

Redemption on the Installment Plan - IV

by Amita

One should not have a life-altering experience after thirty-five - Hemingway

Chapter 1 of 1

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It was the cycle of the Dragon. The year of the Scorpion. The month of the Toad.

The bubble rose from the cauldron. Figures skated around on the inside surface. By his will, they coalesced. Four stalwarts marched through the snow toward a ruined castle, ruined except for a flat black unreflective monolith that reached from the depths to jut out like a sole survivor of forgotten ages.

"You aren't trying that again, are you?" said a reproving voice.

The bubble burst.

"Is it so wrong to try to erase the great strain of misunderstanding and pain that threads its way through every fiber of our lives?" he asked.

"Next, you'll be trying to bring back our friends for whose loss we weep every day, and you'll be trying to reunite lovers whose souls cry out for each other throughout eternity."

"That way lies sorrow and madness," he said.

Sorrow and madness also lies in doing nothing, he thought.

"But I did have a good bubble," he said, "until you burst it."

"Well, you burst my bubble for the holidays," she said. "You never did tell me why Mrs. Tonks changed her mind."

"She deeply regrets the lapse in hospitality," said Severus.

He saw the inquisitive and desire-to-be-helpful expression on Hermione's face and deeply regretted saying that.

Hermione moved closer to examine the paraphernalia and tomes on his workbench. "Was that really an alternate-universe bubble?" she asked. "How do you do that?"

He sighed.

"Alright, don't tell me," she said. "Work alone conjuring up dangerous stuff. Don't let an admirer help you with the hard spells. Don't let a partner stand by to rescue you if something goes wrong. Be that way."

Severus watched an intelligent, attractive, and incompatible witch storm out of his workshop and into the street where she collided with a cart of cauldrons. He ran out after

her.

She struggled to her feet and shook off his helping hand. "Just leave me alone."

He returned to his workshop of unsuccessful projects. The bubbles were, as the intruder had accused, too uncertain and too dangerous. He had tried Tarot cards since he enjoyed reading the patterns, but they were telling him he was creating his own problems: satisfaction with his personal life was close, but he was not recognizing it; the Tonks affair was a harmless matter, but it would become perilous if it were taken seriously. He would rather they indicated clear and grave circumstances.

Several days later, he tried suggesting a low-keyed approach.

"There's no way we can tell Andy she's imagining things," countered Cissy. "She doesn't really trust us yet."

"We can't fail her, not after decades of hostility and exclusion," said Lucius. "Besides, there is a gang in the neighborhood."

"The first note had a sketch of a skull and the caption 'Deth Eeters Unite' written in yellow crayon," said Draco. "The second had a skull with the caption 'Sekrit Plan to Atack' written in red crayon."

"It's getting more serious," said Astoria, "and the poor spelling with a crayon are intended to throw us off the track."

"Are we certain it's not a bunch of pranksters?" asked Severus.

"Even if it is, it's harassment, and it's causing distress," said Lucius. "I've identified several likely lowlifes. I intend to confront them."

Severus groaned silently as things spun out of control.

A different type of meeting convened a week later.

"That Malfoy bloke has been nosing around, trying to suss out if anyone's interested in that pureblood bint that be a widow," said the leader of the gang. "She must have some valuable property even though she don't live like it."

"That's good thinkin', boss."

Another week went by.

"The Malfoys done took that widow bint into their mansion. The word for years was they had disowned her. You boys didn't find anything valuable in the house, so it must be that she's come into some money, but hasn't has a chance to spend it yet. That means the Malfoys are after her pile of geld, but we can get it for us if we hold her ransom."

"That's good thinkin', boss."

"We'll need more help to spring her from that mansion. I thought of that, too."

Meanwhile, back at the manor, Lucius, Cissy, Draco, Astoria, Severus, and Andy were planning their own strategy.

"We may face a large raiding party," said Lucius. "Can anyone think of some others ready, willing, and able to help?"

Everyone shook their head no.

"Ain't nobody here but us Slytherins," said Andy.

Oh, please, please, thought Lucius and Draco, *Please don't let Aunt Andy have a wicked sense of humor.*

Two nights later, the alarms sounded, and the defenders assembled in the east parlor. They had barely positioned themselves behind barriers of furniture when there was the sound of glass breaking and wood splintering as the raiding party swarmed through the doors and windows and over the balcony. Whether it was to defend her grandson or show staunchness now that she was reunited, Andy stood, flung her spells, and stunned two intruders. Three others, however, aimed curses that overcame her defenses. She went flying across the room.

"Andy? Andy?" cried Lucius. "Are you okay?"

"I'm all a tingle," came the reply.

Pureblood thicker than water boiled, and Cissy hurled a hex.

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The villains and the east wall blew out across the landscape.

Lucius gaped at the stone-torn greenery. "My rose garden."

At that moment, Andy's grandson appeared in the doorway. "The noise woke me up," he announced. As Andy scooped him into her arms, he saw the crayon messages on the table. "You found them," he said. "Do you want to play Death-Eaters-and-Aurors, too?"

The defenders revived the gang of ruffians.

"I am prepared to offer you 100 Galleons each in return for your absolute silence on this matter," said Lucius. "You will sign this wizard's contract with safeguards prepared by Mr. Snape."

He coughed discreetly. "And Mary Popfoy will not take any wild stories lightly."

The home guard saw their guests off and retired to an undamaged part of the manor.

"We should have these family gatherings more often," said Draco.

"I've been thinking of redecorating," said Astoria.

Several nights later, Hermione was preparing for bed and thinking about the rumors of the fight at Malfoy Manor. Some gang had been attempting to blackmail or kidnap Mrs. Tonks, but they were confronted and defeated by the Malfoy's. Workmen hired by the Malfoys were secretive, but it was being whispered that one wing of the manor was damaged and that Mrs. Malfoy had been the heroine of the hour.

Hermione still couldn't believe they hadn't asked her for assistance. After all, they probably faced a secret cell of Death Eaters. She could have prevented the damage to the manor, but Severus hadn't even mentioned there was any trouble. And after all the good advice she had given him. That inconsiderate prick.

Prompt from LynF in chat: Severus discovers to his surprise that he wants to know a witch better.

Author's Note: Severus healing himself has taken on a life of its own.

Author's Note: Apologies to Leiber, Laumer, and Travers.