

# Redemption on the Installment Plan – VI

*by Amita*

If the path meanders, how will the warrior find his way?

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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"Hey."

He looked up from his sherry. "Hello Miss or is it Misses?"

"It's still Miss."

"Hello, Miss Granger."

She stood at the table and looked expectant.

"Care to have a seat?" he asked. She sat. Care to join me in a sherry?" he asked, signaling the barmaid. "What are you doing these days?"

She was working at the Ministry. While she was supplying him with details, he was trying to maintain his façade. The last thing he wanted was to meet an old school acquaintance who brought back memories of who he once was, especially someone who reminded him that he had almost been a Keeper. He had always thought he could have been except for one small slip, and that had preyed on his mind until, when he had a chance, he had been so eager to show what he could do that he had made a royal muck of it.

He came back to the present to hear her say she didn't know what to think of her job since, after six months, they were going to transfer her to another department. He offered that they must have been impressed by her and they were giving her broad exposure.

"Do you really think so?" she asked. "I'm not certain I got on well with the last department head."

He was thinking about getting on well and that the worst part of his life was his father constantly bragging about his being a substitute Keeper to all his friends and business associates. He had tried downplaying it, but that had been taken as false modesty, and that had been successful enough that he had to be careful not to overdo it.

His ear returned to the girl at his table.

"And I've read everything about the next department I'm going to," she was saying. "I already have lots of suggestions."

He recalled his over-enthusiasm as a Keeper. "Sometimes, it's better to begin slowly," he said. "People develop ways of operating that differ from the official manual. It takes real intelligence to recognize what's actually happening as opposed to what's supposed to happen."

"That might be," she said.

"If you suss out them out and quickly fit in, they'll be impressed," he said.

"That's a great idea, Cormac," she said. "I'm surprised to hear it from you." She gasped. "I meant that in a good way," she said.

He maintained composure. "That's the way I took it," he said.

"I haven't talked to anybody in a long time," she said. "Will you be here tomorrow after work? I've got to find out what you're doing."

"Yes," he said before he could stop himself.

Cormac McLaggen watched Hermione Granger dash out the door into the evening and mused about Ronald Weasley. He had met Penny Clearwater only a few times, but he had considered her high-strung, not the type for the easy-going Ron. But Ron was a Keeper with quick reflexes. Perhaps he was that ideal type who was calm until it was time for action. They seemed happy together with Penny absolutely doting on him. They had constructed a game machine called the ClearWeasley, and he had deposited a large number of Sickles in it one night.

Cormac took a deep breath. This was unfair. He had fought hard to escape his past, and his new self was still precarious with phases of overreacting and under-reacting. Hermione was the cruelest girl, breeding anguish out of the dead past, stirring old hurts with bright smiles, mixing memory and regret. But he knew she was rebound-girl, and he meant nothing to her. That thought would keep him safe, covering his past with a layer of indifference, feeding a little dignity with fresh insight.

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"Did you want to put the poinsettia or an array of lights in the window?"

"I think lights offer cheer to people passing by, don't you?"

"I know it's just us, but did you want to decorate a tree?"

Andy sank into a chair and stared bleakly ahead. "Ted used to pick the tree. I haven't had one since."

"I'm sorry," said Hermione. "I didn't know."

"No, of course you didn't, dear. But we might get one this year. I think Ted would like us to."

They talked about the holiday menu even though there would only be the two of them and Teddy. Andy mentioned the Malfoys were spending the holidays with relatives in France.

"We need to balance the equation," said Hermione. "They should send some cute boys from Beauxbaton to us."

Andy agreed that was a splendid idea. She wouldn't even mind a crusty professor or two who would enjoy a discreet fling in a foreign land. "Speaking of crusty professors, or ex-professors," said Andy, "maybe we could invite Severus."

Hermione looked at the handsome, aristocratic lady whose eyes were suddenly shining and felt a twinge, but she said, "It would give us an excuse to make another decadent dish, something sinful that we couldn't justify otherwise."

"Lord Dark-Chocolate Truffles," sighed Andy.

"I was thinking of standing rib roast," said Hermione.

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Hermione accompanied Andy for moral support when she went to invite Severus since they weren't certain his old self wouldn't reappear, but when they entered the shop, he gave them such a friendly greeting that Andy gushed out the invitation without any preliminaries and this spontaneous friendliness, contrary to expectations, had Severus readily agreeing to the extent that he was curious about the details of the planned evening, but he couldn't wait for an answer because customers were streaming into the shop, mostly looking for specialty items for holiday gifts, which had Severus torn between trying to accommodate those asking questions and those waiting impatiently at the cash register, whereupon Andy took over the register with such ease and gratitude from Severus that Hermione almost protested that she was good at accounts too, but it was too late, and to make matters worse, Andy was able to carry on a running conversation with Severus about her anxiety over her grandson's education and join him in lamenting over the poor academic preparation of wizards, which had numerous customers entering the conversation in agreement, with the result that Hermione felt excluded even though she knew she had more right to an opinion on the matter than that over-the-hill witch, and Severus's obvious admiration of a woman much too old for him was so unbecoming that it unbalanced Hermione, making it more difficult for her to participate in a conversation which left to that twosome would certainly lead to more intimate encounters where Hermione could well imagine that Andy's extraordinary good looks and her years of loneliness would lead that ditzzy pair down paths they would soon regret no matter how valiantly Severus's manhood rose to the inappropriate occasion and no matter how delightfully Andy would sigh in pleasure as his touch roamed over her magnificent bosom and comely legs before he was embedded in her soft and loving warmth where he, of course, would not remember a more suitable lady, who, though apparently restrained, would willingly offer him so much more if only he could bestir himself to the more uplifting path which would prove his true worth instead of demonstrating himself unworthy of a noble spirit by wallowing in the entangling snares of a comforting woman, and if he would be like that, then so be it, and the offended party would righteously spurn him, and forget him, and what did she care anyway?