- and I decided to include them all.

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London, 1894

The magnificent engine took up nearly the entire music-hall stage, its burnished metal gleaming in the flickering footlights. Taller than the frock-coated magician who stood beside it, the machine was breath-taking, exciting, sinister.

Its central core was a cylinder of brass with a cut-glass door set into it. Other shimmering panels of different-coloured glass circled the core, and through them the audience could see the entire interior, an empty crimson-lined space bathed in brilliant light.

From his position in the two-shilling stalls, Severus Snape growled in annoyance as he craned his neck to see around the babbling families and beer-swilling layabouts and courting couples who obscured his vision. He'd paid the extra money for the lower stalls, foregoing the usual upper-gallery seat that better suited his minor-clerk's wages, specifically to get a better view of this mysterious contraption that seemed about to take the music-hall world by storm.

He thought it was probably only a matter of time until this popular magic act "The Query Family!" shouted the posters outside, accompanied by large, ornate question-marks moved to the swankier venues in Leicester Square, for which he had neither the funds nor the proper clothing. And before that happened, Severus had a few queries of his own, a few things that he needed to learn about this machine and this family.

For they were magical. He knew it, he could feel it the same fizzy tickle in his limbs, the same pulsing heat in his chest, the same sense of being almost (but not quite) able to see beyond the surface of the world to something deeper and clearer. They were same sensations he'd had as a young boy in Spinner's End, before his mam died of the diphtheria, and his da took to drink.

He didn't remember much of his mam's looks his mind would only bring up a blurry flash of a pale face surrounded by dark hair, and a pair of welcoming arms that held him close against a soft, lavender-scented bosom.

But he remembered clearly the sparkling, tingly feel of her magic, how he would watch in awe as she waved her thin ebony wand to make all manner of wonderful things happen. He would sit at her side for hours, listening to tales of the magical school he would one day attend, the marvelous spells he'd be able to do.

"You'll make our fortune, boy!" his da would laugh, back in those sunny days before misfortune chewed up the Snapes of Spinner's End and spit them out, his mother to the mass grave of the epidemic, his father to drink and the loss of his mill job and his home, Severus to the charity of Mr Howard the mill owner, who had liked him and sent him away to be educated at Primrose Academy, a school for boys of the trading and lower middle classes. Most of them, like Severus, were there on the largesse of some do-gooder who saw promise in them, or some rich man who needed a place to park an inconvenient offspring from the wrong side of the blanket.

Primrose (and a more incongruous name could not be imagined) had not been as bad as Mr Dickens' Dotheboys Hall, but it had been grim enough. Still, Severus bright and quiet and bookish, though fast enough with his fists when he needed to be had managed to scrape up enough learning and polish to secure a position as a clerk in the carting firm of Haltern and Mills. He spent his days preparing bills of lading and his nights at the music halls or with his mother's books.

They were all he had of her now six books and her ebony wand, wrapped carefully in flannel and kept in a locked box under his lodging-house bed. He'd never attended his mother's magical school, of course, and he would have written off the story long ago as simply a tale invented to amuse a child if it hadn't been for the spell books, with their densely-printed, tissue-thin pages that never wrinkled or tore or stained. Slowly, laboriously, night after night, he raised his mother's wand and taught himself charms and runes and transfigurations (potions intrigued him, but he had no idea where to find the ingredients). He learnt, and he waited for the day when somehow, somewhere, he would find others of his kind.

And then, last week, he'd gone with his mate Fellowes to the South London Palace, for Fellowes was sweet on one of the dancers there, and they'd arrived just as the magic act had begun the Query Family.

Severus had been watching them with only half an eye what was the point of cheap theatrical "magic" when he could do the real thing? when suddenly the stage had gone completely dark. Every light was extinguished, only to flare to life again to reveal the great brass cylinder, its glass sparkling, coloured smoke pouring from a dozen copper tubes, its bright red interior almost too blinding to look at.

Severus had felt it then the tell-tale surge of heat that crackled across his skin.

Magic.

His day had come. At last.

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What with the crowd and the annoying presence of Fellowes, Severus had not been able to make his way to the stage door in time to confront the Querys in person, but on reflection, he thought the delay was for the best. He'd had time to collect himself, to plan, and Severus rarely did anything without a plan. Life had taught him that survival went not to the fittest but to the canniest, and self-preservation had long been his main goal.

But the goal of self-advancement was not far behind. His magic, he knew, could be his ticket to wealth and comfort and leisure; he yearned to shed the inky skin of the clerk for the butterfly-freedom of a man of letters. First, though, he needed to learn how to put his powers to best use. He needed to learn the ways of the magical world.

He needed the Querys.

So he'd placed his precious wand securely in the inner pocket of his coat and come once again to the Palace, to sit this time in the two-shilling stalls and watch as, once more, the gaslights and footlights suddenly died and then were reborn amid the screams and gasps of the audience. Again, the cylinder appeared, and the Great Query stepped on stage beside it.

He was a tall man, dark-haired and dashing in impeccable evening clothes, with a cape of flame-coloured satin slung carelessly over his shoulder. From this distance at least, he looked handsome, and Severus could hear the shopgirls giggle and swoon.

"Ladies and gentlemen," boomed Query in a faultlessly posh accent, "be not alarmed. Nay, be comforted, for this evening you will learn the answers to some of your deepest questions, and you will observe wonders such as you have never imagined. Behold!"

With a flourish, he raised his arm to extend a golden wand. It was no stage prop, Severus knew; he could feel the power of it rippling through the smoky air. "Accio the Tome of Answers!" Query cried, and from behind him a great ornate book appeared, its gilt pages opening as it floated to hover at Query's side.

"It's electickity, that is," declared a gaudily-dressed swain nearby, his arm draped over the shoulder of a girl in a large beribboned bonnet. "'E's moved that book by some sort 'o current, you bet."

"Ooooh, Charlie," simpered the girl, "the things wot you know. Nobody smarter."

Severus tried to quell them with a glare, and suddenly he could feel his own power surge forth as, to his annoyance, he unwittingly cast a silencing spell on the hapless young man. Though he had made great strides with his magic, he didn't yet have it under complete control; sometimes, like now, it burst out when he least expected it.

"'Ere, Charlie!" the girl screeched in alarm, as the lad's mouth opened and closed soundlessly. "Wot've you gone and done to yer voice, then?"

Before Severus could cast a counter-charm, a wave of magic seemed to wash over him, and he turned to see the Great Query's dark eyes fastened directly on him. In the brief moment before the magician looked away, Severus felt stripped bare, and he shivered in spite of himself.

He pulled himself together enough to release the silencing charm, but the encounter left him shaken. He barely attended to Query's next words, and by the next time he focused on the stage, Query was circling the hanging book, moving his wand over and behind it to demonstrate to the audience that no strings or wires held it.

"Such is the power of this magical book," Query was intoning, "that it contains within it all the knowledge of our fair universe. To those who are pure of heart, it will answer any question put to it." Sheathing his golden wand, he clapped his hands.

From the wings appeared a lovely young woman, about Severus's age or a bit older. Soft, pale-blond curls escaped from her elaborately-arranged hair to trail across her neck and bare shoulders. Compared to those of most of the dancing girls and singers at the music hall, her dress was fairly demure: black, with high, gathered sleeves, a neckline that shewed only a hint of snowy cleavage, a black skirt that fell floorward in a long sweep.

But it was the accessories that had the men of the hall whistling: the tight, boned bodice of black-and-red stripes that set off the girl's high, firm breasts, the ruffle of scarlet satin that lifted her skirt in the front to expose black-stockinged ankles, the exquisite high-heeled red kid boots.

And of course, there was the girl's lovely face: fair and cool, she was porcelain perfection, and Severus fully understood the audience's randy response. He himself wasn't attracted by her sort of unapproachable iciness, but he knew that for others, she represented any number of unexpressed hopes and dreams.

Mr Query knew it, too. Beaming, he escorted the girl to the edge of the footlights. "My daughter, Miss Narcissa Query," he said. "She will be assisting me in unlocking the glorious powers you will see here tonight. Oh, but fear not, my friends it is not dark magic you will be feeling; no evil forces here. There is only the blessed power of Truth and Light and Purity."

A wave of his wand brought a flurry of doves out of the upper galleries; the audiences' cries of surprise turned to gasps admiration as the beautiful birds circled the hall and then disappeared into the wings of the stage.

"And now, my dear," said Query to Narcissa, "may I have the sacred quill?"

Narcissa gave a little curtsy and held out a pillow of dark red velvet decorated with gold braid and tassels. On it lay a large feather of gleaming white. Query's wand

flashed again, and the feather levitated slowly into the air as from above, a shaft of bright light shone down to illuminate quill and book together.

Silent now, the entire house watched as the quill floated, seemingly of its own accord, to hang poised over the book. The Great Query raised his wand high and shook his shoulders so that his red cloak framed him. His other hand he reached towards his daughter, and she reached back to clasp it with her own. The velvet pillow was left to hover in the air, and after a moment, it zoomed into the center of the great smoking cylinder and disappeared.

The crowd gave a collective gasp and burst into applause, though Severus thought he felt a slight undercurrent of discomfort, as if they could sense that here was an exhibition of the unknown beyond any cheap stage trickery.

The scent of magic was cloyingly thick in the air now; Severus felt almost light-headed with it and more determined than ever to connect himself to these Querys. There were questions to asked, Query was right about that, and Severus intended to make certain that his own were answered.

Query and Narcissa had been standing with their arms still raised, their heads bowed, and now Query looked up to declaim, "The Book of All Answers is ready! Which of you will come forward with a question?"

There were murmurs and shuffles from the audience, and finally a buxom, red-faced woman with frizzy hair and an oversized hat pushed her way towards the front of the house. A cook or washerwoman on her monthly half-day, Severus thought, though he had no doubt that the Great Query would treat her like the grandest lady in the land.

And so he did. "Come forward, dear, brave madam," he said, gallantly assisting her up to the stage and bending (with a flourish of cloak) to kiss her hand. "What is your name, please?"

"Prbtdr," she said, and then, when a smiling Query cupped a hand behind his ear to encourage her to speak up, she shouted, "MRS PETERS!" so loudly that the beautiful Narcissa gave a startled little jump. The audience roared with laughter, causing poor Mrs Peters to flush an even deeper red. Then the attention began to please her, and she flashed a cheeky grin.

"Delighted, my dear Mrs Peters," said Query, bowing. "And what question would you like to ask the Book of Answers?"

"Me lad," the woman said. "Me lad Walter. 'E's at a crossroads, like, and don't know what way to go. So I thought mebbe, you know, the book..."

She gestured vaguely, and Query nodded as he reached a gloved hand towards Mrs Peters' frizzy head.

"May I?" he asked, and at her vigorous nod, he placed his fingers on her cheek. Then he threw back his own head, his face contorted in an expression of intense concentration. Finally he opened his eyes and stepped back.

"So you want to know," he said to Mrs Peters and to the audience at large, "whether young Walter should join her majesty's navy or should try to make his fortune in Australia?"

"Blimey!" cried Mrs Peters. "It's like you was inside me very 'ead. That's it to a jot. That's the exact question."

A murmur swelled from the audience, of interest, admiration, some scepticism. Again, Severus felt that light current of unease, until the moment was broken (near him, at least), by the formerly charmed-silent Charlie, who said, "Aw, she's a plant, inn't she?" The louts around him guffawed, and the tension dissipated, though Charlie was so happy with the response that he repeated his comment five or six more times. Severus wished he'd let the imbecile remain a permanent mute.

But if Charlie was no longer paying attention to the magic act, others were. The usual constant movement and talk that marked the music-hall experience had stilled, and most people were watching raptly.

Up on stage, Query turned smartly, the red cloak billowing behind him, and pointed his wand at the floating quill and book.

"Book of Answers," he shouted. "Respond!"

"Respond!" called Narcissa.

Mrs Peters, not to be outdone, also shouted, "Respond!" and gave a salute as the crowd laughed.

Query scowled and for just a moment looked quite sinister; Severus could tell that he didn't like having his dramatic moment upstaged. But almost immediately, his face smoothed into an expression of benign, even fatherly concern.

"Join hands!" he cried, reaching for Narcissa, who promptly reached for Mrs Peters. "Concentrate!"

The quill dipped toward the blank page of the book, and slowly, slowly, began to write.

The crowd watched, enthralled, as the pen moved of its own volition, forming letter after letter. When finally it stopped, there was a hush and then applause. Query waited until he heard the sound peak and start to fade; then he turned toward Mrs Peters and motioned toward the book.

Severus caught the look of embarrassed confusion that briefly crossed her face and realised all at once what it meant: Mrs Peters could not read.

Query had apparently drawn the same conclusion, for he quickly extended his gesture to his assistant, as if he had intended to call upon her from the start.

"Narcissa, my dear," he said. "Would you tell us what the Book has said?"

With another curtsy, Narcissa stepped downstage of Mrs Peters and her father (the better to show off her boots and legs, Severus surmised) and angled herself in front of the book so that her face was to the audience and her pale-blonde hair shone in the light.

"Mr Walter Peters," she read, "should do as his name tells him."

"Wot's that mean, then?" Mrs Peters asked.

"Your lad's full name," said Query. "What is it?"

"Walter Matthew Sidney Peters."

Query turned towards the audience. "What does his name tell Mr Walter Matthew SIDNEY Peters?" he demanded. "Whither should he direct his steps? To the navy, or to...?"

"To Sydney!" shouted the crowd, Charlie included. Mrs Peters clamped her hands to her mouth in astonishment and allowed Narcissa to help her off; Severus could see her mouthing "thank you, thank you" as she walked.

The audience cheered, but Mrs Peters had barely left the stage before there was a flash of blue light from the great cylinder, and a thin trail of bright green smoke began to lengthen itself from one of the gently-puffing copper tubes.

The quill, too, suddenly began darting about the stage on its own, its colour changing from white to the same vivid green as the smoke. Dashing to the book, it waited until a new page turned and then began to scribble furiously.

The rope of smoke, meanwhile, curled out into the audience. Some screamed; others laughed; all kept their eyes glued to it.

"Magic is on the move, my friends!" Query boomed and strode over to read the page on which the green quill had finally finished writing. "It is written: 'the right man must be found.'"

Wheeling, he came directly down to the footlights and addressed the crowd. "Where is he? Who is the right man? Is it you, sir? You?" As he pointed at various men in the audience, the line of green smoke headed toward each one, hovering briefly before snaking off again.

Remembering how intensely Query had stared at him when he'd inadvertently hexed the loud-mouthed Charlie, Severus began to suspect that he knew exactly where the smoke would fetch up, and he was not disappointed.

"Is it you, sir?" Query shouted one more time, and the smoke came directly to Severus's stall, where it formed itself above his head into a sparkling green question mark.

The audience gasped anew, and all those near Severus drew back from him in awe and interest, Charlie's girl clinging to his arm and giggling.

"Come, my son, and see what the magic asks of you," Query called, and Severus was nothing loath. He'd come to the South London Palace intent on finding the Querys. Now, it seemed, the Querys were finding him. As far as Severus was concerned, it came to the same thing.

He headed towards the stage.

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Once there, he was surprised by how difficult it was to see beyond the footlights. But after the first moment, he almost forgot that the audience was present, so strongly did he feel the pulse of magic from the two people who stood in front of him. They knew he felt it, too, he was sure of it. Narcissa, he fancied, smiled at him too knowingly, and shaking hands with Query had given him exactly the sort of tingling jolt that he imagined electricity must give.

"What is your name, my friend?" Query asked, and Severus responded honestly. He had nothing to hide. Well, not his name, at any rate.

"And are you willing to go wherever the magic takes you, Mr Snape?" Query asked next, cocking his head and smiling. Both he and his daughter very were attractive people, and they knew it. And it was more than just appearance; there was something charismatic about both of them, Query especially. The man was hypnotic, no question, and...dangerous with it. Severus wasn't sure why that word suddenly came to his mind, but it was the right one, he could feel it.

The sensation was both worrying and exhilarating.

"Yes, Mr Query," he said. "I will go wherever the magic takes me."

The Great Query turned to the audience. "Shall we send him?" he shouted.

In the roar of approval that followed, the magical cylinder suddenly began to emit even larger clouds of coloured smoke, and the bright light inside the ruby-red core began to flicker, first white, then green, then white again.

This time when Query looked at Severus, the challenge in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Step into my machine," he invited, gesturing toward the shimmering glass door.

"Cor, don't do it, love!" shouted a woman's voice from the audience, and the crowd laughed.

"Go on, hero, get in!" yelled a man. Charlie, Severus was sure of it and soon the entire house was roaring, stamping, howling, "In! In! In! In!"

Severus stepped in.

The ruby-red lining looked deep and sparkling, just as he imagined a real ruby might look. Through the curved glass slits in the sides he could see the stage, as if he were looking out from inside a bottle. There was no exit save the door by which he'd entered, no trick floor or hinged roof that Severus could see. All the coloured, pulsing gimcracks notwithstanding, the thing appeared to be no more than ordinary industrial piping, not magical at all.

He was both disappointed and not a little relieved. Then he realised that the crowd had quieted and that Query had been speaking to him.

"I beg your pardon?" Severus said, annoyed with himself. He didn't want to let the other man gain too much of an upper hand.

"I said, are you ready?"

"For what?"

The audience laughed as if he'd said something funny, and Severus unconsciously balled his fists. The boys at Primrose Academy would have recognised his scowl and beat a respectful retreat; even the masters had come to understand that Severus Snape was not to be mocked.

But if the Great Query noticed the anger, he ignored it.

"For the great unknown! The great adventure!" he shouted. "Seize it, lad! Seize the chance, seize the day! Seize the quill!"

The quill?

At that very moment, the feather quill dazzling white once more floated into the light-drenched cylinder. Severus caught it in one hand.

Immediately, he felt as if a hook caught him directly behind his navel, and he jerked forward; it took all of his not-inconsiderable self-control not to cry out. He was pulled onward as if by a tow-rope, wind whistling in his ears, when suddenly he slammed to a halt, his knees nearly buckling.

His hair had come loose from its tie, and he had to shake it from his eyes before he could see where he was.

It looked to be a drawing room, moderately-sized and almost too warm from the fire crackling in the grate. He had a confused impression of overstuffed chairs and antimacassars, beaded door curtains, peacock feathers in an urn, a large aspidistra on a stand, a hearthrug flanked by an ornate horsehair sofa, and was that a *cauldron* over the fire...?

Any investigation he might have made was forestalled by a figure that rose from the sofa. It was a woman, tall, thin, and dark-haired, swathed in a tartan shawl, small wire-framed spectacles perched on her nose. She spoke in a sharp Scottish voice.

"Stop where you are."

Before Severus could move, he couldn't because the dark-haired woman, with a very steady hand, had pointed a wand at him and said something that sounded suspiciously spell-like.

And Severus realised that he was immobile.

"You will explain yourself," the woman demanded as he felt himself begin to tumble over. She waited until he hit the ground before adding, "At once."

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 7*

The Query family makes Severus an offer he doesn't want to refuse. Steampunk AU. Rating is for later chapters.

### Chapter 2

All was eventually made clear. The dark-haired woman, it turned out, was Minerva Riddle wife of the Great Query, real name Thomas M. Riddle.

Mrs Riddle didn't openly dispute Severus's story about how he had come to appear in her drawing room, but neither did she release him from the immobility spell. Still, she unbent enough to explain that she usually accompanied "the act" to the music hall to serve as dresser and props mistress but had remained behind this evening because of a headache.

"I hope you are recovered now," Severus said, as politely as he could from his prone position on the floor. He had the feeling that it might not be a bad idea to enjoy Mrs Riddle's approval.

But she seemed to find the comment a bit too forward. There was a stiff pause before she replied, "Tolerably."

He tried again. "You are Narcissa's mother?" he asked, with an obscure sense that women always enjoyed talking about their children.

Something flared in Mrs Riddle's eyes, and her pointed face was momentarily lit by an odd expression. "Hardly," she said. For some reason, she reminded Severus of a cat faced with a particularly juicy canary.

He decided to forego further conversation until Query...er, Riddle arrived. There were too many possible pitfalls here; best simply to resign himself to lying in uncomfortable silence.

But rather to his surprise, Mrs Riddle spoke again. "You are magical?" she asked.

What Severus wanted to say was, "Do non-magical people normally materialise out of thin air in your sitting room?" What he did say was, "Yes. Self-trained."

She eyed him narrowly. "Then you did not attend Hogwarts School?"

"I did not," he replied, though what business it was of hers, he wasn't sure. But he fancied that her ramrod-straight back relaxed a fraction at his words.

Interesting.

She fell silent then, and Severus took the opportunity of studying her. Not young, but decidedly handsome in a prim, sharp-featured way; he preferred her type to the more languidly-pretty Narcissa. With her strong jaw, patrician nose, and considerable quantity of mostly-black hair, Mrs Riddle looked elegantly respectable and just the slightest bit frightening. Not someone to run afoul of, Severus decided.

But then, neither was he. He thought he might very much enjoy testing her limits.

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There was an odd sense of inevitability about how it all ended. The Great Query and his assistant did eventually return, and Severus released from the "body-bind" spell and plied with tea found himself explaining his history in more elaborate detail than he had ever vouchsafed to anyone.

He wasn't yet certain if it made sense to trust these people, but still, aside from his mother, they were the only other magical beings he'd ever encountered. He'd seen enough of his own world "Muggle," his mam had always called it to know its limitations, and he firmly believed that the magical one could only be better. He wanted to belong to it, and the Querys could be his way in.

"So now you know why I am not part of the magical world," he concluded at last. "But I am curious as to *why* you are not."

Tom Riddle smiled but did not answer immediately. Instead, he said, "We'll get to that, but first, I wonder if I could ask you a favour, sir?" Before Severus could say yea or nay, Riddle went on, "Do you have a wand, and, if I were to ask you, could you do some magic for me?"

What was this, an audition of some sort? Severus wondered. But he had nothing to lose, so he inclined his head in acquiescence.

"Yes, I have a wand," he said, removing it slowly from his coat. It was not without some trepidation that he allowed the Riddles to take it from him; he was coming to understand that for a wizard, a wand was like an extension of his heart. He felt anxious without it, in the brief moments during which Mr and Mrs Riddle inspected it, but they soon returned it.

"Your mother seems to have cared for it well, and you after her," Mrs Riddle said, approval clear in her voice. Severus felt that she warmed to him a bit.

And then the audition for such it clearly was began.

Riddle asked Severus to perform a variety of spells and charms; he even invited him to prepare a potion, though Severus was forced to confess that he didn't know how. For although he did own his mother's potions book, he'd never had the ingredients or tools.

"Ah, well, no matter," Riddle said. "You have shown me enough to make clear that you have a great deal of magical ability." He sat quiet for a moment and then suddenly turned to look at his wife. "My dear?" he asked.

Mrs Riddle gave Severus a glance that he could only think of as appraising, and pursed her thin lips. "Yes," she said. "I believe he will suit."

"Will suit what?" Severus demanded. He was willing to be agreeable up to a point, if it would help him gain his ends, but he refused to be discussed as if he were not in the room.

Riddle answered smoothly, as Severus would come to understand that he always did. "I will be frank," he said, a phrase that usually made Severus assume the speaker was anything but. "In the wizarding world, our abilities are not surprising; they are shared by all. Oh, some people are magically more skilled or powerful than others, of course. I may say without boasting that I am one of those more-powerful people, but we all compete on more or less the same level. We most of us survive, but not many of us prevail.

"Here in the Muggle world, however, our abilities are exceptional, unusual. Our superiority is clear. And since I am not a man who is prepared simply to survive, I have chosen to come to a place where I am likely to prevail. My dear wife," and here he extended a hand and a smile to Mrs Riddle, who sat straight and silent opposite him, "is also a witch of great ability, and Narcissa is quite gifted as well. We have done very well for ourselves as Muggle magicians, and I believe we can do even better. Eventually we plan to earn enough to be able to give up the stage entirely."

"And do what?" Severus asked.

"Ah, who is to say, my boy? The world will be our oyster, so to speak. I might go into politics, perhaps, or land speculation. The possibilities are endless. But those days have yet to arrive. First, we have the rest of our fortunes to earn."

With a wave of his wand, Riddle freshened the drawing-room fire and motioned the tea pot to pour more tea. Severus was not surprised to find that it was still nicely warm.

"We are making a name for ourselves," Riddle continued, "but we need to do even more. Our success depends on more and grander tricks and effects. We can become international stars. But it will require a great deal of magical energy and effort. In short, we need to expand the act. We have been looking for an additional member of our troupe, and when I felt your power in the audience tonight, I thought perhaps we had found our man."

"You want me to stand on stage in a red cape?" Severus asked, incredulous.

Riddle laughed. "Oh, not immediately, of course. You have a great deal to learn. I am proposing an apprenticeship, Mr Snape. We, Minerva and Narcissa and I, will help you complete your magical education, teaching you what you need to know to work with us, and you, in return, will remain in our employ for at least a year, contributing to the act as we deem appropriate. If, at the end of a year, we find our association to be mutually beneficial, we may all elect to continue. If not, we will part ways with no hard feelings."

After a moment, he added, "You will want to think over the proposal, of course, or perhaps you have questions to ask. Shall we meet tomorrow and?"

"No," Severus interrupted. He'd made up his mind. "I accept your offer."

Riddle beamed. "Excellent." He clapped his hands, and to Severus's astonishment, a little being with huge ears and eyes, its tiny body wrapped in what looked like a tea towel, appeared with a pop.

"Master called?" it he? squeaked.

"Champagne, Beckley," Riddle ordered. "We have something to celebrate."

The creature popped away again, and before Severus could even ask who or what Beckley was, he was back, with four shimmering glasses on a tray.

Mrs Riddle floated one glass to each of them, and Mr Riddle raised his in a toast.

"To Severus Snape," he said. "The newest Query. And what a deep one he appears to be."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 7

Severus's apprenticeship begins, and he learns about more than magic. Rating is for later chapters.

Chapter 3

Thus began a series of encounters in which Severus was educated in more ways than one.

He'd felt a surge of something like happiness as he'd handed in his notice to old Mr Haltern and had cleared out his high wooden writing desk at the carting firm. His tedious inky days as a clerk were over.

Instead of spending his time tracking other people's goods and money, he journeyed every morning to the Riddle family's townhouse in a quiet street near Paddington (they were, indeed, doing well for themselves; Westbourne Terrace was respectably middle class).

Mornings were usually spent with Tom Riddle, learning not only wandwork but matters of stage presence and stance. Though Severus at first felt foolish prancing and striding about, he soon came to enjoy the sense of power and control that he felt as he lifted his wand and caused ordinary household objects to do his bidding. Soon he could make his own cape swirl and billow as satisfyingly as Riddle himself.

He also enjoyed helping to create gadgets and gimcracks to amuse the credulous Muggle audiences. He and Riddle began constructing a moving winged horse, gaunt and spectral, made of metal plates charmed together, with glowing red eyes and nostrils through which smoke could pour. Riddle said that it was a replica of an actual magical beast, although he claimed that he wouldn't have been able to make it move quite so realistically as Severus did.

Severus was sceptical. "I find it hard to believe," he said, "that someone as young and self-taught as I could be more skilled at any sort of magic than a man such as yourself. Even I can tell that you're a wizard of uncommon ability."

Riddle had been smiling, and on the surface, his expression didn't seem to alter. But the atmosphere in the room suddenly changed, became chilly, and Severus had to stop himself from visibly shivering. He knew, somehow, that he didn't want to show weakness before this man.

"Nagini!" Riddle barked. Severus assumed the word to be some sort of hex or spell, until he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and saw, with a thrill of horror, that a great snake had emerged from a basket near the fire. As it passed Severus, it paused and lifted its thick, flattened head to stare at him and flick its forked tongue.

"Come, my pet," Riddle almost crooned, and only after the giant snake had slithered up his arm and across his shoulders did he deign to speak to Severus.

"And now, Mr Snape," he said, in a tone that managed to sound both deadly and genial, "you will tell me, if you please, just how it is that you come to assume that I am 'a wizard of uncommon ability.' You will tell me what you know about me, and you will tell me precisely."

Severus resolutely quelled the flutter of unease in his stomach and answered straightforwardly. "What I know about you, Mr Riddle, is what I have learnt since the night you were kind enough to offer me an apprenticeship. Since then, I've daily witnessed your displays of magic; I would have to be very thick indeed not to recognise your gifts."

His inner voice of discretion told him to stop there, but he ignored it; he refused to let himself be intimidated by some jumped-up stage magician, powerful wizard or not. "But," he added, "your question about what else I know does make me wonder, sir, whether there is something else that I *ought* to know."

He braced himself for...he hardly knew what, for some sort of angry response, some further indication of the dark side that he had gradually become certain existed in Tom Riddle. His fingers closed round the wand in his pocket, just in case.

But Riddle surprised him by chuckling and changing the subject. "Ah, that apprenticeship was one of my better ideas, my boy," he said, as lightly as if the previous moment's stand-off had never occurred. "Take this wonderful mechanical contrivance of yours. The Muggles will recognise it as a clever piece of engineering, of course, but they'll be deuced if they can figure out how it works. Yet they'll all deem themselves too smart to consider the true explanation magic. And that, my friend, is the essence of Muggle stupidity. They will always refuse to face the truth, and in that refusal lies our opportunity."

As he spoke, he unwound the snake from his shoulders and held it out like an offering. Severus felt a wave of revulsion but was careful not to show by so much as the quiver of an eyelid that the snake unnerved him.

"This is Nagini," Riddle said, his voice fond. "She has been with me for many years and is quite a member of the family. You should meet her properly, Mr Snape. Come; touch her. She wants to get to know you, do you not, Nagini?" He stroked the large, flat head, and Severus steeled himself to do the same.

The snake felt cool and dry under his fingers, its scaly skin a shimmering green marked with a pattern of black diamonds actually rather attractive at close range. Nagini blinked lazily and rubbed the side of her head against Severus's hand; if it hadn't been a giant snake he was thinking of, he could almost have said that she nuzzled him.

"How do you do, Nagini?" Severus said, feeling silly, but Riddle seemed to expect some sort of response from him. To his shock, the huge snake nodded, for all the world as if she had understood him.

"Ah, she likes you!" Riddle said. "I am sure the two of you will be great friends."

Privately, Severus had his doubts. But then the snake opened its mouth a trifle, and he could have sworn that she grinned.

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The afternoons Severus spent with Mrs Riddle, improving his Charms and Transfiguration skills, or with Narcissa, learning to brew potions.

He found that he both enjoyed and was unsettled by Charms and Transfiguration lessons. They often required him to be very close to Mrs Riddle as she guided his wand arm or corrected his swish-and-flick, and though her behaviour was always quite proper, even prim, he frequently found himself thinking completely inappropriate thoughts about the firm bosom that occasionally pressed against his back, or shivering with pleasure at the touches of her hand against his.

She wasn't arousing him on purpose, of course she wasn't, but he couldn't help noticing just what a fine figure of a woman she was, tall and regal, with lovely curves of waist and breast that he thought could only partly be explained by a well-designed corset. As to what that corset might look like...no. He did not let himself think of it. At least not while Mrs Riddle was still in the room.

And then came the day that she fitted him for his set of stage clothes. They were to be Transfigured, of course, from older clothes, and she stood close to trace the outlines of his body with her wand, letting it imprint his dimensions into her Transfiguration spells. She knelt to measure his inseam, and the sight of her dark head bending so close to his crotch... To his horror, Severus felt an erection grow.

Mrs Riddle paused, and he could tell she'd noticed, even though the thickness of his wool trousers.

"Enjoying the view?" he snapped before he could stop himself; channelling embarrassment into anger was something he'd been doing since childhood.

"Don't flatter yourself," she snapped back, straightening at once and glaring at him. Her eyes sparked with her own anger, and her lifted chin revealed her pale neck, and it was all he could do not to grab rough hold of her and kiss her. That would shock her, the old cat.

But then, as if she felt the heat between them, she stepped away and said mildly, "Such things happen, Mr Snape. Nothing to be ashamed of. If you'll call for Beckley before you leave today, he'll have your new suit waiting. You'll need to return it to him every fortnight so that I can re-charm everything. Yes, Transfigurations are only temporary," she added, seeing his surprise.

Then she smiled. "But don't worry. I won't need to measure you again."

And she was gone before Severus could decide whether her final comment was a relief or a disappointment.

The evening clothes, duly delivered by Beckley, were the equal of those worn by any posh gent in the dress circle; that night, Severus spent an hour standing in front of the cracked mirror above his lodging-house washbasin, practicing swirling charms on his new cape of sapphire silk.

Lessons with Narcissa were less fraught (if also less interesting in certain ways). He found he had a gift for potions, and she was quite skilled at them, too. They could create scents that would cause the Muggle audiences to laugh harder, applaud longer, feel more excited; they could create ways to change their own appearances with just one draught.

It was a heady power, and he enjoyed working with Narcissa. But unlike with Mrs Riddle, he felt no spark of attraction to the languid, icy prettiness of Miss...was her name actually Riddle? He realised that he didn't have any clear idea of her real position in the household. She lived in; Riddle called his "daughter" while on stage, yet his wife Minerva had said she wasn't Narcissa's mother. Perhaps Riddle had had an earlier marriage?

"Who are you, really?" Severus said abruptly to Narcissa one day as they stood over steaming cauldrons. "Are you Riddle's daughter?"

Narcissa laughed, a hearty sound quite unlike her usual silvery trill, so he assumed it represented genuine amusement and not affectation.

"Gracious, no," she said, arching her long neck in that way she had and touching elegant fingers to the complicated arrangement of her fair hair.

"His niece?"

"No. No relation."

Severus waited, but when it became clear that she intended to say no more, he felt a strong flash of irritation. He'd had just about enough of these people and their cryptic coyness. Being mysterious was all well and good in the "act," but if he were going to stay with them, he needed to know what lay behind the façade. He was going to get to the bottom of this bizarre ménage, if he had to brew a truth potion to do it.

"What are you, then?" he demanded roughly of Narcissa. "And what in God's name *are they*?" He let a jerk of his head indicate the Riddles.

Narcissa gazed at him, unruffled; it seemed to be part of her personal "act" never to allow herself to appear agitated. Finally she gave a soft sigh.

"My parents are Muggles," she said. "Titled Muggles. When they found they had a magical daughter, they were...well, let us simply say that they were not pleased. My father's affairs with servant girls were merely life as normal, but a odd magical child who sometimes spontaneously caused strange occurrences *that* was a potential scandal. So they sent me away, to a school for girls. Not a pleasant one. I...did not care for it, and when I was fifteen, I ran away. Tom Riddle found me and brought me to live with him and Minerva. They taught me magic, I discovered I was quite good at it, and now here we are."

Narcissa's delicately-shaded pauses told Severus almost as much as her actual words. That there must be a great deal more to the story was obvious, but he'd learnt enough for now.

"Here we are," he said. "Quite."

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 7*

The Query family takes a little holiday, and Severus's education takes a new direction.

### Chapter 4

Severus would not have thought that his life could change more significantly than it already had, but he would have been wrong.

It was in Torquay that the next change occurred.

For it was in Torquay that he first watched.

"I fancy a holiday," Riddle had said unexpectedly one evening after a performance in Shoreditch. "A few days away from the bustle of town will set us up nicely. We are resting next week, are we not?"

Severus had refrained from snorting at this piece of disingenuousness. They were indeed "resting" which he'd learnt was theatre talk for "not working" and it was Riddle's fault. The man's always-dicey temper had recently got the better of him, and he had hexed an elderly gentleman who had pushed his way backstage to denounce the Querys and their "infernal machine."

It wasn't the first time the magic show had been attacked as the work of the devil, so Severus was unsure why this particular old man had so roused Riddle's fury. But rouse it he did. Riddle had raised his wand to the old man, who dropped to his knees, gasping and clutching his throat, clearly unable to breathe. He'd turned first red, then puce, and had Minerva not intervened, Severus was sure that Riddle would have let the man die.

It had taken quick and clever magic by Minerva and Narcissa to smooth over the incident Confundus charms and even, Severus suspected, the dangerous taboo of Obliviation. But some unease must have remained, for the manager later told them that he was going to have to cancel their booking for the next week.

Minerva had been decidedly displeased, and Severus assumed that Riddle's suggestion of a holiday was an attempt to placate her. But no matter when he realised that the Riddles intended himself and Narcissa to be part of the party, he was glad. He had never had a real holiday before.

Thus they had found themselves in a small villa overlooking the sea in Torquay. The Muggle owners of the home appeared to be away Minerva was very good, Narcissa confided, at locating convenient lodgings that were both luxurious and free.

"It takes quite a bit of initial spellwork," Narcissa explained, "to ensure that no one can see us, but once all the wards are set, we don't need to worry."

Nor did they. It was a thrilling experience, Severus discovered, to walk brazenly amongst scores of Muggles and not be noticed. Shopkeepers didn't even blink when Narcissa helped herself to baubles, and Beckley the house-elf somehow managed to produce delectable meals without any actual cash outlay for food.

Evenings were spent quietly, with books and games and nightcaps of firewhisky. Severus taught Narcissa and Minerva to play backgammon; they taught him a game that turned out to be a magical version of Hazard, with dice that could change form in mid-roll. In their first match, Severus won five knuts from Minerva, who merely smiled and said, "prepare to lose sickles next time, sir."

They seemed to fit well together, the five of them (for Nagini was always part of the group; she liked to rest her head in Severus's lap as he played cards, and he now felt not even the smallest inner twinge). Hitherto, circumstance and temperament had made a loner out of Severus; he was surprised to discover that he didn't object to some congenial company.

And then things changed yet again, two days before the holiday ended.

Most of the day had been spent innocuously enough, with an invisible visit to a warm-water spa in the morning and a leisurely stroll with Minerva along the Strand in the afternoon. Riddle had been away where he had gone, no one said and Narcissa had pleaded a headache. So Severus and Minerva had set out together.

She had held his arm as they'd walked. "You appear to be settling in well, Mr Snape," she remarked. They'd progressed to Christian names in the privacy of the family apartments, but in public, she was always scrupulously formal, even when Disillusioned. "Magic becomes you." She paused, and then added archly, "like a set of well-measured evening clothes."

He wasn't sure how, but he knew the comment was a challenge, a gauntlet thrown. Could he match her in a duel of words?

He rather thought he could.

"Well," he said, "you know what's been said about the magic of well-tailored breeches. I hear that having a perfectly-cut pair can help a man make a match of ten thousand a year."

"No doubt," was all she replied, but he didn't miss the amused quirk of her normally-stern lips or the approving lift of her always-eloquent eyebrow. He'd passed whatever test she'd set him.

They walked on, her body warm against him despite the many layers of clothing that women seemed to require. By the time they returned to the villa, he had been both



unsettled and deeply aroused.

He'd still been thinking of that walk when the household retired for the night. Tom had returned in time for the evening meal, and after it, Severus had treated himself to the luxury of reading in bed.

He'd just extinguished his candles, intending to lie in the dark and take care of the needs engendered by the memory of an afternoon spent with a woman he found increasingly compelling, when he heard a soft moaning that seemed to come from the Riddles' bedroom down the corridor.

He should have minded his own business, of course. Tom and Minerva were a married couple, after all, and conjugal intimacy was to be expected. But instead, he summoned his dressing gown and left his room. Just in case the moans meant that someone was ill.

The corridor was dark; the only light was that which spilled from the Riddles' open door. Without giving himself time to reconsider, Severus moved towards it and peered surreptitiously in.

The sight that met his eyes stiffened his already half-hard cock: Minerva lay on her back in the large bed, her velvet dressing gown untied to reveal a satin corset of narrow blue-and-black stripes. A frilled petticoat had been pushed up towards her waist, and Severus could see the tops of her stockings. They were black, with red garters, and they ended half-way up her thighs.

It was those thighs, smooth and milky and slightly parted, that caught Severus's breath in his throat and sent his hand under his nightshirt to touch his aching cock. At that moment, he would have given his very life for the chance to bury himself to the hilt between those thin, enticing legs.

As he watched, mesmerised, Minerva gasped, and the sound finally forced his gaze away from her thighs to her face.

The view here was equally arresting. Her head was tipped back, her eyes closed, her mouth open. And her hair—Severus understood now why a woman's hair was so often called her "crowning glory." Long black coils streamed across the ruffled pillows and outlined Minerva's pale throat; thick locks curled down over the swell of her still-corseted breasts, making him nearly groan aloud with the desire to see them uncovered.

Other details now became clear as well. Severus did not consider himself straight-laced, but he felt a jolt of shock when he realised that Minerva's wrists were tethered to the bed-posts, one on each side, held there by strong magical hands that seemed to spring from the posts themselves.

There were several disembodied hands, Severus saw now: in addition the ones that pinned Minerva in place, there were others stroking her arms and tracing the line of her exposed collarbone. As Severus watched, a hand dipped inside the corset to expose—finally—first one pale, dark-tipped breast and then the other.

The sight sent Severus's own hand sliding along his cock; he tightened his grip as he watched the magical hands continue their ministrations.

Suddenly, the long fingers of one of the hands transformed themselves into two hinged golden circlets lined with tiny metal teeth and linked by a gold chain. They were fasteners of some sort, Severus realised, and he stared as the chain threaded its way across Minerva's chest, the shining clamps attaching themselves to her nipples.

She groaned and arched her back, opening her legs further. "Tom, please," she whispered.

Riddle was standing next to the bed, fully-clothed, his arms folded across his chest. He smiled his shivery smile, and his response, when it finally came, was in a voice Severus barely recognised—soft but implacable, like sheathed steel.

"Not yet," he said. "You must wait. But do feel free to beg." Then he reached over to tug on the shining gold chain, making Minerva gasp. "Or if you're impatient, call for Nagini. She is more obliging than I."

Nagini? The thought was both deeply shocking and deeply arousing, and Severus was mere seconds away from what he had no doubt was going to be the best orgasm of his life, when he became aware of a presence at his side.

Almost simultaneously, two events occurred that shrivelled his erection faster than had even the freezing-cold hipbaths of Primrose Academy:

Narcissa chuckled in his ear, and Minerva opened her eyes to look directly at him.

## Chapter 5

*Chapter 5 of 7*

Severus's education continues with Narcissa.

### Chapter 5

Without quite knowing how he got there, Severus found himself back in his room, panting with shock, embarrassment, and anger. To his consternation, Narcissa followed him in.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed. "Get out."

"Ooh, Severus," she said, opening her eyes wide like a caricature of a stage ingénue. "Why did you leave? The show was just getting interesting."

"She saw me!" Severus raged. "Damn it all, I was watching, and Minerva saw me!"

"Of course she did. She wanted you to watch, they both did. Why do you think they made so much noise and left their door open? She's a witch, don't forget. If she hadn't wanted you to hear, you wouldn't have."

Severus knew he was gaping, but he couldn't help himself. "They wanted...?"

"You to watch, yes. They like to be watched. And to watch others, when the opportunity presents itself. It comes of being on the stage, I think," she went on, reflectively. "Something about life as a performance."

"Spare me the philosophy of perversion," Severus snapped. "Are you telling me that I will be expected to perform...sexual acts for them?"

"Not unless you want to." Narcissa tilted her head speculatively and then dimpled. "Severus, you're not a virgin, are you?"

He was not, as it happened, though he had no intention of discussing the issue with her. He'd had exactly two sexual experiences involving other people, that is, and not counting the youthful experimentation that had been part of the Primrose Academy fagging system. Neither encounter had been particularly satisfying, although one had been...acceptable.

The first had taken place two years earlier, when his colleague Fellowes had cajoled him into going on an "adventure" to the East End. They'd ended up with two Cockney streetwalkers in an alley off Hanbury Street. Severus had been uncomfortably aware that just a few years before, one of the Ripper's victims had been killed not far from where they stood, but the women had not seemed to mind. Or if they had, they had not said so. And what could they have said, anyway? They had to eat, murders or no murders, and the shock of even those terrible killings had not changed the world sufficiently to offer them a less perilous way to make their livings.

So Severus had had rather pathetic sex against a rough wall damp with the fog that swirled endlessly round them, his nose full of the scent of offal from a nearby butcher's. The position had been an awkward one, and he didn't think he'd even actually penetrated the girl; she'd had him spend himself just by rutting between her thighs.

It wasn't an experience that left him with a very high opinion of sex, though his cock still insisted on jumping to life with maddening frequency. But Fellowes assured him that the Hanbury Street encounter had not been typical and had urged him to another attempt, this time in an actual brothel with a proper bed. The prossie had been young and giggly and kind in her own way, and, in talking later to Fellowes, Severus had allowed that the encounter had not been unpleasant.

But he had never had sex with a woman who might actually want him, an older woman like Minerva, someone sure of her own mind a woman whom he realised that he very much wanted in return.

He'd thrust the word "perversion" at Narcissa, and thought that what the Riddles did in bed probably qualified as such, but he wasn't actually put off by the idea. On the contrary, he found himself quite intrigued indeed.

He came back from his reverie to find Narcissa still looking at him, a faint smile on her smooth face. Part of him wanted to sneer something cutting at her, so that he could recover his tattered dignity. But another part simply wanted to talk to her; he suddenly had more questions than he knew how to ask.

"You seem well-versed in the Riddles' bedroom habits," he said, making sure to include no note of censure in his voice. "Do you...er...lie with him?"

Narcissa smiled and touched her blonde plaits. "'Lie' with him? Aren't you quaint?" she said. "Yes, I 'lie' with him. With her, too. With both of them together, usually. But they don't require it of me, if that's what you're thinking. It's not the melodramatic price I pay for their protection, or anything of that nature. I do it because I want to."

She had sex with *Minerva*?

Severus had known, of course, that people could engage in carnal activities with members of their own sex; he'd seen plenty of examples at Primrose...at least involving males. He supposed he'd known, too, that women could behave similarly. In theory.

Yet never had he given the practicalities a thought; he'd never even considered what women might actually *do* together. Now, however, he found his mind suddenly filled with visions of blonde hair and black, mingled on a single pillow, of two sets of pale limbs, entangled...

With a snarl of annoyance at Narcissa, at himself, at the world, at his bloody damn cock, which was hard again he stalked away (a trifle awkwardly) to stare out the window into the darkness.

"Since you're being free with information about what you want," he growled at Narcissa, "suppose you explain just what it is you want now? Why are you in my room?"

"Do you wish me to leave?" she countered.

"What I wish is to be given some explanations! Why do you really stay with the Riddles? How did you really come to know them? And why did they really leave their magical world?"

Narcissa looked at him consideringly, and he could see her come to a decision.

"Sit down, Severus," she said. "If you want to hear my story, we might as well be comfortable."

There were two armchairs in front of the fire, and they settled into them. Severus refreshed the flames with his wand and watched their light flicker across Narcissa's pale face. She looked fragile in the shadowy glow, but he knew better than to think her weak.

"I told you that I left school at fifteen," she began, "and so I did. As you might imagine, there were not many opportunities available to an untrained girl whose only assets, at least as far as the world was concerned, were her face and figure. I ended up in a brothel, of course but a good one. I had the looks and the education to do well in a high-class establishment, and I developed quite a bit of skill. Madam Rosmerta, who ran the house, thought I might even be able to make a reasonable marriage eventually."

She was neither boasting nor apologising, Severus realised; she was merely presenting the facts of a business, one at which she apparently had been fairly successful.

"Then one night," Narcissa went on, "Tom Riddle was one of the patrons. He recognised my magic, and, well, I think you can guess the rest. He offered to train me and help me find my rightful place in the magical world, and I accepted."

"Yes, but," Severus objected, "you *aren't* in the magical world, are you? And neither are Tom and Minerva. It can't just be for the money; they look to have made a pile by now."

Narcissa leant forward. "Here's where things get complicated. Something happened in the wizarding world, but I don't know what. I still see Madam Rosmerta occasionally she's magical; she's the one who told Tom about me in the first place and she's let slip a few things. There were some disappearances or something, I don't know. Artefacts missing. People apparently cursed into stealing or smuggling things. Tom was suspected. And it seems there was some difficulty at Hogwarts." She looked at Severus a bit uncertainly. "You've heard of Hogwarts?"

He nodded.

"It's where they met," Narcissa explained. "Tom and Minerva. They were students there together. They didn't actually like each other at first, because they were both the smartest members of their houses and were always competing for top honours, but eventually they came to realise that they were simply meant for each other."

She gave a little sigh, and Severus saw that underneath that cool, imperturbable exterior beat the heart of a romantic.

"But they seem..." Severus searched for tactful words and settled on "so very different."

Which was an understatement, to say the least: Minerva reserved, upright, and severe; Riddle flamboyant, mercurial, and no doubt dangerous. He didn't understand what could draw them together...but on the other hand, he had to admit, their attraction to one another was palpable.

Like Minerva, Narcissa possessed expressive eyebrows, and she raised one now. "On the surface, they are different, perhaps. But there are hidden depths to both of them, hidden darknesses. I don't make the mistake of thinking I really know them."

The unspoken warning, of course, was that Severus should not make that mistake, either, not that he had any intention of doing so. But still, he didn't object to learning

more details.

"They are truly married?" he asked.

"You mean, married in the Muggle way?" Narcissa's shrug was eloquent in its unconcern. "I have no idea. But they are magically bonded, I do know that a particularly complicated form of bond. It's why Minerva's family disowned her. She's a pureblood, of excellent lineage, according to Madam Rosmerta, and of course her parents expected her to make a brilliant match. And Tom is just an orphan with no family at all. But once Minerva willingly performed the bonding ceremony with him, any other match was impossible."

"Magically bonded?" The notion sounded horrifying to Severus. "What does that mean?"

"Why, that they cannot be parted."

"They have to stay in the same physical space at all times?"

Narcissa laughed. "Of course not, silly. But they are emotionally connected. After she bonded with Tom, if Minerva's parents had tried to force her to marry someone else, she would have withered and eventually died. And the people who parted her from Tom would also die. As I said, it is a very complicated bond. So Minerva's family was furious, and they refused to have anything further to do with her."

"These bonds," said Severus, still disturbed by the idea. "They can never be severed?"

"Oh, they can. But it's difficult, and both people must genuinely wish to. I do not believe that Tom and Minerva will ever wish to. In everything, she always chooses him. And he always chooses her."

Whether she heard the wistfulness in her tone, Severus could not tell. She loved them, he realised. They'd become her family. Or something.

"Anyway," Narcissa was saying, "after Minerva's parents cast her off, she and Beckley for he is her own house-elf, left her by her grandmother took up residence with Tom, and Tom went to work for Bourgin and Burke, a magical firm. But somehow he lost his position there, and Minerva had to earn their living by teaching at Hogwarts. She had to keep their bonding a secret, because of course the school would not engage a bonded woman as a teacher. Everything worked out for several years, apparently. I think Minerva enjoyed teaching."

"Why did she leave? Because of what happened with Tom?"

"Yes, whatever *that* was about; I'm not certain. As I said, Tom got into some trouble at Hogwarts, and his bond with Minerva was found out, and she was dismissed, and there was more trouble, and well...the wizarding world is no longer safe for the Riddles. They tried to go back several years ago, Madam Rosmerta says, but they had to leave again. I suspect some of it is to do with Tom's beliefs about Muggles."

"What beliefs?" asked Severus, though he thought he already had a good idea. Riddle made no secret of his disdain for Muggles nor of his conviction that it was wizards, not non-magical folk, who should rule the British Empire.

"Oh, he thinks Muggles should all be shipped off somewhere," Narcissa said, shrugging again. "I don't listen too carefully, frankly. Of course Muggles aren't as significant in the grand scheme of things as wizards, but they have their uses. Better just to teach them their place than to try to move them."

"Hmmm." Severus was deliberately non-committal; political machinations held little interest for him. His only real political concern was with the sovereign entity that was Severus Snape. And just now, he needed to know where he fit into this Republic of Riddle.

"How long have you been with the act?" he asked Narcissa.

"Six years. We've toured everywhere in the Empire; you'll enjoy it."

"What about Minerva?" he asked, with what he trusted was the right note of casualness. He preferred to keep himself to himself; no need to telegraph to Narcissa the fact that he found Minerva desirable. "Does she ever take the stage?"

"No. She doesn't consider it seemly for a woman of her age and position. She does the props and costumes; she's expert at Transfiguration, as you know. And she's the one who arranges our bookings. Some of the agencies and managers don't want to deal with her; they'd prefer to negotiate with a man, but she's insistent, and in the end, they all give in."

Severus had no doubt of it.

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He lay awake long after Narcissa had returned to her own room, reliving the entire bizarre evening in his mind. He supposed he should feel more affected by the news that Narcissa had been a whore and Tom Riddle was some sort of criminal, but he found that he couldn't get very exercised about these facts. He couldn't see how either situation would affect him: he could protect himself from Riddle well enough, and the wizarding world was evidently willing to let Tom alone as long as he continued his Muggle exile. As for Narcissa, well...as far as Severus was concerned, her past life was her own.

Of more importance to him at the moment was the question of what if anything he should say to Minerva in the morning. She'd seen him watching her; according to Narcissa, she'd *wanted* him to watch. Why? What was he expected to do? What did she want from him? She must have felt the spark that sometimes ignited between the two of them: was she trying to tantalise him? Make him jealous? Laugh at him?

This last thought forced him out of bed; he knew he'd get no sleep this night. Instead, he paced through the ground floor of the Muggle house, threading his way through the fussy, over-furnished rooms, idly turning over the few books he found there (these ridiculous Muggles apparently read nothing but *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* and *The Gardener's Assistant*). But mostly, he tried not to think about Minerva and Tom Riddle, asleep together now (or so he assumed) just a few feet above his head.

In the end, he decided to say nothing. If Minerva had wanted him to see her in bed...well, he had seen her. The next move was up to her.

## Chapter 6

In both his professional and personal lives, Severus is about to move from rehearsal to performance.

## Chapter 6

He didn't have to wait long for her to make it.

During the remainder of their stay in Torquay, Minerva behaved as if the scene in her bedroom had never occurred, and after they returned to the city, the whole episode began to seem unreal to Severus, so unlikely that he began to wonder if he had merely dreamt it.

Then came a week's engagement in Holborn the week that Severus was first to appear on stage as part of the act. His magical training had progressed rapidly, and Tom Riddle had pronounced him ready to try a trick or two in front of an audience. Their work on the magic-driven mechanical horse was not yet complete, but Riddle's interim idea was for a tiered basin festooned with the sort of dummy wires and gauges that fooled the Muggles into thinking they were looking at advanced science.

Out of this basin Tom and Severus together would conjure any number of startling effects with very little magical effort *taguamenti* spells to create jets of water that would spray towards the audience and disappear before anyone actually got wet; rabbles of brightly-hued butterflies that would flitter out into the crowd, only to be transformed by the flick of a wand into soap bubbles. And then the grand finale: dozens of hopping mechanical frogs to that would perch all over the stage and footlights to croak out a chorus of "God Save the Queen."

Minerva had pursed her lips at this last touch. "Is there some sort of competition that I don't know about?" she asked. "A contest to see who can mount the most tawdry spectacle in all the music halls? Well, congratulations, Mr Riddle. I believe you and Mr Snape are the winners."

Tom gave a bark of laughter. "When it comes to Muggles, my dear, there's no such thing as too vulgar." Then he'd cocked a suggestively-leering eyebrow at her. "As to mounting..."

Minerva had rapped his arm smartly with her fan, and Severus had felt himself becoming unaccountably warm.

But at last the fountain was ready for a formal rehearsal, and all the Querys had taken it (suitably shrunken for convenient transport) to the theatre one morning.

Their footsteps echoed loudly as they reached the stage, for without orchestra, patrons, and barmaids, the place was decidedly cavernous. Severus stood looking out at the empty house. The gilt-trimmed box seats, the long tables, the red-velvet curtains: all looked very different in the pale daylight that filtered down through the now-uncovered skylights.

It felt odd to be the only ones about, but as he and Tom and Narcissa blocked out their movements for the performance, Severus began to feel a stirring of excitement. He imagined the theatre as it would be in the evening, full of customers who had come as much for the drink and the outing as for the actual entertainment.

Yet, one by one, they would become transfixed by the "Querys" and their "magnificent magical modern machines" (as the programme had it), and they would fall silent, watching in awe.

And then, with gasps, screams, applause, and cheers, they would pay tribute to the power of real magic.

He thought he was beginning to understand the lure of the limelight.

His exalted mood persisted as he made his way backstage after his rehearsal, leaving Tom and Narcissa to work on a Levitation act they were planning. Down in the dressing room he found Minerva meticulously checking each of their costumes to see which might require additional transformation.

She wore a high-necked dress of dark-green wool and looked, Severus thought, exceptionally handsome.

"Severus," she said, glancing up and smiling. "You are finished?"

"Not unless you have decided I'm not fit to continue as part of the act," he said, deliberately misunderstanding.

She snorted. "Persist in your cheekiness, and I might decide exactly that."

Then she eyed him thoughtfully. "Do you know," she said. "I'm thinking that it's time you moved in with us at Westbourne Terrace. It's wasteful for you to continue to take lodgings when we have sufficient room. Would the change suit you? Shall I send Beckley to your boarding house to collect your things?"

Severus considered. It would mean a loss of independence, but it would save money. And it would put him closer to magic and...other things.

"All right," he said.

Minerva nodded and held his eyes just a fraction too long before turning back to her wand.

He was suddenly acutely aware of her, of how close they stood, the cramped, dingy dressing room allowing them virtually no walk space between the chintz-skirted dressing counter and the narrow horsehair sofa heaped with costumes and props. The gaslight flickered wildly for some reason, stability charms on the flames never lasted at cellar-level casting softening shadows on her pale skin and highlighting the thin bands of silver that streaked her dark hair.

"I saw you," he blurted to her back.

She didn't look at him, or even pause her precise wand movements, but he could see her shoulders tighten under the green wool.

"Did you, now?" she asked, amusement or something thick in her voice. "And tell me, Severus Snape, did you like what you saw?"

She turned round then and traced the line of his jaw with the tip of her wand. "Perhaps more to the point, would you like to see more?"

"I " Severus's cock gave a jump, and he could feel his face flush; he hoped the room was dim enough to conceal it. "What do you mean?" he asked, immediately cursing himself as seven kinds of a fool. What an idiotic thing to say.

But the tart retort he expected from her didn't occur; instead, she put her wand down and stepped closer to him, until her breasts brushed his waistcoat and her fingers twisted into the stock at his throat.

"I mean this," she said, and pulled his head down to kiss him.

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Her dress was gone, though whether it had been Banished or removed by Muggle means, Severus couldn't have said. All he could think about was the image that filled his sight now: Minerva in her corset, the whalebone and lacing curving her waist and pushing her breasts nearly over the top of the bodice. Their creamy swell was almost too much to bear, and he reached for her, intending to pull her free; he thought that if he didn't have her breasts in his hands in the next minute, he would expire.

But she forestalled him, catching his fingers and bringing them to the front of the corset. "Take it off properly," she ordered. "I won't have you pawing me like a common

gutter boy."

She waited until he began to fumble with the ties before she added, "Not this time, at any rate."

The possibility of a gutter-y next time nearly floored him, and it took every ounce of concentration to focus on undoing the corset. The fastenings were a jungle of hooks, eyes, ribbons, tapes, and strings; Severus had never felt so clumsy or so near shrieking in frustration.

Just when he thought he couldn't get any more painfully aroused, he felt Minerva's hands on the buttons of his trousers, opening first one, then the second, then moving to his drawers. Unlike his, her movements were deft and quick, and soon she had allowed his rock-hard cock to spring free.

Though for a moment the exquisite pleasure of that release was breathtaking, the next moment brought almost unbearable anxiety, for he knew that if she actually touched him, he'd be lost, spurting over the front of her petticoat like an over-eager schoolboy.

"Don't " he began.

She didn't.

What she *did* was to enchant one of the pale blue satin ribbons that threaded through the eyelet lace at the top of her corset. Severus didn't notice the ribbon until it had almost worked its way out, its long, free end curling in the air next to him. Then, as soon as it was completely loose, it darted away.

He would have been confused, except that the next moment, he understood: his trousers and drawers disappeared, and he could feel the ribbon snaking its way around his testicles and the base of his cock, tightening until it was almost, but not quite, painful.

The urge to come *now* receded, leaving him still highly excited, but no longer in imminent danger of spilling. He groaned in pleasure and relief.

"There," Minerva whispered, her lips close to his. "I hope you weren't in a hurry."

Severus pulled her to him with a kiss and slipped his free hand inside the corset. The hell with taking it off "properly"; she was going to get her "gutter boy" at once.

"Don't let me interrupt."

The voice came from the doorway.

Tom Riddle.

## Chapter 7

*Chapter 7 of 7*

His arrangement with the Querys brings Severus more than he ever bargained for.

### Chapter 7

The shock hit Severus like a blow, and had it not been for the enchanted corset ribbon, he would have lost his erection at once. As it was, he tried to push away from Minerva. Where was his damned wand? He probably had no chance against an enraged Riddle anyway, but without his wand, he definitely couldn't...

A hand clamped on his shoulder...but only to squeeze it.

"I'm in earnest, my boy; don't let me interrupt." Riddle sounded actually genial, and Severus had to resist the temptation to gape at him like one of those giant goldfish he'd once seen at a Japanese garden (the one excursion he'd taken during his years at Primrose). Despite what Narcissa had told him about both the Riddles liking to watch and be watched, Severus couldn't truly imagine that any man let alone one with a temper like Tom Riddle's would want to stand by while his half-naked wife was enjoyed by another man.

But it soon became apparent that Riddle had no intention of merely standing by. With a light hand on her chin, he turned Minerva's head towards him and kissed her deeply; a wave of the wand in his other hand sent her hair falling loose around her shoulders.

Severus felt paralyzed, half his instincts telling him to flee, the other half urging him to melt further into Minerva's touch, to continue to knead the breast he now realised he had completely freed from the confines of the corset.

Finally his body took over, and when he felt Minerva's hand begin to stroke his shaft lightly, he gave up any attempt to make sense of the situation. He just leant back and let himself feel.

Tom Riddle, meanwhile, had moved to stand behind Minerva, twisting one hand in her hair to pull her head back towards him so that he could kiss her again; the other hand he used to fondle the breast not already taken by Severus.

The sight of Minerva's arched neck and two different men's hands on her breasts it was almost enough to tip Severus over the edge, ribbon round his cock or no. But Riddle didn't remain long in his position; he stepped away quickly and found his wand again, flicking it to send the piled costumes floating off the sofa and...away somewhere, Severus wasn't really interested in where.

With another wave of his wand, Riddle lifted Minerva off her feet and away from Severus, who felt keenly the loss of her warmth and touch. It was all he could do not to take his cock in hand himself, but he knew it would be a mistake to finish now. Whatever the others' plans for him, he didn't want to miss them.

He soon learnt their intentions. Riddle lowered Minerva to the sofa so that she was on her hands and knees, a sight that set Severus's cock to throbbing anew. Her breasts tumbled forward, as did her hair, and her face wore such an expression of desire at least partly for him that Severus found it hard to breathe.

A few more wand flicks, and the sofa adjusted itself so that it was at exactly the right length for Riddle to stand directly behind Minerva and push her petticoats up over her waist, no doubt baring her to him; Severus felt a pang at being denied the sight.

But then he realised that the sofa was also now at just the right height for him: Minerva's face was almost level with his own cock. Could it be...? Was she going to...?

The sound of the dressing room door opening distracted Severus, sending another flare of shock to his gut.

It was Narcissa, and when she took in the tableau before her, she smiled her Sphinx-like smile and spelled silencing and locking charms onto the door.

"Do join us, Narcissa," said Tom, and with a pat of her fingers to her crown of blonde plaits, she dipped her head in gracious acquiescence, moving behind Riddle to whisper in his ear.

Severus closed his eyes as Minerva's fingers found his body again, this time moving behind him to feather against his buttocks. Another groan escaped him.

He'd never expected...he should feel ashamed, standing bare-arsed in front of three people whom he'd known only a scant few months., but somehow, he did not. He'd also never expected that it could feel so good to have one's backside stroked, and...oh, god! Was she touching him *there*...?

She was. Light fingers found an orifice that he'd never considered anyone might want to...ahhhhhh.

In his surprise at how good it felt to be penetrated by Minerva's gentle digit, Severus opened his eyes once more, only to be faced with yet another astonishing vision: Narcissa, standing behind Riddle in only her petticoats and corset, fingering one exposed breast, its aureole such a pale pink that it was nearly invisible. Around her thighs there appeared to be a harness of some kind, and from it protruded...for god's sake, it seemed to be a man's cock.

Reason asserted itself before Severus could say anything stupid. A prosthetic penis; he'd heard of such things. The sight of it standing at attention from Narcissa's skirts was as arousing as anything Severus had seen on this most astounding of mornings, and he closed his eyes once more, resolving to be surprised by nothing else that might happen.

Here was blonde, elegant Narcissa about to penetrate the arse of probably the most dangerous man Severus had ever known, a man who was himself about to penetrate the body of the first woman Severus had ever really wanted, and that woman was evidently about to take Severus's cock into her mouth...oh, god, just the thought of it...

Yet there was still one more shock to come. Suddenly, around his naked calf (Severus realised with detached amusement that he was still wearing his shoes and hose), he felt a cool, dry slither.

Nagini. The great snake's presence in the room was no surprise, of course; she was never far away from Riddle. Severus was about to move aside for he assumed he must be blocking her path when he realised that the snake was moving up his leg very purposefully, the end of her tail flicking against his inner thigh just as if she understood about giving pleasure...

The snake rose higher...higher...

The others, Severus saw with a start, had paused and were watching him, their expressions various. Narcissa amused, Riddle devilish, Minerva with one eyebrow raised in what he was sure was a challenge.

When Nagini's tail nudged Severus's opening, he nearly gasped, but managed to keep himself silent. *There, Minerva*, he thought, reaching out to let his fingers brush her face, *top that for control*.

The snake's tail, in the meantime, continued to flutter back and forth against Severus's arse, and now Minerva again touched his cock, and the sensations were altogether almost more pleasurable than he could stand.

"Severus?" Minerva asked at last, and he groaned "yes" without quite knowing what he was agreeing to; all he knew was that he didn't want to stop these feelings.

Then several things happened at once. Tom Riddle spoke a few words a spell of some sort and Severus suddenly felt a soothing, warm lubrication in his arse. Almost immediately, he felt Nagini's tail penetrate him, very slowly, and there was a brief burst of pain before the pleasure began again. He could see Narcissa push herself forward, too, and Tom bent over slightly, grunting in satisfaction before wrapping Minerva's hair around his hand once more and tipping her head up.

"Take him, my dear," he said, and Severus finally found his cock sheathed in her warm mouth, felt her fingers slip the corset ribbon off his balls, setting off a rush of sensation that had him shouting aloud despite himself. Her head was in his hands, he was thrusting hard...

And then Minerva was being taken, too. He could tell the exact moment that her husband entered her; her back arched and she sucked Severus in sharply and it felt wonderful, pleasure from more places than he'd ever imagined, spreading and joining until his entire body was burning with it, he had one hand in Minerva's hair and the other on her breast again and his cock was thrusting into her at the same time that he was being thrust into, and...oh god oh god oh god

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If he'd thought about it in advance, Severus might have expected the aftermath of such an experience to be awkward or humiliating. But instead, when all was finally finished, the others had simply stood up matter-of-factly, putting their clothing to rights as Minerva briskly cast a cleaning charm over all of them.

The spell prickled comfortingly over Severus's skin, and he saw that this was life as usual for his companions. It was their "normal," and if he wanted it to be, it could be his as well. They had accepted him; he had only to choose to accept them.

He looked at Narcissa, patting her plaits as she checked herself in the dressing table mirror. She caught his eye and stared back, her face impassive. Then she dimpled at him and winked.

He looked at Tom Riddle, who was adjusting his cravat, his dark, mobile face at once handsome, mysterious, and compelling, his magic so powerful that Severus could almost see it shimmering around him. A disturbing man, Tom. A dangerous man. And yet perhaps most of all, a highly intriguing man.

Severus looked at Minerva, her black hair now firmly in its bun, her spectacles resting on her nose, every inch the respectable older woman of position and means. She was pinning on a fashionable hat that she'd Transfigured from a pair of gloves; she was going out to meet a theatrical booking agent. The squeeze she gave Severus's arm as she left was a light one, but the press of her fingers stayed in his mind.

He looked at Nagini, curled in her basket near the blazing grate, the management's typically meagre fire enhanced by Minerva's warming spell.

He looked at the tiny dressing room, crowded with the pieces of their lives, and made up his mind.

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Severus Snape, impeccable in a gold-buttoned waistcoat and pristine white shirt, his stock tied just so, a sapphire-satin cape tossed over his shoulder, stood waiting in the wings of the Holborn Grand Music Hall. To his left, girls from the dance troupe were giggling, their short skirts rustling. To his right stood Tom Riddle, dark and imposing, his linen dazzling, his coat superbly cut. From the stage came the sturdy singing voice of the ever-popular Marie Lloyd, the audience joining with raucous delight in the chorus of her *double-entendre*-laden hit song "She Sits Among the Cabbages and Peas."

Beside him, Tom chuckled. "And Minerva frets about *our* tawdry spectacles," he said.

Miss Lloyd finished her set to tumultuous applause, and Mr Norton, the master of ceremonies, bustled onto the stage.

"Ladies and gentleman!" he cried. "Men and women of the world! I know I don't have to tell you that the universe is a dark and mysterious place. But we live in a time of

modern miracles, my friends...the dawn of a new and exciting age! And here to show you some of its marvels, the act you've been waiting for, the answer to all your deepest questions, the one! the only! The Query Family!"

In a swirl of red satin, Tom Riddle swept out onto the stage; with a swirl of blue, Severus followed. Together, they pointed their wands at their magical fountain and brought it to smoking, flashing life.

The audience cheered, and Severus bowed.

He was on his way; it had begun.

The dawn of his new age.

~~The End

**Author's Notes** My thanks to you readers who have left me so many encouraging reviews and my apologies if this ending seems too wide-open or anti-climactic. In your reviews, you had far better plot ideas than I did!

I had such fun writing this story, which was originally for the "Kinky Kristmas" fest at the Daily Deviant comm (hence the high level of you guessed it kink). As I wrote, I was inspired (at different stages and in different ways) by the following fan art:

[Art Nouveau Snape](#) by hever

[Narcissa](#) by dvervzimu

[Madam Malfoy](#) by HerentasMeridiae

[HP Narcissa](#) (with Nagini) by srebrnylis

[Tom Riddle](#) by Einheitstochter

[Tom Riddle](#) (with Nagini) by iago-rotten

[Minerva McGonagall](#) by Dorus the Walrus