

Redemption on the Installment Plan - XVI

by Amita

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"Where are you hiding these days?" asked Andy. "No one ever sees you."

"I'm not really hiding," said Lucius. "I didn't mingle much before if you recall."

"Well, she wouldn't, old bean," said Severus. "She was in exile from your family if you recall."

Lucius had to agree. He told them about living alone in a house on the coast away from wizard society. It was an old house, and that suited him. And he had found a kindred spirit in the waves bashing the rocky shore. He had located a non-wizard coin dealer who sold to collectors, and one galleon a month let him pay all his expenses of living in the non-wizard world. With an effort, he was maintaining the family fortune. Previously, his managers and others had had to deal with an arrogant landlord and lender. Now, they had to deal with a shattered one.

"How shattered?" asked Andy.

"I'm recovering," said Lucius. "I can ride through London in a taxi without screaming."

Andy and Severus were impressed.

It was Sunday morning, and the three were having tea in Severus's shop before it opened at noon. They weren't certain how this had started, but it had become a regular custom, a distraction that was a welcome relief from their private thoughts. They talked more about the house on the coast with Lucius relating some of his adventures. He had to be careful with the electricity. One of his spells had destroyed the wiring. That was expensive.

Andy kept thinking that Lucius needed someone.

"I can't talk business. I'm going crazy. I'm bouncing off the walls. I've got to get out of this house."

Thus was Pansy's response when Cormac visited the Parkinson residence.

He had been asked to recruit Pansy for her bookkeeping skills since the reports said she was doing excellent work with the primary school budget. His family had reminded him that they always had a need for people who could keep the accounts. Of course, he could recruit her. After all, he had performed brilliantly in getting Hermione better placed.

"She can be freelance," his father had said. "Just get her."

Now, Pansy, remembering the awful episode with that ponce Severus, was glaring at another specimen of wizard-kind, daring him to do something besides be a prig. She wouldn't be surprised if he failed to live up to expectations too.

"Well, ... ," began Cormac.

"And don't suggest some relaxing ride through the countryside," said Pansy, "with flowers that look like knickers."

Cormac gave up trying to parse that sentence and said, "I was thinking of an upscale, non-wizard disco, but only if you can dress appropriately for it, something classy that looks casual."

"No problem," said Pansy, already on her way out of the front parlor."

"Something that screams, 'I'm hot, but I'm hard to get,'" added Cormac.

Pansy stopped in the doorway. "All you wizards are the same. And no, I don't need any help getting into my siren outfit," implying that he had missed a beat by not offering. She was smiling as she dashed to her bedroom. This was getting interesting, and she was already one up.

Some hours later, the pair was on their way back to the wizard part of the city when a trio stepped out of the alley and flashed their knives.

"We'll take any spare coin you happen to have," said the biggest.

"Oh my, you're so big and strong," said Pansy as she edged away from Cormac.

"You wouldn't hurt us, would you?" said Pansy as she continued to edge away and slowly raise her skirt to show first her knees and then her thighs.

"You aren't bad bad boys who would steal a little girl's knickers, are you?" said Pansy as she lifted her skirt above her waist. There was the blinding glare of white cotton.

She glanced at her companion, but he was as bug-eyed as the low-life. "Cormac!"

"Oh, yeah," he said, fumbling out his wand and stunning the mesmerized hooligans.

She dropped her skirt and walked off in a huff. Cormac ran to catch up with her.

"Well done, Pansy."

She snorted.

"Aren't you speaking to me? What did I do?" he asked.

She rounded on him. "You didn't have to stare."

"Those three were staring," he said.

"That's different," she said, still walking down the street in a huff.

Cormac couldn't remember the last time he had seen a pair of legs. Now that he thought about it, he wasn't certain he had ever seen a pair of legs, certainly not like Pansy's. *I've got to get out more.*

"I apologize," he said. "It was an accident. I really don't want to look at your legs."

"That's not helping," said Pansy through clenched teeth.

"I'll treat you to an ice cream," he said.

"I can't be bought," she said.

"A hot fudge sundae covered with whipped cream and a maraschino cherry on top," he said, "and a coffee liqueur on the side, and I'll try to apologize again."

She turned to face him. "Add an espresso and you're on."

"Are you saying you're not going to help me?"

"I'm saying I'm not certain I can. You're trying to organize Potions with principles based on Arithmancy, but that type of creative talent is rare."

"I can't think of anyone more qualified," said Padma.

"I know someone," said Severus, "but you may not like the suggestion, and this person was shattered by the war."

"Well, who?" asked Padma, trying to put on a brave front.

"What do you think of Lucius Malfoy?"

"Lucius Malfoy?"

Padma's heart, along with her hopes, sank into the lower depths. She could hardly breathe. Her sister had talked about Severus with a dreamy look in her eyes, and Padma had hoped that this unlikely candidate would extend his courtesy to other witches in obvious need, even if the witch in question didn't want to appear to be in obvious need, but he seemed thicker than a plank. What kind of fate was this for someone who had dedicated herself to academics while in school and now tackled absolutely brain busting stuff for the good of wizards everywhere? It was almost as if wizard kind did not care. It was obvious that handsome and eligible wizards not only didn't care, but seemed to be repelled by her high calling. As a final blow, the one wizard she had hopes for was trying to fob her off on a war criminal in hiding, a dysfunctional war criminal at that.

"Why don't you just tell me straight out that you don't want to work with me and the thought of my company is repelling? I'm a big girl. I can take it. I already know men prefer fluff-heads."

"I am being straight," said Severus, wondering what was going on. "Lucius is a wizard at Arithmancy."

Padma couldn't believe that pilchard was cracking a joke at the same time he was scorning her. Her sister was a terrible judge of character. She looked around for something expensive to break over his head.

"I see you've noticed my antique scales," said Severus.

"What does it weigh?" she asked, hoping it weighed enough to crack a skull.

"I think of it as my Anubis balance," he said. "A heart on one side and a feather on the other."

That gave Padma pause. Someone with a device to remind him of that wouldn't be deliberately cruel, would he? She asked if he had been sincere about Lucius Malfoy. He asserted he was, and said he would mention her and her project when he next saw Lucius. Padma left the shop thinking she might have achieved the lesser of her two objectives, finding someone skilled in Arithmancy.

Severus admired Padma's gentle sway as she left the shop. She was beauty and class and brains, and he was tempted, but the coming ceremony demanded married women. If any participant lost control, the ritual could create incredible bonds deeper and longer lasting than a love potion and it was not fair to subject a vulnerable, unmarried lady to the danger. A married woman was protected by her bond with her husband and could return to a normal life after the cathartic event.

Severus thought about Pansy, and he still didn't know if he had done the right thing. If she weren't so adverse to the Malfoys, he would send the spirited lady to the recovering Lucius kill or cure. No, that thought was unworthy of a friend. He glanced at his scales. The feather seemed to be winning.

An hour later, Ginny appeared to help him prepare more stock, but she took one look and declared he needed a rest, and if he was too tense for a nap, she would give him a backrub, and she insisted they go immediately to his flat upstairs where he could stretch out on a quilt before the fireplace. A few minutes into the massage, he was asleep. When he woke two hours later, he went downstairs to the shop where he found Ginny taking care of the customers.

"It's tea time," she said. Let's close shop. I can put on a kettle while you relax. You look better already."

When she returned with the tea tray and set it on the table, she gave him a questioning look, asked, "May I?" and eased into his lap. She put her arms around his neck and asked if he still ended to escort her to the ancient ritual. When he assured her he would, she squealed with delight and gave him a hug. Then she gave him an appreciative smile followed by a long hug. It would have been ungracious of him not to respond. Ensnared in his arms, she rewarded him with gentle nuzzling and contented sighs.

Wondering if he should, he told her she was lovely. She replied that he didn't have to say that, but she seemed to like it, and he said that he wouldn't say it if it wasn't true, and besides, she was a kindhearted girl to take care of a stranger and let him rest while she tended the store. She ran her fingers through his hair and let her breast brush against his chest. Feeling her nipple harden, he lost a bit of control and said liked her and he liked holding her whereupon she arched into him and he felt both breasts before she resumed a more chaste posture, except she was flushed and she smelled of perfume and girl and animal heat. He stroked her hair as she snuggled into him.

He was afraid he was going too far as his fingers inched over her skirt until they found the outline of her knickers, but she gave him a soft look and traced his face with her finger tips and didn't protest. Even through two layers of material, he could feel the Weasley feminine softness. A wizard could lose himself in it.

Tea time was over all too soon. Ginny Potter gave her friend one last embrace before leaving the shop with a song in her heart.

The antique scales were tilting back and forth between the feather and the heart as confused as Severus.