

The Children

And crossed the dark defile at last, and found
At Roncevaux upon the darkening plain
The dead against the dead and on the silent ground
The silent slain --
--Archibald MacLeish

"We're heroes, Draco. We have to at least play the part."

Draco Malfoy had no right to sneer, Hermione thought, not when he was so perfectly formed, not when his face and body were still entirely unblemished, unscarred. But he did sneer, most often at her, because she most often told him the things he didn't want to know.

"I thought being a hero meant you got a modicum of respect, now and then," he answered, returning to his book.

Draco had grown from the half-sized little twerp of their school days into a graceful, panther-like man; he cultivated the image, growing his hair long and letting it hang in pale strands around his face. Or perhaps he simply couldn't be bothered slicking it back anymore. If asked, that would almost certainly be his reason.

He propped the book on his legs, which were sprawled on a convenient coffee table near the chair he sat in. His hands flicked a page over, and he continued reading.

"Now you know how Harry felt," Hermione said quietly. Draco went very still.

"That was unnecessary, you know," he finally announced. He snapped the book shut and laid it, respectfully, on the table next to the chair. "We're supposed to fight, Hermione, it's what we do. You'll be reasonable, and I'll be insufferable, and eventually you'll win. It's not fair, bringing Harry into it."

"Life's not fair," Hermione said bluntly. His hands went to take the book again and she caught one wrist. He started, and she instantly regretted it. You didn't touch Draco without warning. He hated that.

"Ron will be there," she said. "And Ginny, and Remus. They're saying Snape might even come."

"What about Cho?" Draco asked, with another nose-wrinkling sneer.

"You know they won't let her out," Hermione said. She was very proud of the fact that her voice barely trembled.

"Hah, no. Cho Chang, the great traitor. Saved from a life in Azkaban by one final selfless deed, so instead they lock her up in a Muggle jail for the rest of her life."

"She was a Death Eater, Draco. She tried to kill Harry."

"Might've been better all round if she had, eh?" Draco turned away, pulling his wrist out of her hand more gently than she expected. "I wish she'd killed me, too."

"You don't mean that."

"Oh no?"

"You've no right to be bitter about what was done to you. No right at all. Ginny and I took worse than you did -- "

"But you're still wizards," Draco murmured.

"You could be too."

"Ah yes. Ginny's great plan to print the books of the Wizarding World in Braille. How kind of her," Draco said. "I don't want Weasley's pity, thanks ever so much."

"Come, or don't come," Hermione said, turning to leave. "I just thought you might consider Ginny and Remus for once in your life. It doesn't matter at all to me."

She was at the door of Draco's library before he spoke again.

"It does matter to you," he said. He stood, one hand resting on the wing of the chair. For the first time since she'd come, he faced her fully, his grey eyes -- once so keen for details, the better to mock and insult -- now empty. As though the blast which robbed him of his sight had also robbed him of his emotion. As if the eyes really were the window to the soul, and his soul was tucked away forever behind them.

As if his beautiful unscarred face was a porcelain mask.

"If we're all there, maybe nobody will notice you. That's why you're always with one of us, isn't it? You can't bear to walk a street alone and think that the looks and the whispers and the horrible silences are about you. If you're with Ginny or me, you can pretend they're talking about us," Draco said, with a surprising gentleness.

"That's not -- "

"Fair?" he asked, one eyebrow raising.

"I'm alone all the time."

"Yes, I suspect you are." His hand tapped on the chair, as if he was considering things. "Fine. Ginny can come get me. Tell Lupin if he tries to be my friend I'll take a swing at him. And he doesn't want that, because a blind man in a fistfight is a depressing thing."

"Thank you, Draco," Hermione said. She let the door click behind her, so that he'd know she was gone.

In the end, it was Ginny and Ron who came for him, with a Muggle driver, in a big black Bentley. Not that Draco could tell any of this, but he made it a point to ask about things.

It made sense, after all. You didn't apparate in a blind man's home, though of course the up-side of that was that you always knew where the furniture was going to be. You couldn't use floo powder when you couldn't see where the gratings were. And broomsticks? Strictly for the birds.

Ginny couldn't apparate anyhow, she still hadn't passed her test. And Ron was more comfortable riding; the Ministry of Magic never quibbled when he asked for a car. Enough photos had appeared in the Prophet, right after Voldemort's death, of Ron in the horrible Muggle contraption, the Wheel Chair. These days, in the boots specially made for him by Dumbledore, he could walk, at least, but it was tiring.

"We're to meet Remus at the Leaky Cauldron," Ginny said, prattling on about something or other. Ginny never, ever, shut up. It was like having a permanent radio switched on. Draco detested her, with the formal detestation he reserved for all Weasleys and the talkative ones in particular. That having been said, her idle chatter was a relief. Otherwise it would have been the blind man and the cripple sitting in silence.

Draco didn't need to talk to Ron. The pair of them had said everything they needed to say a long time ago, after the last battle. Plenty of people thought they disliked each other. Truth was, they were too close, now, to ever say how close they were.

"And Hermione?" Draco asked.

"Oh, she's there, with Remus. Professor Snape's come too. You should see him, Draco, he looks so dashing -- "

"Are we speaking," Draco said slowly, ignoring Ginny's sudden 'eep!' when she realised what

she'd said, "of the same Severus Snape?"

"Well, he's been down in Wales, you know, and I do think the recuperation did him wonders -- "

"Sometimes," Draco remarked idly to Ron, "I really wish I'd run off to Canada like I promised I was going to."

"You wouldn't like it. Everybody's nice there," Ron replied.

"Sounds like Hogwarts, only with hockey."

"We're here!" Ginny squeaked, and Draco heard car doors opening. There was a brief second of sun on his face, before someone's shadow blocked it.

"Good morning, Draco," a deep voice said. Colin Creevy, Draco thought. They really were dragging out all the war-horses. "Help you out?"

"Thank you," Draco said, putting a hand on Colin's outstretched arm. He stepped out of the car, and into the warm sunlight. "Hermione didn't tell me you were coming."

"Last-minute thing. I didn't hear about it -- I was in Africa, working with Charlie Weasley. Dragon documentary, don't you know."

"How alliterative," Draco murmured. Colin ignored him.

"When I finally did, you can bet I hitched a broomstick, and did a little apparating. I just got in yesterday evening. I must say, time hasn't dimmed the memory much, has it? I was nearly mobbed."

"Lucky you."

Colin, alone among them, was the golden boy, the untouched; he hadn't been blinded, or crippled, or scarred, or any of it. Wizard historians still weren't sure why. Draco always thought, privately, that it had something to do with young Polaris. That had been Colin and Ginny's job, protecting the child, and then Ginny had gone to fight, and Colin'd had to stand alone, until the others arrived.

As if on cue, Colin stopped. "There's Remus," he said. "Ron and Ginny are saying hello. Hermione's holding Polaris."

"Boy can't walk on his own yet?" Draco grumbled, but he heard Polaris laugh, and had a difficult time keeping from smiling.

"Good morning, Draco," came Remus' voice. "You're looking well."

"I wish I could say the same," Draco replied. Utter silence. "That was a joke, you know," he added.

"Try smiling next time," said Hermione. "Here, Draco, you take the boy, would you?"

Draco felt a heavy weight placed in his arms, and shifted the child to his hip. Polaris must be four or five, now. Small arms wrapped around his neck.

"Hallo, Pol," he said softly.

"Draco!" Polaris squealed. "Hi hi, Draco. I'm waving at you."

Polaris always explained what he was doing; it was a childish respect that endeared him to Draco. He held the lad with one arm, while Colin led him forward again, into the Leaky Cauldron. Noise everywhere stopped. He ought to be used to it by now, but he never was.

Now you know how Harry felt...

Then there was a roar of applause, and Pol hid his face in Draco's shirt.

"I know, little one," he murmured. "I'm scared too."

The wonderful thing about Diagon Alley was its somewhat malleable magical nature; the streets had been widened, temporarily, to allow the parade to pass through. The celebration each year to mark the end of the war and the defeat of the Dark Lord was better -- so Colin said, and he would know -- than Mardi Gras. Draco hated being put on show, but he did it anyway, both last year and this, because Hermione asked him. And he got to see -- hah! -- Polaris, and Ron, and Remus Lupin.

And, as it turned out this year, Severus Snape.

Neither he nor Hermione had seen the Potions master since the last battle. First they weren't allowed to; he'd been too ill. Then he'd been recovering in Wales, and hadn't wanted company.

But Draco could tell there were changes; Hermione's gasp of surprise confirmed them, as did the firm grip of Snape's deft fingers when they shook hands.

"Rumour says your hair's gone white," Draco said, after the greetings were done and they were settled into the magical car that would lead the procession. Hermione and Remus sat across from them, Ron and Ginny up front, and he, and Snape, and Colin, sharing one broad bench seat, facing backwards, with Polaris on Draco's lap.

"Trust you, Mr. Malfoy, to remark upon it, even without seeing it," Snape replied. Not much

change there, then.

"It probably suits you."

"I couldn't say."

"You two are going to drive me mad," Colin said.

"You wouldn't," Draco said delicately, "be the first."

There was a long pause.

"How is Fleur?" Colin asked. Draco turned his head, toyed with Polaris' hair. He'd actually seen the child only once, and that had not been under ideal circumstances, but he was assured that the boy had black hair, Harry's hair.

"The same," Draco replied tightly. "Hermione visits her on Tuesdays. I go on Thursdays. I think Ron sometimes visits too, but he can't keep a schedule to save his life."

"She frightens him."

"She frightens me."

"Do you think they can cure her?"

"No. She's like all the rest he drove mad. There's no cure for Fleur. Death would be preferable, but I can't figure out how to do it without getting caught."

There was another silence, and he smiled. One never knew, with Draco Malfoy, when he was serious about that sort of thing, did one?

The car jerked to life, then, and the parade began. There was a lot of cheering. Colin said people were taking pictures. Draco was glad that he had the child to look after, and didn't have to wave.

"Oh dear," Colin breathed. "Draco, I'm going to swap with Hermione. She wants to face backwards, I think."

"Hermione's a diva."

"Have a little pity? Don't be cruel," Colin said, and Draco felt the cushions shift as he stood. A second later, he smelled Hermione's perfume.

"How are you faring, Hermione?" he asked.

"Shut up, Draco."

"I didn't mean it like that."

They rode on in silence for a while, until his curiosity overtook him. "What's Snape doing?"

"Scowling, mostly. He looks very dignified. Remus too. Ginny and Colin seem to be enjoying themselves, and Ron."

"Unencumbered by a sense of dignity."

"Unencumbered by a lot of things," Hermione said, a trifle bitterly.

"Do you know what they call us?" Draco asked. "I expect you do, you're out in the world more often than I am -- "

"Call us?"

"Yes. Their name for us. Like the Boy who Lived. The Dark Lord. People always have to name things."

He could sense her surprise. "No, I didn't know we...had a name."

"They call us the Children. Because we're still only kids, don't you see. The Children who fought Voldemort and won."

"I don't know if I want to be a child the rest of my life," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"That's the wonderful irony, Hermione. We none of us are children, except perhaps Polaris."

The boy twisted in his lap, and he stroked his shoulder, soothingly.

"Children, of course, are clean beings. Blank slates. Adults have...battle scars. We just happen to wear ours on the outside."

"Stop it, Draco."

"After all, I am the blind prophet, am I not? Ron, with his magical shoes that let the cripple walk. And dear Ginny, I never did get to see the scars on her back."

"Don't say this in front of -- "

"And Severus Snape and Remus Lupin. They were touching Harry, weren't they? When he died? I hear Snape's left arm is gone below the elbow. Just as well. No more inconvenient Dark Mark. Remus was lucky to lose just the hand. And you, my dear Hermione..."

"Don't!"

"To me, you're still seventeen, you know," he continued relentlessly. "I can still see you crystal clear. Uncommonly beautiful. In my memory, none of you are hurt. None of you are missing limbs because of the monstrosity my father helped to bring to power, and no-one is dead."

Now there was silence, and he realised that everyone in the car had been listening.

"In my head," he said slowly, "because I have nowhere else to see it. In my head we're all still children, just like everyone calls us. Isn't that interesting?"

"Do you see Harry?" Remus asked softly.

"Of course I do," Draco said, and suddenly he felt tears on his cheeks. "Hermione, can I borrow a handkerchief?"

"Here," said Snape's voice, and a bit of cloth was thrust into his hand. He nodded his thanks, and tried to be covert about wiping his face.

"It's stupid," he said, as a hand took the kerchief back. The right hand, of course. Snape didn't have a left hand anymore.

And Hermione Granger didn't have much of a face left. At least, that's what he was told. The scars covered most of it. She'd said she'd face Voldemort, see, so he removed it...just as Ron said he would stand with Harry, and Draco said he wasn't blind anymore. Just as Snape and Remus had said that they were the men who would be the boy's hands. Just as Ginny'd said she had his back, and Fleur promised to fight like a madwoman, and Colin had said he'd go to the ends of the Earth -- because poor Colin can never, ever stop running from the guilt at being the untouched one...

We are all punished by the words we speak.

Just as Harry'd said he would die before he'd let Voldemort win...or take back Polaris.

As the cheers continued and the people waved and the cameras snapped, Draco thought about Polaris.

It had been his job to steal the boy, because he was so used to the dark and he knew all about Voldemort, when one was a Malfoy one simply did. Creeping into Voldemort's stronghold with a false Mark, a little bit of magic, and the biggest balls this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Stealing Polaris and an old Nimbus broomstick to escape on. He could still hear Cho's enraged screams as he flew away, dodging curses left and right, Harry's son in his arms.

All those hours of Quidditch paid off, even if I wasn't very good...

How did it come to this. How did it come to Harry and Cho's child, neither old enough to have

children in the first place. Harry and Cho's child the ultimate point of the power struggle, because Cho was a Death Eater and Harry was a...well, they didn't name the good guys, did they? They didn't need names because nobody was afraid of them.

We name the things we fear.

And the wizarding world has named us.

He clutched Polaris tightly, suddenly. Yes, it was right and good that Remus had the raising of the boy, Remus was older and wiser and could see when Polaris was about to walk off the end of the couch or drink drain cleaner or what have you. Of course Remus should have the raising of the boy. He was the one who'd fought the Ministry to keep Polaris, the one who'd said he would kill anyone who tried to take the boy away, and his werewolf blood be damned.

But Polaris belonged to him, to Draco Malfoy.

Harry was dead and Cho was in prison, only even alive because she'd betrayed Voldemort at the last minute and only then because Harry had her child and Voldemort was going to kill them all. Colin had protected the boy and Remus was raising him but Draco had been the first of them to set eyes on the child, Draco was the one who risked his life to bring Harry's son into his arms and by any god you cared to name, Polaris was all Draco Malfoy had.

It will never, ever be over for you. There will be the parades every year and visiting Fleur in St. Mungo's on Thursdays and Ginny's constant, endless, terrified prattling. And the knowledge that you have to hold out your left hand when you meet Remus because he hasn't got a right hand. And Severus Snape's pale white hair. And your library full of books in Braille.

Draco had done a lot of reading, in the past few years, and he knew that traditionally, blind men are prophets. That's deep magic. And yes, he had seen things that had come to pass, and yes, occasionally he did send an owl to Ron at the Ministry to let him know about these things, and no, Ron had never broken his promise not to tell.

But he didn't need to be a prophet to see that his life was stretching out before him in a series of yearly parades and weekly visits. He went nowhere, he did nothing, he simply existed, representing the Children.

Perhaps I ought to visit Remus and Polaris more often, he thought. Perhaps I ought to tell Hermione that it would be a pretty good joke if the blind man fell in love with the woman who's convinced she's too ugly to look at. Maybe I ought to teach Ginny how to live with silence. I do enough of it, after all. I could visit Harry's grave, if I wanted. Colin's always telling me I ought to. Maybe if Colin came along, he could see that the rest of us forgive him.

One big happy family.

Sure thing, Draco fucking Malfoy.

And the parade went on.

And Polaris, who was after all only a child, and did not really know that his father was the Boy Who Died and his mother was a traitor, fell asleep in Draco's arms.

END