

The High Cost of Casual Wishes

by droxy

Miscommunication, misunderstanding, and secrecy surrounding a plan based on love damages trust and severely tests a good marriage.

The High Cost of Casual Wishes

Chapter 1 of 1

Miscommunication, misunderstanding, and secrecy surrounding a plan based on love damages trust and severely tests a good marriage.

Beta Readers: Snapeophile and SouthernWitch69

Summary: Miscommunication, misunderstanding, and secrecy surrounding a plan based on love damages trust and severely tests a good marriage.

Usagistu's/Melanie's Summer 2006 SS/HG Exchange Challenge: This is an SS/HG fic where they are already married, and Hermione believes Severus has cheated on her, but he hasn't. Hermione leaves him, and he's got to win her back. Must have a happy ending and Severus must be in character. No Harry, Ron, or Ginny bashing.

Title: The High Cost of Casual Wishes

The sounds of her tears hitting the glass panel of their wedding portrait echoed across the numbness of her mind. Her heart broke again and again as she watched the man in the photo brushing aside her veil, offering the first kiss between husband and wife.

Hermione Snape flung the frame, crashing it against the wall, in a fit of hurt and anguish. The glass shards sliced the magical picture in half on impact, separating the couple who tried in vain to reunite across the shredded paper boundary.

She felt like a foolish idiot. How was it possible that she did not see the escalating signals of his infidelity? It was 'oh, so easy' to gloss over the facts, she thought ruthlessly, but her anger did not displace her sorrow, for she based her denial of the facts on trust, faith, and love for a man who apparently no longer felt the same.

Hermione began packing her things with unholy fervor and wand waving, including the evidence that forced the awful epiphany that Severus had indeed found comfort from other women. Doubtful second guessing clouded her soul as she wondered how on earth she'd failed him and had driven him into another's arms. Did she not love him enough? Had she become boring? Or perhaps she just wasn't attractive to him anymore?

She fingered the logbook she'd started keeping a month ago when she'd first begun feeling the sharp, niggling stabs of suspicion.

The first signs began when Severus started working late in earnest. He became unusually quiet and would not discuss his work with her, a change in his usual habit. Later, when she tried to engage him in conversation, he snapped coldly at her, complaining of exhaustion and then stalked off in a flurry of robes to their bedroom alone. The time he spent with her on the weekends slowly diminished, and they ceased doing things together with him claiming he had a special project or a large apothecary order. It seemed he always had an excuse to be someplace else, and she was not invited.

"I need to pack my books..."

On the increasingly rare occasions he did make love to her, he seemed distracted and careful, no longer looking into her eyes and sharing his feelings through the connection they once held. The crack in her heart widened as she swallowed the agony of that lost intimacy, the one thing she cherished the most with her husband.

"Need a Cushioning Charm for packing Grandmother's china..."

As she packed, Hermione sharply recalled the moment she'd recognized the need to develop her case. So she had methodically logged in her journal all the subterfuge Severus deployed so effortlessly around her. She knew some of his basic tricks from their time working in the Order when he passed on information about the Horcruxes. But now, he was practicing his well-honed spy techniques on her instead of on the long-ago vanquished Dark Lord.

"Ah, there's my Gringotts key..."

A certain chill ran through Hermione when she started magically investigating their chambers with complex revealing charms several weeks ago. She discovered secondary signs, like little scraps of parchments containing only times and dates and a small, leather-bound account book. The ledger he had transfigured into an empty ingredient bottle labeled 'Gold' contained columns of numbers that perplexed her since there were no titles for the entries. "So, so careful, and subtle you are, Severus," she thought with increasing frustration.

"Can't forget my dirty laundry..."

She knew they didn't have much in terms of Galleons; it didn't matter to her really. A Ministry salary and a Potion master's commissions covered basic expenses, but it was difficult to save or invest given the high cost of living in a populated Wizarding community. Severus had refused to live in less expensive Muggle areas. So, she copied his ledger and reconciled it the best she could with the household budget and noticed a continued drain on their outgoing cash flow. The sum was not that large, but it was enough to raise doubts on what and where he was spending the money.

"My box of Christmas and Halloween decorations..."

Hermione's suspicions increased to a new level because Severus never hid his work ledgers or Potions notes from her before yet another sign. She recalled sometimes he would ask her opinion on his work, and she felt exceptionally lonely since it had been months since he'd engaged her in academic discussions. "How long has it been, Severus?" she mused aloud to no one but Crookshanks, who merely cocked a sleepy, but very interested, eye at his distressed mistress.

"Cat carrier, food dishes, litter box, toys..."

Despite her very great intelligence, there were many things Hermione could not possibly know. Such as, when she was asleep at night, she did not notice Severus pulling her close to his body. She did not know of the self-imposed vow he'd made based on a casual conversation during one of their weekend walks through Hogsmeade. Hermione wanted something that was very difficult to deliver, and Severus would do absolutely anything in his power to achieve her heart's desire. She never heard his softly muttered declarations. "It will soon be over, my love, have patience with me, and when I am finished, you will have everything that you wished for."

She recalled how late one night, in desperation, she'd attempted Legilimency on him when he'd been extremely tired and distracted. The outrage from her dark husband was beyond the level of their usual spats; he did not yell or argue. Instead, he became cold and more isolated.

"You made a promise, *wife*, to never invade my mind," Severus said painfully through gritted teeth, his black eyes burning with indignant surprise and hurt.

Hermione's arms gestured palms up and open as she hotly pleaded, "I know I did, but you've been so preoccupied and... distant for months, and I needed..."

He curtly interrupted her by completing her sentence. "...Needed to see things you should not see! Is curiosity finally getting the better of you, Hermione? Is your Dark Arts research finally manifesting into an addiction for bloodlust?"

His hand shot forward towards her in a halting action, clearly conveying he wanted her silence. A frown creased his sallow face, the contortion of facial muscles causing strands of black hair to fall forward across his forehead.

His words were concise, as if he had carefully planned each and every word before speaking them. "I have my reasons, Hermione. Although you are academically aware of my past, you know I have never wanted you to visualize it. I don't want you... us... tainted by it, and I do not want... to remember either," Severus spoke directly, the discomfort lingering just below the surface.

She saw the disappointment and anger fixed firmly within his dark gaze and flinched slightly under the intensity of it. At her reaction he closed his eyes and looked away. She noticed his shoulders dropping slightly as if in resignation or sadness.

The awkward tension was too much to bear, and she reached out, her hands gently touching his biceps. He turned his head slightly, and she could see he'd resurrected the old emotional barriers of many years ago.

"Severus, please listen to me," she pleaded urgently. "Please don't shut me out. Whatever I did, I am so sorry. You never spend time with me anymore; we never talk. I... I miss you."

He could hear the slight wavering in her voice, her eyes becoming bright with sadness and concern. "Hermione, please stop this. Don't do this to yourself," he said curtly as his eyes intensely scanned her face.

It was her turn to look away, down towards his hand she had gently clasped within hers. Hermione's voice was soft, but full of worry as she spoke. "Severus, we haven't made love in months. You've been beyond impatient with me and angry when I want to be with you. You've been pushing me away. Tell me honestly, Severus, what is happening to us?"

Snake's face darkened with a sour frown, his posture suddenly stiff and tense. "Nothing is wrong with us!" he snapped, pulling away his hand.

With that, Severus swept away from her, his long dark robes swirling in a flourish of momentum. He spun away, stalking towards his sanctuary to think while trying to escape his own anxiety at her words and why she would think anything wrong. It was true he was preoccupied, and he wondered if months had really passed since they'd had relations. His many projects were reaching critical stages, and they took all his time and energy at the moment.

It was that very night while Severus slept that Hermione, with grim determination, cast a tracking charm on his cloak. She wanted hard evidence one way or the other; the doubt was slowly eating at her guts to the point of distraction, and she could not afford to lose her job, not if she needed it to survive... alone.

Within a matter of days, Hermione possessed the heartbreaking evidence from Severus' charmed cloak and locked it away in her Pensieve. A full week of personal research was required to find a spell to duplicate the memories since she felt oddly obligated to present him with the facts.

She wrote Severus a parting letter after finishing her packing and placed it carefully under the duplicated Pensieve. Suddenly she could not stop crying.

"Come on, Crooks. Get into the carrier," she begged, choking out words against the tremble in her voice. But the half-kneazle stubbornly refused and shot away from her when she tried to catch him.

The cat darted under furniture and managed to avoid capture for several minutes until Hermione cornered him under the wardrobe in the bedroom. "Please, Crookshanks, I don't have time for these games. It's time to go now!" she ordered impatiently. The hissing and growling surprised her as she hauled him out by his hind legs from his

cover, but the cat did not harm her.

Instead Crookshanks wriggled and squirmed, and Hermione thought she was trying to hold an armload of several greased octopuses. She barely managed to hang onto her wand to cast an Engorgement Charm on the cage so she could easily stuff the growling cat inside.

"*Finite Incantatem*," she whispered heavily, watching the container shrink to normal size. The cat meowed mournfully within the confines of the carrier while she slowly put on her cloak and gathered her shrunken belongings into a small bag. She bent over, clasping the handle on the cage.

Hermione stood up and took one last look at their small flat and then approached the door. Wiping the tears away on her sleeve, she reached for the door handle, only to have it thrust open for her.

Her eyes, which were already directed at the floor, immediately recognized the dirty edges of black buckled leather shoes poking out from under the drape of heavy black robes. Her eyes traveled slowly up, and she swallowed, seeing his hand still on the doorknob, level with his wide belt tightly secured with small obsidian buttons. Her face shot upwards, and he had slight smirk on his face that transmuted to a look of grave concern upon seeing her tear-stained face.

His voice was low and even. "Hermione, what happened? Why are you crying?" He wondered if someone they knew had died. But his gaze captured her hand gripping the carrier containing a feline that was pawing desperately at the latch.

Hermione shook her head at the fact he was playing innocent to the end, but this was Severus Snape she was dealing with. "I'm leaving you," she said defiantly with a force that cut through her grief.

Snape stood stunned, but then his eyes narrowed as his face flushed, and his voice deepened to a dangerous growl. "Who-is-he, Hermione?"

Now it was her turn to be stunned.

"Tell me!" he yelled, shocking her back into the situation.

She started laughing bitterly at the absurdity of his behavior. "That's rich, coming from you!" she spat testily. "I am not seeing anyone, but apparently *you are*. I've been collecting evidence, Severus! I found your ledgers along with your timetable, and I put a tracking charm on your cloak. Let me spell it out for you. I know where you've been, and I have a damn good idea where the money goes. Go have look at my Pensieve on the desk, if you *really* care. Now let me go!"

She rushed forward to dart out the door, but he stepped inside and slammed it shut. She felt the silent spell lock and ward the room. He reached out and yanked the cat carrier from her grip and gently set it down, blocking the door with its bulk. "You will not leave here, Hermione, without a reason. The tracking charm only shows you where I have been, not what I was doing. You do not have all the facts. I can explain--" he assured her as the anger shifted partly to a plea.

"What else does someone do at a brothel, Severus?" she interrupted, lashing out hotly.

His head tilted away from her to hide the hurt, and he shut his eyes. "What will it require to convince you?" he asked with resignation, then opened his eyes to gauge her reaction.

She couldn't speak. Her voice stuck in her throat as his eyes filled with conviction and remorse pinned her feet to the floor.

"You can perform the Legilimens Spell. I won't hide anything from you," he offered awkwardly with hollow acceptance of the past it would expose.

"No, Severus, you are an Occlumens, and there is no way to detect if you are blocking me," she declined abruptly, wondering with a small hope if she really had misjudged him, while juggling that thought with the burning humiliation that he was just playing with her.

"Veritaserum then," he asserted to Hermione with disturbing acquiescence. "There may be some leftover from the war..."

"You can't do that!" she shouted, both horrified and angry. "St. Mungo's said anymore of it will kill you. I've lived with enough death on my hands, and I won't have you added to that list!" She pronounced each word succinctly, glaring coldly at him, crossing her arms unyieldingly over her chest.

Severus moved slowly away from the door, he looked devastated walking past her and sat heavily on the couch, leaving her standing and free to leave. She watched as he placed his face in his hands, which muffled his normally clear voice. "It does not matter; my life is nothing without you, Hermione. Everything I did was for you. But my plans have broken our trust, and I am at a loss at how to regain it."

Hermione looked at the door. Part of her wanted to run through it, but another part, the curious need to know part, tugged at her mind, begging her for more information. Then she looked at her husband on the couch. She'd planned to leave him without this confrontation and would have done so if not for Crookshanks' lack of cooperation. She figured Severus would have read the letter and later gloated that he was able to rid himself of her easily, but that was not the behavior of the man upon the couch.

"You can't alter memories, only Obliviate them," she stated. "Use your Pensieve."

He ran his fingers quickly through his hair, audibly releasing a breath and rose from the couch swiftly, turning toward the large functional corner cabinet. Once he retrieved the bowl, he motioned her to sit on the couch. "This may take a while," his slightly cracking voice offered.

She sat down on the couch with the bowl situated between them and watched as he touched his wand to his forehead, carefully drawing out long silvery threads that hovered in mid-air before floating into the Pensieve. Her hand moved over the memories before her, and she looked questioningly at him. He moved his hand next to hers. "Go on," he said.

She felt as if she was falling, and suddenly they both appeared in Hogsmeade. She watched his memory through his eyes as they talked, and she laughed at some dry comment he made regarding magical whirly-gigs some families placed in their yards. She missed these outings. She turned to Severus asking, "What does this have to do with the tracking charm?"

"Nothing, but it is important," he said.

She could see herself tugging his hand and excitement lit across her face as he chuckled quietly. There was a house she had admired on their walks, and it was for sale. She urgently led him over to the magical real estate sign where the sales witch showed them a tour with magical photos. "Oh, it's perfect Severus! I've always dreamed of a house like this. It has a large cellar, and we can see the gardens. Oh, look, it has three bedrooms; we could use one for an office!" Severus had walked away to look closer at the foundation when Hermione inquired about the price.

"Foundation looks good. Perhaps we should enquire on its availability," Severus spoke warmly.

She started hedging her words. "Uhm, it's a bit much even if we offered a lower bid." She heard and saw the disappointment from her memory-self. "Besides," she laughed in an attempt to lie, "it's bigger than we really need anyway, and we'd probably have to make improvements."

His memories swirled her around in the mist; she could hear Severus make an excuse to her the next Saturday that he had an errand to run. Instead, Severus had returned to the house alone and made his own inquiry on the price. The next series of events moved so rapidly, she began feeling dizzy. Severus then Apparated to Gringotts where he requested an accounting from the Goblins. Another loud popping noise followed, and he Apparated to his lab and started developing the timetable. She observed him writing numbers from the Gringotts assessment and their household budget on parchment, determining what appeared to be relationships between the numbers.

The visions accelerated through time as she watched him spend days on end developing a plan before transferring the numbers to the ledger she'd found. She could feel

he was in a foul mood when he'd finished it, but when she saw herself in their room, smiling at him, a sense of failure permeated the memory, and he retreated to the bedroom, his hollow voice telling her to stay away.

That scene soon melted away to one where Severus was ripping through piles of his personal book collection. He grabbed several texts mumbling something about research to her astonished memory-self before he disappeared abruptly only to reappear in Knockturn Alley in front of Borgin and Burkes.

Severus' hand reached forward to push open the door, the ringing bell announcing his entry to the shop. His eyes scanned the dark artifacts, pausing briefly at an Invisibility Cloak with a large burn hole priced on sale for 200 Galleons. The view drifted slowly towards shelves overloaded with books.

Borgin stepped out from a curtain behind the counter. "Mr. Snape, what a welcome surprise. I thought I'd never see you here again," Borgin greeted him carefully and with a bit of astonishment. After all, Severus Snape was one of two Death Eaters who had survived relatively unscathed after the war, and the speculation surrounding how he secured his war hero wife led to many a chilling late night tale.

The dark, disembodied voice of memory-Severus replied with graceful confidence, "Nor did I, but I have... business to discuss."

Hermione observed as Borgin's eyes widened slightly with surprise, and then he cracked an oily smile, bowing slightly. "Is there something you are looking for?" asked Borgin salaciously.

Snape replied in a hushed voice, "Not here, somewhere more private."

Borgin's momentary anxiety turned into a tight smile. "Come this way." The proprietor indicated escorting the ex-Death Eater into the small, ancient office.

Long-fingered hands, stained with potion, pulled a bundle from the cloak's inner pocket and reverently placed it on the dusty desk. The hands gently unfolding the burlap to reveal what Hermione knew to be his most rare and cherished books, and she gasped.

"I take it you want to sell these," commented Borgin with thinly veiled disappointment.

"Yes," replied Severus. "You know what these are."

"Of course I do, but I cannot offer you anything that approaches their real value. No one is buying *these types* of books. It is not prudent or fashionable to own such a fabulous collection at the present. I happen to have several in stock that would interest you in particular. I can give you a great deal on them," said Borgin enticingly.

"What will you take for these books?" Snape asked coolly, and Borgin took a step back.

"Five Galleons, nothing more, as I said I have plenty of books in inventory. If this was seven years ago..." offered Borgin.

"No, we are done then," replied Severus curtly as he started wrapping the books.

Hermione noticed Borgin's greasy smile. "However, since you are here, Mr. Snape, we may have other business to discuss. Do you still make potions?"

"Of course, I am still a Potions master," Severus replied in his most silky tone despite his annoyance.

"Ah, wonderful, so you are aware potions are a lucrative venture. You are fortunate, Mr. Snape, to possess such a skill," complimented Borgin easily.

"What do you have in mind?" queried the memory-Severus carefully.

Borgin paused to consider his words. "There is a demand... for certain potions not met by the... general market, such as Polyjuice, Felix Felicis, Wolfsbane Potion, Forgetfulness Potion, and a stronger version of Beautification Potion."

Snape replied in a bored tone, "Those are all potions requiring significant brewing time, and all are illegal except two. One is the Wolfsbane, which St. Mungo's distributes for free. My wife and I supply them. The other one, Beautification Potion, is an oversaturated market. It has many commercial researchers, and they are already pushing the limits of the ingredients' possibilities."

Borgin nodded in agreement, his voice slick and confident. "All valid points, but the fact remains that werewolves are not so readily accepted by society at large. Many are not like your wife's friend, Mr. Lupin, who has an Auror wife and a supportive circle of influential friends, including Auror Potter. No, many still want to hide their stigmatizing affliction, Mr. Snape, and they are willing to pay handsomely to keep their secrets."

"Forgetfulness Potion is not traceable. There are many who still want to forget or who want others to forget the past," added Borgin with heavy implication, then shifting to a wistful, nostalgic tone. "Beautification Potions are not meeting the needs of all of the market: say hypothetically, women severely scarred by the war. So cursed are they that men cannot bear to look at them; they are a horrific and constant reminder of the victors' failures during the war. The commercial sector does not dare conduct that avenue of dark research. Think of the prospects of Beautification Potion combined with Amortentia. I am not a Potions master like you, Mr. Snape, but I can supply you with Veela or unicorn blood if needed."

Hermione heard Severus snort in disgust, but Borgin remained steadfast and relentless.

"Alas, I suppose if you find the regular potions market lucrative, Mr. Snape, you would not be interested in my offer," commented Borgin airily with greasy sincerity.

The memory-Severus paused for a moment and replied wryly, his voice low and controlled for effect, "I will need to draw up a list and assess my costs. I am sure you can appreciate that, Mr. Borgin."

"Fine," agreed Borgin, but his frown indicated he had been level set again. "Can I expect an answer from you in a day?"

"In a few hours, perhaps," Snape eloquently informed him, tucking his book bundle away before using the Floo to return home.

Hermione watched as Severus returned to their small flat and left his book bundle on their desk. Her memory-self tried to offer him lunch, but he grabbed a sandwich, muttering about a potion in progress before Apparating again.

Severus visited several people and places nearby Borgin and Burkes and determined the sources of demand. Several shops in Knockturn Alley expressed a keen interest for variations of similar potions along with the added boon of a large order for poison antidotes. Hermione felt immersed in a sense of satisfaction and hope emanating within Severus' recollection.

However, with keen interest, Hermione noted when Severus entered a beauty salon in Diagon Alley. Borgin was correct in his market assessment, the salon proprietor called to a dark-robed woman in the back, who was not recognizable except for the voice. It was Pansy Parkinson, the beauty of Slytherin who had caught Draco Malfoy's eye in her years at Hogwarts. The proprietor shrewdly hired two of these cursed women in an effort to make her clients thankful for their own undamaged looks.

Severus now spoke hauntingly to Hermione as they watched the scene. "It seems odd after all these years that the robe and the mask were once associated with Death Eaters. Now these women don this attire to hide their deformities. It is rather telling that this sort of crippling has not been addressed by the *Prophet* or St. Mungo's."

Hermione felt pity for Pansy, hearing her explain that the loss of her looks was not so tragic; she just wished the constant itching would disappear. Yet she was willing to be Severus' test subject, despite his warnings that it may not work.

The visions swirled a bit, and Snape was back haggling with Borgin and then several other proprietors near the alley. However, Severus insisted upon an intermediary to handle and deliver the potions to the end clients.

Several visions showed Snape brewing, and he commented to her as she observed. "The Felix Felicis is almost completed, I need to deliver it tonight, and my project will be completed."

They spun out of the memory and sat looking at each other on the couch. "Before you ask, there is more," he said.

"The Beautification Potion, did it help the women?" asked Hermione, guarding the twinges of jealousy with academic concern.

"No, I failed. But in all of this, it was my secondary hope. All I could offer them was fifteen minutes of a cruel and expensive illusion. But Borgin and the others didn't seem overly disenchanted," he spoke flatly, but she heard the bitter disappointment.

"I don't understand, Severus. I could have helped you. Don't you see? Why didn't you trust me to help? If it was a simple matter of money or research, we should have talked. Why the risk and secrecy, and what about the brothel?" she pleaded with half-exasperation, demanding a response.

"You made it clear you will not trust my answer, Hermione, and I need to add another series of memories," he rebutted, returning the silvery thread to his mind and pulling out another.

"Hermione, I want you know I did this all for your happiness. I did not forsake you," Severus claimed, gesturing her back to the Pensieve.

The couple once again fell into the mists of memory. This time the reflections from the storefronts revealed a haggard and exhausted looking Severus under a disguise of heavy Hagrid-inspired whiskers and small square-framed glasses. Next, the vision shifted to his elegant and stained hand that was gripping the leather case that contained the first of his labors after two months.

Pausing briefly before the storefront, the other hand pushed open the crystal door etched with the scripted label of The Satin Flower. Hermione recognized the location instantly from her tracking charm.

She watched black shoes advance until stopping; Severus had kept his head low until reaching the counter.

"What sort of flower are you looking for, sir, perhaps the black orchid?" spoke the melodious voice sweetly. Hermione noticed the beautiful Indian woman standing before Severus' eyes. She had curves any woman would envy and was dressed in native finery of silk trimmed in gold that would have had Narcissa Malfoy burning green with envy.

"I am not seeking flora today, Madam. I am here to deliver a conveyance," Severus remarked professionally.

"Ah, yes, a mutual friend has asked me to accept a delivery for safekeeping until he returns from his business trip. It was his fondest hope you would be willing to accept flowers in exchange?" she purred seductively.

Snape scanned the store. He only saw what appeared to be a light, airy café charmed to be a garden solarium, with several equally lovely witches of all nationalities. Then his eyes landed on the menu and he chuckled darkly.

"But, Madam," Severus rebutted, emphasizing her title, using his deep sardonic voice, "my garden at home contains the rarest and loveliest of all flowers. Perhaps you were misinformed."

Hermione barely registered what Severus said before observing the shocked expression on the woman before she quickly recovered, eyeing Severus shrewdly. "You are clearly correct, sir. I was misinformed," the Madam responded, exposing her severe business persona. "It is also clear our mutual friend owes me a great deal for this inconvenience."

Severus tilted his head in farewell, grabbing his leather satchel when the Madam's hand shot out in an effort to stall him.

"What do you have in the bag, Potion master?" she asked with a false sweetness.

"I am merely a mutual acquaintance--" Severus began curtly, but the proprietress' laugh interrupted him.

"Sir, you do me an unkindness. I know my business and my clients. Your hands are a beacon of your profession," she added, patting Severus' hand knowingly.

Hermione flushed with a wave of jealousy. How dare that woman touch her husband!

Severus' hand gripped the satchel tighter and pulled it away, the other hand now nestled in his cloak on his wand. "I do not see why that is your business," he scoffed, whispering in a dangerous tone.

The Madam's hand gripped tighter around Snape's, and she hissed back, "It is my business! I have potions backordered from Borgin. I am on my last bottle of Polyjuice, and one of my flowers is monkshood, and the Forgetfulness Potion is needed by my clients."

"That is not my concern," growled Severus irritably.

"I can make it your concern. Whatever Borgin was going to pay you, I will beat it. Name your price," the woman blurted rapidly. She released his hand, speaking plainly but with spite riddled in her voice, "Borgin's been holding these products over our heads for years. There is a bloody monopoly on these potions since the source dried up, something about the old fat man disappearing again. Now the slimy bastard is diluting them, my poor monkshood flower has been sick as dog since the last batch. My flowers can't stand him anymore, and I would love to be rid of him, but I've had no other choice until you arrived. It may seem odd to you, but since the war, we created a sort of family here. We take care of each other. Look, I can employ you as my direct supplier. What do you say, Gov'ner?"

Snape paused in consideration. "I understand why you would use Polyjuice and the Wolfsbane Potions, but explain the Forgetfulness Potion, and I will consider your offer," he countered evenly.

The Indian woman frowned and turned speaking to the others. "Trillium, dear, I need you to mind the counter."

Hermione saw the grave look on the Madam's face. When she turned back to Severus, it added years to her. "Very well, Mister"

"Mr. Sinclair," lied Severus before asking, "and your name?"

"I am known as Jasmine. Follow me, then, if you wish to know," replied the woman leading him to a hall behind the giggling witches coquettishly fanning themselves with bits of starched lace.

"I cannot have you betraying the confidences I am about to tell you. I am sure you understand," remarked Jasmine seriously.

"I do."

"I shall require your wand oath then," she stated firmly.

Snape removed his wand slowly from his cloak and touched hers.

"Satisfied?" queried Snape sardonically.

Jasmine laughed. "Yes, very, thank you."

They spoke no more until the Madam led him around the corner and slid open a wall panel. "Look inside," she whispered reverently.

Hermione took a fast breath. "Hannah! Hannah Abbott!"

"Yes, I recognized her, and her parents as well," replied Severus softly.

"This dear man," explained Jasmine, "comes here twice a year. He relives his daughter's sixteenth birthday. The older woman was his wife. I understand she was killed early in the war. His daughter..." she paused, swallowing, then added haltingly, "his daughter was hit by the Medusa Curse. She is now of the sisterhood of cloaks."

"This man you see, he is very lonely and wishes to forget his pain. We allow him to regain some happiness. He will spend time with the memory of his wife. My flowers are Polyjuiced, and you can see the quality is lacking. The Forgetfulness Potion allows him to suspend his reality. I wish I could do something more; he always leaves on the verge of tears."

Jasmine tilted her head cautiously, examining Snape. "You understand," she stated cannily.

"I do," he replied showing nothing.

"This client is not the only one. I don't know how my clients discover me, but we get mothers wanting to spend time with the memories of their deceased children. Another client is well known. He comes here to play Quidditch with his friend, who I understand perished in the war," recounted Jasmine, her voice flavored slightly by mournful anger.

"Oh, dear God," remarked Hermione. "Harry..."

"Yes," whispered Severus, "there is more."

"You gather hair from the dead," the memory-Snape stated without judgment.

"Yes and no," she whispered. "Sometimes they gather it themselves."

Hermione's eyes widened at that revelation. Gathering from the dead was taboo, but not necessarily illegal. The horror stories alone deterred the practice, and she pondered the levels of psychological desperation. A similar level of desperation launched her investigation of Severus. But the ongoing conversation jolted her back to the memory.

"You have not answered why you need the luck potion," Snape reminded her, snapping the Indian woman back into business persona.

"Luck potion? We never use it; there is no business application for it. I'm afraid, Mr. Sinclair, that all those here or come here are beyond that, don't you think?" Jasmine laughed bitterly.

"I think we have business to discuss. You will need to tell me what you ordered from Borgin, and we can go from there," offered Snape reasonably.

The next few moments covered an exchange of two thirds of the satchel's contents. One half of that turned over to Jasmine was for Borgin. The third remaining in the case was for another store.

Jasmine wrote a new order based on her quarterly needs and handed it to Snape, along with payment for the delivered potions.

Hermione felt a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction resonating from the memory. She realized Severus enjoyed the conspiracies and twisting other's plans to fit his own. He had helped the Madam's situation, yet managed to gain a 50% increase over Borgin's offer while still supplying Borgin.

The still disguised Severus of the memory left The Satin Flower and Apparated to the small seedy Wizarding community tucked away in the poorer areas of Muggle Chelsea. It was the second location the tracking charm revealed, the notorious Wynk and Nodd Inn. Hermione flushed, remembering the gossip Tonks told her about the place; it rented rooms by the hour.

This time Snape was more aggressive and smelled, more than spied, his quarry at the dark end of the bar.

"Mundungus," stated Severus in a smooth voice, dripping with disgust.

"Snape, it took you bloody long 'nuf," grumbled Dung over pipe and pint before turning on his stool to face the voice behind him.

Mundungus Fletcher puffed deeply on his pipe and exhaled a thick blue smoke. "Funny though, gettin' an owl from yeh after all these years. Was at yer weddin' after all, but what the bird sees in yehs is a mystery to me. But wi' that face full of fur, I don't suppose she sees much of yeh anyway."

"Hmm, it's a pity I could not postpone this reunion for several decades," Snape quipped and then added, "but you never could say no to an easy job."

"Aye, and me recollectin' what 'append to blokes sayin' no to yeh," muttered Dung under his breath, "but that be in the past, right?"

Snape smiled sinisterly at that comment, causing Dung to slosh his pint.

"Where's the goods?" groused Dung under his breath, flicking his smudged fingers rapidly into his palm in a 'gimme' action.

"Before I do," remarked Snape silkily and then adding in a deadly tone, "I know the inventory, and I will be checking with the recipient."

"Fine 'nuf," Dung agreed, then hastily gulping the remainder of his ale. "You can trust ole Dung."

Severus passed the satchel over and issued a reminder. "Expect an owl with your payment once I have confirmed the delivery, and expect another owl in a month with new instructions."

"Aye, Gov'ner, pleasure doing business with yeh," replied Dung gruffly in a manner showing it wasn't a pleasure at all.

Hermione thought the next memory didn't fit the pattern at all. Severus stood upon a rock pillar at the edge of the sea. The night was clear, and she could hear the wind and the waves and saw millions of stars. All he did was stand amidst the earthly vastness and gaze forever at the heavens. He was like a boiling cauldron of emotions; it was difficult to sort him out.

Hermione turned to Severus, touching his arm and looking at him, and he saw the question on her face.

"I realized that day that I've been blessedly sheltered by you these past several years. It was that day's sudden reminder of life I already know, and I was not prepared for the level of... contrast between what I have that others do not," Severus explained, his voice rumbling quietly.

Hermione responded in kind. "It isn't a crime to be loved, or cared for, Severus."

"I know, but I wonder, and I could not stop thinking of how I did not become as they did," he replied with a subtle edginess.

Before she could respond, the mists of their Pensieve world swirled about, and Hermione observed a series of rapid memories that left her feeling exhausted. Memory-Severus seemed to Apparate or Floo everywhere: to Gringotts, to his lab, and back to stores and establishments of ill repute. The constant gathering and brewing, and the exchanges of potions made her dizzy. His record keeping was fastidious to the point of obsession.

The weariness she felt originated from Severus' memory. No wonder all he did was collapse during the weekends; the man had never stopped working for four months straight.

Then, a scene buried within the hectic events of her husband's memories unfolded. Severus had returned via Floo after a thorny meeting with Borgin. As he stepped from the hearth, she heard him catch his breath. She remembered that Saturday; it was nighttime. She had just finished a shower and was resigned to the fact she would be going to bed alone. Through his eyes she recalled wearing a satin dressing gown he had bought her a year ago, and she was drying her hair with a towel.

She watched as her memory-self threw the damp towel on the floor upon seeing him, and her face beamed with a broad grin. "Severus!" she said happily, running to him. Hermione noticed with a hint of a smile that his eyes were fixated on her legs, which the drape of the dressing gown exposed when she ran. The force of her pulling him into hug made the memory blur for a second.

"Hermione," he haggardly said as she snuggled closer to him.

Her fingers started plucking at his buttons in a teasing fashion, and she rubbed her cheek against his and kissed him above the eyebrow. "I've been thinking of you all week," she whispered warmly, and then her voice turned husky and heated. "I want you so badly; make love to me, Severus."

Her hand quickly worked his robe open exposing his chest while her kiss drifted slowly back across his cheek to finally touch his lips with hers. But he stilled her hand firmly and twisted his head slightly away, preventing her impassioned advance.

He shook his head as he responded roughly through his exhaustion. "I can't, not tonight. I need sleep." His arms pushed her gently away, revealing wide brown eyes dumbfounded with disbelief, and her face full of disappointment and embarrassment at his stark rejection.

The memory-Severus moved away from her slowly, plodding towards the bedroom. When he turned, he saw her standing where he had left her, except she was now staring blankly at her toes and had wrapped her arms around herself as if she needed to contain body heat.

This time Severus turned to touch Hermione, who seemed far away. "I hope you realize that if I had not been exhausted to the point of collapsing, I would have granted your desires instantly and probably on the floor," he said smoothly with a slight bit of humor towards the end.

Hermione shook her head. "I felt so badly after that. You know I tried several times with the same results. But eventually I got the message, and I stopped. I'm not that thickheaded," she said quietly, but the simmering hurt was palpable.

"Is that why you thought I betrayed you?"

Hermione looked into his fathomless black eyes, and the words erupted more bitter than she wished. "It was the beginning of my suspicions, yes." She continued on, painfully explaining. "Oh, Severus, with all the excuses and avoidance, I felt you were slipping away, that you didn't love me anymore. I couldn't concentrate on work; all of it started affecting me. God, I felt so alone."

Severus winced while the memory continued to play out, repeating the similar events of brewing, gathering, and traveling to and fro.

However, there was nothing in his memories that confirmed her distrust. "I think I've seen enough. We need to discuss this," she demanded impatiently.

The two removed their heads from the Pensieve, and Severus glanced at his wife, feeling uncertain how to bridge the gulf between them. He busied himself with replacing the memories back into his mind and set the bowl aside.

"Hermione, Severus," they said in unison.

"You first," she offered.

He stared at her intently. "Do you still believe I was unfaithful to you?"

"No, no, I don't, but I..."

Severus interrupted her. "Do... do you still wish to leave?" he asked urgently in a slightly demanding tone.

Hermione sighed and looked at her hands, the fingers entwining themselves. "No, I never wanted to leave, but I thought you didn't love me. I-I never stopped loving you, Severus. But I couldn't bear the pain of living with the constant reminder of what we had shared," she replied wearily, the emotional rollercoaster of the last month taking its toll.

In that very instant, black-robed arms pulled her into a tight unrelenting embrace. Severus clutched onto her and kissed her on top of her head, burying himself in the abundance of curls residing there, while whispering with unconcealed relief, "Thank heavens."

After her initial momentary stiffness, Hermione's body relaxed against his chest. But her frenzied mind spun with thoughts and questions. "I understand you took on all that work to get that house, but what I still want to know is why all the secrecy?" she implored.

Severus eased his hold on her so he could see her face, but he didn't remove his arms from her.

"You desired that house, but you had it set in your stubborn mind it was an impossible dream. I know you link this dream to other wishes you have for the future. You also thought to divert your disappointment and spare any feelings of inadequacy on my part. I assure you I would not have felt that way. What I see are simply obstacles to overcome. The secrecy was part of my selfish desire to give you a pleasant surprise, to give you something worthy of what you have given me. So, I simply investigated on my own and developed a plan to achieve that specific goal. However, the plan proved unstable due to the variable of time; there was always the risk the house would sell. But once I stumbled upon the opportunity with Borgin, I saw a way to mitigate the time variable by accelerating the plan. I also did not want you to associate with the likes of Borgin; you would have certainly hexed him. Nor would you want the press to catch you entering The Satin Flower or the Wink and Nodd."

Hermione angrily pushed away from him, mad in the way Molly Weasley would yell at her wayward children. "Severus Snape!" she lectured furiously. "You made illegal potions! What would happen if the Aurors caught you, especially with Dung of all people? Oh, the press would have a field day with that and drag me into it as well! It was one thing to make such potions during the war, but I don't need to tell you bored Aurors would give their wand arms for a little excitement and added job security these days."

Severus did not look contrite at all. He smirked, feeling a bit happy that she was angry with him, for it showed she still cared.

His action only inflamed Hermione, and she escalated the tirade. "Wipe that smirk off your face, Severus Snape! I suppose you think it's cute, but I don't. How do you plan on explaining the income? The Ministry tracks Gringotts accounts now. You didn't need to make illegal potions; you could have asked me for help!"

Severus sighed. "The reason you determined the drain on the accounts is because I was not depositing the Galleons into Gringotts, you only saw records of withdrawals. There is no income to explain because there is no record of it. Legal potions are twice the work for half the money," he explained in first year teaching mode.

That tone of voice earned him a hard thump across the nose with a couch pillow. When he looked up, his wife was glaring at him with eyes red from unshed tears. Her voice lost its venom as it shifted to incredulous sadness. "Twice the work, Severus? Your memories indicate otherwise. You were killing yourself, but you were also killing me by ripping my heart out in the process. If you want to surprise me Severus, make one of those wonderful dinners with the wine laced with Amortentia, and yes, I know about that, or get tickets to Rosmerta's winter solstice celebration and dance with me until my feet ache." Hermione's voice trailed off to just a whisper as she shifted her gaze away from black glittering eyes to bury her face in her hands. "But the house..."

His hands rested on her shoulders, and he gently turned her towards him. "Hermione?" he questioned seriously as her large brown eyes scanned his face and she bit her lip in frustration trying to explain.

"Severus, don't you understand? I took a vow. We took a vow when we married to help and trust one another in good times and in bad. As well meaning as your intentions are, I don't need that house to be happy with you. Molly raised an entire family on one Ministry income, and she lived in a modified pigsty! What you tried to do, it was really sweet of you, and I don't want you to think I am ungrateful about the house. But, you... you didn't trust me or our vows... you..."

Her head sagged against him, and her hand pounded on his chest punctuating the words as she poured out her emotions. "You silly, wonderful, misguided, arrogant man, how could you think that this burden was yours alone, or even a burden at all?"

She looked up at him feeling hurt that she had to explain this to him since he now looked unhappy and confused. "This house project would have been so much easier on both of us if you had trusted me. It could have been fun, Severus. We would have worked on it together instead of practically wrecking our marriage and health in the process."

His serious expression went straight to her heart. "Hermione, in my plans I had not considered our marriage as a variable. It has been the one constant I've had for several years. I now realize I should not have taken it for granted."

Now it was Hermione's turn to smirk as she replied with uncharacteristic irony. "Are you trying to tell me that Mr. Snape, the Slytherin of Slytherins, did not consider an angle to a plan?"

Severus shot her a wry smile, and deep inside he felt some relief, though he remained uncertain if she had really forgiven him.

Her head snapped towards the door at the sounds of a half-kneazle yowling in discomfort. "Oh, no, Crooks has been in that cage..." she explained rising off the couch to release him.

Crookshanks bolted out his confinement like his tail was on fire, leaping onto the lap of Severus Snape. The cat ducked under the Potion master's arm, seeking security from his owner-warden. Snape pulled Crookshanks onto his lap, scratching the fur behind the ears until the cat purred loudly. Severus commented dryly, "I think he likes me more than you at the moment."

Hermione stood staring at the odd pair; her husband and cat usually just pleasantly coexisted by ignoring each other. Seized with sudden understanding, Hermione let out a howl riddled with self anger. "God, how could I be so stupid!" she cried.

"Crookshanks... God, he would have known if you had changed. He would have reacted if your real intent was to harm me emotionally or otherwise. I should have remembered this and saved us both a lot of grief," she stated somberly.

Severus set Crookshanks aside and stood, taking quick strides to capture and hold his wife close to him. He stroked her hair, his low voice rumbling quietly as he spoke. "Despite our magic and intentions, we are only human. It seems we both made mistakes, and I have no desire to repeat mine. It is easy for me to forgive your mistakes, Hermione, for my mistake hurt you for a long time, and that alone has hurt me tenfold."

Hermione raised her head off his shoulder to look at her husband. The softness in his dark eyes off set his somewhat taciturn expression. "I love you, Hermione," he whispered, the words slightly catching in his throat. "Can you find in your heart the ability to forgive my idiotic foolishness?" he added with more bite.

Her hand reached up to gently brush away the hairs that always seemed to fall across his face. "I already have," she replied softly.

At that comment he seized the opportunity and kissed her fiercely.

The End

Authors Notes: I sincerely hope you like the response to the SS/HG exchange challenge story you've just read. This novelette is my first long fic, and it was a difficult subject to handle. I've been writing drabbles for over a year and half, and found this challenge incredibly taxing.

I bow low and kiss the hands of my betas with utter gratitude and appreciation.

Fanart 1: See the house that Hermione loves at <http://charmingcottage.livejournal.com>.

Thanks to Perselus and Seaislewitch for giving me permission to link this art and their story associated with it.

Fanart2: The lovely Usagistu/Melanie has kindly granted permission to link art to this fic. Irony that she did this art not knowing this fic was her gift in the exchange! Art "Snape and Hermione Sitting" <http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/35153905/?qo=6&q=by%3Ausagistu+sort%3Atime+-in%3Aascraps>

and another Art at this location <http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/9878414/?qo=75&q=by%3Ausagistu+sort%3Atime+-in%3Aascraps>