

Poppet's Choice: Restitution's Gift

by nagandsev

A one-shot presented in nine vignettes. A long-forgotten promise is claimed, renewed and honoured, regardless of the dire straits from which it had sprung, yielding an unforeseen outcome and a peace which Lucius could never have imagined.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: A one-shot presented in nine vignettes. The deepest, greatest thanks to the one and only linlawless for her wonderful beta help and support to get me over the finish line for the LBB, and the wonderful rivertempest, and all the LBB mods working behind the scenes, for your kindness and support and understanding...it was truly appreciated beyond words! And also the greatest thanks to proulxes for her contributions to this version and for her ongoing support on all levels and patience with me and my noodling...again, I am thankful beyond words!

Griphook of Gringotts prodded the broken, flaxen-haired wizard seated beside him with a long, dark stick. The goblin snarled, "Sign, stamp and seal the partial allocation of estate for the claimant! No rest for the weary or wicked!" He poked the wizard again; it wasn't a wand, so it could not hurt the wizard much, but nonetheless, it gave the goblin a deep murky satisfaction to prod *this* particular wizard. Even though it had been thirteen years since Griphook had been imprisoned in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor, threatened and tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange while Lucius Malfoy looked on, it seemed like yesterday to the goblin. The memory of his humiliation was still fresh in his mind.

True, for Griphook, humiliating any wizard would do, but this one in particular...assigned to him as a 'conditional prisoner' from Azkaban by the Ministry, as the goblin's personal servile charge...gave Griphook a thrill of pleasure unlike any he had known.

Enjoying the grimace of pain etched on Malfoy's face, Griphook watched as the wizard slowly took the quill and signed the lengthy parchment placed in front of him. With physical difficulty, the blond wizard stamped it with the Gringotts mark and rolled it up, hot-wax sealing it closed.

The wax had barely coagulated when Griphook snatched the parchment away from Lucius, only to slap another one with a long list of itemized allegations against the former Death Eater and allotted claims for compensation.

"Ten thousand Galleons, Malfoy, for claimant number 137," rasped Griphook. "Ten thousand less from your prestigious vault is hereby further deducted. Next!"

Lucius sat despondently in Griphook's office as claims and claimants came and went. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month.

And so it was that he lost track of time and only knew the darkness and hell of his Gringotts gaol cell, a converted hollow vault, in which he was kept when he wasn't enduring being Griphook's servile charge. His life was a grey blur in the dark shadows deep underneath the goblin bank, his existence here only marginally more surreally bearable than it had been before in his hellish quod at Azkaban.

Thirteen years had passed since the downfall and extinction of Voldemort. Thirteen years of captivity and imprisonment. He'd lost whatever sanity he had left since his capture and arrest all those years ago, and he could only vaguely recall feeling anything anymore.

Staring numbly into the vast darkness of Gringotts' cavernous space, he blinked blandly, dully aware that the interims of humiliating servitude to Griphook the Goblin had taken their toll on him...

And yet, in the far recesses of his mind, a mad thought flitted from time to time...the thought that somehow, somewhere, someone would still remember him. Someone would care. Someone.

But no one did. Time pressed on and desperation grew, twisted and deepened inside him.

His mind and spirit had been broken as much as his body; the Dementors had seen to that.

He had barely been spared their kiss, but in the last hour when he was to be left to them, a conditional reprieve of sorts was given...a highly conditional one. Griphook had arranged with the Ministry to get his own personal pound of flesh from Malfoy, but oddly enough, instead of the goblin demanding monetary supplementation for grievances done to him whilst held prisoner at Malfoy Manor, he had asked that Lucius be made his servant. And his request had been granted. Malfoy was moved from Azkaban to Gringotts and kept under lock and guard while Griphook oversaw each and every claimant's file for compensation from Malfoy for past injuries and harm done to them by the former Death Eater.

And so it was that Lucius was 'given' to Griphook under the condition that he would be returned to Azkaban at the first *uncooperative* sign or act. Lucius had at first been relieved and had even thought that Gringotts would hold a chance for escape. As time went by, and it was made clear that escape was not a possibility, he prayed for parole, somehow, some way. But it quickly became clear that he had been transferred from one hell to another as he endured further indefinite punishment and humiliation in the form of liquidation of his estate, claim after claim, Galleon by Galleon, Sickle by Sickle, Knut by Knut, all under the brutal scrutiny and control of Griphook.

Advised to legally separate from Lucius, Narcissa had left for France, supposedly with Draco, ready to reinvent herself. Half of the Malfoy estate was transferred into tangible assets...hard, cold Galleons...and added to the Black family's assets. Lucius had initially mused how effortlessly and with what ease a new life must have awaited Cissy. But amusement soon turned to bitterness when he heard vicariously through various taunts from the wizard guards of Azkaban and Gringotts that his son, his only child, had married the younger Greengrass witch. Even more bitter was that it was revealed that he had a grandchild whom he had never known, let alone ever seen. Draco had never visited him.

Lucius chose to believe that it was because Draco had never been allowed. It kept what little tether of sane associations he had left...or was it complete denial?...for he could not accept that it was a deliberate choice by Draco to stay away. To utterly reject him. Abandon him.

After all I did for Draco, the ungrateful...! He would torment himself with his self-pity and denial of his former actions, his selfish, self-serving motivations *Greed beyond avarice!* And now... *now what have I? What am I?* Believing himself to have been a victim and a helpless pawn in Voldemort's sadistic web was still easier to swallow.

And so it was that Lucius wept in the darkest hours of his solitude when his past truth and present life clashed, the clarity that he was but rotting flesh with limited time, any worth and value left summed up by the remaining Galleons left to his identity. *And once they are gone, where will I be?* He shivered in cold sweat, knowing that Dementors were eagerly waiting his return to Azkaban. An unmarked grave in its earth was waiting to cradle his remains.

In the dark hours of the night, when Lucius was most susceptible to such disparaging thoughts about the grim reality of his life, when he was at his lowest state of vulnerability, slowly, the truth burned through his layers of denial. The brutal facts that it was more than possible that his own flesh and blood had rejected him, his spouse had abandoned him, and all of his family's wealth, honour and power of past centuries was now taken away from him, bit by excruciating bit, forever.

He was condemned now to be the instrument of the Ministry's sense of ironic justice; he was the cosignatory of each deed and claim brought before him. This strategy by the goblin to instill the pain of retribution in him...someone who had been so very bloodthirsty for power, wealth and control...to break him, at long last, had succeeded.

Insatiable vices, controlling and propelling my life, marking my deeds, my loyalties, my creed, reflected Lucius, biting his cheeks in anguish. *My affections!*

He huffed and told himself he didn't care. *It's the least Cissy deserves, her freedom and fortune, after all she's been through... after all I put her through. And Draco.* Lucius gritted his teeth as he stared into the darkness of his gaol cell, the spelled bars mocking his impotence and captivity. Confused, ambivalent feelings about his son battled and gnawed away at him.

But I had no choice! My whole life, I have had no choice... a prisoner of greed and power. Seductive, merciless, all-consuming power...

Yet, having once resigned himself to his sentence of indefinite imprisonment, nothing had prepared him for this. His fear of truly losing his mind. Madness *Slowly losing my sanity.* Aware that he was losing it and the overwhelming feeling of helplessness it entailed *A fate worse than death?*

He stared blankly into the void, as he did every night. *How can I take my own life?*

He pondered this until, in his misery, fretful sleep finally came to him.

oOoOoOo

The next claimant for restitution and compensation of loss from the war entered Griphook's office.

Lucius stared past the magical handcuffs and chain encircling his wrists, dully registering quills and parchments piled on the goblin's table awaiting signing and processing. He became fixated on a dark crack in the bank's floor, numb to the world.

Suddenly, his breath hitched as he heard Griphook greet the claimant.

"Ah, yes, so delighted to see you, Mistress Tonks. So glad that you are finally well enough to come in person. Please, have a seat. I've drawn up the final agreement that he is to sign...as designee, you must witness the offender signing over the compensation claim in the form of a Trust Fund. A technicality merely, but it is a requirement of our establishment."

"Let him sign it then. It's unbearable to be in his presence longer than I must."

At the sound of *her* voice, something snapped inside Lucius. A spark was lit. A flicker of deep emotion stirred within Lucius. Wild desperation, at first. Then, hatred. Not hatred of *her*. Of *him*. Voldemort. *No, of myself!* The decisions he had made. The life he had led. *Greed for power beyond avarice!*

"Sign, wizard!" snarled Griphook, jabbing Malfoy with his stick.

Lucius risked a bold look up at the witch and froze.

Her patriarchal beauty was as it had always been, yet even in his battered and broken state, he could not deny how much thinner and more delicate she appeared than when he had last seen her so long ago. Her dark hair was swept up, framing her lovely, sad face. *Andromeda!*

She stared decisively at the wall, refusing to give even a mere glance his way.

"Sign, wizard!" growled Griphook viciously again.

Lucius flinched and lowered his hand to where the signatory line was, but as his eyes fell across the parchment's content, names and words registered here and there. *Trust Fund for one Edward Remus Lupin... Edward Remus Lupin? ... Son of the deceased Nymphadora Tonks and Remus John Lupin... Grandson of the deceased Edward Tonks...* His fingers froze in a painful cramp, and his lips contorted to form words, but none came out. His face was frozen in a strangled grimace. Lucius could only gape at Andromeda, imploring her with his eyes to turn around to him.

A sudden whack against his knuckles snapped Lucius' attention to Griphook, who bared his teeth, hissing, "Sign, you worthless sod, or it is back to Azkaban you go!"

As the goblin watched the quill tremble in the wizard's hand, Lucius forced himself to set quill to ink and sign, stamp and seal the parchment. As Griphook snatched the quill from him, he gave a desperate look to Andromeda, his mouth dry and parched, but suddenly, his blood was pounding in his veins as never before.

She continued to ignore him, giving her attention to Griphook instead.

"Andromeda," croaked Lucius, finally managing an utterance, even though his voice was rusty and weak.

The goblin jerked the signed parchment from under his dirty, stiff fingers and handed it to her.

"Thank you, Griphook." Andromeda turned and began to walk away.

Somewhere, somehow, a deep wild surge of clarity erupted, and Lucius propelled himself up and at her, lunging at the witch, clinging to her, pleading like a mad man, "Help me! Mercy, Andromeda, mercy!"

"Don't touch me. Let go...how dare you!" She whipped out her wand.

He grabbed her wand hand, tenaciously holding it, keeping her from hexing him, even as she demanded, "Unhand me now!"

As Griphook snarled furiously and yelled for wizard guards, Lucius whispered fiercely, "You promised me! We promised each other...remember? They've taken everything from me, but your promise... your promise, I still remember!"

The brunette witch's eyes shot daggers at him. "Take your hands off me!"

But Lucius held on to her for dear life. And as continuing calls for security and loud voices were heard reverberating behind them, coming closer, Lucius saw her expression change dramatically. Tears formed in Andromeda's eyes, and her features softened as she whispered, "Lucius... Look what has become of you... What have they done to you? What did you do to yourself?"

Wizard guards entered, one grabbing and prying his desperate clutch off her. Lucius felt a hex hit him, and he became limp. As they dragged him away, he managed one last plea. "Andromeda!"

No, it is a right, my right! She made a promise to me, and I made one to her...with my blood I promised her!

This piercing memory caused a wave of volatile outrage to explode within as his feet and body scraped along the stone floor from the guards' rough handling, and he bellowed, "Your promise I claim! Andromeda, I reclaim what is mine to claim!"

oOoOoOo

Rotting away in Azkaban prison... Lucius scratched at the dirty stone floor absentmindedly. His isolation cell's walls were bleak and blurry, and the screeching of Dementors erupted somewhere nearby. *Finally... their kiss... It will be a welcomed death...*

The years of the dreary sterility of Azkaban had seeped deep into Lucius' psyche.

Once again, he had been returned after his outburst and perceived attack on Andromeda at Gringotts that day years ago. He glared around at his encompassing tomb, even though he had resigned himself to his fate, accepted that he would spend his remaining, dying days in its lair. But some days, such as today, there were sporadic moments of lucidity, in which his unbearable reality was inescapable by any means; these moments were closely followed by periods of frenzied paroxysm.

He suddenly felt the trickle of liquid on him, snapping him to the here and now. A wizard guard was pissing on him, and he heard through the dimness, "Wake up, mudwaller. You've got a visitor."

Several seconds later, one shadow replaced another, and Lucius tried to focus, his arms shaking as he pushed himself up.

"Who...who are you?" he croaked.

"I'm here for you, Lucius Malfoy. I'm here to take you."

Lucius didn't recognise the male voice, and with the little clarity he had, he heard himself whimper, "You're...you're my executioner? Today is my day to die?"

The barred door creaked open, and Lucius saw a tall muscular wizard, his pink hair mesmerising, glowing like a halo in the rank darkness of his cell. "I'll be put out of my misery sooner than later, is it? My merciful killer angel?" He heard himself laugh, a maniacal laughter; he felt he would have vomited if he had had anything inside him.

"You'll die one day. But today is not that day," the stranger replied neutrally.

Two Azkaban guards entered and grabbed Lucius, dragging him to his feet.

"Your stench reeks of piss," said the pink-haired wizard bluntly as he whipped out his wand and placed a Scouring Charm on Lucius. "Follow me with him, guards."

Lucius felt himself half-dragged, half-carried upward, higher and higher. He knew not how long it had been when suddenly they entered a sunlit circular stone room; it appeared that they were in a tower space.

"We're going to Apparate, Malfoy. Side-Along Apparate. Do you remember how? You must hold on to me tightly. I'll do the rest," instructed the younger wizard in a no-nonsense manner.

As Lucius squinted, his eyes adjusting to the sunlight, he saw that the young wizard's hair now had streaks of purple and green. Lucius took in his stature and solemn expression, and his mind reeled as the uncanny, incomprehensible image of Remus Lupin flashed through his mind.

"Who...who are you?" he rasped hoarsely.

"You know who I am," replied the young Auror with gritted teeth, and his eyes flashed with barely controlled anger. "The question you should be asking is why ~~Why~~ am I here?"

Lucius blinked, confused. "I'm... I'm to be released?" The thought was so heady that he might faint from it.

The Auror snarled, "Only into my care, for now. Much depends on the next few hours...on your next conversation..." The younger wizard grabbed Lucius' arm firmly. "I'm not here on my own accord, but on behalf of one who has asked to see you."

"Auror Lupin?" A guard held out a pair of magically binding handcuffs and assisted the young Auror in placing them on Lucius.

"You're...you're a Metamorphmagus. Like your mother," uttered Lucius, dully putting the pieces together.

"As if my mother meant anything to you." Then Teddy snarled out again, "I'm only here for one reason. Andromeda is dying. She wishes to see you. You'll be under my guard and care. No deviation. At the slightest attempt to escape me, I'll kill you. Your choice, Malfoy. Do you understand?"

"Dying? How? Why?" Lucius rasped out weakly. His mind reeled as he remembered the last time he had seen her that day at Gringotts. True, Andromeda had appeared thinner than he could ever remember. Different. But it had been so many years; so many things had changed. And they were older. *Was she ill then? I hadn't seen her in the flesh for years. Did she use a glamour spell to conceal her true state of appearance?*

"It's not my business why my grandmother wishes to speak to you. If it were my choice, you wouldn't be allowed to get near her. But she asks for you."

And with that, the determined Auror grabbed Lucius roughly to him, and they Side-Along-Apparated.

"Lucius?" Andromeda was weak, but her eyes were gentle and welcoming as she held out her hand. "Come, sit beside me."

Has she forgiven me? Blinking around at the clean sterility of St Mungo's terminally ill ward, Lucius slowly shuffled over to her hospital bed. He gave a wary look to Teddy, who was staring at Andromeda and him with a disapproving frown. But then, the young Auror crossed over and gave his grandmother a gentle kiss on the forehead before abruptly crossing away to stand just outside of the doorway of her room with his back to them; apparently, he wished to give them some sense of privacy.

As Lucius sat carefully down on the mattress, she took his hand.

Lucius sighed a sigh of relief. *She's no longer angry with me? She has forgiven me?* As he felt the soft feminine touch of her fingers giving his a gentle squeeze, he felt a strange sensation of warmth deep within him respond to her, and he placed his other hand on top of hers, holding it.

In a dry whisper, he asked softly, "Young Lupin told me you wished to see me... What has happened, Andromeda?"

"It's an incurable ailment; my blood can't fight it off, can't strengthen." She gave him a small smile and seemed to rest for several seconds before continuing. "I remembered my promise to you and have carried it over to Teddy. He'll honour my wish...to help you. Help you rehabilitate, reinvent yourself again...if you'll cooperate. This is your opportunity to be *good*."

She smiled weakly, and to his amazement, Lucius saw a slight glint of the mischievous nature he had known so well when they were younger. It shone forth from her eyes, an irresistible teasing streak he had pleasurably been the object of so long ago. A powerful wave of emotions washed over him, reminding him of who he had once been. Who they had been, before ...

"How?" rasped Lucius, trembling as a flood of guilt and pain and longing poured forth...from where, he couldn't understand. He had felt all the life inside him dry up, drop by drop every prolonged day in imprisonment; he had thought he was utterly empty, utterly numb.

And yet... and yet as he continued to gaze into Andromeda's soft eyes, framed by the dark circles underneath them and the pallor of her discoloured complexion, he felt a surge of energy that he knew not he had and felt compelled to ask, "How could I make or expect others to give me a second chance?"

"You must take a risk once more, Lucius. The decision is yours. If you choose to rejoin the dance of life, Teddy will help you. Free yourself... Free your mind."

"How?" he croaked. "How can I?" He searched her eyes for the answer. "I'm broken... I've been broken all my life, one way or another. You know that so well."

"Perhaps because you've never felt you truly needed anyone. You only knew control. To control others. You never needed help. Never needed a true second chance. But you have now...someone to help you..."

"How?" he whispered.

"You're a risk taker, Lucius. It's up to you." She squeezed his hand gently once more. "Heal yourself. Let Teddy help you find Narcissa and Draco. Go after them. Claim your life back and live it, Lucius. But for your family. Health and family." She breathed in deeply. "And that includes Teddy. He has no one else. Cissy, Draco and you."

"I think he'd prefer to not have any family at all if we are what is left to choose from."

She shook her head. "That's not true. His veneer is a protection device...you could help one another, Lucius. He is in love with Victoire Weasley; he wishes to wed. He's ready to take the next step in a new chapter of his life. I won't be there for him, but you can be."

Andromeda gazed at him. "Lucius, we made a promise to each other. So long ago, but a promise nonetheless, as you reminded me with your *reclaiming* years ago. But you are lost... and in need of help in your darkest hour."

"My darkest hour happened a long long time ago, Andromeda. Several times. So many times that I can't remember clearly."

She gave him a pained look. "You betrayed me. I had several darkest hours, and you were never there for me for even a single one. Only as a peripheral agent to spur them on... My husband was murdered. My daughter was murdered...my daughter, Lucius!" Her chest rose and fell more rapidly. "My son-in-law, Teddy's father, all of them murdered by your darker beliefs and lack of ability to..." Andromeda stopped herself and looked away for several seconds as if seeing something beyond the walls of the hospital. Then, she continued, "Will you not make restitution when the opportunity is being given to you to do so? Will you not accept my gift, Lucius?"

They both gave a look towards Teddy's figure, outside the doorway, on guard and alert.

"He'll have no one, Lucius, when I'm gone."

"He's a grown man, Andromeda; he doesn't need anyone except himself."

"Listen to yourself, Lucius. After all you've been through, can you still deny that people need people?"

Lucius felt Andromeda clasp his hand as if she would never let go. "There is so much that you can help each other with...Teddy has so many questions about the family, about why...why I fled the madness, the darkness. You understand the madness we struggled to survive in, Lucius. Help Teddy. Help him understand."

"Andromeda..."

"And he can help you... help you rebuild a new life in a new world."

"He despises me. He loathes me. I know the look well."

Andromeda didn't respond, and Lucius watched her carefully as her eyes closed, and her tight clasp loosened to nothing, and she seemed to have drifted into a deep sleep.

oOoOoOo

Remembering Andromeda lying in a hospital bed for the terminally ill at St Mungo's was now another surreal dream. There were times Lucius saw her, saw her dying from her illness, it consuming her, the image consuming him. But there were other times he still saw in his mind's eye the vivacious, middle Black sister, untameable and teasing him.

She had taunted his dreams, haunted his dreams his whole life in one form or another.

She was, seemingly, always out of his reach except for that one time. One time she had had mercy on him and gifted him with touching him the way he had prayed so many times she would. And then... and then she had allowed him to touch her, and kiss her, and...

oOoOoOo

Black Manor, Early Summer, 1972

The labyrinth's towering hedgerow loomed around the pair, naturally cloaking them from any outside interference, but of course, a few cloaking charms were added for safe measure. Sheltered in the spacious heart of the Black Manor's garden maze, Lucius and Andromeda quipped and teased back and forth at leisure.

"Our cousin Regulus Black?"

"You'll find younger men like an older woman... an experienced woman."

"I'm a few years older, but who says I'm experienced?"

"Would you like to be?"

Andromeda gave a cheeky smirk to her future brother-in-law, saying, "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were implying something."

Lucius grabbed Andromeda around the waist and pressed her against him. Against his hardness.

She playfully made to push him away, protesting, "I don't think so." She gave him an irresistible coy look and teased, "You're not my type."

Lucius arched an eyebrow. "And what is your type?"

She smiled and traced his jawline softly with her pointer finger. "Just... something different."

"Different?"

"Yes, different." She gave him a wicked grin, enjoying him being slightly miffed. "In fact, I've chosen someone, someone who is delightfully different."

Lucius' eyelashes fluttered. *Is this part of her game?* He decided to play along.

"Well, let's see. It can't be Rodolphus. He's taken already, *and* you think he's vile." Lucius smirked. "At least that is what you told me the last time I checked."

Andromeda's eyes shined with amusement at him.

"That leaves your blood-traitor cousin, Sirius..."

"Now, be nice; you know I like him," she whispered with her finger pointed upward on her full lips.

"Or his insane brother..."

Andromeda giggled and teased, "He's too boney; besides, he only has eyes for your Dark Lord."

At the mention of Voldemort, Lucius' playful demeanour disappeared. He became taciturn as he searched her face for clues. Deciding he had had enough of playing games with her for this evening, he replied, "You can marry any unworthy idiot you wish, but you'll always have me to make up for what he lacks. Do you understand what I'm saying, Andromeda? What I'm offering you?"

"To be your little darling always, Lucius?" she whispered heatedly in his ear. "To be your poppet? Like my sister?"

"Narcissa? She's the epitome of all that we hold pure and dear." Lucius inhaled intensely.

"Yes, Cissy is a lovely, irresistible creature, isn't she? I'm a little in love with her myself."

Lucius straightened up to his full height and gazed at Andromeda, and slowly, his eyes mirrored the amusement shining from the brunette's. "Are you? I believe I'm jealous." He stepped closer to her. "You don't want to make me jealous, do you?" He reached out and pulled her to him.

Andromeda's laughter set off a wild desire deep inside him. She undulated and playfully protested in his arms until his steady gaze slowly calmed and centred her.

Enjoying the sparkle of her lovely hazel-brown eyes, Lucius questioned what it was about her that he couldn't control himself being drawn to. Andromeda was warmth and softness, her body supple and suppliant and giving, and yet at times, a spontaneous and wild energy emanated from her, like a constant coal burning, only then to explode and sizzle out of control.

She was drawing him nearer and nearer with her *heat*.

"Andromeda," he whispered, his voice husky and low. He found her lips, soft and succulent; she reciprocated and her body yielded to his touch. An overpowering surge to consume her rushed through him.

Breaking for air, he whispered urgently again, "Andromeda..."

This time, she gave him a shove, and he became aware of how painfully hard he had become.

Exquisitely sashaying back, Andromeda teased, "No."

Lucius' jaw clenched, and he was finding it difficult to sustain playing *this* game in particular, one which he and Andromeda played when they had the rare chance of being together alone.

"You vixenish little poppet, you," coaxed the increasingly frustrated wizard, slowly stepping towards her. "You're driving me quite mad. You're thoroughly wicked, you know, making me ache so hard. I can barely take a step."

Suddenly, Andromeda stopped backing away from him, and slowly, a sad but longing expression passed over her face. "Kiss me."

Lucius' hands flexed. "What?"

"Kiss me, Lucius. I want to be kissed by you. *A*kiss kiss... deep and hard."

His eyes narrowed as the air grew heavy with the earnestness of her request. He only thought of the incongruousness of the situation for a fleeting heartbeat before he enveloped her in his arms and guided her down onto the garden's plush banquette placed in an ornamented cupola's centre, gracing the labyrinth's lawned heart.

"Promise me..." she started to say, then stopped.

"What?" asked Lucius, exasperated. "What? I'll promise you anything. Well, not marriage."

She slowly unwrapped the silk tulle shawl covering her shoulders and bared her full and sculpted décolleté.

He huffed, admiring her with an appreciative gaze. *Can this be happening? She's giving herself to me? After all this time?*

He fumbled with her frontal corset bindings, enjoying the texture and challenge of undoing them with his bare hands, without the aid of a wand. He could barely think of what he was saying as his fingertips came in contact with the exquisite silky firmness of her breasts, and he struggled to mumble, "I can't offer you that anymore..." His fingers grazed lightly over one of her hardening nipples, and he instinctively lowered his head to gently lick and explore the natural magic of her body responding to his touching and tasting...

He was lost in time as he felt her undulate and softly moan under his lips as he went lower and lower. He swirled his tongue on her navel and then even lower down, nipping lightly on her soft skin as his hands pulled and impatiently tugged her skirt down. Her scent was dizzying, and he only knew he had to taste its source, the spring of her innate witchery. He nudged his head lower, determinedly spreading her thighs apart. The fragrance from her sex intoxicated him, and he sought desperately to burrow his tongue inside of her.

Lucius took his time exploring every inch of her; he lost track of time and space, and he only knew her taste and touch and had no sense of consciousness other than... *Andromeda!*

And so it was an hour or so later that Andromeda asked Lucius again as he stroked his fingers tentatively over her body, "Promise me, Lucius?"

The blood rushing back into his brain, he blinked hard and frowned. "I can't break off my engagement!"

"No, you silly wizard..."

Lucius held her tight and in a low voice uttered, "Ask of me what you wish."

"Promise me that if I ever ask you for a favour, you will grant it?"

Lucius frowned. "Favour? What sort of favour?" Andromeda had a wild look in her eyes, reminding him of Bellatrix, and it caused a heavy wariness to engulf him.

"A *favour* favour," she mocked gently. "Don't worry. I don't want access to your Gringotts Vault."

Disgruntled at her vagueness of her *favour*, he reluctantly mumbled, "Whatever you wish."

"Are you capable of doing that, Lucius Malfoy? Making an unconditional promise to another? And keeping it? Someone who is not a part of your *affiliation*. One person to another, promising to each other to help the other out in a time of need, whatever the case may be?"

Lucius raised an eyebrow and stared coolly at Andromeda.

"Only if you will promise to do something for me as well..."

She laughed. "Oh, Lucius, haven't you ever heard of unconditional love? Giving without expecting or demanding anything in return?"

Lucius frowned. "If you wish proof of my earnestness, and I of yours, then..." He paused, feeling a sense of empowerment take him over, before announcing, "With my blood, I'll seal the deal. And you, Andromeda? Dare you bond your promise to me with your blood?"

Andromeda gave him a bittersweet smile and then softly whispered in his ear, "Don't worry, Lucius. Absolutely, I agree to your terms."

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Knockturn Alley, Early Autumn, 1972

"How did you find me?"

"How? I have my ways, Andromeda. I have my sources. But I mean, really? Knockturn Alley? Hiding away in a back room of Borgin and Burkes?"

"My family have been loyal customers for ages. It didn't take much for Borgin to do me a favour, take me in...a Dark trinket, and he was grovelling at my feet."

Lucius pursed his lips in thought and raised a speculative eyebrow at the highly excited witch. "My in-laws owed Narcissa and me. They asked if you were perhaps visiting with us... staying the night."

Taking his leather gloves off, one finger at a time, Lucius gave Andromeda a cool stare. "Cissy has covered for you, but... she also sent me to find you. A few Sickles offered here and there and *voilà*..."

"Well, you've found me. So you can leave and tell her I'm fine!"

"I'm not leaving without you," he stated bluntly. But he showed no sign of leaving immediately as he incongruously took off his cloak and then slowly took off his velvety outer jacket. "But first, let us use this time for each other, shall we?"

"Wh...what are you doing? "

"Getting comfortable. Just getting comfortable, Andromeda." He slowly unbuttoned his waistcoat as he slowly walked over to her.

The witch's chest heaved up and down in emotion.

Is it for me? he thought keenly. Before he could close the final gap between their bodies, in a flash, her wand appeared in her hand, and she said, "Step back. Don't make me hex you, Lucius."

Arching an eyebrow, he halted and replied, "Now let's just be calm... I merely wish to talk with you, privately, before we return, Andromeda."

"I am not going with you! I'm not going back! Ever!" Her hand gripped her wand tighter, and Lucius knew she was seconds away from her unleashing her emotional state on him in what would be a horrible hex.

He slowly backed away, lowered himself to sit on a makeshift bed in the dismal back storeroom and leaned against the wall.

"Talk to me, Andromeda. Talk to me like you used to, remember?" Lucius waited for a response, but Andromeda only stared at him, as if she were about to pounce or flee. He sighed. He had forgotten how much like Bella she could be sometimes. "Tell me why. What has happened to upset you?"

She laughed a high desperate laugh, so similar to her sister Bellatrix's. Not Narcissa's. Narcissa never laughed. She had barely ever smiled, in fact, noted Lucius to himself. He gazed hard at Andromeda; her laughter was edged with a distinct bitterness and pain.

Lucius' eyes smarted at the fierce impact of the sound and the restless pacing she had begun to mark the floor with. Lucius pursed his lips tighter in impatience. The Dark Lord would summon him this evening, and he really had no time or nerves for any of the Black sisters' hysterical episodes.

Lucius huffed, standing up. "If you're not going to tell me now, come back with me to the Manor-talk to Cissy. She wants to help you, Andromeda."

"I won't. I can't go back-I won't! I can't be everyone's little poppet anymore, Lucius. Yours, my father's-I can't keep up the pretence!"

"Pretence? What pretence?"

Her head shook with a violent unspoken reason.

"I'm going to him! He loves me-he wants to take care of me; it's something you can't understand, Lucius!"

"Don't do it. If all of this rancid drama, you running away, is about what and who I believe it is-don't do it."

"I can't. I can't anymore. I'm suffocating, Lucius. Suffocating! This life, the lies... The emptiness of it all-it's smothering me. I can't endure it anymore-"

"Andromeda!" He sprung at her and snatched her into his arms, ran his fingers through her hair, stroking her, then holding her, softly whispering in her ear, "Listen to me. Just bide your time. You can reside with us-"

"Lucius-"

"I'll help you. Andromeda, I want to help you. Let me." His voice was strained. "Let me!"

"No, no, no..." Andromeda broke and wept in his arms. And then she struggled to free herself from his grasp, wild and full of unbridled energy.

So like Bellatrix, and yet, not. Proud, strong and as fiery as her ten-months-older sister, born in the same year, reflected Lucius as he held on to her. *They're almost like twins. Except Andromeda's madness is dark and deep, and private... And Bellatrix's is public, all explosive and wild...* He gripped her tighter. Andromeda's pain has always been contained, but this is like an arrow's point, sharp and precise.

As he clasped her fiercely to him, Lucius snapped and snarled, "It's all that filthy Muggle-born's fault, isn't it?"

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Now to Lucius' present...

Sitting on a garden bench, Lucius looked on at the wedding party of Teddy and Victoire Lupin, which was festively going on under a large golden tent. He had stood in as the groom's father, something that he had not done at his own son's wedding, and the role had left him with a profound sense of pride and honour and... a feeling of worth that he had never before quite experienced in life. It was second only to certain memories: the intimate experiences of his own wedding, his son's birth, and yes, one special evening, so very long ago, of making love with Andromeda.

And his promise to her... One of the few promises he had been able to fulfil out of all of the depravity he had been consumed with and participated in for far too much of his life.

The birds chirped; butterflies and spring flowers abounded. The boisterous merry sounds of wedding guests enjoying themselves resounded out and around from inside the tent.

Quaint and lovely, thought Lucius as he noted The Burrow's wildflowers, then turned back to watch the newly wedded couple dancing their first dance.

He felt the gentle touch of Narcissa's hand on his shoulder and looked up. "I believe this dance is mine?"

"By all means." He rose and led her to the dance floor.

Across the tented room, as Lucius and Narcissa joined the dance, Draco and Astoria came and waltzed along with them, closely followed by the youngest Malfoy, Scorpius, whose dance partner was a lovely young witch by the name of Rose.

As Weasleys and Delacours filled the floor, everyone mixed and flowed with the current of music sweeping them around, celebrating life.

Narcissa whispered in Lucius' ear, "Andromeda would have been so happy... and so proud of you, as I am, Lucius."

He was at a loss as to how to respond to her.

"Thank you," whispered Narcissa softly in his ear.

He stared at her, seeking to gauge whether Narcissa offered immunity or if there were still any signs of distressed recrimination for his past. But, she only encompassed him with welcoming eyes. With love. Unconditionally.

He kissed his wife, and she reciprocated.

They continued to dance-to do the dance of life-together.

The war was finally over. That all-consuming, long episode of his life and being a prisoner to it could now be closed. Being controlled by its stigma, which had marked his

every thought and move, was finished. For inwardly, Andromeda and Cissy were more alike of the three sisters, unconditional love being their shared inner core and strength.

Andromeda's gift of restitution had freed him at long last.

The past could truly rest in peace.

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