

# Wicked Fun

*by LivingTheDream*

Severus finds himself increasingly distracted by a pleasant red head.

## One

*Chapter 1 of 4*

Severus finds himself increasingly distracted by a pleasant red head.

"Irresponsible, irritating, arrogant, self-centered, Muggle-loving child!" Molly Weasley was stomping through Diagon Alley with a vengeance. She was also thinking out loud without realizing it and subsequently not watching where she was walking.

"My dear Mrs. Weasley, I hardly think it fitting behavior for the wife of the Assistant Minister of Magic to be physically assaulting poor professors and calling them names. I've done nothing to you. Lately. That I know of."

Molly looked down, distressed, to see the Hogwarts' Potions master sprawled out on the sidewalk in front of her.

"Professor Snape! I'm so sorry! Here, let me help you up. I was distracted..."

"Obviously."

Molly blushed furiously and helped the acerbic Potions master to his feet. No one was sure what had happened after he fell in the Shrieking Shack. Think he was dead, Harry worked to clear his name with the memories Snape had given him and testimony from Albus' portrait. When his name had been cleared and his Order of Merlin announced, he'd thrown everyone for a loop by showing up at the ceremony to accept it, assisted by Lucius Malfoy of all people. Thinner, paler, if either was possible, no one doubted it was Snape. In the five years since that day, he'd not changed much. He'd returned to Hogwarts to teach Potions, still surly, angry, and dour. Winning the Order of Merlin, First Class, had not softened his demeanor, nor had he changed his teaching style now that he was a "war hero". The only difference between his classes now and those of old was that he no longer coddled his Slytherins.

He dusted himself off.

"Are you quite all right? What, pray tell, has you so in a dither that you cannot walk without causing disaster?"

Molly gave him a suspicious glance, trying to determine if he really cared about her answer or was just looking for an opening to verbally flay her.

Snape sighed a deep, long-suffering sigh: the sigh of the eternally mistrusted.

"Yes, I really want to know. It's not like you to be so careless when you're out in public. Come, let me buy you a drink, you look like you need one."

"Professor Snape, that's really not necessary, I'm sure you have many things to do "

"Mrs. Weasley, I seldom have the opportunity or the inclination to buy someone a drink. I suggest you take advantage of this rare moment. If nothing else, from one Order member to another, I owe you a drink for finally silencing the horror that was Bellatrix Lestrange."

Molly nodded her consent and followed Snape to the edge of Diagon Alley. For a moment, she was afraid he was leading her into Knockturn Alley what would people think if the wife of a prominent Ministry official was seen in Knockturn Alley? but he stopped just before leaving Diagon Alley and led her into a pub called *The Greengrass*.

"Two firewhiskeys please, Derek," he called.

"Certainly, Severus. And I have your monthly order ready as well." Molly was surprised. Very few people called Snape by his first name he must be quite a regular.

"Thank you, Derek. I'll pick it up on my way out."

Derek gave them their requested drinks, and they made their way to a table in the back. Snape pulled Molly's chair out for her and then sat down after she was seated.

Snape gazed at Molly for a moment, then raised his glass and said, "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley, for killing Bellatrix Lestrange. Honestly, that woman was a complete nightmare. She was always trying to touch me; made my skin crawl, especially knowing that she would have preferred to have been intimate with the Dark Lord." He shuddered in memory.

Molly blushed again.

"Thank you, Professor Snape. I've never been much for killing, but that was as close to a pleasure as I believe I've ever come while carrying out that act. She threatened my Ginny. She was a right piece of work, that one."

Snape almost smiled. "Indeed. So, Mrs. Weasley, what's got the wife of a high government official so preoccupied that she's stomping around Diagon Alley, alone, and plowing into Potions masters? Don't you have house-elves or general lackeys who can run your errands for you?"

Molly sipped on her drink for a moment and considered her words.

"Just remember, you did ask," she said in warning.

Snape motioned with his hand, palm up, encouraging her to speak her mind.

"I'm just about to pull my hair out with Arthur. I know it's not becoming of me to speak ill of my husband to another man, but high ranking muckety muck or no, this is the last straw." With that, the flood gates opened, and she proceeded to tell Snape what living with the Muggle-loving Arthur Weasley for the last forty years was like. They'd never had much money until recently, but money had never been a problem. They'd loved each other and that had been enough. Arthur was a slob, though, and this drove Molly crazy. He left stuff everywhere: Laundry, shoes, Muggle artifacts, parchment.

She could have probably dealt with the lack of funds and his disorganized nature. When one added Arthur's tunnel-vision obsessive love of all-things-Muggle, however... Molly was at her wits end. In addition to his obsession having kept him stagnant at the Ministry for so many years before Voldemort's demise (and thus contributing to the cash problem), it also made their daily life chaotic. It wasn't about being pureblood or that Muggle things were beneath them. It was that Arthur often tinkered with things he didn't know anything about, and then made a huge mess. And then he disappeared, leaving her to clean it up. He claimed to be hopeless with domestic charms, but honestly, Molly had never even seen him attempt one. The latest incident had involved him attempting to clean the chimney, Muggle-style, and accidentally demolishing it. The last bit of their Floo powder had been scattered about the property when the chimney fell. Arthur had then claimed an emergency at the Ministry and Apparated away, leaving Molly to repair the chimney and go to Diagon Alley to get more Floo powder. As for house-elves, or lackeys, when the mess involved Arthur's dalliances into Muggle-things, Molly preferred to take care of the cleanup herself.

Snape, strangely, seemed to be listening to and contemplating every word. He motioned to Derek for another round. He'd always suspected Arthur was a slob.

"Mrs. Weasley, not to be disrespectful, but you've been married for almost forty years. Surely you'd noticed these things before now? I mean, we all did..."

"Well, at first I thought the Muggle thing was endearing. It was cute. And then we had children. When you've got seven children, and two of them are Fred and George, you don't really have much time to assess things. And then, there was the second war... and grandchildren... I guess it's been just recently that I looked at my life and realized that I was married to the Assistant Minister of Magic, and he drives me absolutely nuts!"

"Far be it from me to judge relationships, madam, and I have no idea if you want to hear my opinion..." he trailed off, unsure if he should proceed.

Molly reflected on everything she knew about Severus Snape and then said softly, "Professor Snape, in all the years I've known you, I have always found your opinion extremely valuable. You're not one to tread lightly, which means you'll speak the truth, even if it's not what people want to hear. So, yes, I would like to hear your opinion on the muddled bedlam I just rambled on about."

"Hmmm...well. It seems to me that you are an amazingly resilient witch, who has put up with far more than anyone should have asked. You have survived two wars, raised seven strong-minded and hearty children. You've put up with a husband whom most women would have sacked years ago. That only Fred was lost in the last war was against all odds and a testament to your skills at raising your children. You gave them hope, and optimism, and warmth and love. Do you have *any* idea what that's worth? Do they? Really?" Snape's voice had dropped to a hiss.

"And then, with all this happy, fluffy love everywhere, in the middle of it all, you

killed Bellatrix Lestrange, an extremely powerful psychopathic bitch. You really are quite an amazing witch, Molly Weasley. Even if you can't see it. Even if they can't see it."

Molly was taken aback by Snape's words. It was as if he was offended on her behalf. She'd never known he gave her any thought at all; much less that he actually had what seemed to be a rather strong opinion of her.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley. It seems I've overstepped my bounds. I'm not sure what came over me." The reserved, stiff Potions master was back.

"Not at all, Professor Snape. I dumped on you and asked you for your opinion. What you've said has given me quite a lot to think about; I'd just never imagined that you'd even thought about any of it."

Snape was obviously uncomfortable, as if he couldn't find the right words.

"Hmmm... I don't know that I ever had. It's just that when you laid it all out, it suddenly seemed so obvious. And so... unfair to you."

Molly regarded Snape for several long moments. His reaction seemed genuine. There wasn't a trace of cunning or mockery in his face; he truly seemed to care about her state. As she sat there, wondering what on earth had caused her to spill her heart out to Severus Snape of all people, she had a moment of clarity: because he was the first person, in too many decades to count, who had actually asked her if she was all right... and had listened to the answer. While she did not doubt the love of her large brood, she found that they generally assumed how she was feeling about any given subject. They assumed she was happy, they assumed she'd at least somewhat recovered from Fred's death (as if that would ever happen); they assumed she loved Arthur as much today as she had when they'd married. They took her opinions lightly, blew off her warnings as laughable "Molly-overprotection mode", and used her as a weapon with their children: "If you don't do as I say, I'll go get Granger Molly and you'll be sorry you defied me." She suddenly felt a surge of resentment toward her dismissive litter. She felt taken for granted. And if anyone knew what that feeling was like, it was Severus Snape. It was such a simple act of consideration - to actually listen to her while she spoke - and offer commiseration. She felt it was a sad state of her affairs that Severus Snape was the first person in recent memory to do that. It felt good just to have someone listen and understand. She was unexpectedly filled with warmth and affection for the man.

Snape felt the shift in Molly's demeanor and was somewhat taken aback. She had an odd look, one that he was wholly unfamiliar with as it related to him. He thought it might be gratitude and affection, but he wasn't sure. She flashed him a shy smile. Something long dormant in the back of Snape's brain stirred.

"Professor Snape, I've been rambling, far beyond the bounds of polite conversation. Thank you for listening to me blather on like the old house-wife that I am. I'm sorry I knocked you down in the street. It's I who should be buying you drinks, not the other way around."

Snape flashed his own rare, smile and said, "Well, perhaps you can return the favor next time. I may need to ramble on about evil first-year Gryffindor essays or Hogsmeade duty with Sybil Trelawney."

Molly's eyes widened as she realized that Snape had smiled at her. He'd smiled, a true, genuine smile, not the evil smirk that he offered when someone else was suffering. In all the years she had worked with him in the Order, she'd never seen it. She wanted to make it happen again, his whole visage changed when he did that. She would have to think about the implications of that later...

"There will be a next time? Will I have to knock you down again?" she asked with a laugh.

"Only if you want to," he replied easily. Wait. Where had that come from? His mouth had somehow become detached from his brain... Was he flirting? With Molly Weasley?

"But it might be less traumatic if you just met me here," he continued, "I don't have class on Thursday afternoons, so I usually fetch any supplies I can't get from Hogsmeade then. So... same time next week?"

"That sounds like a plan," Molly replied with a smile.

Snape went to the bar and retrieved a case of Ogden's from Derek. Molly frowned for a brief moment and then allowed him to escort her out of the pub.

A/N: Thanks as always to my betas, Ladyinthecloak and Semptra, without whom I would be an ellipse and comma mess.

## Two

### *Chapter 2 of 4*

Severus finds himself increasingly distracted by a pleasant redhead.

Snape finished his shopping and made his way back to Hogwarts in time for dinner in the Great Hall, dropping his packages off in his office. Not that he was hungry – he was never hungry - but as Deputy Headmaster and Head of Slytherin, he was supposed to be at dinner, and Minerva got cranky with him when he missed it. He definitely wanted to avoid her ire at this juncture. He really wanted nothing more than to retreat to his rooms, curl up with a new bottle of Ogden's, and try to sort out his afternoon. He was sure the Ogden's would help. In fact, he was certain the Ogden's was essential. He pushed his mushy peas around on his plate and tried to avoid Minerva's notice. Too late.

"SEVERUS!"

He dropped his fork, startled, and looked at Minerva.

*You're going soft, old man*

Out loud, he said, "Yes, Minerva?"

"I was asking you if you were all right. You seem out of sorts," she said, exasperated.

"How can you tell?" Harry Potter, the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, muttered under his breath.

*Typical.*

"I heard that, Potter," he growled. "I'm fine, Minerva, thank you for asking. I'm just trying to work out a particularly difficult potion I've been working on."

"Well, be that as it may, eat."

"As you wish." Severus sighed and began to shovel food into his mouth. He really had no interest in mushy peas right now, but the sooner he cleared his plate, the sooner he could escape to his quarters.

"Honestly, Snape, you'd think we hadn't won the war. Somehow you mysteriously survived, and no one's trying to kill you. Well, not very many people, at any rate, and only one or two here in the castle... so you should be living it up! Get a girl. Or at least get a hobby, preferably one that doesn't involve getting a group tattoo and setting fire to Muggles," Harry grumbled.

"Harry!"

Minerva's scolding tone was too little, too late.

Snape threw his fork down with a clatter, glared at Harry, and stormed out of the Great Hall.

"Sorry, Minerva. But someone had to say it to him, and he hates me anyway. He's driving us all insane." Harry had the decency to look properly ashamed, but everyone else at the table shot him a look of gratitude. He'd said what everyone had been thinking.

"I don't care. You will go apologize to him. Tonight. Or Gryffindor's practice slot on the Quidditch pitch will be suddenly taken up by Hufflepuffs on Thursday afternoon."

"You wouldn't!" Harry's eyes were wide.

"I most certainly would. It's bad enough to call out a fellow professor, but you did it at dinner in front of the students. Now go." Minerva was definitely not one to be trifled with, Harry decided. Especially when there was Quidditch at stake.

"Yes, Minerva, of course, I'll go apologize. You're absolutely right, what I did was uncalled for. Before I go, may I check in on Ginny and James? To let them know where I'll be and to tell them to start looking for me if I don't return... you know... if he starts throwing things... or hexing me..."

Harry really was pathetic at grovelling.

“Yes, fine, go check on your wife and child. But Merlin help you if I find out you haven’t apologized properly.”

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Storming back to his quarters with appropriate dramatics and deduction of points, anyone who’d been watching would have thought he was in a fine snit. The truth of the matter, though, was that he was just glad to get out of the Great Hall and get back to his rooms.

Severus Snape had lived in the castle for most of the last thirty-four years. When he wasn’t living in the castle, he had lived with his parents during the summers when he was a student, or alone in the house on Spinner’s End when he was an adult, or with the other Death Eaters wherever they were holed up. None of this lent itself to the idea that meal time was an enjoyable social event. For Snape, whose mind was always running at full speed, the need to eat was a nuisance. As he’d never really been exposed to anything other than mediocre house-elf fair, his mother’s timidly prepared meals, or the abysmal food while in hiding as a Death Eater, he found the idea of eating for the sake of enjoying a fine meal, enjoying the company of his mates, or eating with abandon, completely foreign. And when one considered the combination of the pedestrian house-elf prepared meals, Snape’s generally anti-social nature, and the fact that the head table now included Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Neville Longbottom, it was a miracle he ever showed up to meals at all, and in truth he only did so because Minerva required it. Forcefully. And with a wand. So while being insulted by Potter at the head table was grating to be sure, his insults were also quite useful in getting Snape out of dinner. He’d fulfilled his requirement to Minerva; he’d shown up. It wasn’t his fault that Potter couldn’t keep his mouth shut and insulted him venomously at every opportunity. And of course, now Minerva was bound to send Potter down here to apologize for what he’d said at dinner.

*Wonderful. Another disingenuous apology from Potter.*

Snape paused for a moment to wonder why it was that Potter had taken to insulting him lately; it had been escalating: growing more public and pointedly personal. It hadn’t always been like this. They’d never been friendly, so to speak, but this was a new development. He mentally shrugged and decided it wasn’t worth worrying about.

*I deserve it.*

He thought about the problem vexing him, the question of why he’d chosen to be nice to Molly Weasley this afternoon. Maybe he could experiment and try to be nice to Potter. If it felt the same way as being nice to Molly, he’d know he’d lost his mind and check himself into St. Mungo’s. If it didn’t, he’d know something else and could calmly while away the evening drinking himself into a stupor. If nothing else, it would make Potter uncomfortable, and that was always worth something.

A/N: Thanks as always to my betas, sunny33, Ladyinthecloak and Semptra, without whom I would be an ellipse and comma mess.

## Three

### *Chapter 3 of 4*

Severus finds himself increasingly distracted by a pleasant red head.

Harry hurried to Gryffindor tower, where his wife and son awaited him. Ginny had stopped playing Quidditch for the Holyhead Harpies two years ago when she’d become pregnant with James, and now served as the Quidditch coach and flying instructor at Hogwarts. Arrangements had been made for a house-elf to care for James when Ginny was in class. As Head of Gryffindor, Harry had the same dinner attendance as Snape, but Ginny preferred to feed James in their quarters. The eighteen month old was too much of a handful for the Great Hall.

“Hey Gin,” Harry called softly as he entered their quarters.

“Hey, Harry. James and I were just playing with his broomstick.”

“He’s going to be a phenomenal flyer, especially since he’s starting so early,” Harry laughed, and continued, “I just wanted to check on you and make sure you don’t need a break. I said something offensive, albeit true, to Snape at dinner tonight and he stormed off in a huff. Minerva’s making me apologize to him. I’m on my way there now, but if I’m not back in an hour, avenge my death.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately. Why can’t you leave him alone?”

“I only said what everyone else was thinking. It’s been five years, and he still acts like he did when we were fighting Voldemort and he was in the middle of it. When he survived Nagini and became a hero, I thought it was what he always wanted, and he’d lighten up, maybe relax, but he hasn’t, not even just a little. All this time I thought he had an excuse, there was a reason he was so miserable, but when that excuse went away, the truth of the matter is he just enjoys being miserable and making everyone around him miserable.”

Ginny looked at him thoughtfully.

“Harry,” she began gently, “have you ever considered that he did have an excuse, but he’s had it for so long he doesn’t know anything else?”

Harry considered this possibility. He hadn’t really thought about what it must mean to be Snape. In spite of everything that he’d found out from Snape’s memories, whenever he thought of Snape, the word “git” inevitably came to his mind and any deep consideration was forgotten. He thought of his own aversion to asking questions, ingrained into him as a child by the Dursleys when food was withheld for the simple act of asking about his parents. What must it have been like for Snape, who’d been tormented by everyone he came in contact with for decades? He blanched. He thanked the gods once again for his wife’s sharp observations and perceptive nature. Despite her fiery temperament and outstanding athletic skills, she was, after all, Percy’s sister.

“You’re right, Gin. As always. I’ll go apologize and try to be decent to him. Still, though, if I’m not back in an hour or two, you’ll come hex him and scrape me off the wall?”

Harry attempted a hang dog expression and failed.

“Harry James Potter, you are the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor who, at seventeen, smote the most powerful dark wizard who ever lived with nothing more than an Expelliarmus. If you can’t handle a middle-aged Potions master, I’m leaving you to shack up with him instead.”

With that, Ginny shoved Harry out of their chambers.

Harry trudged down to the dungeons, wand out, preparing to defend himself against hexes, Legilimency, and plain old Muggle dishes. He was understandably quite

surprised when he knocked on the door to Snape's private quarters and heard a calm, "Enter." A trap, perhaps? He entered cautiously.

Snape was in his favorite chair in the sitting room with a glass of firewhiskey in his hand, staring at the flames in the fireplace. He looked at Harry for a moment and then nodded curtly.

"Potter." Snape stood up.

Harry blinked. This was not how he'd expected this to go. He thought he'd be dodging bottles by now. Or jars of cockroaches. Or hexes. Hell, he thought he'd be dodging something by now, at any rate. Or maybe they were going to duel properly?

"Um... Professor Snape, after some reflection, I realize that what I said at dinner was disrespectful and uncal—"

"Oh, shut it, Potter, everything you've ever said to me has been disrespectful, and we both know you're only down here because Minerva threatened you with something massively unpleasant if you didn't come. What was it this time? That you'd have to feed the blast-ended skrewts the next time Hagrid goes on vacation? That you'd have to chaperone the next Hogsmeade weekend with Trelawney?"

"She threatened to give the Hufflepuff Quidditch team our practice slot on Thursday afternoon," Harry answered without thinking. Snape was being cordial. Well, cordial for Snape, anyway, and it was throwing him off.

"I see. Well, I accept your apology and I will tell Minerva how you came down here and apologized and that you were properly remorseful."

Harry stared at the bottle next to Snape's chair. How much had he been drinking?

Harry began backing out of Snape's sitting room with a panicked look on his face. Any minute now...

"So, apology accepted, I'll let Minerva know; is there some reason you're still here?"

With that, Harry fled.

Snape chuckled.

*So much for Gryffindor courage.*

A/N: Thanks as always to my betas, sunny33, Ladyinthecloak and Sempra, without whom I would be an ellipse and comma mess.

## Four

### Chapter 4 of 4

Severus finds himself increasingly distracted by a pleasant red head.

#### Chapter Four

Snape sighed, refilled his glass, and sank back into his chair. While causing Potter to flee was always amusing and a distraction, it didn't help his current dilemma. Actually, it made it worse. He downed his drink and poured another one. The experiment had been doomed to fail, either way, really. He had gone out of his way to be nice to Molly Weasley this afternoon, and he had absolutely no idea why. But it had been sort of pleasant, in a way. He didn't know why that was, either. When he was nice to Harry, he had enjoyed making Harry uncomfortable and paranoid. It was, to his twisted way of thinking, fun. But it wasn't the same as being nice to Molly. It wasn't in his nature to be nice to someone for no reason, and he generally didn't do anything without a reason. True, some of the reasons he'd had for doing things throughout his life hadn't been, well, good reasons, but they were reasons, nonetheless. Taking the Dark Mark, for instance, had been because... revenge, was it? Or something... perhaps he'd just been bored.

Which brought him to his current state of affairs. It was quite possible that he was... bored. After surviving the Marauders, the Dark Lord, Albus Dumbledore, Nagini, and the Wizengamot, his days were now filled with trying to impart knowledge into the emptiest of heads and drinking himself into oblivion at night. But that really had limits in terms of entertainment. And it was petty and pathetic, and he had a headache every morning. Unbeknownst to the rest of the world at large, Snape did realize how pathetic his life truly was. It was just that he hadn't made plans after the final battle, not expecting to live through it. By his estimation, he and Potter were the two most powerful wizards alive in Wizarding Britain. And he was reduced to this? At least Potter had a powerful, intelligent witch for a wife, and his son. Potter was right (not that he would ever admit that to anyone). He needed to find a girl. Had he really been flirting with Molly Weasley this afternoon? Maybe he should still check himself into St. Mungo's. She was definitely off limits. But if that niggling in the back of his brain was any indication, it probably didn't matter. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew what that was. He hoped he was mistaken, because if his brain had suddenly taken a liking to Molly Weasley, disaster was soon to follow.

He did have a sort-of "date" scheduled with her next week. Maybe he could just practice talking to women with her. It would be helpful to practice being relaxed in front of someone; it was difficult to do at the castle with the students around and Minerva breathing down his neck. He certainly wouldn't touch her; she was another man's wife, for Merlin's sake. And he wouldn't actually tell her that he was looking for a girl, either; that would instigate a flurry of matchmaking the likes of which he wouldn't survive. Using his Slytherin cunning, though, he should be able to ferret out what sorts of things women expected or wanted, and then... what? Approach one at The Three Broomsticks and ask her out? He shivered and finished his drink. It was too horrible to contemplate, so he decided to first test the waters with Molly, and then worry about the rest later.

Running Potter off with an overabundance of politeness had had the added benefit of getting Potter out of his hair quickly. But he'd promised Potter he would inform Minerva that he'd complied with her wishes, and it was best to get that out of the way quickly as well; otherwise, it would get dragged on for days, and there would be lots of, "Severus, you know, he's very young and used to speaking his mind..." and "Severus, if only you could try to get along with your colleagues better..." It was still early, so he decided to take a stroll to her office instead of Flooing. Floo calls always made his neck throb and that was to be avoided whenever possible. Why anyone hadn't thought to raise the level of fireplaces to a normal head-height was beyond him.

He passed three couples making out in the corridors and took off an obscene amount of points off Gryffindor and Ravenclaw just to see if it made him feel better. It didn't. As he arrived at the gargoyle that guarded Minerva's office, he rolled his eyes and muttered the password, "Gryffindor will take the cup" and began to ascend to her office.

"Severus, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Minerva looked up from her desk as Snape entered her office.

"I hope it's not too late. I promised Potter I would tell you that he came by and has been properly remorseful and that I accepted his apology for being rude at dinner."

Minerva looked at him suspiciously. "You've been drinking. How do I know you didn't just hex Potter and dump him into the Forest?"

"Of course I've been drinking; I just had a visit from Potter. And yes, you've found me out; after all those years of protecting his undeserving arse from his own dim-wittedness, I've finally snapped and hexed him and dumped him in the forest for the centaurs to find. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the one that starts these altercations; Potter is."

"You know I don't like you wandering the castle when you've been drinking. It's not that I don't trust you. I'm just trying to protect you from any gossip getting back to the Board of Governors. Why didn't you just Floo-call?"

Snape simply shook his head slightly. "Can't."

"What do you mean you 'can't'? Is there something wrong with your Floo connection? I can have the elves—"

"There's nothing wrong with my Floo connection, Minerva," Snape ground out. "I don't like to use the Floo because..."

Minerva watched in fascination as her normally verbose Potions Master struggled with words.

"It makes my neck hurt," he finally said in a rush.

Minerva's eyes widened at this admission. She'd had no idea that Snape felt any lingering effects from Nagini's bite. Not that he had ever been forthcoming with information, but she wondered what else he was not telling her.

Trying to change the subject, Snape said, "Minerva, it really wasn't worth penalizing Gryffindor's Quidditch team. They need all the help they can get this year."

Minerva was not fooled by Snape's attempt to bait her off topic.

"Severus, are you alright? After everything you've been through, you know there are people you can talk to—"

Snape's features noticeably hardened, and he cut her off.

"I'm fine, Minerva, thank you for your concern. I'm sure you have many things to do, and I don't want to keep you. I just wanted to let you know that Potter did what you told him to, so please do not punish his House. Good night."

"Good night, Severus. I'll see you at breakfast," Minerva called to his retreating back. She made a mental note to keep an eye on her Potions Master. She'd been expecting a breakdown of some sort from him for years now; she wondered if the cracks she knew were there were finally starting to show.

Taking out his irritation with Minerva on the hapless students who crossed his path, there was a flurry of activity as students scurried this way and that, and he slammed his way back to his own quarters.

A/N: Thanks as always to my betas, sunny33, Ladyinthecloak and Sempra, without whom I would be an ellipse and comma mess.