

Finding Draco

by Keppiehed

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Can he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 8

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Can he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

Draco closed his eyes and leaned his head back until it rested against the brick wall. He felt the familiar pain in his temples that meant a headache was starting up. He sighed and tried to release some of the tension from his neck and shoulders. The noise from the bar was bothersome, and he gave it up as inevitable that tonight, like every night before, he would be cursed with a throbbing skull.

He slowly exhaled and opened his gray eyes to survey the scene before him. Draco had worked hard to become a regular here, just another nobody. After a lifetime of standing out, he finally understood the benefits of not being noticed.

After the war, he had been humiliated, ashamed. He couldn't face going back to his old life. There was nothing to go back to. His personal reputation was disgraced, and his family's honor was completely destroyed. The name of Potter was on everyone's lips as not just hero, but savior, and that was just too much to bear. Draco had to leave.

Had to run away, if truth be told.

The furthest place he could find was America. He wasn't just running away from everyone he knew, but everything he knew as well, and America seemed to him like the place to do it. After all, it was the land of milk and honey, wasn't it? The land of opportunity, and give me your poor and huddled masses, something like that? Draco was done with magic and wizarding, done with the whole thing, and he needed a fresh start. America was going to be the place to do it.

Only no one had told him how hard it was for a boy alone in the world. He had nothing and no one to lean on. For someone who had relied on family and money his whole life, it was more than a wake up call; it was near disaster. Draco had grown up quickly then, had seen the harsh side of things he had never dreamt of. It was an education, all right. One learned the hard way.

It had taken Draco several years, but he eventually worked his way into a life off of the streets. He had his pride thank for that. Now he lived carefully with a cloak of anonymity, in the shadows, always watching. He still felt like he needed to hide and look over his shoulder. He would never be happy, but that was his penance. He had long accepted that.

Draco picked up his beer and downed it, grimacing at the bitterness of the brew. These Americans! All they seemed to want to drink was pigswill! Draco preferred a nice Bordeaux, or even one of the domestic Napa vintages if he had to, but beer was lamentable. If you walked into any bar in town and extolled the virtues of a nice Merlot, however, you immediately stood out as a freak or weirdo. Draco wistfully set down his bottle and listened to the hollowness of the sound as it made contact with the table. He really longed to pluck the stem of an elegant flute of crystal, filled with Moët, perhaps, but those days were long in the past. Now it was burgers and fries in a sports bar. His lip curled at the thought.

Draco suddenly felt tired. There was no use dreaming of the past. This was his life now, filled with things that he had made and constructed to fit in. There was no magic. It was as he wanted it. These yearnings from the past happened to everyone, from time to time. Didn't they? Who wouldn't want the finer things when they had nothing now? He just had to get a hold of himself.

Draco looked blankly down at the food he had ordered. It was a waste he couldn't afford these days, but he wasn't hungry. The ache in his head intensified, and his gaze swept out over the crowd in the restaurant. There was nothing to hold him here, no one to care. He wearily reached into his wallet and threw down enough money to cover his bill and tip. He stood up and walked out.

There was a light drizzle starting in the dusk, and a chill settled over Draco. He shrugged into his jacket and set off for a walk, hoping that the brisk air would help clear the stuffiness of the bar away. The streets were mostly empty in the gloom, and it matched his mood perfectly. He stared at the glare of the light as it reflected off of the slowly forming wetness on the ground, the harshness all around him hurting his eyes. He welcomed the pain defiantly. It helped dull his thoughts, and he walked on mindlessly into the growing night.

He dug his hands into his pockets and was surprised to feel a square of stiffness in there. His brows drew together in confusion as he drew the card out for closer inspection. What was this? It must have gotten into his pocket by mistake at the bar. He was about to toss it away as an advertisement, but a glitter on the card caught his eye, and almost against his will he turned it to read.

His lips moved soundlessly as the words worked themselves into his stubbornly blank brain. "Mind-Healer. The best in the business. Discreet, late hours. Find me when you are ready. 303 Pickle Street"

Draco pressed his lips together. This smacked of magic. He had worked hard to stay unnoticed for too many years to be caught now, but there was no help for it; he would have to move. This was not something Muggle, he was as certain as he could be. Whoever slipped it to him was aware of who he was, so he had to run again. Now.

Draco just stood in the rain, his blond hair starting to drip wetness onto his cheekbones and run in rivulets down into his collar. He didn't even care. He was just so tired of it all. The running, the working so hard. He wanted to be good at something, to be proud of himself. He was weary of always looking over his shoulder. He had been in this city for a while now. He thought he was safe and beginning to settle in. Now he had to leave it all behind. The weight of it was crushing.

Draco stared dumbly up at the street lamp, the pain of the light nearly blinding him. It was later than he had realized. Time was doing that these days, getting away from him. He was just too stressed out. He needed some clarity from this numbing fog that seemed to be around him. He gave himself a mental shake and peered around. He didn't know where he was. He had allowed himself to wander to an unfamiliar part of the city.

Don't panic, he thought. Just trace back to the nearest sign and see if it looked familiar. Draco walked back to where he had come from, noticing the buildings that lined these streets. They looked more like shops. He was not in a residential district, then. This was not a good part of town, though, because a lot of them were dark and abandoned. The ones that were still in business had dim lights shining out through grimy windows. Draco didn't want any trouble. He hurried on to the corner and looked up.

When he could finally make out the words on the cross-streets, he frowned. What was going on here? The sign read that he was at the corner of Pickle Street. Draco glanced down at the card he still held in his hand, just to confirm, and it was just as he suspected. The address of the healer was listed as being on Pickle Street. This was no coincidence. There was some sort of magic involved.

Now that he was attuned to it, he wondered how he could have missed it. There was a subtle hum of magic in the air, as clear to him now as if he had cast the spell himself. He would not easily be rid of whatever sorcery was cast over him; he didn't even have his wand with him. He cursed himself for a fool, but he hadn't needed it in too many years to bother carrying it anymore. Who knew that some random evening trouble would find him? He should've known better; that was how the bad things always worked. When you least suspected it, they sneaked up on you.

Draco might be a lot of things, but stupid was not one of them. If there was magic as strong as this invoked, he might as well find out what was going on, or it would be worse for him in the end. He was tired of running and being a coward. He squared his shoulders and followed the numbers on the buildings. His footsteps echoed eerily off of the deserted damp pavement until he stood before number 303.

It was a small, unassuming door set back in shadow. There were no windows or storefront to advertise what kind of business this place might be home to. In fact, it looked as empty as its neighbors, but Draco wasn't fool enough to believe that. The gilt of the address gleamed at him with an almost knowing wink as he reached for the knob.

The door opened easily on oiled hinges, despite its decrepit appearance. Draco stumbled a little gracelessly over the threshold and quickly regained his footing, ready to meet whatever foe awaited him.

The interior of the shop was at odds with the broken down exterior, showing a warm, welcoming space filled with lit candles and drying herbs hanging from the rafters. Draco further suspected magic at work, as there was no way this place was that big on the inside without some sort of spell. His eyes darted around, but even in the far corners, he didn't detect anyone else there.

There were two overstuffed armchairs, a wall of books, a table with two steaming mugs. Draco frowned. This looked like the sort of place you would curl up and read a good book, not abduct someone to. What was going on here?

A rustle of movement caught his eye, and Draco jerked his head in time to see a figure standing against the curtain of the back wall. There must have been a cordoned off area he hadn't noticed that led to a back room. He couldn't make out the face, but it seemed to be a woman wearing long gray robes. A witch, then. He drew himself up to his full height and waited for the inevitable confrontation.

"Be at ease, Draco Malfoy," a gentle voice floated out to him.

Wait! He knew that voice! Warning bells went off in his head as he tried to place the tone of the woman standing in the doorway. His head was throbbing unmercifully, but he steeled himself to concentrate. This was someone from Hogwarts; it had to be. He couldn't place her. "Show yourself, Witch. What game are you playing at?" he growled at her, his patience unraveling.

"No game," she sounded unconcerned, but started moving forward slowly.

Draco stood his own ground, making her come to him. He knew that she held all the power here, but he wanted to feel in control of whatever he could. Knowing that this was a woman gave him an advantage. He always had a way with the ladies; maybe he could use that here. He tried to give her his most imperious stare until he recognized the face the voice belonged to. "Luna? Luna Lovegood!"

"Who else?" Her voice was still as calm as her features, which seemed completely placid and untroubled by the fact that she had conducted an act of magical abduction upon one of the wizarding world's most influential denizens. Well, he amended silently, he had been an influence. Before.

"Who else?" he sputtered, at a total loss. That didn't happen often. He could only stare at her. He hadn't known her very well during their days at school, but he had heard she was a bit of a nutter. It seemed the rumors were true. "What do you want with me? Do you know what you have done?" He was still slightly incredulous. If it weren't for the weirdness of this mess, and his incapacitating pain in his head, he would have put her in her place effectively a few minutes ago. As it were, his wits were still scattered by the surreality of the whole situation.

She gave him a dreamy little half smile, as if he were a dull-witted child. "I know what I did. It took a lot of effort, you know. Do you know what you did, I think, is the better question." She then looked vaguely at him, but she didn't really seem to expect an answer, as her attention seemed to be directed somewhere over his left shoulder.

Draco felt the strangeness of this whole encounter multiplying by the moment. "Luna? I think that you have some problems. Really. You have enabled a very strange magical adherence spell that located me and drew me here to you. I could feel it. I don't know your purposes, but abduction is against the law, as I am sure even you are

able to realize. So, I am going to just be on my way, and I won't mention this to the authorities, but you will *back the hell off!*" Draco winced as the volume of his own voice hurt his head. He hoped that didn't ruin the impressiveness of his speech.

Luna spread her hands. "You are free to leave anytime, Draco. Go in peace."

Draco was suspicious. This wench was a total nutcase. "What is going on? What game are you trying to play?"

Luna tilted her head. "No game. I already told you that."

Draco was getting frustrated. "Then what is the point in kidnapping me here, just to let me go?"

Luna laughed, but it grated on his nerves, as if she knew something he didn't. "You are being a little dramatic, don't you think? I didn't abduct you, Draco. I merely invited you, and you accepted my invitation. You are free you leave, as any guest would be. Go, if you want. But," she lifted a pale eyebrow, "I do believe that I can help you."

Draco felt himself gaping, and struggled to regain his ground. "You expect me to believe that you, a person with whom I am not intimately acquainted, located me by accident and just... *happened*... to send out a magical invite to hang out at your creepy place?" He gestured around. Her place wasn't creepy, far from it, but that was beside the point.

"Of course not. That isn't true, is it? I took a great deal of pains to locate you. That is my business, after all. I was just saying that I didn't abduct you and bring you here against your will. You wanted to come, and so you did. Even if you didn't realize what you wanted," she added thoughtfully.

Draco was reeling from confusion that was making him wonder if some dark magic was at work. "Will you please stop speaking in riddles?" he gritted out. "What are you talking about? What is your business? How-why-did you try to find me? Are you working for-" Here he broke off, almost unable to say the name that hadn't crossed his lips in so many years. "-Potter? You were friends, after all," he spat out accusingly.

"Oh, Harry? No, I haven't seen Harry in ages! Not since he got married and settled down. He is very happy now with Ginny and-" Luna saw his face and hastily changed the subject. "No, Harry did not send me. I am my own mistress. I have my own job now, and I am quite good at it, you know." Luna seemed to focus on Draco for the first time, and her already gentle features softened some more. "Look, why don't you sit down while I explain it to you? No use standing here when we could be comfortable. I can see that you have a headache."

Draco instinctively stiffened at what he perceived as her pity. "I just want an explanation, if you think you can manage that in short order. I am not here on a social call."

Luna shrugged and left him standing there. "Well, suit yourself. I am going to sit down while I talk. If you change your mind, I poured a hot cider for you." With that, she took a chair and began to sip on one of the steaming mugs.

Although he was still suspicious, Draco was not raised without manners, and he felt like a boor standing there in the middle of the room while she curled up in her chair as if he were not there. As she began to talk, he walked to the empty chair and sat down in it, just out of courtesy. He had to admit, it was comfortable.

"I trained as a Healer after the war. It wasn't what I originally had intended, but I seemed to have a knack for it, and, well, who ended up where they thought they would be after that time? It turned out that I specialized in helping people with... disturbances in certain areas," here Luna trailed off uncertainly. "To be blunt, there was a big need for Healers who were good with mental problems. Those are the kind that are most deeply entrenched, the injuries most resistant to treatment and magical intervention. Not every Healer is equipped to handle it. It turns out that I can. So that is what I have done in all that time."

Draco had been listening out of politeness, but the import of what she was saying seeped in. "Are you saying that you are here to treat me?" His voice was startled.

Luna took a sip. "I know it seems hard to accept. The magic from *You Know Who* had seeped into the air after his... destruction. In the intervening years, we realized that it created a kind of poison to those around him, and that it had done damage. The good news is that it is reversible, but it has been worsening without treatment. You must be in agony, Draco. I can help you. That is why I am here."

Draco was trembling in anger. "Are you suggesting that I am poisoned? Insane? You are the crazy one, Lovegood! Everyone knows it! I am leaving, right now. Don't contact me again!"

Draco shot up out of the chair, and a wave of dizziness and nausea almost brought him to his knees. He mastered himself with all of the bitter pride that had gotten him through his life and strode in the direction of the door. It was a haze, so he was only guessing. His vision still wasn't clear. When he was nearly there, Luna's soft voice called out to him.

"Draco, wait. The headaches. That is a side effect. They started after the war, right? They have been worsening. They will only get worse. Your temper, your sadness and confusion, the emptiness inside of you. I know all of that. It isn't a weakness. It is just that you are sick. Think of it like this: you caught a cold. And I have the medicine to make you better. Otherwise it will go on like this, only getting worse, for the rest of your life. And I am so afraid that will be short at this rate." Luna sounded sad for the first time since he got there.

Draco's hand stilled on the knob. He was so tired of it all. "How did you find me?" He was ashamed of how hoarse he sounded, the betraying weakness.

Luna stood up. "Your need was the greatest. I seem to be able to tell, wherever they are, whomever they are, who needs me the most. There are so many, I just get this feeling. I know, it isn't much of an answer for you. I can't really explain it. It's all I know. I can't rest until I find out who needs me. Will you let me help you?"

Draco felt crazy and broken, like the whole course of his life rested on what he said next, like nothing was as important as his answer. He took in a ragged breath, determined to turn her down. He didn't need anyone. He would rather die alone in a gutter than risk his honor accepting help from a Gryffindor, of all people. His words stuck in his throat.

"Yes."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 8

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"Good! I knew you'd agree!" Luna laughed girlishly in her high-pitched voice. "Let's start the procedure right away. Come and sit back down over here while I get ready. It will only take me a moment."

Draco turned away from the door, already regretting his hasty answer. Luna's chatter was annoying to him, so he tuned her out. He didn't have any other options if what she said was the truth. She did seem to know an awful lot about it. He pushed his suspicions away and then did a double take when what she'd said finally sunk in. "Uh, Luna? Did you say procedure? What exactly are you planning on doing?" He tried to sound curious and not nervous.

"Hmmm? Don't be alarmed, Draco. I have been doing this for ages, and it is perfectly safe," Luna assured him. "I don't mean to rush you, but if you don't mind sitting back down, I'd like to get started. This is going to take some time, and it is getting rather late already. I have an early morning appointment with a hinkypunk who has been bothering the people here. I said I would be happy to talk to him. Personally, I think he just needs new shoes," Luna rattled on, oblivious to Draco's rising unease.

Draco came back to the chair he had previously vacated and perched on the edge, his spine ramrod straight. What had he agreed to? This girl was an obvious loose cannon. He had to be crazy to entrust himself to her ministrations.

A jolt of nearly electric pain chose that moment to shoot through his head, making him suck his breath between his teeth. The whole room tilted for a minute, and he saw little black dots swim before his eyes. Draco fought to hold onto consciousness, and the feeling that was dragging him down into the depths passed. He slumped weakly into the overstuffed chair. It seemed that he was at the mercy of a lunatic, like it or not.

He became aware that Luna was calling his name, and he opened his eyes and tried to assume as dignified a bearing as he could manage while in blinding pain. He thought he cocked an eyebrow sufficiently. "Yes, what?"

"I am about to begin. Just relax." Luna was humming.

Draco should have been alarmed, but he couldn't keep his eyes open. He felt soft hands on his temples, massaging. He tried to jerk away from the personal contact...how dare she touch him?...but the struggle was too much, and he felt darkness overcome his senses and swallow him up. His last thought was mortification at losing his awareness like a weakling, and in front of her, like this. Then he knew nothing.

Xxxxxx

Something was tickling Draco's nose. He tried to ignore it, but no matter which way he turned his head, it kept annoying him. With a put-out huff he cracked an eyelid and was instantly overcome with a sensation of complete and utter unfamiliarity. He was curled into a chair and had apparently fallen asleep somewhere. Being that it had been quite a few years since his wild youth had led him to black out over too many firewhiskeys, he tried to remember what the fresh hell had happened. He pushed away the tasseled blanket that was bothering his face and sat up.

Ah, it was all coming back to him. He was at that girl's place. Luna the Lunatic. How fitting. Draco touched his head. The last thing he remembered was having a headache, and then she touched him, and he woke up here. What had she done to him? What time was it?

As if on cue, Luna bustled through the back curtain, singing a little ditty to herself. She saw him sitting up. "Good morning, Sleepyhead. Or, afternoon. You slept like a baby. I always wondered why people say that. Have you ever watched a baby? They don't seem to sleep all that well, if you ask me."

Draco jumped up in consternation, ignoring her blather. "What have you done? I never sleep in! I am, by habit, an early riser! And there is my job to think of. I'm late!"

Luna turned her back to him and started harvesting the herbs that were tied in bundles over her head. "Oh, it's Saturday; did you forget? Yes, um... about that. We need to talk. Draco, have you been forgetting things lately? Or, if not forgetting, then misremembering them?" She peered at him.

Draco stared at her. "Well, how would I know it if I misremembered it in the first place?"

Luna smiled a little, but he wasn't reassured. "Yes, of course. Are you hungry? I made Toads-in-the-Hole."

Draco resisted the urge to run his hand through his hair. That was a habit he had thankfully never acquired. His hair was usually perfectly styled, and even if it wasn't this morning, that was not an excuse for him to break a lifetime of good breeding and go ruffling it up now in frustration at this nitwit girl in front of him. He clenched his teeth instead. "I am leaving. That is what is going to happen. I don't know what your story is, nor do I care. I regret that I tarried last night long enough to get entangled with you. You are not capable of giving me a simple answer to even one question. Please, kindly move so that I may be on my way, and forget you ever knew me. Go help the next poor sap on your list."

"But your headache is gone," Luna explained patiently, as if he had not just brushed her off.

"Yesss, thanks. I might have taken a bottle of Tylenol just as easily," Draco said slowly.

Luna blinked. "A what?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! A Tylenol! It's a Muggle potion, not that it works half the time, but you get my meaning, Loony... uh, Luna. Now, move!" Draco was getting antsy.

"Draco, there is something else," Luna said. "I feel compelled to finish what I started. You know, you came here on your own last night, but after I got involved, I couldn't turn you away, only having half healed you, especially knowing what I know now..."

"It's fine," Draco interrupted her. "I absolve you of your duty, you can be done and not be burdened with guilt."

"No, it's not that," Luna breathlessly continued. "The damage was worse than I thought. Your memories, they may be corrupted."

"What?!" Draco exploded. "What don't you get? Do you want me to sign a paper or something? You. Are. Done. Good-bye." He turned on his heel and left her staring at him worriedly, twisting her sleeve out of shape. "Bloody Gryffindors, this is what I get, every single time I deal with one. Nothing but trouble...." He was muttering to himself in his haste to get away from her. Maybe the crazy rubbed off, he thought wildly.

"Draco, wait!" Luna called, just as he reached the door.

He ignored her.

"I was not in Gryffindor." Her voice was soft.

Draco paused a minute.

"I was in Ravenclaw. Do you remember that?" Luna went on. "Really, please tell me. Do you remember that I was in Ravenclaw?"

Draco thought for a minute. Luna was friends with Harry Potter, everyone knew that. He remembered her at Hogwarts. Draco and Luna hadn't been close friends, of course, but he did have clear memories of her there, sitting at the common room tables, eating and joking and laughing. She wore red and gold robes and belonged to the house that he hated. She attended class, sitting next to Ron, her head close to Harry's as they looked over their cauldron together in Potions. What was Luna talking about? "Luna, you are mental. Clearly, you need some help. Why don't you go to St. Mungo's and take a holiday?"

Luna stepped closer to him. "Listen, Draco, just for a minute. After I started your healing last night, I realized how very much the poison had affected your system. There

were many adverse effects, more than I had ever seen in a person before. I was not equipped to deal with it. I began to see, as I went deeper, that your memories had lost their integrity. Not all of them, just some of them. I do believe that this is reversible, but I need time to figure it out. If I don't, you will not be able to function. I think that the core of memories that are most affected right now seem to be the ones relating to relationships in your school days, things like that, but it will spread into short-term and long-term if I can't help you. Right now, you don't know what is real."

Draco could barely comprehend what Luna was saying to him. "Are you trying to tell me that you were not in Gryffindor?"

Luna shook her head.

The horrible realization crashed over him. He couldn't have faith in anything. He didn't know what was real. He couldn't trust himself. He turned away from her to hide the sudden well of tears that leaped to his eyes. He had never trusted another human being on the planet before this moment; now he couldn't trust himself, either? What cruel jest was this? His only choice was to trust a crazy girl with a bunch of half-baked ideas, yammering on about hinkypunks and nargles? He willed himself to get a grip and took a big breath to steady himself. "Can you do anything about it?"

Luna pursed her lips. "Well, I think so, but who is ever to know what is going to happen when you start messing in other people's memories? I shouldn't like you to be leaching into my brain, but how fascinating. I never have done anything to this extent before. I think that maybe if I used the draft of the..."

Draco felt himself turn greenish.

"I'll certainly do my best," Luna amended as hastily as she could in her roundabout way. "I think there is a fair chance, if you just would relax. It won't hurt more than getting bitten by a ghost."

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"That is sort of an old joke from my childhood, something my father always used to say to me. He would say, 'Luna, it won't hurt more than the bite of a ghost,' because of course, silly, a ghost doesn't hurt." She flashed him a brilliant smile.

"So, to restate the situation, you think that this will be painless, with a little better than average chance of successful recovery of true memory?" Draco confirmed, trying to steer them back to terra firma. One of them had to be the sane one.

"Uh-huh." Luna seemed a little too dreamy for his taste. After all, his rational mind rested on the ability of hers.

Draco snorted. "When do we start?"

Luna turned away. "After breakfast. Or, lunch. I had a hard time with that hinkypunk. It wasn't his shoes after all. Toad-in-the-Hole?"

Draco rolled his eyes. He would be damned if he would eat some witchy, grassroots concoction. Then he remembered that he was broke and crazy. He swallowed over the lump in his throat and, with as much dignity as he could muster, managed, "Yes, thank you."

Luna got the food ready. It turned out to be a rather tasty recipe of toast with an egg in the middle, not nearly as gruesome as the name implied. As Draco sat down to eat, he had a thought. "Luna?"

"Yes?" She looked vaguely at him.

"I have a question. Was Professor Sprout ever the Headmaster?"

Luna went back to eating. She was reading a manual on the mating habits of thestrals. She shook her head and continued reading.

"Even for a short time, like, two weeks, after a suspicious incident involving squid ink in an exploding candy?" Draco pressed her.

Luna didn't look up.

Draco thought hard. Everything seemed like it had happened. What to ask about? "Did Hooch fall off a broom and break her ankle teaching the first years how to fly?"

Luna just grunted.

Hmmm. Draco was getting alarmed. Well, if he was going crazy, he had a thought to console himself with. "Then tell me that Harry Potter didn't defeat Voldemort and become a hero and savior to the wizarding world!" He sat back, triumphant. That one was clearly too outlandish to be real. Even he doubted it; it smacked of megalomania.

Luna fixed him with a blue stare. "That one happened," she told him calmly.

That wiped the smirk clean off his face.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 8

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"... So then it was quite easy, really, to recapture and medicate the chimera. Once you knew what had been bothering him, you just had to offer him a..." Luna's tale had stretched out like an oversized scarf that had no end. Draco could almost feel his eyes crossing in boredom. He didn't give two figs about chimeras, hinkypunks, nargles, or whatever other creature this silly girl insisted on prattling on about with the greatest enthusiasm. If she cared so much about them, then why wasn't she off pestering Hagrid? Wait, was Hagrid real?

Draco sat up and cleared his throat rather rudely. "That's very interesting, Luna." Clearly a lie. "I was hoping that we could talk about me." The truth, if a little blunt perhaps.

Luna blinked at him, drawn away from her thoughts of ailing magical creatures in need of her unique brand of assistance. "You? You weren't there, Draco."

"Yes, I know," he snapped, "but I am now, and I need your help. Could we get back to the topic at hand?"

Luna nodded. "Of course. What do you want to know?"

Draco held his breath and counted to three. Losing his temper would not help him. "Well," he began carefully, "I am not on a vacation here. I do have a job, you know. I have to get back to my real life. How long is this going to take? And, more importantly, how much do I owe you? I..." He broke off. This was not easy for him, but it had to be said. "I am not rich anymore, you know," he finished quietly.

"Oh, I wouldn't take advantage of you, Draco! We'll settle on a fee later. I don't even know if I can entirely cure you, so let's just wait and see, okay? As far as time goes, we will have to have sessions. I can't cure you all at once. This is going to take time. A long time. Perhaps months." Luna looked over his head thoughtfully. "It shouldn't interfere with your work, though. If I am doing it right, you will be getting better after every session."

Draco had stopped listening after she had said the word months. "How long?" he fairly screeched. His head was beginning to throb again, but he barely noticed. "You are trying to tell me that I need to see you weekly for several *months*?"

"There's no need to shout," Luna interjected.

"There most certainly is!" Draco shouted. "Do you know what you are suggesting? Therapy! With you! I won't do it!"

"Well, I don't see why not. I will be doing most of the work," Luna reasoned. "You'll just be lying there."

This further entrenched the idea of a head shrinker in Draco's mind, and he began to feel panicked. He didn't know why, but he just couldn't abide the thought of coming to see Luna every week, as simple as that, like making a doctor's appointment to be cured. If there was one thing he was sure of, it was that she was no psychiatrist. "I suppose you want me to call you Dr. Lovegood, right?" he sneered, miserable. He had no good reason to lash out; he just didn't want to be nice to anyone right then.

"If you'd like," Luna said mildly. "I *am* a healer, you know."

"No!" Draco exploded. "I most certainly would not like! Don't you even recognize sarcasm when you hear it?"

Luna shrugged. "I guess not. Do you want to get started?"

Draco just stared at her. She was totally crazy. He was lost. "Yeah." His shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Okay, just go sit in that chair. You seemed pretty comfortable in it before. That's the point. To relax," Luna instructed him.

Draco began to feel nervous, but he wasn't about to admit it. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I have to remove the poisonous influences first. I began that process last night, but the toxins have already heavily invaded your whole system. It is a vigorous process, but you shouldn't feel a thing. There is a certain stain left by the poison, sort of like ink after you have cleaned it up." Luna was gesticulating as she spoke, as if this would help to clear up what she was saying. "Then we have to address that issue of reconstruction. I think we should cross that bridge when we come to it, shall we?"

Draco was beginning to be sorry he had asked.

"Just lie down and relax, please," Luna repeated patiently, waiting.

Draco settled into his chair and tried his best to get comfortable. He was jumpy in his own skin. The words *toxin* and *reconstruction* were not exactly conducive to relaxation. When he felt Luna's fingers at his temples, he nearly jumped a foot out of the chair and sat up. "What do you think you're doing?" He glared at her accusingly.

Luna looked back at him. She had taken a position behind the chair. "Healing you."

"Well, fine, then, but you don't need to touch me to do it. Just... use your thoughts or something," Draco bit out. He was a private person. He didn't like just anyone to be intimate with him.

"That's silly!" Luna laughed. "How do you expect me to do that?" She began to giggle.

Draco narrowed his eyes, and a dark look came over his face. "That's your problem, *Dr.* Lovegood."

"Oh, Draco, I'm not going to... to... *violate* you, for Merlin's sake! Just lay back and stop this nonsense! You are being more unreasonable than a blast-ended skrewt with a case of the rash fungus!" Luna sounded more amused than exasperated, though.

Draco could feel a blush stain his cheeks. "*You* should be the one worried about being violated, not me!" he spat out snottily before he realized exactly how that sounded.

Luna's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Silence hung in the air.

If Draco had been blushing before, he had to be crimson now. He laid himself down without another word, inwardly cursing himself as a fool. When did he lose his edge? If his days of insulting people with flair were at an end, he might as well give up now. He fervently hoped that if Luna got around to erasing memories, she obliterated this one.

He steeled himself for the feel of fingers on his temples and so was able to restrain himself from flinching when the contact came. He kept his eyes stubbornly open, staring at the ceiling above, focusing on nothing. He was determined not to enjoy what was feeling like a pleasant massage. He chanced a quick look upwards at Luna. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be concentrating on something else, as if he were not even there. Her fingers left his temples and began stroking across his brow, over his nose and cheekbones. He found that he had to close his eyes, because eventually she stoked his whole face, even his eyelids, forming a kind of a mask with her fingers, tracing patterns over and over.

Draco began to be lulled against his will. It wasn't a trance, exactly, but he did feel a warmth, and a tingling, and then the glow of magic on his skin. He felt something being drawn from him, through him, and he struggled with it, tried to fight it, but it drained out and away. He opened his eyes and the world felt lighter and cleaner.

He didn't move for a moment, just experienced. It did seem as though there was a slight difference. He could feel quiet in his head, where before there had been a buzz that he hadn't even noticed until the blessed lack of it. Colors looked sharper to him; everything just didn't seem so bad. He couldn't explain it; it was subtle, but he felt like himself, for the first time in a long time. Maybe there was some truth to what Luna had told him, after all. Maybe he had needed help.

Draco sat up and turned around. Luna was slumped in her position behind his chair. Her skin looked grayish, her blue eyes dull and her yellow hair lank. Had this been the price of healing him?

She seemed to understand his question and didn't make him ask. "I am fine, it is always this way right after. Yours was just a strong dose. I have the capacity to filter this. Don't worry about me, Draco. I just need some time. Why don't you come back in a few days, and I will have devised the next step. I think I got all the toxin, so we can begin the reconstruction work."

Draco had been a little worried; she looked terrible, after all, but he couldn't admit to that. Guilt would mean that he was either at fault or that he cared, and neither of those were true or acceptable. He shrugged instead. "It doesn't matter to me, Lovegood. I feel fine; why should I come back now? I think I'll be on my way, if it's all the same to you."

"Wait, Draco," she reached out, but her voice was hoarse. "There is more. I can't explain now." Her head was nodding in exhaustion, her eyes closing. "It's important...." She stopped, almost gone. "...Come back again...." That was really it; her body folded in on itself and she slipped to the floor; asleep or in a faint, Draco didn't know.

He looked at her with disgust. This was not a mess he wanted to clean up. An unconscious girl on the floor because of him. He just wanted to leave, to get back to his place, shower and forget about this whole encounter. He felt better already. His headache was gone.

He was about to do just that, but when he took one more look at her, something stabbed him in the area of what used to be his gut. Her neck was at an awkward angle as she lay on the floor. She would have a nasty headache when she woke up if he left her like that. Maybe she wouldn't finish the job, then. And if he wasn't all the way healed, he would be in serious trouble. A Malfoy never burned his bridges for sport.

With that sound reasoning to assuage his conscience, he picked her up and laid her in the chair. She was as light as a feather. She reminded him of a bird, all bony and angled. He found the fringed blanket and made sure it was tucked in around her.

And if he couldn't find a self-serving reason for that kindness, then he blamed it on his altered mental status.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Will he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

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A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse

Draco went back to his life, just like he'd told himself he would. He didn't bother sparing a thought for the kooky girl in the weird shop who had healed him. He was better. His headaches were gone, so he had no need of her anymore. She had said she would be okay, too, so he didn't have any obligation to her. In fact, it had been awfully nice of him to have even seen to her comfort enough to pick her up off of the floor, he told himself.

So why did he have this niggling feeling in his chest? He was all right when he was busy and working. He made sure to keep himself occupied all day. At night, though, alone and unguarded, these thoughts kept sneaking past his defenses. They were as bothersome as little gnats that flitted around his head. He kept shooing them away, but a minute later they would resettle.

What if everything he believed in was a lie? What if he wasn't who he thought he was? What was real? What was the nature of reality, then? Draco wasn't usually an introspective guy, and this was the first time he had ever doubted himself. He didn't like the feeling one bit. He didn't like the idea that things were not certain, that he was not king of his kingdom. That was why he had come here, after all. He had left behind everything he had ever known, so that he could have an absolute of at least some kind. Now that girl had shown up and rocked his boat. Well, he couldn't live with that.

When, after three weeks, it became evident that she wasn't going to contact him, and she wasn't going to bill him, Draco got mad. This was not acceptable. How dare she show up in his life, disrupt it like this, and then leave him in the lurch with all of these questions? The only reasonable thing to do would be to go and demand some answers! He intended to do just that.

Draco waited until a Saturday morning, and then showed up on her doorstep. He didn't bother even knocking; he just barged right in. He had worked himself into a temper with each step over, and he was going to give her a piece of his mind. There she was, sitting, calmly sipping something in an earthenware mug, as if she had all the time in the world! The sight of it rankled him unreasonably, and his ire ratcheted up a notch. "Luna," he nodded at her icily, determined to be the victor this time and not lose his wits.

"Draco?" Luna looked up dreamily, as if he was the last person she expected to see. "Hello!"

"Hello," he sneered. "Just sitting here, enjoying your weekend?"

"Yes, thanks. I know this shop that makes the loveliest baguettes, just down the street. You really ought to try one. Is that why you're here?" Luna smiled in invitation.

Draco's mouth fell open. He had forgotten that she didn't seem to understand sarcasm. Perhaps she really was dull-witted. "No, Luna, don't you remember our previous conversation at all?"

Luna considered. "Not especially, to be truthful. After a healing, I am a bit woozy. Did I say something scandalous? I figured you would be back whenever we agreed." She shrugged. "Here you are, so I suppose I'm right. Want breakfast before we begin?" She held out a plate of pastry.

Draco felt like all the wind had gone right out of his sails. Never had anyone done that to him before. He had always had the upper hand in any conversation or confrontation. This slip of a girl was somehow bulldozing right over him, and she didn't even seem to realize it! He had to do something to regain his ground. The problem was, every time he opened his mouth, he was at a loss. He didn't even know where to begin; he wasn't even that angry anymore. Had she put a spell on him or something? Draco eyed her suspiciously.

"Go on, take one. They're made by this woman who must be part pogrebin, I think. You can't stand near her for too long, and she is a little short. It's the red eyes that give her away, but you just can't beat her baklava." Luna was babbling contentedly and fraying a piece of said delicacy to shards while she concentrated.

"Thank you, no," Draco said stiffly, having forgotten entirely where the thread of the conversation had started. How frustrating.

"Oh, Draco, I must warn you, if you have a notion to get some pastry of your own to steer clear of her for now," Luna added hastily, seeing his face. "Just accept mine, there's plenty. You know how pogrebins can be, even half-blooded ones, and I shouldn't think you would be ready to tackle that in your current state."

Draco felt his temper swell, and he grabbed onto it for dear life. Any reason for provocation was better than this constant state of befuddlement! "Oh, and why shouldn't I be able to handle a... whatever you can handle?" he finished, somewhat lamely. As if he, or anyone else in their right mind, had a clue what the hell a pogrebin was.

Luna gazed at him. "Oh, I'm sure you could handle quite a bit, Draco," she answered cryptically.

He was again stymied by her constant acquiescence. He needed to vent at someone, to sting her with his rapier wit, but she refused to play the game and be a target, even

for a minute! He felt out of sorts. That made him sulky. He heaved a dramatic sigh. "If you are done indulging in your leisurely morning, would it be too much to ask that we begin? Some of us have other things to do, you know. We can't all sit around eating *pain du chocolate*."

"Oh, Draco." Luna shook her head. "I thought you knew your geography better. The pogrebin is Russian, not French, although I can see how you easily mistook it, what with the baguette I offered you earlier. Still, if you ever do see the dear lady, I would caution you not to make that mistake in her hearing. She is touchy about it, and you know what happens then!" Luna chuckled, then broke off suddenly as if imagining a scenario that might not be something to laugh about.

Draco felt his face turning red. "It was an expression," he gritted out, "meant to convey my annoyance. Could we please just get on with it?"

"Uh-huh. Whenever you're ready," Luna said, as if for all the world it had been him holding them up.

Draco strode over to his customary chair and threw himself into it somewhat petulantly. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine. I'm ready." He tried not to sound put out. "Go ahead, heal me."

He could hear, rather than see, the slight smile. "It isn't as simple this time, Draco. Remember what I told you last time? I think I got all of the poisonous influence. All that remains is the stain that is left behind. In order to fix that, I have to do some reconstructive work to remedy the areas that have atrophied..."

"What!?" Draco screeched. He leapt to his feet in outrage. "Are you trying to imply that I have brain damage?" His voice was nearly inhuman in its pitch. Probably only bats could hear it in this range. He was too distraught to notice.

"Well, of course," Luna continued blithely, seemingly unaware of the insult she had just dealt out. "I thought that I said that at the outset. However, I think it is reversible. This part is different, though. It calls for your participation! Isn't that exciting?"

Draco could believe he might have suffered a degree of brain damage, because none of this seemed to be sinking in, and he had thought he was a pretty quick study. "Huh?" was all he could manage. Then he wanted to kick himself. Oh well, his chance for first impressions was long past, and this was, thankfully, only Luna, after all. She already thought he was mental. Still, he endeavored to smooth his hair back and snap his jaw shut to preserve whatever dignity he might still maintain. If wit was lost to him, at least he might have his appearance!

For her part, Luna seemed not to notice his floundering and continued with her explanation. "Yes, that is the part that I've been working on and I'm anxious to try. Your morality centers and certain parts of your memory seem to be affected, so I have constructed scenario rehabilitation maneuvers for you to try out. The more success you have with them, the quicker you will be healed. So your health is dependent on your cooperation in these exercises. Are you ready?"

Draco was beginning to feel a little nervous again. "What exactly am I going to be doing in these 'exercises'? And why do you think my morality is lacking?"

"I will put you into a sort of hypnotic state, and you will be in a situation that feels very real to you. You will need to use your ingenuity to solve a series of puzzles to unlock health points. There is no 'right' way to solve a drill, but there are ways that will award you more health benefits than others. Should you choose to do it the 'wrong' way, we will be at this for as long as it takes to completely heal you," Luna explained breezily. "Don't worry; it's perfectly safe. You will never actually be gone from this chair, no matter what you think is really happening in your imagination. Are you ready?"

Draco looked at the girl in front of him doubtfully. This was going to require giving up a lot of control. He wasn't sure he could do that. "How do I know you won't just leave me like a zombie, Doc?" he sneered.

"I have a fairy coming by at three o'clock who needs a charm for mending her wing. I don't think I want to involve you in that!" Luna sighed. "Fairies are a lot of maintenance, especially with men around, and good-looking blonds to boot! You are too much trouble for that. She would put a glamour on you in two seconds flat. Have I told you about the time I happened to find the gateway to Faerie? It only opens..."

"No, uh, some other time. I'm ready now," Draco interrupted her hastily. Luna's stories tended to wander off-topic a bit, and they could be here a while. He eyed her closely. Had she called him good-looking? Of course he was, everyone knew that, but she'd said it very matter-of-factly, not much like a compliment. He shrugged to himself. "What should I do?"

Luna sat in the armchair across from him and crossed her legs. "Just settle in and get comfortable. You won't notice anything is even happening until you begin. Then you will be in a situation. It will be pretty obvious what needs to happen then. But Draco, I am telling you to try and do the right thing, okay?"

Draco sniffed and sat back. "I always do the right thing, Lovegood. Why would you even doubt it?"

"So close your eyes," Luna instructed.

He did. He didn't feel sleepy, just bored. He waited a moment, but he didn't hear anything. Luna wasn't talking or chanting; he didn't feel her hands on his temples. He wanted to fidget, but he quelled the urge. He waited a moment more, but nothing was happening. "Luna?"

No answer. Draco began to become impatient, and he cracked an eyelid. He started when he saw the room around him. He wasn't in Luna's shop anymore! How had that happened? The scenario must have already started! That was fast. He stood up. He was in a store, a Muggle grocery store.

All of a sudden, Draco realized that he was hungry. Starving, in fact. He couldn't recall ever having been so hungry in his whole life, and he had seen some pretty rough times. He recognized the feeling of lightheadedness that came over him, and he swayed on his feet. 'It's just a dream,' he told himself, though it was hard to believe, with the sharp pangs gnawing in his belly. He was nearly delirious. He breathed in slowly through his nose and held his breath, waiting for the feeling to pass. It did, after a moment.

Draco assessed the situation. Luna had said that it would be obvious what to do. Well, he was hungry, and there was food all around. Pretty simple. He reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

Empty.

What the hell? Draco patted himself, but to no avail. He shoved his hands into his pockets, but there were neither the Muggle bills that he had become accustomed to dealing with, nor even a meager coin. Other shoppers were beginning to give him funny looks, but he didn't care. He was desperate for food, and it was surrounding him. The fragrant odor of some rotisserie chicken from the deli section chose that moment to waft towards him, and it nearly brought him to his knees with longing. He had never wanted anything so much as he wanted a piece of that chicken right then.

His eyes cut over to the bakery, and the sight of the freshly baked bread made his mouth water. He could just take a loaf; no one would ever know, and as soon as he got his wallet, he would bring some money back. It wasn't stealing if you paid it back later, right? Draco's feet started towards the bakery of their own accord, as if drawn by magic.

Desperation made Draco tremble, and he clenched his fists as shame washed over him. 'Stop it!' he told himself sternly. Malfoys did not behave this way, not in public, not for any reason! He had to get a hold of himself, whatever it took! Luna had said that this was not real, that none of this was happening. He grabbed onto that thought as a beacon, and somehow found the strength to walk, one step in front of the next, to the exit of the store. He didn't know how he did it, but he walked out slowly, the doors sliding shut in a silent whoosh behind him.

Draco stood alone in the parking lot, the gathering gloom highlighting his misery. It was, of course, winter, and snowflakes began to fall on his head. He felt the bite of the wind more keenly than he would have normally because of his extreme hunger, and he sorely missed his coat. He had nowhere to go, but could only stand there dumbly under a mercury vapor light that flickered on and off, blinding him and making his eyes water in the icy air. When would this be done? Luna had said that he had to solve the scenario and it would be finished. Surely turning his back on temptation was enough of a challenge?

"Damn you," Draco muttered up at the sky, shivering as a gust of wind tore through his thin shirt. He hated himself for shaking, even if it was just with cold.

"Excuse me?" A woman was walking by and heard him. She was startled, thinking Draco had cursed her.

"Oh, nothing, ma'am. Sorry," Draco mumbled. Great. Now he looked crazy and sounded crazy.

The woman gave him a concerned look and hurried away.

Draco stared after her, but saw that she had dropped her wallet. He reached down to pick it up, and it fell open, spilling its contents out onto his palm. There had to be several hundred dollars in there! His voice died in his throat, as the image of the roast chicken popped into his mind. She wouldn't miss a few bills...five dollars, that was all. He would see her name and return the five anonymously, even. Yes. That was what he should do.

Wasn't that still stealing? Draco's conscience nagged at him. She didn't give him five dollars, after all. He was taking it.

Well, he wasn't going to ask her, he told that stupid voice mutinously. He would rather starve than beg! If he returned it later, then no harm was done, he reasoned. Intent was what counted here. Decided, Draco slipped the bill out of the wallet and ran after the woman.

She turned around suspiciously when she heard Draco approaching. He held up her wallet, wheezing slightly with the jog he had had to work up to catch her. The fear melted out of her eyes when she saw it, replaced by recognition, anger, and finally amazement, as all the pieces of what must have happened clicked into place in quick succession in her head.

"Oh, young man, how can I thank you? You have no idea what this means to me. I was just thinking about how there isn't an honest soul in this world today, and how perfect that you came along to prove me wrong just now!"

Draco began to feel something bad creep up his spine. Surely not guilt; he was in the right here! He also started to see spots in his vision, and just nodded his head.

"Please," she continued enthusiastically, heedless of Draco's growing discomfort, "allow me to reward you. It's the least I can do for your restoring my faith in humanity!" She held out a hundred dollar bill to him.

Draco gulped. He had earned that, hadn't he? He had returned her wallet, right? His hand wouldn't reach out. "I can't."

"Nonsense! Take it, with my gratitude," the woman insisted.

Draco began to feel lightheaded again. "No, really, I can't. Please, just let me go." He tried to stumble away. Somehow, it seemed as if this had gotten mixed up. Maybe he hadn't done the right thing after all?

"Are you okay?" he heard the woman ask, just before he fell.

"Of course!" he retorted haughtily, his head hitting the cement.

"Someone, call an ambulance..." She sounded so far away...

Draco opened his eyes to tell her he was fine; he didn't need an ambulance but he saw Luna sitting across from him.

"Welcome back," she chirped.

He grimaced, disoriented.

"Of course, you weren't gone anywhere to need a welcome back to, but I figure you feel as though you were, and that's what counts, isn't it? So, how was it?" Luna grinned.

"Don't you know?" Draco felt like he had been through a war.

"Well, not the particulars." Luna shrugged. "I could peek in on you, but you seem like the type who would want privacy. I know the outcome, though."

"So do I," Draco replied wryly.

"Ha! I suspect you think you do, but go ahead and tell me what you think." Luna propped her chin on one knee.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "I did just fine, thanks. You really threw me to the wolves on that one, you know."

"Well, they aren't designed to be easy. They are designed to exercise your brain," Luna commented. "You did okay. You got half points. In some things you chose the optimal solution. In others," Luna shrugged, "not so much."

Draco curled a lip at this report. "Well, well, I suppose you would have done it better, right, Lovegood?"

"Not really, but it isn't about me. Don't you want to know where you got it right?"

Draco stood up. "I am going home now," he said frostily. "Thanks ever so much for your torture. I think I have had enough for one day. I don't need to sit around and chat like your girlfriend. Don't you have fairies for that sort of thing?"

"Sure," Luna said sadly. "So I'll see you next week then?"

"Maybe. Why, is your social calendar so full that I have to book this far in advance?" Draco asked loftily.

"No, Draco, it's just common courtesy. You know I'm here for you. I'll be ready when you are," Luna said quietly.

Draco was abashed, but he tilted his head up to hide it and looked down his nose at her. "It's good to know you are at my beck and call. When I feel like dropping by for a bit of torment, I'll be back. See you, Lovegood."

"Bye, Draco," he heard her say, just before he shut the door behind him. He didn't know why, but he knew that he would be back first thing next Saturday morning, come Hell or high water.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 8

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Will he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

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Draco had been raised to be mindful of his manners and that included the art of reciprocity. He had been offered breakfast; thus, he was honor bound to procure breakfast this week in return. The fact that he hadn't eaten the bagels from last week was a moot point. He still had a duty to perform, and a Malfoy never fell short of expectations.

Draco didn't think too closely about why he was up at the crack of dawn on the first day of his weekend. If he had, he might not have liked the direction that his thoughts led him. His normally peaceful workweek, filled with previously mind-numbing work, had been curiously boring. He realized for the first time that he didn't really have any close confidants or even anyone at work that nodded hello. This was a little disconcerting. No one noticed him at all. Perhaps he had achieved his goal of blending in a little *too well*.

Since he tried hard not to think these thoughts, even to himself, he didn't have to bother shaking off the sense of unease that was creeping up on him about some of his lifestyle choices. When Saturday morning dawned, he was long awake and ready to greet the day and thought it only appropriate that he bring the first meal of the day to Luna. She seemed particularly fond of it. Not that he cared about her preferences, of course.

Now grumpy about the unintended introspection that he had been trying to stave off, Draco contrarily stopped at the only place that offered breakfast on the way to Luna's, determined not to go out of his way. This was courtesy, no more. He was not making a special effort. If she liked doughnuts, then fine. If not, what was it to him?

He stomped in, the cheerful jangle of the bell annoying him even more. The fluorescent lights made him blink in expected agony...then he realized that he didn't have a headache. The thought stopped him dead in his tracks. This was the first time in a long time that he hadn't been blinded by those harsh lights. Maybe Luna's treatments were really working.

"Can I get you something?" a girl in a ridiculously pink uniform asked him, way too chipper for this time of morning. *Ah, well, that's what you get for stopping at a twenty-four hour place where the girls drank coffee all night long*, Draco thought condescendingly. *Another deplorable American habit. What was wrong with tea?*

He shook himself out of his thoughts. "Just pick me out a dozen." He waved his hand, deliberately negligent as to the choices.

"Cake or filled?" the girl leaned over the counter slightly. She seemed to be flirting.

Draco was used to his effect on women. He was particular about who he took home, but he enjoyed the interplay, wherever he was. He was a good-looking man and women appreciated it. Today, however, he felt nothing. Draco fixed the girl with his icy gray stare. The whole thing seemed so silly, really. "Whatever seems best to you, I'm sure. I trust your superior judgment as the doughnut expert." He allowed himself a small smirk. It felt good, like his old self, something he hadn't known he was missing.

The girl got the insult and snapped her spine straight. "Fine."

Draco's eyes fell on a machine behind the counter and a thought wormed its way into his brain. It wouldn't be any extra effort, since he was here anyway, so it was okay. "Is that hot cider?"

"Unh-huh." The girl was tossing his doughnuts into a sack rather more harshly than warranted, he thought.

"I'll take a cup to go, as well," he said. The memory that she liked that was a real one, he knew. She had been drinking it twice since he'd been there.

The girl rolled her eyes to make sure he saw her disdain. "Whatever. That's \$7.55."

Draco paid and left. The whole encounter left him in better spirits, and he arrived at Luna's in a decent mood. He knocked briefly and opened the door. As always, the knob turned easily for him and he went in.

"Luna, I brought break..." Draco ground to a halt, as Luna was not to be seen in any of her usual places. Was he there too early? It had taken him a while to actually get there, so it should have been fine. Where was she? "Luna?"

"I'm here," her voice called, muffled, from behind the curtained area.

Draco set the food on the table, pleased with himself. He pulled out a chair to sit down, and found that he was actually looking forward to talking to her and finding out what crazy creature she had a cure for.

He frowned. What was the matter with him? He needed to get out more if he thought Luna Lovegood, of all people, was good company. What would his father think if he could see him now? Draco felt a blush stain his cheeks at the thought. The mighty had certainly fallen. Well, he had fallen far, but he would not fall far enough to lose sight of his pride. Draco held his breath for a moment. He may have needed Luna's help, but he didn't need her friendship. He couldn't forget that.

Luna chose that moment to come out. She gave him a wan smile. "Good morning, Draco."

"Luna." He inclined his head stiffly.

"I see you brought breakfast. Thank you, but I am ready to get started right away today," Luna stated.

Draco was a little startled. This seemed most unlike Luna. He covered his surprise. "Yes, of course. I brought these for you. Whenever you want them is fine."

"Good. Let's go." Luna led him to their customary places, and Draco sat down. He couldn't help feeling a little lost at the curtness she was showing.

"Luna, you aren't feeling sick, are you?" Draco began to worry a little. Not for her, he told himself, but for his own welfare. If she wasn't up to snuff, then maybe something would go wrong. He couldn't chance it. "We can do this another day, you know."

Luna sighed. "I'm just a little concerned, Draco, to be honest. This next scenario is one that is short, but pivotal. I don't think you will have any problems at all. I will just feel

better when it's all over with, that's all."

Draco eyed her. She did look a little tense. Maybe that was it. Luna probably didn't stress out too often; maybe it didn't agree with her. The rest of the sane world just drank a fifth of gin to deal with it, but Draco suspected that Luna wasn't the type. He could see dark purple smudges on the delicate skin under her eyes, and he guessed that she hadn't been sleeping. Well, it was no concern of his if she was dull in her personal life. Not being able to sleep because of your problems was boring, he concluded. He pushed the fact that she wasn't sleeping because of worry over *him* conveniently out of his mind and picked a piece of lint off of his arm. "Ready when you are."

"Okay," she smiled tiredly, "same as last time, just close your eyes, and you will open them in a situation that needs resolving. Only, in this case, there are several solutions. Think carefully if you want full credit this time, Draco," she warned.

"Yes, I understand," he answered impatiently, closing his eyes. He could do this without help. He'd done the right thing last time, hadn't he? Well, mostly.

Draco opened his eyes to find he was standing on a patch of grass in the sun, in a neighborhood not far from his family home. The sun was shining right in his eyes. He reached out a hand to shade it. There were trees all around him. Ah, now he recognized where he was, in a park! There were kids around, but it wasn't too crowded.

It wasn't immediately obvious what he was supposed to do there. Draco was relieved to feel that he was not starving. He took a step, and the first thing he noticed was that his wand was jammed into the back pocket of his pants. Draco reached back and took it out thoughtfully. He had not used magic in so long a time, he was nearly a Squib! He took a moment to readjust to the feel of the wand in his grip and ran his fingers over the wood. He couldn't decide if it felt good or not. In the end, he just let the well of emotion pool around him and then shoved the wand back in the pocket it had come from.

A cry interrupted his musings, and he looked around. A little girl was standing by the nearest tree, bawling her eyes out. Draco couldn't help but feel bad. He looked around for her mother or an obvious guardian, but the girl seemed alone. Ah, it must be the beginning of the challenge, then. Still, he approached her cautiously.

"Hey, there," he started uncomfortably. He had never been good with kids. "What's wrong?"

"My kitty!" the girl sobbed uncontrollably. She managed to point up. "He's stuck in the tree!"

Draco looked up, and sure enough, up in a monstrously huge oak tree was a tiny black kitten. It saw Draco looking and meowed adorably. Draco scowled. This had Luna written all over it. At least it seemed straightforward. Get the damned kitten out of the damned tree.

Draco sighed. He didn't feel like putting the energy into this. It didn't seem to matter what he wanted, though, because the little girl was crying louder with every passing second. In fact, a crowd was beginning to form. Draco eyed the tree as the girl began to hiccup. It didn't have any obvious hand holds, but he might as well give it a go. Maybe the girl would quit her whining if he did something constructive. She was beginning to get on his nerves.

Draco hitched his pants legs up and tried to find purchase in the gnarled bark. It was old and crumbled the minute his shoes made contact. He circled the base of the tree, an endeavor that seemed to take him a full minute, and though he found a few reasonable knots he might use, there were no branches or anything else that he could use to grab onto. He hadn't been the sportiest child, having been denied tree-climbing privileges on the grounds of the Manor, so he had to give up almost before he began. This was not a tree he could scale.

The kid was really beginning to go supersonic in her grief. Draco looked up and saw the kitten sitting there calmly, way up in the leafy green canopy. He could almost see the twinkle in its beady eyes all the way from where he stood on the ground. "Hey, kid, do you think you might shut up so I could hear myself think for a minute?" he ground out through gritted teeth, the sound of her voice piercing his eardrums.

That only made the crowd gasp, and the little girl wail louder, if possible. Draco groaned. This was a nightmare!

All of a sudden, he realized that he had his wand with him. Ah, perfect! It must have been sent to help him deal with this mess. He whipped it out and pointed it at the wicked little black rat, intending to *Accio* it and be done with this as elegantly as he could still manage, but at the sight of this action, the little girl became hysterical, shrieking, "Don't shoot my cat! Please!"

Draco looked at her like she was insane. "I'm not going to shoot your cat, kid! I'm going to get it out of the tree for you."

"Please don't shoot her, Mister!" The little girl was so distraught, she threw herself at Draco's feet, crying and hyperventilating.

Draco was nervous and annoyed. Apparently this avenue of retrieval was blocked to him. He lowered his wand. "Fine. I'm not going to hurt your cat, kid. Relax, will you?" He shook his leg, a feeling of disgust overwhelming him. Before she could protest again he shouted, "*Accio* broom!"

This brought his broomstick flying through the ever-growing crowd just moments later, to shouts of mingled awe and dismay. Draco held out his hand and caught it neatly, then swung one leg over, ready to fly up and get the girl's cat.

The little girl's mouth hung open in pure surprise as she stared up at him. The broomstick maneuver had caught her off-guard, and stopped her tantrum in full swing. "You're a witch?" she asked him tearfully.

Draco grimaced. He raked back his blond hair with one hand, and gave her his most distinguished smile, one he thought might be appropriate for heroes to bestow on little girls while rescuing their kittens, if he were the type. "A wizard, actually."

The little girl's lip trembled, and Draco knew what was coming. "What?" he snapped.

"Don't... don't... steal my kitty!" she pleaded, her eyes full of tears. The assembled crowd ahhhed, and she began to cry again in earnest.

Draco was exasperated. "I don't want your stupid cat!"

"You're a witch, and witches always want black cats!" she wailed.

Draco's lips curled in utter disgust. "Oh, for Merlin's sake." He had had enough of this humiliation. He pushed off the ground and shot into the tree, careful not to clock himself with a thick branch. The kitten saw him coming and didn't even try to escape, just crossed one paw over the other. Draco squeezed a bit harder than he needed to when he picked it off the branch, but it purred the whole way down. Just before he handed it to the girl, he felt the pink tongue dart out and lick his finger. Draco scowled and thrust the cat at the girl.

"Oh, thank you, thank you..." As soon as the kitten left his grasp and was in her hands, Draco saw a flash of light, and he was back in the chair, staring at Luna.

"Well, that one was terrible!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you think I failed, right?"

Luna let out a breath she had been holding. "You got the girl her cat, right?"

Draco wrinkled his brow. "Yeah. So I won?"

Luna was silent for a minute. "It isn't winning or losing, Draco. You know, I once heard someone say, 'Magic without morality is corrupting.'"

"Dumbledore," Draco guessed contemptuously.

"It is true, you know. I've seen it happen. If you have ever been around the Fae, you will know that. I can tell you a tale or two, but really it just twists the mind into a thin

ribbon of metal, and then there is nothing left but a ghost of a person. You have seen it, too, Draco," Luna whispered.

Draco knew what she meant, but he was unable to admit it.

"You didn't handle the scenario as well as I had hoped you would. But I was hoping for a lot. Too much. The point of that exercise was nearly inhuman. The girl was so hard to deal with. The ultimate win in that was not the cat, but the comfort." Luna stopped looking at Draco, and picked at a loose thread on her robe, her voice quiet and subdued. "I was hoping that no matter how irritating she was, you would find it in your heart to be kind to her, Draco. A fellow human with a need. She had need of some comfort. Any small amount would have done, and been the unlock. You just couldn't do it, though. You were mean to her." Luna wouldn't look up. "You will never heal, never be the wizard you once were, if you can't find your heart and not be so afraid. I can only lead you so far into the light, Draco. You have to take the steps yourself. I don't want you to be lost."

Draco didn't know what to say. He had been filled with anger, annoyance, lust for admiration, the impatience to be done with the job. He had never stopped to consider that there should be a better motive. His mind just didn't work that way. Shame flooded through him. It wasn't the first time, but it was the first time that he let it, and didn't hide it. He bowed his head.

"Draco," Luna said gently, "You didn't fail, either, you know."

"I can see that I did just wonderfully in trampling everyone's feelings. What is left to me?" Draco said bitterly.

"You had a choice," Luna pointed out. "There were a lot of outcomes to that scenario, you know. You did rescue the cat, after all. You did the right thing. In some outcomes, perhaps the cat doesn't survive. Perhaps the girl doesn't."

Draco looked up at Luna in horror. "How much of a monster do you think I am?"

Luna shrugged. "I don't. You never know the power of the mind, though, Draco. You shouldn't underestimate it. The things I have seen people do." She smiled apologetically. "If I thought you were a monster, I wouldn't be trying to save you. I just know you are capable."

Draco looked at her uneasily. "Small difference."

Luna laughed. "Big difference. We all are capable of a lot of things. It's our intentions that make us who we are, Draco Malfoy, and don't you forget it."

Draco looked at Luna with new eyes. He couldn't decide if she was the craziest person that he knew, or the sanest. Maybe both, at the same time. "What are you capable of, Luna?" he asked her seriously. He was surprised that he'd asked her. He didn't know where it had come from, but all of a sudden, he wanted to know the answer.

Luna looked straight and sure into his eyes. "A miracle, I hope," she answered without hesitation.

Draco didn't think he liked the sound of that.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Will he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

Disclaimer: This all belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse.

Draco was not happy.

Therapy (although he was loathe to admit that it was, indeed, therapy) was supposed to *bè*helping him, wasn't it? Instead, he was starting to notice that he was not at all happy...with anything. Before Luna had dropped into his life, he had gone about his business with a certain amount of satisfaction. He had always gotten by. Now, it was as if he had woken up from a long nap and realized that he had been living a nightmare. No one knew him. No one cared what happened to him.

How had he allowed such a situation to develop? Malfoys were not part of a herd; they didn't just blend into anything, ever. Yet that was what he had been doing for far too long. He had to change that, right now. This could not be allowed to continue. Draco was not a drone. He had been the Sex God of Slytherin, dammit, at one point in his life! You didn't just earn a title like that by sitting back and letting people waltz all over you! Some kind of action needed to be taken, and fast.

Draco stared at his face in the mirror. He hadn't lost his looks, thank Merlin. He had his genes to thank for that. Obviously women still found him attractive. He tilted his chin up and glared at himself. He still had an imposing stare. Now he just had to get his confidence back. Somehow he had lost his nerve, or his drive. He clenched his fists. It was that damned Potter, always him. The very idea of his arch-nemesis soured Draco's mood instantly. He flipped off the switch in the bathroom with more force than necessary and nearly bruised his finger in the process.

Draco hadn't been paying attention to his wardrobe since his flight to America. His time on the streets had taught him about economy and necessity, and for some reason, he could never quite bring himself to care what he looked like anymore. Now, suddenly, as he surveyed his choices, he was displeased. He might not be rich, but he was no pauper, either. What had he been thinking when he bought this stuff? This wasn't dressing to his best advantage. If Draco knew anything, it was how to look good, and this stuff wasn't going to do the trick.

He felt more like his old self as he picked through the piles of his sad laundry with a jaded eye for fashion. When he found a red lumberjack's flannel...that was the final straw. Had he ever worn it in public? Draco tried frantically to remember. He resolved to go shopping as soon as he could manage it. In the meantime, he found a black turtleneck and a pair of jeans that would do nicely. He looked himself over in the mirror. Not bad, if he did say so himself.

It was a Saturday, so Draco supposed he should head over to Luna's. He didn't want to go, but they had an informal arrangement, and it would be bad manners to stand the poor girl up, after all. He wouldn't want to deprive her of his presence when she probably waited all week for it. He brushed his hair back out of his eyes and grabbed his coat.

Draco was there in no time at all, and when Luna heard him, she called out, "Draco? Come on in. I'm just making up a tincture. I'll be done in just a minute, if you don't mind waiting."

Draco took off his coat and tossed it negligently across the back of one of the unoccupied couches, since there didn't appear to be a coat rack. "I'll just make myself at home," he replied sarcastically, sitting in his spot.

"Please do, it'll just be a second. Remember that fairy I was telling you about? The one from last week? Well, the spell didn't work, so I had to make up this unguent because..."

"Spare me," he muttered witheringly. "Your fairy tales are really of no interest to me, Lovegood."

"Oh, but this one is just so interesting, you see. The fairy tore her wing because she..." Luna continued on doggedly.

"Luna!" Draco interrupted. "I said I don't give a sickle about your fairy! I am here. Don't you want to talk about *me*?"

There was a short silence. "What about you?"

Draco smirked. That was more like it. "Well, whatever. Isn't there anything you want to know about me? I'm sure you lead a dreary life here, and I am your most exciting acquaintance. So, go ahead. Ask me anything."

"How did your head get so big?"

Draco sat up and frowned. "What?"

Luna came over and smiled sweetly. "Nothing, Draco. I wanted to tell you before we start that this is going to be a big challenge for you today. It's going to be different from the last two, and maybe take you longer to figure out."

"I hope it's more fun," Draco muttered darkly.

Luna smiled. "I think that for you, it will be more fun, yes. Also, Draco, I think that you are doing remarkably well. Depending on how you do today, I should have a much better idea of how many sessions we have left."

Draco raised an eyebrow at her. "You mean, I'm almost done?"

Luna swallowed. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. It depends on how you do on each challenge, remember? They are all different, so they'll be harder for you, or maybe easier, depending on personality and where the toxins left a mark. Let's just see how it goes. All I can say is that you should try your best to do the right thing every time."

Draco felt annoyed. Luna was so concerned about hammering home this message, like the moral in a children's story that she thought he was too stupid to understand. "I get it, Lovegood. Go ahead...do your worst. I will always come out on top." Draco didn't know why he was trying to rattle her with that choice of words, but he was. He held her gaze, a supercilious look on his face.

Luna got the point. Her white skin flared red, and she dropped her eyes.

A slow smile crossed Draco's face. Could Luna be harboring a crush on him? Oh, this was too good to be true. "What's the matter, Luna? Cat got your tongue?" he drawled softly.

Luna frowned into her lap. "Let's just get started, okay?"

Draco grinned. This was going to be fun. This was territory he could easily navigate. "Well, well, it seems as if the tables have turned. You are the one wanting to move fast now."

"Draco! Let's just do this right now." If anything, Luna's face was redder than before. She sounded a little desperate.

Draco should have taken pity on her. He knew what it was like to have the kind of complexion that gave you away like that. It was traitorous. Right then, however, he was simply enjoying himself too much to care about the cost to her. "If you really want to 'do this right now,' I am not one to stand in your way..." he trailed off suggestively. He loved it when he could use his victim's own words and throw them right back in their face like that! Luna must be pretty innocent to not have even seen that one coming!

Silence. He peeked up through the fall of his bangs, which he knew was a particularly devastating look for him. Luna was just sitting there, with her fingers threaded together, staring at her lap. She wasn't flirting back, or grinning at him. She was shaking a little. Draco felt what must have been remorse flood through him. She just looked so vulnerable and still sitting there, so pure, like a statue of marble. All of a sudden he felt like the world's biggest heel, and he desperately wanted to protect her.

Where were these thoughts coming from? He didn't want to protect anyone! No one was worth that, least of all some Ravenclaw. Or Gryffindor. Whatever. He shook his head to clear it. Luna was still sitting there, drawn in as if to protect herself from his verbal onslaught.

He cleared his throat. "Luna?"

She didn't look up.

He continued. "Uh, I may have upset you with some comments that were... more forward than I intended. It was only in jest, and I hope that you can get over that in order to finish my healing. After all, we are both adults here. It wasn't like I actually *meant* anything. Right. So, can we get back to the business at hand?" There, neatly handled, Draco thought. He hadn't actually apologized, but he'd let her know that she didn't have to freak out. It was a win-win.

Luna sat there for a minute, and Draco had to restrain himself from a few eye-rolls. A little bit of teasing, and she really took it to heart! This girl was psycho, all right.

Luna avoided looking at him. "Fine. Let's begin," she finally said.

Draco just closed his eyes.

He heard the noise before he saw it this time. There was a roar, and when he opened his eyes, he knew right where he was. He recognized the Quidditch pitch in the main stadium at Hogwarts. He was right in the center of it, all by himself. Except that it wasn't set up for Quidditch today. Chained to the ground, in the center of the stadium, was an enormous dragon. If Draco recognized the breed correctly, it was one of the fiercest. A Chinese Fireball. It looked mad.

The roar of the crowd shook him out of his state of shock. It looked like most of the school was there. Draco looked up, past the banners in Slytherin green and silver, to all of the people assembled to watch this spectacle. He recognized a few people. There was Professor Sprout, and Blaise Zabini. He saw Cormac McLaggen and a few other faces from various houses. So this was not current time. The faces looked younger, like he remembered them from his youth.

Draco should have been most concerned about the angry dragon in front of him, but there was a twisting in his gut. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the crowd yet. He scanned frantically, every row, every seat until...

Draco relaxed. He wasn't there. Potter was not there to watch him. Neither were his miserable sidekick toadies, the so-called Golden Trio. Draco didn't care to examine why it mattered so much what stupid Potter thought; he was just glad that he was free to concentrate on his task without having to worry about blundering in front of *him*. Not that he would, of course. He just didn't want to spare a thought for him.

A white-hot jet of fire rent the air, followed by an ear-splitting screech from the dragon. Draco ducked. Time to consider the problem at hand. The dragon was getting

irritated. What was Draco supposed to do? This scenario, unlike the last one, was not very clear. He was standing there with a dragon. Now what?

The dragon began pacing. Its tail started lashing. The crowd sent up a few oohs and aahs. While Draco was trying to figure out what to do, the Fireball was getting impatient. Draco felt the familiar shape of his wand in his pocket, and didn't bother to spare a grin for Luna's unintended visual pun. She was, apparently, too innocent to see the double entendre that it was.

Maybe he had to kill the dragon? No, Luna had seemed pretty uncompromising on the idea that this was a moral exercise. So, killing was a last resort. Was the dragon hiding something? Maybe it was guarding treasure, like the egg that Potter had to get from the Triwizard Tournament? The idea that Draco had to step into Potter's shoes and do the same task made his blood flare. He could do it just as well as that scar-face and not be found lacking! If the whole school was watching, he couldn't lose! Draco took a deep breath. This was his worst nightmare...to be directly pitted against Potter and found lacking. He couldn't fail.

Draco took one look at that dragon, and the task seemed impossible. The dragon was getting really worked up, lashing back and forth. He was starting to pull against the simple silver chain that restrained him. How could Draco do this? It was mind-bogglingly difficult. He screwed up his courage. If Potter could do it, then so would he!

Draco took out his wand and tried not to shake. When the Fireball saw that, it whipped its head back and forth viciously. Draco felt like running, but he knew he couldn't. "Accio egg!" he shouted.

Nothing happened. The crowd murmured.

Draco felt sick. Perhaps it was not an egg, but something else? Draco tried to rack his brains. What had Potter done in this case? Called for his broom. Draco castigated himself. Stop thinking of Potter! Be your own man!

The dragon spewed a jet of fire right at Draco. In an instant, reflexively and without thinking, he countered *Aguamenti!* Water shot from his wand and helped to protect him. It felt good to do real magic, to not overthink and overanalyze. It reminded him that he had been good at magic, once.

Before he could get lost in nostalgia, disaster was upon him. Some of the water from his *Aguamenti* charm had inadvertently splashed the Fireball, igniting its rage to a higher peak than ever before. Draco watched, helpless, as the irate dragon shook itself into a fury and snapped the only tether holding it steady. It then raised itself to his full glory and turned on the source of its irritation: Draco. The crowd yelled in muted sympathy.

Draco's wits fled him. He was but a man in the face of a towering monster bearing down upon him. Draco's only thought as he stared into the maw full of sharp teeth was sheer terror. There wasn't anything he could do! He was powerless. This thought shamed him even as he was frightened. He didn't want to be scared, but he was. He squared his shoulders.

The Fireball moved with lethal, serpentine grace, and was over him in a crouch before he could blink. The heat radiated off of the iridescent scales like a furnace. Draco couldn't square his shoulders any more. He fell to the ground, the thin veneer of his dignity melted away like butter in the heat. He was nothing more than a coward. This thought pained him as he stared at the horror above him. He almost closed his eyes, so he wouldn't have to witness his own demise reflected in the shiny scales, but if he had, he wouldn't have seen the thorn.

From his vantage point underneath the dragon, a place rarely seen by the casual observer, Draco could see one of the few places that was unprotected on a dragon. The pad of the foot was a relatively tender spot, and this dragon had gotten a thorn lodged in one. Just before Draco's head was in the dragon's mouth, he shouted, "Accio thorn!"

The offending item flew free, and the dragon paused, cocking its head. It stopped and backed up. It examined the injured foot, then recoiled, at peace.

Draco lay his head down, still sprawled in the dirt. The dragon had just been in pain. Leave it to Luna to put a twist on an old children's fable.

The crowd cheered, but Draco found that he didn't need the accolades right now. He was worried about his cowardice. He didn't like how much fear he had shown. If Potter had been in his place...Hell, he *had* been...he would have done it with more finesse. Draco closed his eyes.

Luna was waiting. They both were quiet for a minute.

For the first time, Draco felt the need to ask. "So, how did I do?" He said it without any trace of irony or cynicism.

Luna didn't avoid his gaze. "You completed the challenge, you know that. But, Draco, you have some bigger dragons in your life than a Chinese Fireball to tame. If you don't, they will most certainly eat you alive."

This time Draco looked away first.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 8

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Will he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

Disclaimer: All of this belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse.

Draco was restless. He couldn't put his finger on why, but he had hardly been able to sit still all morning. The feeling had been growing stronger all week, first at work, and now at home. He felt hindered, somehow, and he was anxious to shake off those restraints. The fact that nothing was holding him back didn't ease his mind. He wanted to be gone from here, to be free. He was no Muggle. He was tired of pretending to be one.

The thought surprised him. Draco took a deep breath and settled into a chair, suppressing his excess energy by dint of will. He would not be a slave to his baser instincts. He forced himself to sit rigidly, one ankle crossed neatly over his knee, until the clock struck eight. Then he allowed himself to rise. It wouldn't do for Luna to think he was sitting around with nothing better to do than to show up on her doorstep. It wasn't as if he didn't have a life. He could have been doing anything right now. He had a lot of better things to be doing, in fact. She should just be glad that he remembered to show up at all. He was choosing to do this. It wasn't like she had any special appeal,

Draco rationalized.

Feeling relieved about his motives, Draco made to grab his coat, then stopped mid-motion. His eyes caught sight of his wand, which was lying, neglected, on his dresser. He had been using magic in the scenarios, but not in real life. Suddenly, he longed to feel that sensation again. He reached out and grabbed for it.

The wand felt so familiar in his grasp, it was as if it had never been gone. Why had he given up this part of his life, this part of himself? It was hard to remember now. Draco briefly closed his eyes, leveraging the weight, balancing the wand as a whole. He gently tipped it in a few graceful arcs, appreciating the feel of it, an extension of his reach. Then his gaze hardened. He would not forget who he was again. He would not allow himself to sink into the miserable stupor that had invaded his life for so long. With steel in his voice, he Apparated.

"Draco," Luna's singsongy lilt greeted him without the least bit of surprise at his unexpected intrusion.

"Luna," Draco replied. He was a little nauseous. He had forgotten the effects of Apparating. He was a little out of practice. He was just lucky he hadn't splinched himself in his vigor!

"So, Draco, I was thinking that maybe you might have some extra time today? You know, after our session?" Luna asked, looking over at him. "I was going to go down the street and see if I could help my neighbor clear his garden of gnomes, but it turns out that he spelled them out yesterday, and I have the weekend free after all. Do you think that maybe you would want to just stay for a while? We could play a board game or something. Whatever you like to do. What *do* you like to do, Draco?"

Draco was startled. He looked at Luna, and she was gazing at him with totally innocent eyes, just waiting to hear what the answer would be. Like she was asking a friend to hang out. Like they were... *friends*.

The idea was appealing. He could imagine them sitting, chatting, just having a nice time. After all, what was waiting for him back at his place? Nothing, like always. A cold, empty apartment. It was devoid of all human feeling. He didn't have another soul to care about whether he came or went, if he lived or died. Now this girl was asking to care. She wanted to know about him, his interests. What did he like to do? He didn't know. The idea scared him. He wanted it, wanted her, but he couldn't reach out and take the hand of kindness that she offered. Something hurt in the area of his chest, deep inside. He didn't want to think about that.

He slammed down his mask and narrowed his eyes. "What do I like? It would be too sophisticated for you, I'm sure. Games? The only games I am interested in don't involve a board, Luna." He smirked at her, making his words sting. "My stakes are high. Too high for the likes of *you*."

Luna looked mortified. She looked like a deer caught in the headlights. She had taken a chance, asked a simple question, and gotten into a conversation that was way more than she could handle. Her thoughts were easy to read in her huge, luminescent eyes. They glistened with the tears that wouldn't fall, making them look like mirrors. Draco could see his own brutish self reflected back. He felt like he had just trampled a flower, but he had had no choice. She was getting too close. He had to protect himself.

They stared at each other in silence. His haughty gray eyes, her misty blue, until she sniffled a little. He hated himself, but he couldn't show it. All of the good looks in the world couldn't cover the rot beneath, he thought to himself contemptuously.

"If you're ready?" he inquired.

Luna nodded. Her face was an unbecoming mix of red splotches, as sometimes happened to the fair-skinned when they tried to suppress tears. She walked silently to her seat, waiting for Draco to take his place.

Draco was surprised that she was still willing to help him, after the insults he had thrown her way. She seemed mightily intent on her do-gooding. He couldn't understand it, but he would not look a gift horse in the mouth. He settled in.

"As always... Draco." She seemed to pause over his name. "You know the drill."

He didn't look at her, but closed his eyes. "Indeed I do."

He heard the roar of the crowd before he saw it. Wait, something seemed familiar. Draco opened his eyes.

He was in the same place as the last scenario. Luna must have messed up in her distress. He was in the middle of the Quidditch pitch, with the dragon. Yes, Draco glanced around. Everything was the same. He felt his irritation rise. Would Luna see her error? She said she didn't watch, but she still seemed to know what happened. Draco stood there a moment, while the dragon became annoyed.

Draco felt silly. "Luna!" he shouted at the sky. Could she hear him? Nothing happened, except the crowd roared.

Draco sighed, tapping his foot in impatience. It seemed that Luna was not about to rectify the mistake. Well, what a waste. He would just have to redo this and get another situation. It would be easy, because he knew the key now.

A roar from the crowd drew his attention upwards, and Draco happened to spot some faces.

Wait. There was Professor Snape. And Pansy Parkinson. They hadn't been there the first time around, he was sure of it. Draco frowned. What was going on here? Draco scanned the crowd a little more carefully. He recognized every face there; likewise, he didn't see anyone missing, save one: Potter. Even that bushy-haired Mudblood and red-headed Weasel were there.

Draco began to feel nervous. A sheen of sweat began to slick over his face and body. Something was different here. This time, every person he had ever known was up in those stands, watching him. But he had already completed this task, hadn't he? And why wasn't Potter here? His nerves jangled. Better get this over with. He didn't like where this was going one bit.

"*Accio* thorn!" Draco shouted, pointing at the dragon and desperately hoping that that was the problem this time around. Sure enough, the offending thorn flew to his grasp, and the dragon calmed. The silver chain unlocked itself, and the dragon launched itself into the air and flew away, much to the amazement and delight of the audience.

Draco shielded his face and watched in faint puzzlement. So, that was it? Well, good. He needed an easy one for once.

When he looked back down, he saw the figure of a man standing there. Whomever he was had been behind the dragon the whole time. Draco stepped forward to get a better look. The man didn't move.

Draco's mouth fell open as he recognized that dark, disheveled mess of hair, those black glasses. "Potter!"

The crowd grew silent to hear every word of their exchange.

Harry dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Malfoy."

Draco couldn't keep the sneer off of his face. "What are you doing here? Come to slay the dragon? It isn't *your* challenge, you know!"

"I know. It's yours."

"You are no challenge to me," Draco snarled.

"What are you so angry about?" Harry asked gently.

"As if it's any business of yours what I feel about anything!" Draco was shouting. He was so angry, he could hardly stand it.

"Maybe it is," Harry said calmly.

Draco saw red. That smarmy git had nerve to even address him! The very idea that Potter thought that he had any control over what Draco thought or felt made him lose his temper. "Shows what you know, Potty! I'm not mad at all! You stupid, miserable, jerk..." Draco fell silent as he realized he was screaming at the top of his lungs. He struggled to regain control. He just wanted to hit Potter's idiotic face as hard as he could!

Harry was watching him. "No, Draco, I don't think you are mad."

"What?" Draco looked up, taken off guard by his agreement. Did he have to be so damn agreeable? That was annoying! Draco clenched his teeth.

Harry leaned in, so the audience wouldn't hear. "I think you are sad."

Draco gaped at him. "Sad? Sad! You are a sorry sack of sh..."

"...And embarrassed," Harry interrupted quickly. "And a whole bunch of other things, but mostly just sad. There is one other 'S' word, but I can't help you with that one."

"Well, unless you mean sexy, Potter, you are out of your mind. And frankly, I didn't think you swung that way, but what do I know?" Draco looked him up and down and said, in as insulting a tone as he could muster, "Even if you did, I wouldn't help you out, because you aren't fit to shine my shoes, let alone look at my gorgeous face and dream about having a crush on *me!*"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I didn't mean 'sexy,' Draco. For the love of Merlin..." he trailed off, almost looking amused.

"What?" Draco's temper flared. How dare Harry Potter laugh at him? He was not a subject to be ridiculed or made fun of! He wouldn't have it! "Just what is so funny?"

Harry instantly sobered, pushing his glasses up in a way that made Draco want to rip them off and grind them under his heel. "Nothing, actually. Nothing is funny at all. Like I said, it's sad."

"I'm not sad!" Draco shouted desperately. This was at odds with the truth, which was threatening to bubble up inside of him.

"Well, what are you, then?" Harry asked.

Draco felt a well of feelings, and he couldn't push them down anymore. Before he could stop them, the words flew out of his mouth. "I'm sorry!" As he said them, he realized that they were true. He cringed at the realization, but it loomed up before him too big to deny. He was sorry. For so much, he couldn't possibly say it all, not now, not ever.

The echo of his words, his utter humiliation, hung suspended over the stadium. They seemed amplified in the perfect silence, every ear attuned to the interaction between Harry and Draco. Draco felt a dam burst inside of him. He couldn't hold it back any more. The prick of tears stung his eyes, and sorrow clogged his throat, but he forced himself to look his rival in the face and stand up straight. "I'm sorry, Harry." He couldn't say more, but he accepted the truth of the words, and the meaning shone forth.

Harry looked back at him and smiled slightly. "I know, Draco. It's okay."

Suddenly Draco didn't want to be Harry. He had tried, with the egg and the dragon. But now he just wanted to let it all go. The whole damn war, everything. They had all paid a price; would they have to keep paying forever? Draco put out his hand.

Harry shook it.

That's when Draco noticed that he felt lighter inside. He felt a hard knot dissolving. The people in the stadium started disappearing, one by one, and Draco was left facing Harry.

Harry looked at Draco. "I forgive you, Draco."

Draco could have said something bitter and clever. He had a comeback ready. Instead, he bowed his head, and for once just said, "Thanks."

The last thing he saw was a pair of green eyes looking into his; then he blinked, and it was over.

Draco sat up, amazed. He knew he was different; he could feel it. "Luna! Luna, you did it!" He jumped to his feet. "I think I'm cured! I can't explain it; I just feel so much better now."

Luna looked up at him. "Yes, Draco, I know," she said quietly.

"How much do I owe you?" he said.

"Owe me?" Luna repeated flatly. "You owe me nothing, Draco Malfoy."

Draco looked back at her, finally registering the fact that she seemed upset about something. "Is this about before? Sorry I was a bit of a prat. I was a little anxious. I know what I need to do now. I'm going to go back to the wizarding world. You've healed me. I still have a long way to go, but I'm back to my old self. I don't know how I lived without magic for so long. If you need references, I will be happy to furnish them for you. You performed admirably, Luna, you do know that?" Draco peered at her, but she didn't seem to hear his words. He shrugged. "Bill me later, when you figure it out. Owl me, in fact. I will no doubt be on an upswing of fortune, once I find my way in the world."

Luna slowly got to her feet and walked behind Draco. He had a spring in his step that he hadn't felt in a long time. She held the door for him, and just before it swung shut in his face, she pulled it back. "Oh, and Draco?"

"What?" he looked back at her, wondering what she had to say.

"I just want you to know that I play for high stakes, too. It's just that when I play, I play for keeps." And with that remark, Luna shut the door gently, but firmly, in Draco's face.

Draco frowned at the door, with the feeling that he was missing something. It was only after he was halfway home that he realized he could have just Apparated. Somehow, the thought didn't cheer him. He shoved his hands into his pockets to protect them from the chill and kept walking home.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

After the war, Draco is lost and alone. Will he find redemption from an unlikely source? Come on, try out a rare pair today!

Disclaimer: This all belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: This is the last part! Thanks for reading it; I hope it doesn't disappoint. Many thanks for the tireless work of my beta, Melisse.

Once Draco had made up his mind to return to the wizarding world, there was no turning back. It seemed as if there was no other decision, and he had no qualms at all about wrapping up his Muggle life. In fact, it surprised him how little time it actually took to unravel so many years of living; it took only a matter of weeks to get his affairs in order to depart from this place, as if he had never existed at all. Instead of making him sad, though, he simply looked forward to being gone and beginning a new life in the place that really mattered to him.

As the date for his departure approached, Draco felt a strange reluctance descend upon him. He first noticed it after the initial flurry of his preparations were made; now, his inertia of excitement was slowing. This was most unlike him, to be deterred in his enjoyment by anything like subtle conscience. Draco did not want to think about what might be bothering him. Yet he couldn't ignore the nagging sensation, the tugging at his gut that became his constant companion. It began to wake him up at night and haunt his every motion. At this rate, he would soon not even *want* to go!

The morning before the day he had chosen for his return to Malfoy Manor, Draco leaned over his bathroom sink. He hadn't gotten a decent night's rest in far too long. His thoughts were conflicted. He looked at himself in the mirror. His skin was pale; his eyes were starting to get bags. This was ridiculous. He rubbed his nose. It was time to admit it: maybe he should say goodbye to Luna. It wasn't like he *missed* that crazy girl, but he had left things rather abruptly. A Malfoy did not like loose ends, either, and that was what this situation could be termed. Yes, it was the right thing to do. He had to finish this off. It was the prudent course of action here.

Draco was galvanized into action. He got ready to go in record time, ignoring the fact that a meeting for closure should not bring a twinkle to his eyes, nor make him leap forward in anticipation. He had a purpose, and nothing seemed more important right now than finding Luna and talking to her. How long had it been since he had seen her? All of a sudden, it seemed like ages since he had listened to her ramble on about some random problem, getting distracted and correcting herself, the non sequiturs piling up too fast to keep up with. Draco longed to just sit and listen to her gentle voice. After all, who did he know who cared about things the way that she did? Luna cared about everyone.

Draco stopped in his mad dash, struck by the sudden truth. Luna cared about *him*. They were friends. He had never had a friend before. He had had people who pretended to be, who had wanted to be for the wrong reason, but no one who had ever seen his flaws and still liked him and asked for nothing in return. Not money, not status. Luna had only asked for his time.

Draco cringed. He had not even seen it for what it was. He had been so blind, so far gone from what people were like, that he could not even sit and be a friend. He had actually asked what he owed her.

Draco realized that the feeling he was experiencing was missing Luna. Well, he had messed it up, but perhaps it wasn't too late. He would go over there right now and spend the whole day. He would have her breakfast, made by her strange neighbors, ask her what *she* wanted to do. Maybe Draco could be her friend. Surely she would see that he was worth keeping.

Draco grabbed his wand. He couldn't be bothered with walking at a time like this. He Apparated.

As soon as he got his bearings back, he realized that he was in the street outside of her shop. Draco frowned. He had intended to Apparate inside, but perhaps his aim had gone off in his haste to get there. Draco pocketed his wand and strode forward.

He nearly stumbled as his weight hit full force against the door. The knob was cold in his hand. It didn't turn easily like it usually did. Draco frowned. Perhaps this would be harder than he thought. Luna must be a grudge holder. Well, he hadn't thought her the type, but he'd had plenty of practice in charming women out of a snit, imagined or otherwise.

"Luna," he called smoothly.

No answer.

It was then that he noticed the dullness of the brass on the address. Usually it gleamed in welcome, as if it was winking at him. Today it was just dim, covered in a slight scrim of rust. Draco's brows drew together. Something was off here.

He stood back from the door, and noticed that everything on the whole street was dark and uninhabited, like usual, but that this building was no different. The door was old, the paint scratched... it looked totally deserted. Draco's heart beat faster. Was this a spell, or something more? Time to find out.

He drew his wand. "*Alohomora!*" he shouted at the door, with perhaps more vigor than was necessary. It clicked obligingly. Draco opened it. There were no other wards, so he entered, wary of what he would find.

The place was a mess. It was as ramshackle on the inside as it was on the outside. It looked as if a good stiff wind would blow the whole thing into nothing more than a pile of timber and bricks.

Draco let out a breath he hadn't known he had been holding. There was nothing remotely resembling the overstuffed chairs, the warm place he had come to look forward to being in. There was nothing here that looked like Luna. There was no magic in this place. His shoulders slumped.

Draco had the strangest feeling, as if he had just lost the most important thing, though he hadn't known he had even had it until a few minutes ago. He turned around a few times, unseeing, until he realized that this was real, not some sort of fake scenario. He couldn't just fix this by doing the right thing and winning the game. He felt bereft.

A sharp sound startled him as the door blew open, and a little old man hobbled in. "Who goes there?" the man wheezed out, before breaking into a fit of coughing.

Draco was at a loss. "Sorry. I was here to see a... friend. I must have come to the wrong place. I apologize for disturbing you. I was just on my way out."

The old man, who was ancient and resembled a gnome, got his coughing under control and bent up to look at Draco. "You here to see her?"

Puzzled, Draco narrowed his eyes. "Probably not. I'm just leaving. Good day."

"Hold on, not so fast, sonny. Luna. You here for Luna?" The old man chuckled. "She said you be an impatient one, as impatient as you be good looking. That be you, then."

Draco felt both ridiculously pleased and irritated. "Do you know where Luna went? Did she leave me a message?" He was embarrassed by the eagerness in his voice.

The man laughed. Actually, he cackled. Draco was beginning to see how Luna came by some of her more outlandish stories. By the time this was through, he felt that he would have a few whoppers to tell himself. "She be gone, son. She be gone these last few weeks. Not an ardent suitor if you not be noticin' that fact, eh?"

Draco, to his dismay, blushed. "I am most certainly not her suitor. I am merely a friend, as I stated earlier. I did come to see to her welfare, however. Can you tell me her whereabouts?"

The man was unimpressed. "That girl not be needin' another friend, *friend*. Get me?"

Draco glared. "Be that as it may, I am a friend. And how that comes to concern you, I still have yet to guess. However, I would be grateful for your assistance in locating her." He felt his impatience starting to reach epic proportions.

The old man laughed gleefully. "Oh, I've hit a sore spot, have I? The high and mighty Lord of the Manor be needin' somethin' from me, and don't want to be waiting on it? Well, how's about you be using your best manners and give me a pretty little please with some sugar on top? And don't forget that cherry."

Draco's mouth fell open. He stared at the old man, who was grinning in enjoyment. Draco's temper flared up, but he did his best to hold onto it. How much did he really want to find Luna? He closed his eyes for a moment. Was his dignity worth this insult? He drew a measured breath, and with a glare that nearly set fire to the old gnome, said in his iciest voice, "Pretty please. With sugar on top. Kindly reveal what you know about Luna."

The gnome shook his head. "You forgot the cherry, Your Highness," he mocked.

Draco put every bit of venom into his words that he could. He was wrong, it wasn't an old gnome; he must be a troll. "With a cherry on top," he spat. Luna had better appreciate this!

With those words, the old man stopped laughing. He looked Draco in the eye. "I was wrong about you, then. I didn't think you would do it. Sorry, son, just having a bit of sport with you. I've lost my bet."

Draco cocked his head. The man's voice sounded funny. His accent was gone, and he started changing, metamorphosing into a tall form. When the transformation was complete, the creature before him was so luminously beautiful, Draco could hardly stand to look at it. Although he had never seen one before, he recognized it for what it was: a fairy.

"I know you, Draco Malfoy. You need not fear me. I will not put a glamour on you. This time," the fairy said. Her voice was musical, her skin like ground diamonds sparkling. She was tall and thin, her gossamer wings wafting behind her delicately.

Draco was dumbfounded. He had never been in the presence of anything so powerful before, including the Dark Lord. This being was sheer magic, her knowledge old and strange. If she wasn't even trying to enchant him now, he was grateful, because he felt his mind reeling anyway. He could barely stand to look directly at her, and he made a mental note to heed more carefully the magical creatures he might come across in the future, in case they were anything like this one. This wisp of a thing could crush his mind and will into powder with a flick of her finger. He thought she may have asked a question, but he couldn't gather his wits, so he nodded respectfully, hoping to gain time.

The fairy laughed, used to her effect on humans. "You wish to know about Luna. Luna was friend to me, for her part. I took a liking to her, although she declined to come to Faerie. She is... different from your kind in some ways. Although still disappointingly perishable. You humans, so finite. Your minds are incapable of grasping the enormity of the evanescence of which your entire reality is comprised. Knowing that, what is the consequence?"

Draco looked back. "Are you really asking me?"

The fairy laughed musically. "Our days are full of ennui. I lost a bet in guessing your capricious nature. Perhaps I can win it back again," she explained cryptically. "Go ahead, enlighten me."

Draco thought hard. There were things at stake that he couldn't fully comprehend here, but he thought that there might be enormous problems...or benefits...depending on his answer. "You think that we mortals don't matter because our lives are too short? That nothing we do matters next to the eons in which you have to walk the Earth, learning, playing, everything. So you're asking me to explain why we bother doing anything at all if we're just going to expire in what to you amounts to the blink of an eye? What to us would be a season?" He looked up to confirm.

The fairy nodded, starting to look bored.

Draco thought for a moment. She had a good point. Why, indeed? He had struggled with that himself. Why bother doing anything at all? "Because!" he almost shouted. "Because it does matter what we do, who we love, no matter how brief it is. Perhaps the briefer it is, the better. Meaning does not need to be ages long to have quality. The length of your life doesn't matter; the way that you live it does. You have to be happy. To be happy, you have to make others happy. I think that's what Luna was trying to teach me. Maybe we humans learn it faster than you fairies do, that's all. Maybe it takes you that long to get it right!" The understanding and the words were out before Draco realized who he was actually talking to. He winced.

The fairy pursed her lips. "You are foolhardy, Draco Malfoy. To be Fae is not a curse, but a gift. To be human is a curse. However, I shall not strike you down because I have been amused and not bored, and precious few humans can manage that. Your gift from me shall be to go unharmed. Go." She turned to go herself.

"Wait!" Draco nearly kicked himself for being the fool she had called him, but he had to know. "I need to know about Luna. I did say 'please,' after all." He tried to crack a somewhat winning smile.

The fairy was starting to drift off, her attention exhausted. "She is gone, Draco Malfoy. You shall not find her here. It is not my place to tell you where she is, nor shall I, though it is within my power. Know that she has a gift for healing humans, and she goes where her gift takes her. That gift brought her to you, as it has taken her away from you. Do not seek her."

Draco stared, unseeing. He had expected to hear a place that he could go, to find her. This was just... nothing. He was surprised by how bad he felt hearing that.

"Draco Malfoy?" The fairy turned back. "One more thing. Luna has a heart full of forgiveness and kindness. You will meet her again someday, and when you do, you will both be happy and fulfilled. There is no anger in her heart against you. Now go into your own future and be at peace." With those words, the fairy faded out.

Draco sighed. He did not like hearing that verdict. He wanted to find Luna himself and thank her for all that she had done for him. He had no choice but to hope that wherever she was, she was okay, and that she knew that he wished her well. He took a minute to think about how much he regretted; then he breathed out and let it go.

There was nothing left to do except leave this grim shadow. There was nothing here for him now. His future was ahead of him. It would be what he made it. Draco opened the door of the shop and stepped out into the fresh air. The sun was shining, and for a minute, it brought tears to his eyes after the darkness. He looked up and saw nothing but the clear blue sky above him.