

Redemption on the Installment Plan - XIII

by Amita

There are many paths to the One.

Chapter 1 of 1

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"I've had more than enough of the Malfoys, thank you."

Severus waited for Pansy to leave the shop in a huff after that reaction to his mentioning there was going to be a Winter Solstice celebration at the Malfoys, but she continued sipping her tea in a calm manner. Well, he hadn't invited her; he had just mentioned it in passing. Besides, she wasn't married, and that might lead to awkward entanglements. He reflected that most of the population her age was not married – a fractured generation, their childhood stolen by terror and their world shattered by war.

"Wouldn't you like to socialize with someone besides the Malfoys?" she asked.

He wondered if that was a leading question and decided that if she was going to tease him, he could tease her in return.

"An interesting question," he said. "I might have to reinvent myself."

"Oh, not at all," said Pansy. "Just get out more and talk to people. Lots and lots of people would like to meet you. And lots and lots of girls, too, if they knew you were approachable." She slumped in her chair. "Unlike me, the social pariah."

He offered that she was keeping the accounts for the fledgling primary school, and everyone appreciated it. She countered by saying she could do that secretly and she had learned bookkeeping to balance the family finances and, since no one would ever employ her, she was lucky they were wealthy or she would be out on her bum.

"And such a cute bum," said Severus, playing the teasing game.

She brightened. "I could show you some of the family enterprises. We own several forests that produce the best wood for wands and broomsticks."

And I could show you some family wood, thought Severus.

She added her family had partial ownership of several shops and she could take him on a tour although it would have to be discreet since the Parkinson daughter wasn't that popular.

"Cloak and dagger," said Severus. "Perhaps a bit of a disguise."

"Oh, that would be fun. Would you like to?" asked Pansy as she poured him the rest of the tea.

He gave her a gentle appraisal and talked about disguising with a light touch.

"You can dress more maturely since you have the grace and poise of an older woman." *A grace and poise any wizard would love to have by his side.*

"Your experiences have deepened you and it shows in your face." *A woman who has seen much, who would be understanding.*

"You will be a beauty all your life. A subtle outfit will display it best." *Fine skin, lush hair, firm figure.*

"Men will be captivated by your eyes." *Smoldering, dark pools of passion, but everyone would know it would be only for her chosen wizard.*

"The excursion might be fun for you, but it will be a delight to your companion," he concluded. *Control yourself, Severus, old bean.*

"And for the finale, you can rip off my costume," said Pansy.

"A girl with a sense of humor," said Severus. *What a tease.*

Pansy's attention was drawn to an old set of scales which Severus assured her were antique. Pansy said it was silly, and even sillier that she had never tried it, but she had always wondered how much a feather weighed.

More than my heart, thought Severus.

Not any feather, a beautiful feather. He watched her select one that pleased her, and he watched her sensitive fingers as they reverentially handled the weights until everything was in balance, and he envied the feather and scales that received such loving attention. He had not thought that a young witch could appreciate a fine instrument that had seen so much or that a wealthy witch could appreciate the beauty in such a mundane object as a feather.

"It's yours," he said to the lady who was aching to be appreciated. "We can work the feather into your disguise."

Her heart was pounding as she approached the building. It was such a small thing, nothing to get excited about. *Oh, what will he think of me?* She entered and walked past the bookkeepers, marking and recording invoices. She imagined all of them stopping their work to stare at her. She imagined leaving, blushing with shame with the staff sniggering at her. *Didn't they have anything better to do?* She knocked at the office door, walked in, and closed it behind her.

"Hi Andy," said Cormac.

"It's ... It's almost lunch time," she said. "I was in the neighborhood and I was just passing by and I thought why ever not, I mean, if you're not too busy, but if it's inconvenient, then just forget it, and I don't want to bother you."

"Are you suggesting lunch?" asked Cormac. "That's a splendid idea. Have a chair while I mark my place in this report."

A minute later, he looked up. "Let's go."

While she was sipping her tea and deciding which sandwich to order, he asked if she intended to edit the grade three reader.

"You mean misuse some more muggle artifacts?" she asked.

"What exciting lives you educators live," he said, "facing brats both in and out of the classroom."

He mentioned her royalties from the grade two reader were becoming substantial. Apparently, adults were buying them. His family had performed some market research and concluded the attraction was the non-wizard fairy tales.

"I included the simple ones that I enjoyed," she said.

When the arrival of their sandwiches interrupted their conversation, she noticed her knee was pressing against his leg. *How is it I'm sitting so close?* She tried moving her knee away, but for some reason, it refused to budge. She was feeling a bit giddy. *What did they put in this sandwich?*

As they walked back to his office, her hand reached for his. He took it. No-time passed, and suddenly, he was saying goodbye outside the office building.

"I really liked lunch," she was saying. "I want to return the favor and I'm free tomorrow and I could fix something although it might only be stew but it would be a relaxing Saturday evening."

"A quiet evening sounds good," he said. "I could look at your collection of fairy tales."

Wait till you see my etchings, she thought. *It will be a fairy tale come true, and I'm not that quiet.*

Later the next evening, after beef stew, after peach cobbler, after Teddy was in bed, Andy led Cormac to the sofa and brought him her favorite collection of stories. She moved closer as he leafed through the pages. She was next to him. She was leaning toward him as his arm went around her shoulder. Her forehead was against his. Her nose grazed his. Her lips, his. Everything but Cormie went out of focus. She clutched him, moaning as her body pressed against his. She was stretched out on the sofa with Cormie holding her. Hours went by as he just held her.

He left at midnight, promising to return tomorrow for Sunday brunch.