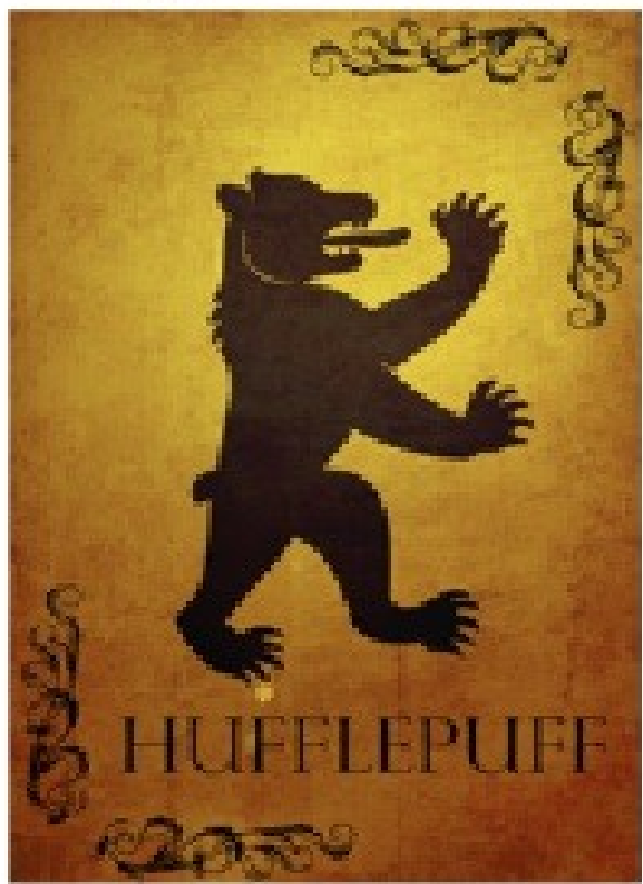
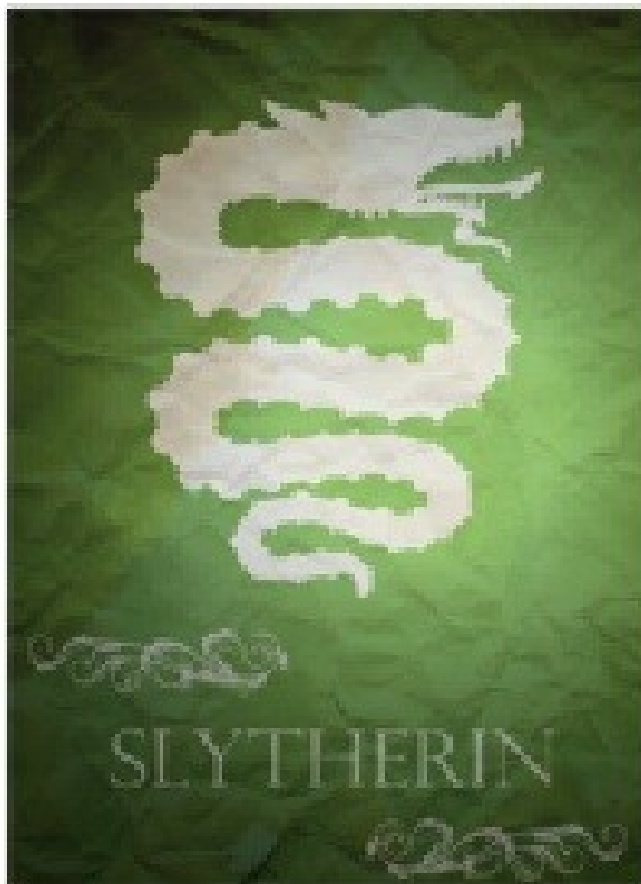


The Other

by MultiMapper



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Part 1: Choab

Chapter 1

The letter. After years of expectation, he finally held it in his hands.

"Go on Master Choab, open the bloody thing. We 'aven't got all day." Mrs. Puckett said irritably.

Choab ignored the crotchety old witch and read the name on the envelope carefully.

'Mr. C. Nightshade.'

Choab slowly opened the letter, thinking about how he couldn't remember anyone calling him by his last name.

"I've got me own work to do. When you're done with that letter, bring it to me sitting room so's I can see what you'll be needin from Diagon Alley." Mrs. Puckett said sharply as she waddled from the room.

Choab carefully read the letter and made note of the school supplies he'd need to buy.

'Finally.' He thought as a rush of relief coursed through his veins.

'After all these years of being alone, I'll finally be able to be around others my own age... in three weeks, my life begins.'

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"What is that?" Choab asked as he walked out of the mansion he'd called home all his life.

"A carriage. It's just got a glamour to make it look like a muggle automobile." James said as he led the way.

"Auto...?" Choab asked with confusion.

"Nothing worth thinking about Master Choab. It's just the easiest way of getting us where we need to go." James said with a smile as he held the rear door of the vehicle open for his young charge.

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Choab looked with wide eyes at everything around him.

He'd never been away from the mansion before and wasn't at all prepared for the chaos of Diagon Alley.

James had been somewhat concerned about keeping track of his young charge, but needn't have worried. Choab kept held fast to his hand every step of the way through the street, gripping with fear and excitement.

"Here we are, we need to get you some school robes." James said as he pulled Choab into a shoppe.

"Let me guess. Someone needs some robes for Hogwart's?" The elderly shopkeeper asked with a delighted smile.

"Yes sir." Choab said timidly.

"Set him up with your finest of everything made from only the best cloth, and every item custom tailored, if you please." James said with pride.

"No." Choab said in a full voice that surprised everyone in the room, including himself.

"Master Choab, it's proper for you to wear only the best. Your father..." James began to say, but was cut off.

"My father!? I've seen him twice in my life and neither time did he speak to me. If he's so concerned about my appearance, he should have come to outfit me himself. I'll have the robes of my choice, or I'll have nothing." Choab said defiantly.

"Mrs. Puckett will be hearing of this, you can believe that!" James said as his anger started to rise.

"And she'll be hearing about what happens when she leaves the maids unattended every full moon. Is it worth you and Catty getting sacked just to dress me up like a bloody ponce?" Choab asked with a superior look.

"Blimey, 'ow'd a young lad like yourself learn to be such a right bastard?" James asked in wonder, forgetting to use his proper language.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's in my blood, or maybe it's from watching the staff members stab each other in the back. No matter, are we agreed that I will be choosing my own wardrobe?" Choab asked in a very businesslike tone of voice.

"Y... Yes Master Choab." James said hesitantly.

"Good. I'm sorry sir, I should have thought to resolve that before we entered. Could you outfit me with whatever is the most common style of robes and uniforms for first year Hogwart's students? I'll take whatever you have ready made that's nearest my size." Choab said kindly, contrasting the demanding voice he'd just used with James.

"I'll just need a few measurements." The shopkeeper said with a wide eyed expression.

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"I can't believe you'd allow 'im to buy such common things. The Master will not approve!" Mrs. Puckett said in disgust as she looked through the purchases.

Choab watched without expression while James tried to think of something to say.

"We'll just 'ave to go tomorrow and take all this rubbish back and buy proper things." Mrs. Puckett said as she dropped the robes in a crumpled heap.

"No." Choab said flatly, the first thing he'd said since they'd returned to the mansion a half hour earlier.

"I'll 'ave no lip from you. Young master or no, I'll 'ave proper respect from ye. I don't know what you did to make poor James buy you these rags, but I'll have none of it!" Mrs. Puckett said as her face began to redden.

"I think you'll allow me to keep these things, you'll report to my father that everything is as it should be and you'll do so without complaint." Choab said firmly.

Mrs. Puckett opened her mouth to begin an all out tirade, then noticed the calculating twinkle in Choab's eyes.

A moment of silence fell over the sitting room.

James used the battle of wills between the head housekeeper and the young master of the house to mask his escape.

"I know my father would be quite interested in the missing volumes of magical texts from his library. How much did you get for 'The Tome of the Archmage Konikal' anyway?" Choab asked with a sly smile.

"I... I..." Mrs. Puckett sputtered as she looked around to see if anyone was listening.

"I'm sure he probably didn't inventory my mother's jewelry, so he won't notice what's come up missing as long as you stay away from the big pieces." Choab said, then muttered a magical phrase and gestured with his new wand.

The robes and uniforms began to straighten and fold themselves and fall into order.

Mrs. Puckett's eyes got even wider as she watched the young boy, barely eleven cast a spell that was beyond her ability.

"You don't think I spent all my life in this house without reading the magical library do you? How do you think I knew about the missing books?" Choab asked as he turned to look at her.

"You... you..." Mrs. Puckett sputtered, this time in fear of the child.

Choab dropped all pretenses and said in a chilling tone, "I'm off to school in three weeks. After I'm gone, you can steal whatever you want, it's no concern of mine. I've been holding my tongue and biding my time until the letter arrived. Now it's here and certain decisions have to be made. I would like those decisions to be made in my favor. I have enough evidence on every person in this house to make sure that none of you have a future in any respectable job ever again. And the evidence I have gathered against you may or may not be enough to have you sent to Azkaban. To prevent finding out, all you have to do is follow my instructions."

Mrs. Puckett could only nod.

"Then have someone properly store my school supplies until my departure. I'll have my tea in half an hour." Choab said firmly, then walked out of the room.

"James!" Mrs. Puckett called in a screech.

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Choab walked into his room and looked around.

'Oh Merlin! I'll be glad to be out of this place.' He thought to himself as he walked to his mirror.

Looking back at him he saw his reflection. Eleven years old, slender, straight brown hair, brown eyes, plain features, completely unremarkable.

With little effort, Choab affected an expression of wide-eyed innocence, then switched easily to fearful confusion.

'I think I'm ready. My life will be much easier if they underestimate me.' Choab thought as he switched to his masterpiece, the sad and dejected look.

"Am I interrupting?" A chilling voice asked from behind him.

"No Grandmother Tuboll." Choab said as he turned to face the ghostly figure, letting all expression fall off his face.

"Quite a performance in the sitting room. Your great Aunt Celia was laughing so hard that she nearly manifested." The ghost said with an expression that was almost a smile.

"I'm glad she didn't. It might have made my intimidation of the old thief more difficult." Choab said seriously.

"Quite right. Oh, by the by, Bertram wanted you to know that Mrs. Puckett is planning a special surprise for you at tea-time."

"Poison or a sleeping spell?" Choab asked without concern.

"Poison of course. The pathetic old thing isn't much more than a muggle anymore, not that she could do that much in her prime." Grandmother Tuboll said haughtily.

"It's what I expected, thank Bertram for the confirmation. This will be the... sixth? Maybe seventh time she's tried to poison me... unless you count her dreadful cooking, then she does it every night." Choab said with a chuckle.

"My poor little duck. If only I had a body, I'd teach the old hag to mess with my boy." Grandmother Tuboll said with a shake of her insubstantial head.

"Don't worry Grandmother. Her plotting is somewhat entertaining. Tell me, has she lured James into her bed yet?" Choab asked with a mischievous chuckle.

"Oh Merlin no! Even a half-wit like James has better sense than that. But you have to give the pathetic creature credit for trying." Grandmother Tuboll said, this time giving an actual smile.

"I suppose I'd better dress for tea. I wouldn't want to give the bitter old thing cause to chastise me." Choab said with a grin.

"As if you haven't given her enough cause over the years." Grandmother Tuboll said with a chuckle.

Choab put on an expression of wide-eyed innocence.

Grandmother Tuboll let out an audible laugh as she dissolved into the ether.

* * * * *

Choab walked into the dining room carrying a letter.

"Your tea is ready Master Choab." Mrs. Puckett said through gritted teeth.

"In a moment, I just have to owl a message." Choab said as he passed through the room.

It took a moment for Mrs. Puckett to realize what he'd said. She hurried out of the family dining room and found Choab attaching a message to the leg of an owl.

As she approached him, he whispered his instructions to the owl and let it go.

"Who... Who did you send a message to?" Mrs. Puckett asked quickly as she waddled up to him.

"Oh, to myself at Hogwart's. It's my insurance that nothing will happen to me before I arrive there." Choab said as he walked past her into the hallway leading back to the family dining room.

"I... What's in the message?" Mrs. Puckett asked in frustration as she tried to keep up with Choab.

"Only what we discussed earlier about you being a thief... and that I'm in fear for my life and believe that you're going to try and kill me before I can get away." Choab said in a nonchalant tone.

"Oh Master Choab! You have such an imagination." Mrs. Puckett said with forced humor as they entered the dining room and Choab sat down to his meal.

"Would you look at that..." Mrs. Puckett said and gestured to the tart in the middle of the table.

"Catty should know better. Those berries aren't even ripe. That tart won't be edible. I have a nice custard ready to go. Tuck into your meal and I'll be right back." Mrs. Puckett said as she whisked the tart away.

"Make sure you dispose of it where the dogs won't get into it. We lost two dogs to the 'tainted quail' incident." Choab said, hammering home the point that he knew what she was doing.

"Yes, quite." She muttered as she waddled out of the room.

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"Are you ready to prepare for bed Master Choab?" James asked timidly.

"Yes James." Choab said as he looked at the young man.

"Shall I draw your bath?" James asked, averting his gaze.

"In a moment." Choab said and waited for James to look him in the eyes.

"Sir?" James asked, and chanced a look.

"I'm sorry about the incident at the clothier's. If I could have thought of another way to have achieved my goal, I would have used it." Choab said quietly.

James seemed to relax a little.

"You're the closest thing I have to a friend here James. And to tell you the truth, you're the only one I'm going to miss." Choab said as he looked away.

"Thank you for saying so Master Choab. And thank you for not mentioning... you know... the things we do..." James said uncomfortably.

Choab smiled as he said, "No one will ever hear of those things from me. You've given me the closest thing to affection I've known in my life. In fact, if you'd like to draw that bath now, you could join me if you wanted."

James gave a warm smile and said, "I'd like that Master Choab."

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"The portal is just over there, through that post." James said as he pushed the cart.

A woman and young girl walked through the portal while Choab watched.

"I can take it from here James." Choab said seriously.

"Are you sure? I wouldn't mind coming with you to see you off." James said with honest caring.

Choab smiled as he said, "Thank you James, knowing that you want to means a lot to me. I just don't want my classmates to think I'm flaunting the family wealth or some nonsense like that."

"I understand. Then I'll say my goodbye to you now Master Choab." James said formally.

"Goodbye James. I hope things work out so you and Catty can get away from the mansion and have a good life together." Choab said honestly.

"We'll be gone in a fortnight. I asked her to wait till you'd gone to Hogwart's." James said happily.

"Be good to each other." Choab said seriously.

"We will. Now off with you. It wouldn't do to be late." James said as he gestured to the portal.

On impulse, Choab ran up and gave James a quick hug before taking hold of his luggage trolley and walking briskly toward the portal.

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"Do you mind if I sit with you?" Choab asked hesitantly from the cabin doorway.

The two girls looked at each other with question, then gave identical shakes of their heads.

"I'm Choab."

"I'm Pansy Parkinson and this is Darla. We only just met, so I don't know her last name yet." One of the girls said as the other seemed to shrink away and try to blend into the seat cushion.

"Are you both first years too?" Choab asked, carefully watching Darla's expression, thinking such a timid, fearful expression might come in handy someday.

"Yes. Isn't it exciting? What house do you think you'll get sorted into?" Pansy asked with excitement.

"Oh, I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose it doesn't matter to me." Choab said casually.

"You have to have some kind of idea. Are you a good student? Because if you are, that might mean Ravenclaw." Pansy said seriously.

"I don't know. I've been taught by a private tutor all my life so I don't know how I am compared to others." Choab said, consciously making his voice tremble, giving the effect of being fearful.

"Maybe not then. And if you're scared of answering a few questions, then you probably won't be in Gryffindor. They're the brave ones. You'll probably be in Hufflepuff. I think Darla is going there too." Pansy said with a considering glance at the girl beside her.

"Where will you be going?" Choab asked, trying to sound as if he didn't know.

"Slytherin of course. That's the house where leaders and politicians come from. Both my parents and all my grandparents were in Slytherin." Pansy said proudly.

Choab nodded thoughtfully, not wanting to prompt the pug faced girl into further chatter.

"Do you know what I've heard?" Pansy asked in nearly breathless excitement.

Choab looked at her, knowing that he didn't have to ask, she'd tell him.

"Harry Potter is going to be going to Hogwart's this year. Can you believe it? *The boy who lived* is going to be in our year. Isn't that exciting?" Pansy asked with glee.

"What house do you think he'll be in?" Choab asked before he could catch himself.

"Gryffindor of course. He's got to be one of those hero types." Pansy said with certainty.

Choab nodded, filing the information away for later.

"Have you had a chance to look at your books yet? I couldn't believe everything we're going to have to learn in the potions book. It'll just take forever to understand it all." Pansy said emotively.

"It didn't look that hard to me." Choab said slowly.

"What? Did you see that first potion? I didn't even know what some of the ingredients were. This is going to be so much fun. I can't wait to get started." Pansy said with delight.

Choab thought back to the first potion. It was a simple concoction that he could have mixed when he was five. As Pansy pulled the potion book out of a bag she was carrying, Choab quickly said, "I'm going to see if I can get a look at that Potter guy. I'll see you two later."

"Good luck at the sorting." Pansy said, then started reading aloud from the potions book to Darla.

Choab closed the door behind him and shook his head to try and dispel the buzz from her incessant chatter.

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Choab wandered along, looking in different rooms, trying to find one where he thought he could get some peace and quiet.

He peeked in one where two boys had apparently bought the entire trolley of snacks. Imagining the aftereffects of all that candy, he decided to try elsewhere.

Finally, he was able to find an unused room where he could sit by himself quietly.

Less than a minute later, a voice interrupted him, "Here's one. Come back when we've arrived, I need some rest."

Two other boys, rather stout, nodded and walked away.

"You don't mind do you?" The blond boy asked, not waiting for an answer before walking in to take a seat.

Choab gave a noncommittal smile and gestured to the seat opposite.

"Malfoy. Draco Malfoy." The boy said with arrogance and superiority in his voice.

"Choab." he said without expression.

Malfoy looked at him, as if willing him to give his full name.

Choab was not in the mood to be bullied, so he matched Malfoy's stare with his own indomitable resolve.

Their staring contest might have lasted all the way to Hogwart's if not for someone opening the door uninvited.

"Do you mind if I join you?" A frizzy haired girl asked hopefully.

"Yes." Both Malfoy and Choab answered simultaneously.

The girl got a shocked look, then slammed the door.

Malfoy and Choab looked at each other and smiled.

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The rest of the trip to Hogwart's passed without conversation. Both boys were content with the silence and appreciated it.

Almost immediately after the train stopped, the two stout boys appeared at the door.

Malfoy nodded at Choab before leaving the cabin.

A moment later Choab left the cabin and followed the tide of students off the train.

A large man called, "First years, follow me!"

Choab immediately fell into line with the other first year students to follow.

After a pleasant night ride on some enchanted boats, they arrived at the grand castle that was Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Choab assessed the place carefully and decided that from the outside, it seemed a decent enough place to spend the next seven years.

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As they reached the top of the stairs to enter the great hall, they were stopped by a witch that reminded Choab of the upstairs maid at the mansion, Millicent.

She blathered on about the sorting for a while which didn't interest Choab in the slightest, then they followed her in.

The ceiling was an impressive glamour that Choab had to admire. The floating candles seemed a bit showy, but he supposed that it was expected, what with people from all social classes attending and what not.

The group stood in a line at the front of the hall before a stool with a ratty old hat on it.

Choab was frankly impressed when it started to speak. That's when all the things he'd heard about the sorting came together in his mind and it finally made sense to him.

The first student was sorted into Gryffindor and you'd have thought from the ruckus he'd just invented broomless flight. Choab couldn't understand the fuss. He hadn't achieved anything, he hadn't won anything, he was simply sorted into his house.

The students seemed to cheer louder with each successive sorting and Choab couldn't wait until it was his turn, so he could sit down and be away from the focus of the shouting.

"Draconis Malfoy." Was called, and he watched as Malfoy was sorted into Slytherin to many cheers and much congratulations.

"Cherub Nightshade." The old witch, McGonigal said firmly.

A few whispers could be heard, mostly from the Slytherin table at the mention of his name.

Time seemed to stand still as the hat sat on his head and sorted through his mind.

After an exaggerated silence he finally heard the hat announce "Slytherin".

Choab walked to the Slytherin table and was greeted with handshakes and welcomed as part of the Slytherin family.

'So that's what it feels like, I've always wondered.' Choab thought to himself as he took a seat.

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After a well prepared meal, and a somewhat longwinded speech by the headmaster, first years were led to their houses.

Choab followed along, trying to pay attention to where he was going so he wouldn't get lost later.

"The female Slytherin prefect led them to a blank wall in the lower level and told them the password.

As she said it, the doorway revealed itself and opened to them.

Choab walked in slowly and was impressed with what he saw.

The common room was large and well appointed.

It was filled with comfortable, good quality furnishings. The atmosphere was nothing short of luxurious.

"Boys, follow me." The male prefect said and started down a hall.

Choab followed, not sure what to expect next.

"Two rooms, four students each. You sort out where you go, or I'll sort you." The prefect said without humor or malice.

Draco Malfoy made a show of looking into each room before saying, "Crabbe, Goyle, and Choab. In here with me."

Choab looked at the other four boys who weren't chosen and saw the looks of disappointment and envy on their faces.

"Crabbe and Goyle, over there." Malfoy said and pointed at the two beds on the far side of the room.

"Choab." Malfoy said and pointed at the bed nearer the door.

Choab nodded and moved to his bed.

The luggage started appearing by each boys bed. Although Choab had never seen it before, he knew it to be the work of elves.

"Good. I'm glad to see they're on top of things." Malfoy said firmly as he started to unpack.

Choab opened his trunk and began to put his casual clothes away.

"What's that you've got there?" Malfoy asked, looking at several pairs of dark green, brown and black pants.

"I was told that we would need casual clothing." Choab said in confusion.

"Is that casual where you're from?" Malfoy asked, using something between a sneer and honest curiosity.

"Yes. What do you consider casual?" Choab asked curiously.

Malfoy moved to his trunk and pulled out a pair of very nice dark blue pants.

"I don't recall seeing that style when I was shopping. Do you think I should get some clothing like yours?" Choab asked hesitantly.

"No. Now that I've seen what you call casual, it makes my own casual clothes look rather common. Did you buy those in Diagon Alley?" Malfoy asked as he looked them over.

"Yes. The clothier on the main street directed us to a more discreet store for casual wear." Choab replied cautiously.

"I'll need to go there when next I visit." Malfoy said seriously, then went back to his own clothes.

Choab got to his robes and decided to hang them the easy way.

"*Clotho Leviosa.*" He said with a wave of his wand.

The robes levitated in a row and hung themselves in the wardrobe.

"You're pretty good at that. But I wouldn't go showing off in class with it." Malfoy said casually.

Choab looked at Malfoy curiously.

"From what I've been told, some of the professors get a little put out if you learn anything before they've taught it to you." Malfoy said seriously.

"Thank you. I understand." Choab said in thought.

"We're from two of the oldest families here. We have to set the example for everyone else of what's expected." Malfoy said as he put the last of his robes away.

"Why?" Choab asked as he took a seat on the edge of his bed.

"We're kind of like the prize. If they live the right way, marry the right way, go to the right parties, socialize with the right friends, then some day maybe they'll get to be us." Malfoy said seriously.

Choab looked at Malfoy with confusion, trying to decide if he was joking or insane.

"Well, not literally, of course. But be like us. We are an example of what it is to have wealth, bloodlines, social standing and all the rest. It falls to us to show them that all that they go through to reach the top is worth it." Malfoy said as he took a seat on his own bed.

Choab thought about his words and finally looked at Malfoy with question.

Malfoy smiled and said, "You held my gaze and didn't cave in when I demanded something you weren't ready to give. You sat in comfortable silence with me on the trip here. I didn't know your name then, but I could see your breeding. Nightshade is a well respected family in the wizarding world and I'd be proud if I could call you my friend."

"I'd like that... what should I call you?" Choab asked cautiously.

"In private, when it's just the four of us, you can call me Draco. Outside, you should call me Malfoy." Draco said seriously.

Choab nodded in thought. When he looked up he saw Draco's expectant expression.

"Oh. Excuse me Draco. You may call me Choab outside. When we're alone... Cherub I guess. No one's ever really called me anything but Choab."

"What about Cherry?" Draco asked with a playful smile that looked somehow out of place on his face.

"No. I don't think so. Not a very flattering name." Choab said with a chuckle.

"But it is descriptive." Draco said with a sly smile, that looked more proper for him.

"Perhaps, but in my case, inaccurate." Choab said in response.

Draco's eyes went wide and he got an expectant look.

"Maybe I'll tell you later... not on the first date." Choab finished with a wink.

Crabbe and Goyle laughed from the other side of the room and drew Draco and Choab's attention.

"Sorry, small room." Goyle said, trying to hide his smile.

"Cherub, This is Goyle and the other one is Crabbe. Both these guys are from good families and I've known them for years. They've sort of volunteered to be my body guards until I get settled in." Draco said in a relaxed voice.

"Why do you need body guards?" Choab asked cautiously.

"Well. When you're dealing with people who are trying to climb socially, there's no problem. But there are mudbloods and mixbloods and a few families like the Weasleys here who have given up any hope of progressing socially and preach that breeding and social status doesn't matter anymore. When around those types, violence tends to erupt." Draco finished with irritation.

"There are mudbloods here?" Choab asked in wonder.

"Yes. They don't advertise it in the school literature, but witches and wizards born of muggle parents are allowed to attend here. I happen to know that there are a few in our year... not in Slytherin, of course." Draco said seriously.

"I had no idea. I've never even met a muggle." Choab said in awe.

"I can't say I've really talked to any myself. From what I've heard, we're better off for not having had the experience." Draco said seriously.

"Bloody boring, they are." Goyle said frankly.

"We met some over the summer. They kept going on and on about 'telly' this and 'telly' that till I was sick to death of it and wanted to punch 'em in the mouth." Crabbe said in a growl.

"What did you do?" Choab asked cautiously.

"I punched 'em in the mouth." Crabbe said in a tone of voice as if to say, 'isn't it obvious'.

A knock on the door preceded the entry of a tall, slender man. Choab recognized him as one of the professors.

"I am Professor Severus Snape." The man said, then paused to be sure he had everyone's undivided attention.

"I am the Head of your House. If you are having problems in this school, you will go to your prefects or come to me and we will help you. As Slytherins you are expected to remain at the top scholastically by whatever means. I expect each of you to bear yourselves with the decorum and proper studiousness as befits your place in this school." Professor Snape said and looked at each boy to gauge their comprehension.

In a quieter tone, he continued, "Mr. Nightshade, a word with you."

Choab stood from his bed and walked to Professor Snape.

"Come along." Professor Snape said and walked out of the room.

Choab looked back into the room to see Draco, Goyle and Crabbe looking back at him.

Chapter 2

Professor Snape led the way out of the Slytherin rooms and into the hallway.

Choab kept silent as he followed, wondering why he had been singled out.

Finally they arrived at what was obviously a classroom door.

Professor Snape waved his hand before the door and it opened.

Choab walked in cautiously, followed by Professor Snape.

A chill went down Choab's spine as he heard the door close.

Choab turned and looked Professor Snape in the eyes as he said, "I'm surprised. I didn't think I'd be asked to give... 'extra credit' at least until classes had started."

Professor Snape only revealed his shock at the statement by the arch of an eyebrow before saying, "Nothing so dire. And as head of Slytherin House, if anyone, professor or prefect, requests such 'extra credit' from any student, I expect to hear of it immediately, am I understood?"

"Yes. My apologies Professor." Choab said, but didn't avert his gaze.

"No matter. The reason I've brought you here is to discuss the glamour that you're wearing." Professor Snape said seriously.

"Sir?" Choab asked in confusion.

"We professors see a variety of students each year and have become attuned to certain spells. Though the glamour you're wearing wouldn't be apparent to most wizards, nearly all the staff noticed it when you walked into the great hall." Professor Snape said in a low voice.

"I'm sorry sir, I don't know to what you are referring." Choab said quietly.

Professor Snape looked carefully at Choab's expression and seemed to come to a decision.

"Perhaps you don't." Professor Snape said, then walked to a cabinet and selected three vials of liquid before returning to Choab.

"Come along. We'll go to the infirmary and let Madame Pomfrey have a look at you. If this is something that's been done to you, she should be able to tell." Professor Snape said as he led the way out of the classroom.

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"Oh, for Merlin's sake..." Madame Pomfrey muttered as she waived her wand over Choab again and again.

"Well?" Professor Snape asked with irritation.

"Near as I can tell, there are some two dozen spells on the boy. Glamours, hexes and transfigurations. All of them are years old."

"Mr. Nightshade, do you have any idea of how this happened?" Professor Snape asked carefully.

"No sir. I don't know anything about it." Choab said seriously.

"Here's a compulsion that keeps him from recognizing the magics used against him." Madame Pomfrey said in concentration.

Professor Snape turned with a swish of his robes and walked out of the room.

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"Yes Severus. I believe you're right." the Headmaster said from Choab's bedside.

"Will it be safe for the child if we choose to unbind the spells?" Professor McGonigal asked cautiously.

"Yes. I believe so. There is just no way of knowing what the spells are hiding." Headmaster Dumbledore said in thought.

"Mr. Nightshade, do you understand what we are talking about?" Professor Snape asked carefully.

"Yes sir. Someone has changed me." Choab said quietly.

"Yes, quite. The question is, do we want to undo those changes to find what is beneath?" Professor McGonigal asked rhetorically.

After a moment of silence, Professor Snape said, "I think the choice should belong to the child."

Dumbledore nodded his acceptance.

"Mr. Nightshade, do you want us to release the magics and reveal your true form?" Professor Snape asked cautiously.

"Yes sir." Choab said with a tremble of honest fear in his voice.

"This could take several hours, perhaps days and there most certainly will be some pain involved. Are you certain that you want to proceed?" Headmaster Dumbledore asked with concern.

"Yes sir. Completely certain." Choab said as he pushed down his fear and regained complete control.

"As Madame Pomfrey identifies each spell, we can deal with it." Headmaster Dumbledore said seriously.

Madame Pomfrey nodded and began to wave her wand over the boy again.

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"How are you feeling?" Madame Pomfrey asked as she noticed Choab's eyes begin to flutter open.

"Hurt." Choab gasped out.

"I don't wonder. Here, this should help." She said as she waived her wand across Choab's chest.

"You went through quite a bit last night." Madame Pomfrey said in her ever present cheery tone.

"What happened?" Choab asked as he blinked, trying to come fully awake.

"Too much to tell. Let's just say that we got the worst of the magics off of you and be done with it." Madame Pomfrey said and gestured to the bedside table.

Choab glanced at the table in time to see breakfast appear before him.

"You need a good meal to build your strength." Madame Pomfrey said more seriously.

Choab tried to achieve a sitting position but fell back.

"The new body is going to take some getting used to. You've got some muscles that haven't been used in a very long time." Madame Pomfrey said gently.

"New body?" Choab asked with worry.

Madame Pomfrey bit her lip and nodded, then walked away.

Choab tried to sit again, this time just managing it. He lifted a hand to reach behind him to find what was pulling on his back when he noticed his hand.

All thoughts of the weight on his back left him as he examined his long slender fingers with fingernails that looked like claws or talons.

"What?" Choab asked with fear.

"Shhh. Don't worry. I've just gone to get you a mirror." Madame Pomfrey said as she returned to his bedside.

Choab took a deep breath and accepted the mirror with shaking hands.

"Before you look, Headmaster Dumbledore said that we can restore the glamour when this is all done. Remember that." Madame Pomfrey said with concern.

Choab nodded and lifted the mirror to see his true self for the first time.

The golden blond hair was the first thing he noticed as he slowly tilted the mirror. Golden blond, just like his father's.

Reluctantly, he continued to tilt the mirror until he looked into his eyes and saw deep blue eyes staring back at him... again, like his father's.

Tears began to well up in his eyes as the realization fell on him.

"Shhh. It's not so bad. We can fix the scarring." Madame Pomfrey crooned.

Choab looked at her in confusion, then tilted the mirror to see the rest of his face.

Three scars, obvious claw marks extended down his face from just below his left eye down his cheek, tapering off just before his jaw.

Choab blinked to clear the tears from his eyes and looked at his face more intently.

He was the younger image of his father. The same features, the same coloring, the same eyes.

"Headmaster Dumbledore will be in to talk with you shortly. Please try to relax." Madame Pomfrey said in a worried voice.

Choab nodded and handed the mirror back to her.

"You can keep that here if you'd like to get familiar with your new look." Madame Pomfrey said, trying to sound calming.

"No. Thank you. I've seen enough." Choab said in a weak voice.

Madame Pomfrey nodded and took the mirror.

Choab reached behind him to feel what was pulling on his back and felt something odd... soft... attached.

"What?..." Choab trailed off in confusion.

He grabbed whatever it was and pulled the edge of it to where he could see it.

A wing.

He jerked on it and felt a stab of pain as he realized that the thing wasn't just attached, it was part of him. He had wings!

"What am I?" Choab asked as he looked at Madame Pomfrey with fear.

"We're still not quite sure of that. But rest assured that before you leave here, we'll have the answer." Madame Pomfrey said in a soothing voice.

Choab felt darkness intruding on the edges of his vision and fell back on the bed.

His vision narrowed to a pinpoint before consciousness left him entirely.

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"Just a broken wrist." the voice of Madame Pomfrey said from the other side of a partition.

A whimpering cry sounded from someone.

"I need to get back to the class. Merlin only knows what they'll be up to if left unsupervised."

Another voice said gruffly.

"Mr. Longbottom will be well taken care of. Go attend to your class Madame Hooch." Madame Pomfrey said with assurance.

Choab could hear brisk steps leaving the room over the whimpering child.

"Just lie still and I'll be right back to take care of you." Madame Pomfrey said in a gentle voice.

Choab looked down at his hands to see that the long clawed fingers were still there, it hadn't been a nightmare. Or more accurately, the nightmare had been reality.

"How are you doing young man?" Headmaster Dumbledore asked from beside him.

"I... I don't know." Choab said honestly.

"I imagine it's quite a shock when..." Dumbledore began.

"...Everything you've ever known about yourself is a lie?" Choab finished, barely managing to keep the tremble from his voice.

"Yes." Dumbledore said in a whisper.

"What am I?" Choab asked in a small, child voice.

"You're a young man not unlike any other at this school." Dumbledore said with assurance.

Choab looked at him incredulously.

"After consulting a few sources and confirming a few suspicions we've concluded that your mother transfigured herself for a significant portion of her pregnancy and your physical appearance is the result." Dumbledore said seriously.

"So what am I?" Choab asked again.

"As I said, you're a young man not unlike any other. Your appearance is simply... unconventional." Dumbledore said carefully.

Choab looked at his hands and thought about his wings and finally realized the truth.

"A harpy." Choab said as he looked up at the Headmaster.

"We assume so." Dumbledore nodded.

Choab looked at his hands again, and considered what this meant.

"It is possible to restore the transfigurations and glamours that you arrived with if that is what you desire." Dumbledore said quietly.

Choab looked at his hands, but made no show of hearing the Headmaster's words.

"I'll leave you to think about what you'd like to do." Dumbledore said and began to walk away.

"Headmaster?" Choab called suddenly.

Dumbledore turned to look at Choab curiously.

"Could Draco Malfoy come talk with me? I'd like his advice." Choab asked with hope.

"I'll have him stop by after classes let out for the day." Dumbledore said, then walked away.

Choab felt a rumble in his stomach and realized that he hadn't eaten his breakfast earlier.

He looked at the bedside table and saw that the food was gone. From the light in the room, it appeared to be after noon.

"I imagine you're hungry by now." Madame Pomfrey said as she hurried around the partition.

"Yes ma'am." Choab said shyly.

With a quick wave of her wand, a full meal appeared beside him.

"Go on. Enjoy your meal. I have an injury to attend to just now." Madame Pomfrey said quickly as she left.

Choab sat up, once again noticing the wings on his back trying to pull him back down.

With a little conscious effort, he was able to get the wings to fold in close to his body and give him something closer to his normal balance.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached for the fork, then stopped. His arm was longer than it used to be.

With much difficulty, Choab was finally able to pick up the fork with the taloned fingers and manipulate a bite of food onto it.

As he tried to guide the fork to his mouth, he realized that he was going to have to relearn how to do just about everything if he chose to keep his true form.

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It had taken nearly an hour for Choab to finish eating.

He was feeling a mix of frustration, anger and bewilderment at the events of the past day.

"Cherub?" A voice called cautiously from the edge of the partition.

"Believe it or not." Choab said darkly.

"What happened?" Draco asked in a mix of confusion and horror.

"This." Choab said and spread his arms.

"What?" Draco asked as he stared at Choab with wide eyes.

"The professors noticed that I had a glamour on me when we arrived. Professor Snape brought me here so we could find out what was underneath... this is it." Choab summarized.

"Did you know?" Draco asked hesitantly.

"No. I didn't have any idea." Choab said in a whisper.

Draco had a distant expression for a moment, then met Choab's gaze.

"Can you help me decide what to do? It's... too much." Choab said helplessly.

Draco nodded and walked to the chair beside Choab's bed and took a seat.

"Dumbledore said that he can restore the transfigurations and glamours if I want..." Choab trailed off.

Draco nodded.

"But I can't stay like this... I mean. Look at me!" Choab continued in a pained voice.

Draco nodded again.

Silence fell between them as they both thought.

"How did this happen?" Draco finally asked.

"They think my mother transfigured while she was pregnant with me and it changed me into this." Choab said irritably.

Draco nodded and stared off in distant thought.

"I remember what you said about breeding and old families and all that. You're the only one I know to ask about this. What should I do?" Choab asked desperately.

"Let's sort this out bit by bit." Draco said carefully.

Choab nodded with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Since your family put the spells on you, I'm guessing they were trying to protect you." Draco said in thought.

"Trying to hide their mistake." Choab mumbled.

Draco looked at Choab curiously.

"It all makes sense now. Until three weeks ago, I never left the mansion where I grew up. I've only met my father twice and he just glared at me like I was something dirty. I've never seen my mother. We didn't even have elves. All the staff at the mansion are witches and wizards with little or no ability, so they wouldn't recognize the glamour for what it was..." Choab trailed off as tears began to fill his eyes.

"What else?" Draco asked, sensing that Choab was on the edge of discovering something.

"The glamour was just to make me so I didn't look like my father... They transfigured me to hide my hands and wings." Choab said as the tears began to fall.

Draco nodded as a serious look fell over his face.

"Maybe I should just take the glamour. I don't want to look like him anyway." Choab said with disgust.

"If that's what you want..." Draco said in a calculating voice that made Choab look up in curiosity.

"...but it wouldn't make things right." Draco said as he met Choab's gaze.

"You've got an idea." Choab said with hope.

"A thought." Draco said and betrayed a small smile.

"I'll take it. What have you got?" Choab asked and hefted himself up to sit on the edge of his bed.

"First, I need to know your objective. What's most important? Do you want to get through Hogwarts as easily as possible? Do you want to get revenge on your family? What do you want?" Draco asked seriously.

"I want to be myself. I've been living their lie all my life... and a little revenge might be good too." Choab finished with a smile.

"Good answer. Whatever else you were denied from your family, your breeding continues to show." Draco said with a look of admiration.

"Thank you Mr. Malfoy. So what do you suggest I do to achieve my objective?" Choab asked as he leaned forward with interest.

"Take stock of your appearance. Keep what you like, change what you don't." Draco said firmly.

"Okay. First thing, the claws have to go. It's impossible to do anything with them." Choab said as he held up one hand.

"I can imagine. What else?" Draco asked seriously.

"I'll keep the wings. They're part of me and I think I'll get used to them." Choab said and got a look of expectation, silently asking for Draco's approval.

After a moment of thought, Draco said, "Perhaps you should consider changing their color... they're awfully... white."

Choab thought about the suggestion, then got a mischievous smile.

"It looks like you've got an idea." Draco said with interest.

"Green and black with silver accents?" Choab said with a full grin.

"The Slytherin colors! It's a bit obvious, but likely to placate anyone who might object to your nonstandard appearance... at least in our house." Draco said in thought.

"And who else matters?" Choab said, maintaining his grin.

"Good point." Draco conceded with a smile.

"I'm thinking I'd like to change my hair color to black, something like Professor Snape's. What do you think?" Choab asked in thought.

Draco looked at Choab carefully and finally said, "Yes. I can see that working."

"And I'll keep the eyes and the scar just the way they are." Choab said with a glint in his eyes.

Draco raised his eyebrows, more as a prompt to continue than an expression of surprise.

"Anyone who has ever seen my father will recognize my eyes. They're very distinctive. He won't be able to deny me anymore." Choab said with intensity.

"And the scar?" Draco asked without expression.

"It's my expression of myself. It's a symbol of every hurt, every lie, everything they did to me." Choab said with defiance in his voice.

"It sounds like you have a plan." Draco said with a smirk.

"It sounds like I do." Choab said with a smile.

"How long are you going to be in here?" Draco asked as he looked around.

"I'm not sure. Probably not too much longer. I think I'm only still here so they can be sure I won't go insane or suicidal..."

"...or homicidal." Draco interjected.

Choab nodded and continued, "When they know I'm going to deal with it, they'll probably let me go."

"What do you want me to tell the Slytherins?" Draco asked seriously.

Choab thought about the question and finally said, "Don't make any announcements or anything, but if someone asks, tell them whatever you think they need to know. I can't see it being anyone else's business, but by the same token, I have nothing to hide."

"Spoken like a pure blood." Draco said with a smile.

Choab smiled at Draco as he said, "Thank you for helping me Draco. It was a bit much to deal with all at once."

"We have to stick together. Just because we're from old families doesn't mean we don't have problems, it just means we face them with dignity and decorum." Draco said in a haughty voice.

Choab smiled and said, "Yes, we do."

Chapter 3

"Oh my, you're looking much better this evening. I trust that young Mr. Malfoy was of some comfort to you." Headmaster Dumbledore said with delight.

"Yes sir. Mr. Malfoy was very helpful." Choab said calmly.

"From your expression it would seem that you have reached some decisions." The Headmaster said evenly.

"Yes sir. I have." Choab said seriously.

"Tell me what you've decided and we'll do our best to see that you're taken care of." Dumbledore said happily.

"Well, it's not as much as you might expect. I'd like something done about my hands, these talons are really inconvenient. Besides that, I'd just like to change my hair and wing color to something less... radiant. I am a Slytherin after all." Choab finished with a smile.

"Yes, yes. Well done Mr. Nightshade. Professor McGonigal will be down shortly to help you with your hands. I believe Professor Snape will be best to help you with the remainder. How does that sound?" Dumbledore asked with a smile that was just a bit to cheerful.

"Very good Headmaster. When may I leave the infirmary?" Choab asked cautiously.

"As soon as Professors McGonigal and Snape are finished I should think." Dumbledore said in a considering voice.

"Thank you Headmaster." Choab said, trying to convey his appreciation.

"You're very welcome young man." Dumbledore said as he withdrew from the partitioned area.

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"It will be much simpler if you have the spell on an amulet. A simple bracelet can hold the spell in place for you and you will be able to remove it at will." Professor McGonigal said seriously.

"I just don't see the advantage in that." Choab said in thought.

"Try thinking of it this way. As you get older and stronger in your magic, the transfiguration spell will have to be recast more and more often to maintain it. By using the amulet, you won't have that worry and you'll have the advantage of your natural form should that be desirable." Professor McGonigal said in an imploring voice.

"Thank you for explaining it to me and allowing me to decide Professor McGonigal. I'll do as you suggest and accept the transfiguration spell on an amulet." Choab said seriously.

Professor McGonigal gave a brief smile, then went to work enchanting the bracelet she brought to contain the spell.

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"The Headmaster asked that I come to assist you Mr. Nightshade. What can I do for you this evening?" Professor Snape asked seriously.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd like to change the color of my hair and wings." Choab asked, forcing himself to sound strong.

"I hadn't expected you to be concerned with such... cosmetic... details. Before I agree, may I know of your reasoning?" Professor Snape asked, not revealing any emotion in his request.

"All my life I've looked the way my father chose. Now that his spells have been broken, I'm the younger image of him. I want some control over who I am and how I appear." Choab said with fierce intensity.

"Very well. What color would you like?" Professor Snape asked, a notable softening in his voice.

"I would like to change my hair color to black, and straighten it if possible..." Choab began and noticed a curious look on Professor Snape's face.

"Yes. Like yours." Choab admitted shyly.

Professor Snape straightened his posture and hid any emotional reaction.

"And I'd like my wings to be black, green and silver... to show my pride in my house." Choab continued in a stronger voice.

Professor Snape nodded in thought for a moment, then said, "Come to the potions lab and we can accomplish your goals."

Choab sat up and realized that he was shirtless.

"Um. I don't have anything to wear..." Choab said timidly.

"Just wrap yourself in a robe for now. The situation with your wardrobe will be sorted out in due time." Professor Snape said seriously.

Choab pulled the robe up to cover his wings and gripped it closed at the neck with one hand.

When he was ready, Professor Snape turned with a swish of his robes and led the way out of the infirmary closely followed by Choab.

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"This potion should achieve the proper results." Professor Snape said as he opened a book on the desk.

Choab looked carefully at the potion and finally said, "If you would like, I could prepare this myself."

"I'll consider it recompense for missing your first class." Professor Snape said as he began to gather ingredients.

"Thank you Professor." Choab said seriously as he inwardly smiled.

After nearly half an hour of preparing the ingredients and one last reading through the book. Choab began to mix the ingredients, falling into the familiar pattern he'd used in the past six years of his potion making at home.

"Quite an interesting method of combining ingredients, where did you learn it?" Professor Snape asked with interest as he watched Choab pouring three ingredients from one beaker to another several times.

"I followed the instructions in my father's potion books and taught myself. But the books tend to assume that you know how to do things like combine complimentary ingredients or dissolve them. So I tried a few different methods until I found something that worked." Choab said as he continued the pouring.

"In this class we put the solution into a beaker and stir it steadily until completely integrated." Professor Snape said seriously.

"I tried that, but I had problems with the ingredients stratifying within the solution, even though I was stirring." Choab said and stopped his pouring to look carefully at the solution.

"Many students have that difficulty. With practice you learn to alter your stirring stroke to sufficiently prevent stratification." Professor Snape said in his lecturing tone.

"I'd like to see that. Some ingredients are too sensitive to be combined my way." Choab said, then poured his beaker of ingredients into the cauldron.

"Are you able to recognize which ingredients those might be?" Professor Snape asked with interest.

"Yes. A few failed potions and one very fragrant explosion caused me to research common ingredients in regard to sensitivity. Anything I'm not sure of, I assume to be sensitive until proven otherwise." Choab said, then waived his hand over the cauldron and gestured as he said, "*Camborie Cambolis Ignum Infume Nicto.*"

The mixture in the cauldron seemed to explode, then just as suddenly implode.

"You purposely forced and contained a cascading reaction. Why?" Professor Snape asked, now in full teacher mode.

"It cut nearly an hour off the brewing time. In a potion that doesn't use blood rites or temporal-spatial components the forced reaction causes immediate bonding of the ingredients without changing the potency or effect of the potion." Choab said, not realizing that he was being quizzed.

"You realize that you just performed that spell without the benefit of a wand, don't you?" Professor Snape asked seriously.

Choab looked up quickly and said, "I'm sorry Professor Snape. I forgot. I won't do it again."

"You misunderstand my meaning Mr. Nightshade. Most of the students here won't ever achieve the use of wandless magic. Such power bodes well for you." Professor Snape said seriously.

"Yes. I also know that if I do that in front of the wrong people, I'll be branded as a prodigy and separated from the rest of the students in the interest of advancing my studies." Choab said forcefully.

"To help you realize your full potential." Snape said as he nodded in agreement.

"Realize my full potential to be what? To be the most isolated, maladjusted being in the wizarding world? Thanks to the actions of my parents I'm more than half-way there, thank you very much." Choab said with a lost, desperate look in his eyes.

"So you intend to masquerade as someone less intelligent and less talented than you truly are in order to further your social interactions?" Professor Snape asked carefully.

"It seemed like the thing to do." Choab said with a shrug.

"Portraying yourself in such a manner would be no different than choosing to return to the glammers and transfigurations that you arrived with. You really should be consistent with your choices. Either be your true self or be what you are expected to be. Being both is not a viable option in the long term." Professor Snape said seriously.

Choab thought about the words as he carefully dipped the potion from the cauldron into a vial.

"Thank you Professor. I hadn't recognized the fallacy in my decision." Choab said as he looked at the vial in his hand.

"How confident are you in your abilities?" Professor Snape asked seriously.

Choab smiled and drank the potion down without hesitation.

"I trust you will discuss your choice with Mr. Malfoy before making a final decision." Professor Snape said as he gathered more ingredients from around the room.

"No. I talked to Draco earlier because I was having trouble sorting out my options. You've just stated my options very clearly and if I'm going to be true to my own convictions, the choice has already been made." Choab said with resignation.

"Mr. Nightshade, you are Slytherin. Knowing what that means, what do you believe the probable reaction of the other Slytherin will be to your true self?" Professor Snape asked in a leading tone while continuing to gather ingredients.

"The physical differences will breed initial suspicion, but will eventually be seen as the inconsequential, cosmetic affectations that they are. Any skills or knowledge that I possess that surpass their own will be seen as resources to be exploited." Choab said in thought.

"Potential problems?" Professor Snape asked as he began to prepare the ingredients.

Choab noticed what he was doing and glanced at the potion book before starting to finely mince herbs.

"The main problem for the Slytherin would be the concern that my abilities may be used against them or withheld from them." Choab said in thought.

"Solution?" Snape prompted, then started grinding something with a mortar and pestle.

"A show of loyalty to... Slytherin. My wings?" Choab looked up with surprise.

"Possibly. Your subsequent actions will have to reinforce the gesture." Professor Snape said in thought.

"What do I do about the other houses?" Choab asked as he returned the majority of his attention to the herbs before him.

"What would their reaction be toward you if you were of average appearance, wit and ability?" Professor Snape asked as he weighed the dust he had just ground.

"Because I'm Slytherin, they wouldn't trust me." Choab said, then looked up again in surprise and said, "No matter what, our houses would tend to prevent any type of significant relationship to develop. My appearance and abilities may amplify their reaction in the beginning, but the end result is the same."

Professor Snape walked to a cabinet without comment.

"So... if I'm honest with my housemates and reserve my best efforts while in the company of others then I may be able to have what I've wanted all along without giving up anything significant." Choab said as he went back to his herbs.

"Look." Snape said as he handed Choab a mirror.

Choab looked in the mirror and smiled. He was surprised to see himself with long black hair framing his face. Choab hadn't considered that changing his hair color would also change his eyebrows and eyelashes. The change had the effect of drawing attention to his deep blue eyes.

"It's better than I imagined." Choab said happily.

"Your completion of the potion negates any adverse effect on your grade from missing my first class. Your method of dissolving appropriate ingredients and your use of magic to expedite the brewing process have earned Slytherin thirty points." Professor Snape said, then held out a hand for the mirror.

"Thank you Professor." Choab said with a smile, then transferred his completed herbs to a small cup to await their use.

"I'll need one of your feathers to bind the spell properly." Professor Snape said as he carefully measured some powder on the scale.

Choab reached back and took a firm grip on one of his feathers. After taking a deep breath and tensing his jaw, he gave it a solid yank.

"Son of a Muggle!" Choab cursed as he hopped in a tight circle, rubbing the sore spot on his wing where the feather had been.

"A little sensitive?" Snape asked, obviously fighting back a smile.

"I imagine it's about like pulling off a fingernail. Please tell me we won't have to do this often." Choab said as he tried to sooth the hurt.

"No. Once should be sufficient unless you decide you want to change your coloring again." Professor Snape said seriously.

"If I'd known it would hurt like that, I would have thought twice about changing it at all." Choab said honestly while rubbing the tender spot on his wing.

"If I may have your attention, I will demonstrate the proper method for brewing a potion in my class." Professor Snape said seriously.

Choab let loose of his injured wing and turned his full attention to Professor Snape.

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"What are we going to do about my clothes?" Choab asked as he followed Professor Snape to the Slytherin dorm.

"Headmaster Dumbledore mentioned earlier that he would instruct the house elves to alter your wardrobe to accommodate your... individual needs." Professor Snape finished diplomatically.

Choab smiled at the choice of words, then clutched his robe a little tighter around his head as they passed through the hidden door.

Several students of all ages looked up at their entry and looks of curiosity and concern passed over their faces at the huddled form accompanying Professor Snape.

"Mr. Widget, would you ask Mr. Malfoy to join us in the common room?" Professor Snape asked in a cold voice.

The Slytherin prefect immediately walked down the hall to the boy's rooms and returned a minute later with Draco, Crabbe and Goyle following.

"As some of you may have noticed, Mr. Nightshade has been absent from your ranks for the past twenty-four hours. He may need some assistance to overcome what he missed in the first day of classes." Professor Snape said firmly.

"What's wrong with him?" Pansy asked cautiously.

"Mr. Nightshade was under the effect of some two dozen spells to alter his appearance. This was done to him without his knowledge or consent. Do keep that in mind." Professor Snape said and turned to look at Choab.

After taking a deep breath for courage, Choab released the robe that was covering him and allowed it to fall to the floor.

Silence fell over the room as everyone looked at the handsome young man with long silky black hair, miles deep blue eyes and a distinctive scar on his left cheek.

Choab carefully spread his wings to their full span so everyone could get a good look at them. The black feathers revealed their iridescent green hue as the light hit them. Thin silver threads were barely noticeable on the vein of each feather.

"Beautiful." Pansy said in awe.

Choab smiled at her with relief.

"Now that you've been assured that Mr. Nightshade is indeed who he claims to be and was in no way responsible for deceiving you, I will take my leave." Professor Snape said as he withdrew from the gathering.

"Thank you Professor." Choab said with gratitude filling his voice.

Professor Snape gave an almost imperceptible nod as he made his way out of the room.

The room exploded into a whirlwind of questions from everyone present except Draco.

"I'm not sure about everything. The professors saw the glamour when I arrived. They were able to dispel everything that was done to me. As far as who, when, why and how it happened. I have my suspicions, but anything more I could say would just be speculation." Choab finally explained, answering several questions at once.

"Did anyone give you tomorrow's assignments?" Draco finally asked.

Choab turned toward Draco and gave a brief smile as he said, "No. How bad are they?"

"Come to the room and I'll cover it all with you." Draco said seriously.

"Thanks Malfoy." Choab said as he picked his robe up off the floor.

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Once the door was closed, Choab let out a sigh of relief.

"How are you doing Cherub?" Draco asked with concern.

"I just hope my first two days aren't typical of the rest of my time at Hogwart's." Choab said as he walked to his bed.

"Well, you didn't miss much. From what I saw of your wand work yesterday, you could probably miss the first two weeks and still be ahead of most of the class." Draco said as he sat on his bed to face Choab.

"About that..." Choab said uncomfortably and bit his lip while he considered how to tell Draco.

"It looks like you want to tell me something I probably won't like." Draco observed.

"Not exactly. It's just... I'm going to show you something..." Choab began uneasily.

"I think he wants to flash you Malfoy." Crabbe said with a snicker.

Choab laughed at the suggestion and decided to get it over with.

He made a complicated gesture and focused on the words of the spell in his mind.

The potions book laying on his bedside stand quickly glided through the air and into Choab's waiting hands.

"You're... you can... wandless magic..." Crabbe stammered with astonishment.

"Just how powerful are you?" Draco asked darkly.

"I don't know. I didn't have a wand until I got one for school. I've been doing wandless magic for about three years." Choab said weakly.

"What else can you do?" Goyle asked in wonder.

"Probably anything in the first year potions book." Choab said uncomfortably.

"Oh, I bet Snape is going to love that." Crabbe said sarcastically.

"He gave Slytherin thirty points for the potion I mixed to change my hair color." Choab said seriously.

"Thirty?" Goyle said in surprise.

Choab nodded.

Draco was staring off into space for a moment before asking, "So how much does Professor Snape know?"

"Everything. I got so busy mixing my potion that I forgot where I was for a minute and used a spell." Choab said darkly.

"Who else knows?" Draco asked, still deep in thought.

"No one. But I was thinking about telling the other Slytherin." Choab said, feeling concern at Draco's attitude.

"Hold off on that. You can never get an advantage back after giving it away." Draco said absently.

Choab waited for Draco to work through whatever was on his mind.

"Cherub, do you trust me?" Draco asked with intensity.

"Yes." Choab said immediately.

"Then I'm going to ask you to be completely honest with me. If you want, Crabbe and Goyle will leave the room." Draco said seriously.

"If you trust them to stay, then so do I. But if you're going to ask for my trust, are you going to give me yours in return?" Choab asked seriously.

Draco nodded and said, "I need to know, what you said before about why you're like this, was it true?"

"Yes. Professor McGonigal thinks my mother transfigured into a harpy while she was pregnant with me." Choab said, then continued, "And before you ask, I haven't lied to you about anything else I've told you either. I just didn't mention the wandless magic."

"Why would your mother do that?" Goyle asked curiously.

"Maybe to escape a certain dark wizard who has remained nameless for the past eleven years?" Choab said speculatively.

"I remember my parents telling me about the magical defenses they put in place. No one was safe." Goyle said distantly.

"That may not be the reason, it's just the only thing I could think of." Choab said carefully.

"We won't volunteer it as an answer, but if someone presses for an explanation, I say we go with it until proven otherwise." Draco said firmly.

"I can live with that." Choab said with a nod.

"What about your..." Draco said and held up one hand and wiggled his fingers.

"Professor McGonigal declawed me." Choab said happily and held his hands up for Draco to see.

Crabbe and Goyle looked on in confusion but didn't say anything.

"Watch this." Choab said and pulled off the bracelet.

Over the course of fifteen seconds, Choab's hands lengthened and the talons began to protrude. Within half a minute his transfiguration was complete.

"You could do some damage with those." Crabbe said with wide eyes.

"If we ever need a body guard, would you consider backing us up?" Goyle asked as he stared at the talons.

Choab chuckled as he said, "I'd be honored to be your body guard if you need one."

"I was thinking about something else." Draco said in a serious tone.

Choab grabbed his bracelet and put it back on his wrist. He looked expectantly at Draco as his hands returned to their human appearance.

"I think you should consider using your formal name, I mean, the same way I use Malfoy." Draco said carefully.

"Why?" Choab asked curiously.

"From what you've said, your family has kept you hidden away until now. You're out of hiding, you should act like it. Cherub Nightshade is what emerged from the cocoon that was Choab." Draco said seriously.

Choab thought about the words and finally responded, "I'll need to think about it. When I came here, I thought I'd just hide in the background of things and watch what was going on without really participating."

"Do you know what history calls people who do that?" Draco asked seriously.

"What?" Choab asked curiously.

"Nothing. History doesn't name them because people who skulk and lurk and hide don't change the world and they don't matter. We're Slytherin, we're not here to learn how to blend in, we're here to stand out. Malfoy, Nightshade, Crabbe and Goyle are going to stand out my friends." Draco said with passion.

"How can you be so certain?" Choab asked in a mix of awe and concern.

"Cherub Nightshade lived his entire life locked in a house. He read the books, practiced the spells, mixed the potions and found the answers the rest of us will probably still be looking for seven years from now. What he lacks is the awareness of the world that he needs to exploit his knowledge and skills. Draconis Malfoy grew up watching the maneuverings of the people around him and learning what drives people to do what they do. While Nightshade was learning potions and spells, Malfoy was learning politics and covert influence. What that all means is that Cherub Nightshade commands knowledge of the academic and Draconis Malfoy commands knowledge of the practical. When their efforts are combined, they can surpass anything either could do alone." Draco said happily.

"Where does that leave us?" Crabbe asked cautiously.

"Guarding our backs. Keeping us on target. Maybe even taking a fall for one of us so we can do what needs to be done. But what you two get out of the deal is a share of whatever rewards we enjoy." Draco said passionately.

Crabbe looked at Goyle with a lost expression.

"So do we still get to beat people up?" Goyle asked in confusion.

Draco nodded seriously.

"Good, then I'm in." Goyle said with a smile.

"Me too." Crabbe said happily.

Choab looked curiously at the two and noticed the playful twinkle in their eyes.

After a moment of thought, Choab announced, "Draco is right. If anyone talks about Choab, they're talking about the brown haired guy who went to the infirmary last night and never came back."

Draco got a smile of accomplishment and extended his hand to shake.

"Malfoy. Draco Malfoy." He said, mimicking his introduction on the train.

Choab took off his bracelet and watched as his hand transfigured.

"I don't want there to be any magics or illusions between us." Choab said seriously, then carefully took Draco's hand and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Malfoy, I am Cherub Nightshade."

Part 2: Cherub

Chapter 4

"Are you ready to do this?" Draco asked as he helped Cherub straighten his robes.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Cherub said with as much confidence as he could muster.

"Just remember what I told you last night. Don't let their ignorance and inferior breeding distract you from who you are. They will only see what you let them see, so show them what it means to be from a proud, old family." Draco said, then stood back to take one final look at Cherub's appearance.

"I'll remember." Cherub said and adjusted his posture.

"Just focus on getting used to the classes and leave the reactions and comments from the rabble to Goyle. If anyone tries to cause you grief, he'll deal with them." Draco said, then glanced at Goyle to receive a nod of confirmation.

"Let's do it." Draco said and led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Draco, Cherub, Crabbe and Goyle walked into the great hall to the cacophony of everyone in conversation.

The level of volume began to decrease as more and more students saw Cherub and stopped to stare at the winged boy amongst them.

Cherub made a conscious effort to fully retract his wings as he sat down between Draco and Goyle.

"Are you ready for the potions class today?" Draco asked, trying to break the tension among those at the Slytherin table.

"Yes, I read through the text and shouldn't have any problem." Cherub said, trying to maintain a relaxed tone of voice.

Cherub looked up at movement from the front of the room and saw all the professors enter in procession.

Morning announcements were made and Cherub began to relax as most of the students attention moved away from him to the front of the room.

Breakfast appeared and Cherub realized just how hungry he was.

"The food is very good here." Cherub said casually as he made his selections from the center of the table.

"You think so? I find it to be a bit bland for my taste." Malfoy said in a considering tone.

Everyone around them was listening intently to the conversation while making their own selections.

Cherub decided to try and initiate conversation with someone else and noticed Pansy sitting across from Draco.

"Pansy, in all the chaos of the sorting I never did see what happened to Darla, did she get sorted into Hufflepuff like you predicted?" Cherub asked before taking a bite of his food.

Pansy blinked twice before snapping out of her daze and finally said, "She was sorted into Gryffindor if you can believe it. She did as good a job at hiding her true nature as..."

Cherub smiled at the look of wide-eyed terror on Pansy's face as she had obviously spoken before thinking.

"I guess you won't be the next in line for the job of sorting hat then, will you?" Cherub asked with a teasing smile.

Pansy blushed and finally gave a relieved giggle.

Conversations began to spark up around them after that and Cherub settled into a comfortable meal. His breakfast was interspersed with casual conversation with the other first years at his table.

* * * * *

Cherub walked into the potions classroom and looked around for a place to sit, when the room suddenly fell silent.

Professor Snape walked briskly to his desk and said, "Mr. Nightshade, as you weren't here yesterday you seem to be without a partner."

"I believe Mr. Nott ended yesterday's session in a similar state, so if you will take the seat next to him, we will begin."

Cherub looked around the room and found Theodore Nott, a fellow Slytherin, sitting near the back of the class, looking at him curiously.

He quickly took the seat beside Theodore and listened intently to Professor Snape.

"In preparation for any potion, certain steps must be followed and the order of preparation may be significant. Why? Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked with a chopped tone.

After a long moment of silence, Hermione said, "That wasn't in the reading you assigned."

"Why? Mr. Nightshade?" Professor Snape asked in the same tone.

"Certain ingredients begin to lose their potency as soon as they're cut or ground. You place them in the order of preparation where their potency will be most effective for your potion." Cherub said in thought.

"But that wasn't in the reading." Hermione objected.

"Mr. Nightshade, will you tell Miss Granger where you found the correct answer?" Professor Snape asked without inflection.

Cherub thought for a second and remembered a passage of text he had skimmed over the night before in preparation for class.

"The reading you assigned yesterday mentioned that shrieking mandrake root quickly loses its potency when altered in any fashion from when it's harvested. It stands to reason that if an ingredient makes the transition from full potency to inert over a period of time and that transition is initiated by preparation, then the degree of potency should be able to be controlled by being aware of the time span between preparation and its inclusion in the potion." Cherub said carefully.

"Five points to Slytherin for the correct answer to my question and five points to Slytherin for supporting that answer with sound reasoning." Professor Snape said firmly.

"But..." Hermione began to say.

"Miss Granger. If you were to learn only what is written in the book there would be no need for you to attend this class. You could simply read the book and be done with it. Mr. Nightshade has just demonstrated one of the disciplines you are here to learn; deduction and reasoning. Speaking of deduction Miss Granger, a five point deduction from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn." Professor Snape finished coldly.

After an icy moment of silence, Professor Snape looked around the room and finally said, "Now we will practice the principle that was just discussed by brewing the potion on page 54. The number of ingredients will require you to form into groups of four if you are to have a hope of completing the potion in the allotted time. Maintain your partnerships and move to the workstations as I call you."

"Granger, Parkinson." Professor Snape said sharply and pointed to the first workstation.

"Nightshade, Malfoy." He said and gestured to the second.

Cherub, Theodore, Draco and Harry walked to the second workstation.

"To do this correctly, someone needs to be in charge." Draco said firmly.

Harry looked like he was about to object when Draco continued, "I think that since Nightshade got the right answer, he should tell us what to do."

Cherub glanced at the appropriate page in the book and smiled. He walked immediately to the supply shelf and picked up two hour-glass timers.

"Potter, begin grinding the mineral components into fine powder. They don't lose potency so order doesn't matter." Cherub said firmly.

"I don't know which ingredients are minerals." Harry said weakly.

Cherub looked at Harry with surprise, then said, "Malfoy, get Potter's raw ingredients. Nott, start to pulverize the jimson weed, it needs to rest before we use it. Turn this timer the moment you finish. I'll start on the henbane, it has to be sliced just right or it won't absorb properly."

Everyone started working and were silent until Draco finally said, "Potter has everything lined up, what needs to be done next?"

Cherub kept his focus on his slicing and said, "Get the dry ingredients that don't require preparation and measure them. Prepare the cauldron for use. As soon as it's heating, check to see that Potter is grinding the minerals to the proper texture, then see that the exact amounts are waiting for us when we need them. A fraction of a dram either way can spoil the potion."

Draco nodded seriously and began to work.

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Cherub finished the painstaking slicing, flipped his own timer and transferred the henbane to a shallow dish, then walked around the table to check on everyone's progress.

"That's exactly right Nott. I'm glad you're going to be my partner." Cherub said as he watched Nott's attention to detail.

"I'm glad too." Nott said with a smile as he kept his focus on his work.

"You need to twist the pestle or you won't break down the crystalline structure." Cherub said as he watched Harry grinding the minerals.

"Like this?" Harry asked cautiously as he began to twist.

"That will work, but let me show you an easier way." Cherub said and scooted in beside Harry.

"Oh, I see." Harry said timidly.

"Haven't you ever mixed potions before?" Cherub asked as he handed the mortar and pestle back to Harry.

"No. I... um, never had the chance." Harry said uncomfortably.

"Well now you do Potter." Cherub said and began to walk away.

"Please call me Harry."

Cherub saw the lost, overwhelmed expression on Harry's face and said, "I tell you what Potter, outside class I will."

Harry nodded and went back to grinding minerals.

Cherub looked over the preparations and read over the potion text one more time before saying, "Malfoy, will you help Potter measure the minerals now? We're almost ready to begin."

Draco left the cauldron and moved to Harry's side.

After a quick inventory and glance at the book Cherub looked at his teammates and said loudly enough for all of them to hear, "It's time to begin. Potter, add the salt peter."

Harry hesitantly took the small tray of powder and dumped it into the cauldron.

"Potter, watch Malfoy add the bloodstone, the ingredients need to be added slowly and evenly so they will disperse through the potion." Cherub said in a professional voice.

Harry watched as Draco took the small dish of ground bloodstone and drizzled it into the cauldron.

"Nott, as soon as your timer runs out, add the jimson weed." Cherub said while keeping his gaze fixed on the boiling mixture.

Nott watched his timer carefully and appeared to be ready to attack the dish the moment the last grain of sand fell.

Cherub glanced at his timer, then at Nott who was moving into action.

Nott picked up the dish of jimson weed and began sifting it through his fingers, letting it fall through into the potion.

"You see Potter, by adding the jimson weed this way, Nott is preventing it from clumping and becoming concentrated. With this method it will release it's effect evenly." Cherub said instructively.

"Nott, start stirring the cauldron while we add ingredients. Slow and even." Cherub said in a firm voice.

"Potter, add the bone dust." Cherub said as he picked up his henbane and watched the timer carefully.

"Malfoy, add the talc."

When the last grain of sand fell in the timer, Cherub began to sift the henbane through his fingers into the potion.

"Potter, add the slippery elm bark." Cherub said as he focused on his task of evenly distributing his ingredients.

"Malfoy, add the willow shavings. Potter, add the spider's web, you can just dump it in." Cherub said as the last of the henbane fell through his fingers.

"Potter, what does the book say next?" Cherub asked, and turned the timer over yet again.

"It says *whilst the brew has...*" Harry began to say in a dramatic voice.

"Paraphrase." Draco interrupted.

"It'll turn blue." Harry said flatly.

As Nott continued to stir the cauldron all four watched the potion carefully.

"There it goes." Nott said with a smile.

The group watched with delight as the potion changed from a murky gray sludge to an ethereal blue creamy liquid.

"You did it." Harry said with a delighted smile at the potion.

"We did it, Potter. Every one of us had a hand in it." Cherub corrected.

"As it should be Mr. Nightshade." Professor Snape said seriously as he walked past the workstation.

"I'll get the bottles." Draco said quickly, knowing that successful potions were sold by the school to offset the cost of ingredients.

"Nott, keep stirring until the timer runs out, then help Malfoy bottle. Potter and I will get this cleaned up." Cherub said as he started to gather the small dishes and bowls.

"What do you want me to do?" Harry asked as he watched.

"Clean the mortar and pestle. Then wipe down the table." Cherub said as he carried the containers away.

As the timer ran out, Theodore Nott stopped his stirring and picked up a funnel. Draco ladled with one hand as he held the neck of the potion bottle with the other.

"How long do we have?" Theodore asked quickly as he held the funnel for Draco.

"Anything that isn't bottled in two minutes will be useless." Draco said as he ladled a steady stream into the funnel.

"I think we can do it." Theodore said seriously.

"Then we will." Draco said confidently and increased his speed.

"What else?" Harry asked as he looked around.

"Let me see your class notes." Cherub said seriously.

"Why?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Either do as I say or don't offer to help." Cherub said firmly.

Harry cautiously handed Cherub his notebook.

"Your handwriting is better than mine, start writing labels for the potion bottles while I stopper them." Cherub said and handed Harry his notebook back.

Harry considered apologizing but thought better of it and went to work writing labels.

"That's it! Who gets to wash the cauldron?" Draco said as he finally dropped his ladle.

"I'll get it." Nott said and carried it quickly to the wash sink.

"Then I guess we're ready to give these to Professor Snape." Cherub said as he sealed the last bottle and handed it to Harry to be labeled.

"I'll get him." Draco said and hurried across the room.

"Sorry about that thing with the class notes." Harry said quietly to Cherub.

"No need to be sorry. I'm sure before the next seven years is over we'll tread on each other's toes a few times. Just know that when I'm in charge, it's Mr. Nightshade talking to Mr. Potter. It doesn't carry outside this class and it isn't personal. When you're in charge, you will probably choose to deal with people differently than I do. I'll do my best to follow your lead and will probably piss you off somewhere along the way." Cherub explained, then fell silent as Professor Snape approached.

"What do you have for me gentlemen?" Professor Snape asked regally.

Cherub motioned to the eight bottles of potion lined up on the workstation.

"Properly prepared as evidenced by the color. Properly sealed as evidenced by the lack of crystallization on the top of the potion. Properly labeled and the work area is appropriately cleaned. Well done. You have earned one point... per bottle... per student for your respective houses." Professor Snape said calmly.

All four boys held their enthusiasm until Professor Snape walked away to check on another team.

"We just got twenty-four points for Slytherin." Nott said with amazement.

Harry looked a little lost.

"Potter, you just earned eight points for your house. That's a good thing no matter how you look at it. Look around, did any other Gryffindors earn any points today?" Cherub asked seriously.

Harry looked around at the room full of frustrated students trying to make their potions and reluctantly shook his head.

"There you go." Cherub said, then noticed Draco's disgusted look, directed at Harry.

Cherub glanced over at the next workstation, then quickly said, "Potter, would you go to the supply room and get the large container of beetle breath just inside the door?"

Harry opened his mouth to ask, then caught himself and walked to the supply room.

"Guys, I think we'd better move... now." Cherub said loudly enough to catch Nott's attention.

"What's going on?" Nott asked as he walked with Cherub and Draco toward the back of the room.

"Wait for Potter, then I'll explain." Cherub said, then noticed Harry exiting the supply room. Cherub motioned for Harry to join them.

"Why did you move?" Harry asked curiously as he sat the large container on the table beside Cherub.

"Nott, do you know why we were so careful to keep the henbane and jimson weed from clumping?" Cherub asked as he glanced back at Hermione and Pansy's work area.

"Yes. If they clump, they form concentrated pools in the solution that can become volatile." Nott said carefully.

"You mean it will explode?" Harry asked with worry.

"Erupt might be a better word." Cherub said, then as if on cue, a high pitched squeal of a scream came from Hermione and Pansy's work area. Slimy, sticky purple foam spat and oozed out of the cauldron, coating everyone and everything in the surrounding area.

"That's Ron." Harry said with worry and began to move away, but Cherub held him back.

"Potter, beetle breath is the neutralizing agent you need to stop the reaction. Go sprinkle some of that in their cauldron." Cherub said and handed Harry the container.

"Thanks Nightshade." Harry said quickly and ran to help his friends.

"Why didn't you go take care of it yourself?" Draco asked curiously.

"Because I'm a Slytherin. That means I'm meant to lead. I've done my leading today so I'm happy. Potter is a Gryffindor. I saw a chance for him to do some heroing so I thought I'd help him out." Cherub said as he watched the chaos with an amused smile.

"Well I'm a Slytherin too..." Draco said in a wounded tone.

"If you remember, you're the one who put me in charge today. I'm still not at the point where I'm comfortable 'taking' charge, but when it's given to me, I can handle it." Cherub said in thought.

"There goes another one." Nott said quickly as a second cauldron erupted.

"Are you gentlemen enjoying the show?" Professor Snape asked as he slowly approached.

"Yes, as a matter of fact we are. How about you?" Cherub asked with a smile.

"This happens every year when we make this potion. I feel it teaches some valuable lessons about preparation, the proper method for adding ingredients... and cleanliness.." Professor Snape said, then pointed at a third cauldron beginning to erupt.

"How long will it take to get all this cleaned up?" Nott asked curiously.

"It will be well into the next class period, which by some strange coincidence, your class group has free today." Professor Snape said with a knowing smile that confirmed that this event was planned in advance.

"Since your group completed the potion properly, you may stay to help your classmates clean or you may go about your business if you would rather." Professor Snape said casually.

"I'm going outside." Nott said immediately.

"No flying without supervision." Professor Snape said sternly.

"Yes Professor." Nott said quickly as he headed for the door.

"I'm going to go too. I'm just going to ask Potter if he wants to go with us." Cherub said happily.

"He doesn't like me. He wouldn't even shake my hand when we met, I don't think he's going to want to hang around with us." Draco said seriously.

"Probably not, but it's nice to be asked." Cherub said casually as he walked toward the slippery, slimy purple mess.

* * * * *

"Potter. Professor Snape said that those of us who completed the potion are free to leave while the others clean up. Would you like to come with us?" Cherub asked from the edge of a purple pool of goo.

"I'd like to, but..." Harry began to say but was abruptly cut off.

"You can't go with him, he's a Slytherin." A red headed boy said angrily. Cherub recognized him as the one who let out the disturbingly feminine scream.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Cherub asked carefully.

"No. And I don't want to know you, Slytherin." The boy said in disgust.

Cherub shook his head dismissively and turned his attention back to Harry.

"I just came over to let you know that you're welcomed to join us if you'd like to. We'll be leaving in just a moment." Cherub said then cast a disapproving glance at the red haired boy before leaving.

* * * * *

"He's not coming is he?" Draco said as he pushed himself away from where he had been leaning on the wall.

"Probably not." Cherub said without concern as he altered his course to fall in beside Draco.

"You don't sound too disappointed." Draco said as he opened the classroom door.

"I'm not really. I just thought that if I were in his situation, I'd appreciate the offer." Cherub said casually as they walked into the hall.

"Hey Nightshade, wait up." Harry called from the classroom doorway.

"We're outside class now, you may call me Cherub if you'd rather." Cherub said with a smile.

"Yeah, I'd like that Cherub. You can call me Harry."

"Does that go for me too?" Draco asked cautiously.

Harry looked at Draco then glanced down as a brief look of shame fell across his face.

"Yes, of course that goes for you. I'm... I'm sorry about day before yesterday. I'm not used to being around people, I guess. Sometimes I don't act properly." Harry murmured.

"I know that feeling Harry. What would you guys like to do?" Cherub asked, trying to lift the mood.

"Well I think Nott had the right idea. Let's go outside for a while." Draco said hopefully.

"I'm in." Cherub said and looked to Harry.

"Lead the way." Harry said, his mood much improved.

"Draco is leading now. I was just the leader in potions class." Cherub said shyly.

"When do I get to be leader?" Harry asked in a half-teasing voice.

"You don't." Draco said firmly.

Harry got a look in his eyes like he was ready to fight.

"Hold on Harry. What I mean... Cherub, you explain it to him, you're better at it." Draco finished with a dismissive wave.

"What he means is that we're Slytherin, we're learning to be leaders. You're a Gryffindor, you're learning to be an activist... basically a hero. When leading needs to be done, we'll take care of it because it's what we're expected to do and we're good at it. When some heroing needs done, you'll be first on the list to deal with it." Cherub said, then smiled as he saw the sunlight pouring in the open door.

"Leaders? I thought Slytherin were all evil, learning to be dark wizards." Harry said seriously.

Draco was about to bark a response when Cherub held up a hand to prevent him and said, "Do you honestly think Hogwart's or anyplace else would sanction the recruiting and training of those type of people?"

Harry thought for a second while they walked and finally said, "No. I didn't think about that."

"I think you've been listening to people who don't know the facts. The truth is, we're one of the four houses, just like Gryffindor. Your house focuses on bravery and fighting for your beliefs. Our house focuses on making us strong leaders who are sure of our abilities. Some Slytherin turn their skills to dark use, but so do some Gryffindors. If you check out the histories of dark wizards through the past few centuries, you'll find them evenly distributed throughout the houses." Cherub said seriously.

"How do you know so much?" Harry asked curiously.

"I read a lot." Cherub said frankly with a shrug.

Harry seemed to be waiting for more.

Finally Harry snapped out of it and he said, "Sorry, I just realized that if I asked Hermione the same question, she'd still be answering about this time tomorrow."

"Well, Draco can tell you that I can go on a bit at times. But I do make a conscious effort to keep it down." Cherub said with a shy smile.

"This feels great." Draco said and spread his arms as he tilted his face to be warmed by the sun.

Cherub smiled at the scene and stretched out his arms and wings.

"Wow." Harry said with wide eyes.

"What?" Cherub asked as he abruptly stopped his stretch.

"Nothing, I mean. I've never seen you... do that... before." Harry said nervously.

"Spread my wings?" Cherub asked carefully.

"I didn't realize they were that big." Harry said shyly.

"I guess they'd have to be to support my weight." Cherub said with thought.

"Can you fly?" Harry asked with a boyish smile of delight at the thought.

"You know, I haven't tried. What do you guys think, will I get in trouble?" Cherub asked carefully.

"Wrong question." Draco said seriously.

Cherub and Harry both turned to Draco with matching looks of question.

"The proper question is: if you get caught, will it be worth it?" Draco asked seriously.

"It will." Cherub said with a smile and started to flap his wings.

After a minute of flapping and a few hops, Harry weakly said, "Um, it doesn't seem to be working."

"No. Not even a little." Cherub said as he flapped harder.

"I think you're too heavy." Draco said as he looked at Cherub consideringly.

"There's not much I can do about that." Cherub said as he stopped his flapping.

"Sure there is. Be lighter. The Leviosa Spell should be able to be modified, then you can use your wings for propulsion and navigation." Draco said in thought.

"It sounds like it could work. Give me a minute to work on the spell." Cherub said and stared off in the distance.

"But I thought the Leviosa Spell was for floating a feather." Harry said in confusion.

"The one we used in class yesterday was, you can modify the spell to make it levitate other things. Cherub levitated his clothes into the wardrobe the night he arrived." Draco said proudly.

"I'm ready." Cherub said in thought.

"Okay, the flying class brooms are right over there. If you get in trouble, give a yell and Potter... I mean Harry will be up to help you." Draco said seriously.

"Me?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Hero." Draco and Cherub said in response, simultaneously.

Harry gave a genuine smile and nodded his agreement.

Cherub decided to try and do the spell without a wand or spoken words. He wanted the effect to be as if it were natural flight.

After a deep breath to calm himself, Cherub spread his wings dramatically while he concentrated on the words in his mind and made the subtle gestures of the Leviosa Spell with his hands.

"He didn't use a spell." Harry said in awe as he watched Cherub glide into the air.

The silky caress of the breeze on his skin was like his first ever taste of freedom.

"Guys, this is great." Cherub said as he soared, then did a barrel roll.

His instincts guided him exactly where he wanted to be with only a thought.

"Cherub, you need to come down now." Draco said seriously.

Even though he was caught up in the bliss of gliding effortlessly through the air, Draco's serious tone got through to him.

Cherub carefully landed between Harry and Draco.

"Why did you want me to stop?" Cherub asked with concern.

"Seeing if you could fly was one thing, but if you're going to be soaring and flipping, you should really have a professor watching out for you. Harry and I wouldn't be able to get to you in time if you got into trouble." Draco said seriously.

"I guess so, I just felt so free. It was wonderful." Cherub said in a dreamy tone.

"I feel the same way on my broom." Harry said with a distant smile.

"We have flying class after lunch, maybe if you ask Madame Hooch, she'll let you fly without a broom." Draco suggested carefully.

"I can ask. If she says no, then I'll talk to Professor Snape and see what he suggests." Cherub said as he started walking.

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Comfortable silence fell over the group as they walked without purpose or concern.

"I'm sure Hermione and Ron are thinking that you're corrupting me right now." Harry said in thought.

"I suppose we could try if you really wanted us to." Cherub said in a teasing voice.

"It would be a shame to disappoint them." Draco said with a nod.

"It wasn't a suggestion, just a thought." Harry said with a smile.

"Your friends really don't like us do they?" Cherub said more seriously.

"No. They're convinced that you're evil and anything you do that seems nice is just to try and deceive us." Harry said with regret in his voice.

"It's the money." Draco said firmly.

"What money?" Harry asked curiously.

"Our families have money. People who don't have money look at us and think that since they don't have money and we do, we must have done something dishonest to get it." Draco said with an open expression.

"But that's ridiculous. I have money and they don't treat me that way." Harry said in defense of his friends.

"They will." Draco said darkly.

"What do you mean?" Cherub asked curiously.

Draco looked around the school grounds and gave a shrug before sitting in the grass.

"Sooner or later something will happen that can't be ignored. Some problem will present itself and you'll solve it with your money because you can and it's the right thing to do. From that point on, everything changes. You aren't a person anymore, you're a resource. It is natural to exploit resources to accomplish goals. Regardless if the goals are lofty high ideals or selfish desires, you end up being used to fulfill the desires of others. When the time comes that you can't or won't finance the wants and dreams of those who have been draining your accounts, you'll be seen as a traitor to whatever cause you've been supporting. You'll be called the same names that Cherub and I are being called at this moment by members of your house." Draco said quietly.

Harry thought about it, but didn't respond.

"Harry, tell me honestly, what do you think would happen if you used your money to buy yourself something that you would really enjoy? Would your friends be happy because you're happy or would they be jealous and resentful and accuse you of flaunting your wealth?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"I've thought about that." Harry whispered.

"So have I. That's why I don't have the expensive custom tailored robes. I didn't want to give people additional ammunition to use against me when they hear my name." Cherub said quietly.

"Did it help?" Harry asked slowly.

"Not really. I think that if I had gotten the more expensive robes, people would have assumed my wealth a little earlier, but it all ends up being the same." Cherub said honestly.

"I can see that. I was so sure that I was being put in with the 'good guys' when I arrived here, but now..." Harry drifted off in thought.

"That's part of the problem." Cherub said as he looked off into the distance.

"What do you mean?" Draco asked curiously.

Cherub turned to Draco and said, "Think about what it means to be a Gryffindor. They fight for their beliefs, they do what's right, they jump in and fight for those who can't or won't defend themselves. All noble traits. But consider that your best friend and worst enemy may both have those traits in common, the only difference being what they believe in. Being a good guy is relative depending on who is defining good."

"An interesting point." Draco said, then laid back on the grass to stare at the passing clouds.

"My uncle is like that." Harry said with wide eyed realization.

"How's that?" Cherub asked with interest.

"My Uncle Vernon thinks that wizards are evil and wrong and shouldn't be allowed to exist. But... what you just said... he believes it. He thinks his cause is right and is ready to fight to defend it, he feels that he's protecting his family who can't defend themselves." Harry said in wonder.

"He sounds daft to me." Draco said without moving his stare from the clouds.

Harry smiled at the statement and said, "He is, but I never understood why he was daft. It's hard to admit that we are alike in some ways, we just have different beliefs."

Silence fell over the group as they each thought their own thoughts.

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"Guys, are we going to be friends?" Harry asked, breaking the long introspective silence.

"Maybe... Probably not." Draco said with something that might be regret under his words.

"Why not?" Harry asked, obviously afraid of the answer.

"Because your friends won't allow you to be friends with us. They'll make you choose." Draco said as he turned to look Harry in the eyes.

"And you won't?" Harry asked cautiously.

"No. I wouldn't do that. I think Cherub can tell you that." Draco said seriously.

"What friend do I have besides you?" Cherub asked with surprise.

"I seem to remember waaaaaay back when, you said you were going to invite someone to join us when we left Professor Snape's class." Draco said with a teasing smile.

"Oh yes, way off in the distant past a half an hour ago." Cherub said with a chuckle.

"Why don't you tell Harry how he got invited, I think he needs to know." Draco said seriously.

"Well, when Professor Snape said we could stay or go, I said I wanted to go and told Draco that I was going to invite you." Cherub said in thought.

"Did I say anything like 'you can't be friends with him if you're friends with me'?" Draco asked casually as he rested back to look at the sky.

"No. You just said you didn't think Harry would join us because he didn't like you." Cherub said in thought.

"Sorry about that." Harry said in a mumble.

Draco glanced at Harry and held out his hand. "Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Harry took the offered hand and said "Harry Potter."

"There, now it's done. Whatever happened before is forgotten." Draco said and turned his gaze back to the clouds.

"I don't know how things are going to work out with Hermione and Ron because of this. I want to be your friend. But I can't promise..." Harry drifted off sadly.

"We're not asking you to promise anything. If your friends make you happy, then go and be with them. Life is too short to limit yourself with people who drag you down." Draco said as he looked at Harry again.

"I don't understand." Harry said carefully.

"Like Cherub for example. He's friendly, smart, has a good attitude... well, most of the time." Draco said with a teasing smile directed at Cherub.

"You grow wings and see how cheerful you are." Cherub said in a growly voice.

"Anyway, I feel better about myself when I'm around him. He asks my opinions and is willing to trust my decisions. By the same token, he's willing to take charge when it's something that he's better at, like potions." Draco said slowly.

"I feel the same about Draco. He listens to me and gives me his honest opinion. I'd probably still be in the infirmary freaking out about the wings if it weren't for him helping me sort through my options." Cherub said frankly.

"But if... I mean... would I be butting in if I wanted to hang around with you guys sometime?" Harry asked slowly.

"You mean coming between us?" Cherub asked to be sure.

Harry nodded.

"Not at all. Crabbe and Goyle share a room with us and are always invited to join in when we're talking or goofing around. It's only better with more people." Cherub said with a smile.

"Those are the big guys. They look mean." Harry said cautiously.

"That's right, they 'look' mean. Because of that, people treat them like they are mean. And sometimes, they live up to people's expectations of them because you can only go so long being treated that way before you finally start to give in to it. But inside, they're both really good guys, I trust them completely." Draco said with a sad, concerned look in his eyes.

"He's right. I've only known them a few days, but I can see how people react to them... it's easier to have wings." Cherub finished in a small voice.

"I never thought about how they felt..." Harry said as he looked off into the distance.

"No one does." Draco said in the same distant tone.

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"What's our next class anyway?" Cherub asked lazily.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts." Draco said in a bored tone.

"It sounds interesting." Cherub said in thought.

"It sounds that way, and yet..." Draco drifted off.

"Is it really that bad?" Cherub asked Harry.

"Do you want to see my class notes?" Harry asked and picked up his bag.

Cherub nodded, then accepted the notebook.

Evil is Bad?

"That's it? For an hour lecture?" Cherub asked incredulously.

"It's one more sentence than I had." Draco said as he rolled on his side to face the other two.

"Professor Quirrel stutters and stammers and repeats himself and says nothing. I listened, really listened for the entire hour and couldn't find a point anywhere. The only thing I got out of his lecture was a pounding headache." Harry said darkly.

"Well, we're required to go. I can't say I'm looking forward to it now." Cherub said as he tilted his head back.

"We just have to get through it and it'll be time for lunch..." Harry said, then looked away.

"What's wrong Harry?" Cherub asked with concern.

"I don't want this to end. I mean, us sitting around, talking about... whatever comes up. I've never done that before." Harry said in a small voice.

"Well, I can't promise that we'll be able to do it again, but just so you know, you're always welcomed." Cherub said seriously.

"That goes for me too." Draco said firmly.

"I'll remember guys. I hope you're wrong about Hermione and Ron and that I can still work it out so I can be friends with all of you." Harry said as he looked at the ground.

"If anyone can make it work, it's you Harry. Draco's got the wisdom of the world, I've got the knowledge of the books, but you have the Heart." Cherub said softly.

"If you guys start snogging, I'm going to vomit." Draco said with his biggest teasing smile.

"Let's get him." Harry said and jumped up.

Draco bolted from his spot on the ground and started running.

Cherub and Harry were in close pursuit.

Chapter 5

"What are you guys doing?" Theodore Nott asked in confusion as he approached the pile of giggling boys wrestling in the grass.

"Teaching Draco not to tease us." Harry said before being pulled back into the wrestling match.

Theodore watched and smiled as Harry and Cherub tried to pin Draco down.

"We could use some help here Nott." Cherub called out as he fought to keep hold of the squirming Draco's arms.

"Okay." Theodore said, then started pulling at Harry, trying to free Draco.

"You're supposed to help US." Cherub said quickly.

"Malfoy needs the help worse than you do." Theodore said with a laugh as he pulled Harry onto the ground beside Cherub and Draco.

"Thanks Nott, I'll remember this." Draco said as he shifted his weight and flipped Cherub onto his back.

"My wings!" Cherub yelled in pain.

"Sorry." Draco said and eased back.

"It's okay. They just don't want to bend that way." Cherub said as he sat up and flexed his wings.

"Guys, it's almost time for DADA." Theodore said as he and Harry stopped wrestling.

"Yeah, I guess we'd better get inside." Cherub said with regret.

All four boys stood and started to brush the grass off their class robes.

After everyone was assured that they were presentable, they walked as a group back toward the school.

"I just wanted to thank you for inviting me today. This is the most fun I've had since I've been at Hogwart's." Harry said bashfully.

"Does that include the game of keep-away I played with you in flying class yesterday?" Draco asked with a smirk.

Harry laughed and said, "I was so mad at you about that. Now I know you were just playing, but I really thought that you were evil and wanting to steal Neville's rememberal."

"Did I miss something?" Cherub asked curiously.

"I'll tell you later." Draco said over his shoulder to Cherub.

"As I was saying, thanks for inviting me. I haven't given you any reason to want to include me and I appreciate it." Harry said seriously.

"Well, I can't promise you anything as entertaining as wrestling in the grass, but if you'd like to study with us tonight, you'd be welcomed to join us." Cherub said with a smile.

"Um. I'm sure Hermione and Ron are going to expect me to study with them." Harry said hesitantly.

"Then let's make it an open invitation. If you find yourself without a study partner sometime and would like to join us, you'll be welcomed. No pressure, no commitment." Draco suggested.

"I'll remember that. Thanks." Harry said shyly.

"Would you mind if I studied with you?" Theodore asked cautiously.

"You're my potions partner Nott, of course you can join us." Cherub said cheerfully.

"You guys can call me 'T' if you want. It's kind of a family nickname." Theodore said shyly.

"Only if you'll call us by our first names too." Cherub said seriously.

"It's a deal." Theodore said with a smile.

"But that's only outside class. When we're on 'official business' it's last names only." Draco said firmly.

Theodore nodded as Harry asked, "Why is that? I didn't think to ask before."

"It's like a signal that play time is over. When we're in class, it's time to be serious and do what needs to be done." Draco said definitely.

"That makes sense. Take some time for work and make it work only, then take some time for play and make it play only. I like that." Harry finished with a smile.

"How do you do it Harry?" Cherub asked curiously.

"Well, I never really thought about it. I guess I'm serious most of the time, there really isn't much time for fun." Harry said in thought.

"Not good." Draco said with a shake of his head.

"Why not?" Harry asked, devoting his full attention to Draco.

"Everyone needs certain things in their life to stay healthy. Food, water, sleep, exercise... stuff like that. It keeps your body healthy, but your mind needs things too. You need routine, work, relaxation and fun. If you don't give yourself those things regularly, then you'll start to stress out. From the way you reacted to today, it sounds like you're only getting relaxation and fun when it happens by accident. It's going to cause you trouble in the long run if you don't let yourself release stress and just have fun." Draco said with concern evident in his voice.

"He's right Harry. I've only known you a few hours but I can tell that you need to let loose more often." Cherub said quietly.

"Thanks guys. I'll try and do that. Maybe we can hook up sometime and do something fun." Harry said hopefully.

"Open invitation, remember?" Draco said with wide eyes.

"Got it. I'll try." Harry said with a smile.

"I guess it's time." Theodore said unenthusiastically as they walked into the school to the clamor of voices exiting classrooms.

"Would you like to sit with us at lunch today Harry?" Cherub asked with a smile.

Harry was about to try and decline when he saw Cherub's teasing smile.

"If Ron and Hermione disown me, I'll be there." Harry said in a teasing voice.

"No chance of that. I'm sure they'll be pumping you for information and looking for any signs of corruption." Draco said seriously.

Cherub slapped his forehead and said, "That's what we forgot to do. We were going to corrupt Harry today."

"We'll have to do it next time." Draco said in a disappointed voice.

Harry laughed, then saw Hermione and Ron walking toward them.

"I'll see you guys later. Thanks again." Harry said with a genuine smile.

"Have fun with your friends Harry." Cherub said, trying to hold in a chuckle.

"They're going to give him hell for days." Draco said offhandedly.

"And prove everything we said to him." Cherub said with a nod.

"Did I miss something?" Theodore asked curiously.

"Nothing worth talking about. Just watch Harry and his friends for the next few days. It might be entertaining." Draco said with a smile.

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"I never thought one hour could be so long." Cherub said as he walked with Theodore and Draco out of the classroom, followed by Crabbe and Goyle.

"I don't think even Harry could have gotten one sentence of notes out of that lecture." Draco said in a tired voice.

"I doubt he *heard* one sentence of the lecture with those two on either side of him." Theodore said frankly.

"One point for T." Cherub said in agreement.

"Someone needs to call the circus and tell them one of their freaks got out." A red headed boy said with a sneer.

"Yeah, it must have got out of it's birdcage." Another identical red headed boy said with the same expression.

Crabbe and Goyle came around either side of the group to defend Cherub.

"You got a problem with our friend, you got a problem with us." Goyle said firmly.

"Like a bunch of first years can do anything to us!" The first red head said with a laugh of derision.

"Don't you Weasleys have anything better to do than mess with first years?" Draco asked, speaking the name Weasley as if it were filth in his mouth.

"Oh, so that's what Weasleys are." Cherub said as he looked at the two boys as if weighing their worth, and coming up short.

The twins looked at Cherub curiously.

"You mentioned that they were ignorant, low-class rabble but you didn't tell me they were spawned in litters." Cherub said in a superior and snotty voice.

The two red headed boys stared at Cherub in astonishment.

"Come along, we should be going to lunch. We wouldn't want people to think we associate with..." Cherub trailed off with a shiver of revulsion and walked away.

Draco, Theodore, Crabbe and Goyle followed immediately behind Cherub, trying to hold in their laughter.

* * * * *

As soon as Draco was able to stop laughing he said, "I've never seen you do the stuck-up snob routine before. You were great."

"You had me believing it." Theodore said in an impressed voice.

"It was all I could think of to do short of using magic. I didn't want Crabbe and Goyle to get in trouble over someone like that." Cherub said with a smile.

"What did you guys do? The Gryffindors are looking over here like you murdered someone." Pansy asked as she sat at the table.

Everyone turned to look at the Gryffindor table to see a group looking back at them angrily, most notably a collection of four red heads.

"I guess I might have mentioned their lower station in the social scheme." Cherub said as he faced away from the Gryffindor table again.

"And that Weasleys spawn in litters." Theodore chuckled.

Pansy let out a full laugh at the statement, drawing even more attention from the Gryffindors.

"Now comes the good part." Crabbe said and motioned to the doorway.

Harry walked into the room, engrossed in conversation with Hermione.

"That Granger girl sure can talk." Pansy said as she watched.

"I've heard that." Draco said absently as he watched Harry and Hermione sit at the Gryffindor table.

After a moment of animated conversation, Harry got up and walked around the end of the table and approached the Slytherin table.

"May I speak with you for a moment?" Harry asked Cherub seriously.

"Here or privately?" Cherub asked casually.

Harry looked around the table and considered before saying, "I just want to hear your side of the story that I've just been told."

"Oh, that's easy. The two identical Weasleys were taunting me, saying that I was a freak that escaped from a circus and belonged in a cage... things like that. So I responded in kind with the only thing I knew about them, their social class." Cherub said simply.

"So all that stuff they said you said... you said?" Harry asked carefully.

"I think we need to work on your language skills, but yes. Cherub was attacked verbally and fought back. I think you would have been proud of him if you'd been there." Draco said as he looked Harry in the eyes.

"I've got some thinking to do guys. I'm going back to my table now. Sorry if I sounded like I was accusing you of something. I really wasn't. That's why I came over, to find out what really happened." Harry said, pleading with his eyes for them not to hate him.

"Harry." Cherub said, drawing his full attention.

Harry looked at Cherub hesitantly.

"Open invitation." Cherub said seriously.

Harry smiled and nodded before leaving the table.

"I think he's beginning to see it." Draco said in a considering voice.

"Yes. Sometimes you just have to beat someone over the head with the obvious a few times before they notice." Cherub said with a smile.

* * * * *

The food appeared and everyone started making their selections from the feast before them.

"Would you guys mind if I joined you?" Harry asked, surprising everyone in the area.

"Please do, scoot down everyone." Cherub said and made a place for Harry between him and Draco.

"Are you sure no one will mind?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Does anyone have a problem with my friend sitting here?" Draco asked the people surrounding them.

"Are you going to lecture us about how evil we are or how bad it is to have money?" Pansy asked curiously.

"No. I promise I won't." Harry said shyly.

"Then sit down. The cucumber sandwiches are extraordinary today." Pansy said as she grabbed two more.

"Thank you." Harry said with a smile and accepted an empty plate that was handed down the table to him.

"Is there anything I need to know about the flying class coming up? No one's mentioned that I need to study anything in advance of it." Cherub asked casually.

"Can you ride a broom?" Draco asked as he pulled some sliced meat and cheese cubes onto his plate.

"Yes, I'm not very good, but I can ride one." Cherub said in thought.

"Then you'll be fine. We only hovered a few feet off the ground yesterday. You may not even have to do that if Madame Hooch will let you fly without a broom." Draco said seriously.

"So you can fly?" Theodore asked curiously.

"I sure can. I tried it for a few minutes today. It was great." Cherub said with a smile.

"Aren't you guys going to ask why I came over here?" Harry asked curiously.

"I can guess." Draco said flatly.

"We'll be interested to listen if you want to talk about it. But no, we're not going to ask." Cherub said from his other side.

Harry chuckled and shook his head.

"What's so funny?" Theodore asked curiously.

"The Gryffindors interrogated me about everything we said and did all morning. And even when I told them things, they acted like I was lying to them." Harry said with a smile.

"Why is that funny." Cherub asked with concern.

"Because you guys, who are supposedly evil, just want to listen if I feel like talking. My so called friends, the good guys, want to pump me for information that they can use against you." Harry said as he fought to keep from laughing.

"I don't get the part that's supposed to be funny. It sounds terribly sad to me." Cherub said in confusion.

"It's just ironic. I was so sure I was right and believed everything I was told. I can't believe I was so stupid." Harry said as he shook his head.

"The Gryffindors are staring at us again." Pansy said in warning.

"Of course they are. We've corrupted their bright and shining star." Draco got a look of dawning realization and said, "Nott, get the prefects and ask them to come down here."

"What's wrong?" Cherub asked with immediate concern.

Draco held up his hand in a 'wait' gesture until the prefects arrived.

"Widget, Prang, this is Harry Potter. As you can tell from his robe, he's a Gryffindor. I'm concerned that some of the Gryffindors are going to either incite violence or openly attack members of the Slytherin House because they think we're corrupting him." Draco said seriously.

"Okay. No one leaves this room in groups of less than four, the more the better. I'll let Professor Snape know what's going on so he can keep an eye open for signs of trouble." Widget said firmly.

"Understood. Just make sure everyone knows. We were confronted on the way into lunch by two third years, and that was before Potter sat down to eat with us." Draco said in a completely business-like tone.

"Noted. Enjoy your meal, then get to your next class." Widget said quickly, then hurried away with Prang at his side.

"If my being here is causing you trouble, I can leave." Harry said weakly.

"It won't make any difference at all. Like Malfoy said, they confronted us before you sat down with us. This was going to happen anyway." Cherub said seriously.

"Widget was right. Let's eat, enjoy, then get to our next class. Just stick with us Potter, I'm not even sure that you'll be safe from a bunch of Gryffindors who are fighting for a cause." Draco said in an icy voice.

Harry's eyes went wide as he thought about Draco's words.

* * * * *

The first year Slytherins and Harry moved as a single group from the dining room to the flying class outside.

"Are you going to switch houses now Harry?" Ron Weasley asked in a mocking voice.

"Once sorted, you stay in your assigned house for the remainder of your time at Hogwart's. You really should get your facts straight before you speak." Draco said coldly.

"No one asked you Malfoy. Why don't you just leave Harry alone. He's not one of you." Ron said with a sneer.

"No, he isn't. Potter is a person with his own mind and own will. I find that I enjoy his company, so he is welcomed to spend time with me if he chooses to do so." Draco said simply.

"You just want to turn him into a dark wizard like you-know-who. I bet you serve you-know-who already, don't you." Ron said in an increasing voice.

"Why do you bother to ask a question when you won't believe my answer?" Draco asked curiously.

"See? Did you see that? He didn't deny it! He serves you-know-who! I knew it." Ron yelled loudly enough for all to hear.

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Nightshade. Headmaster Dumbledore would like to speak with you." Widget said as he walked onto the flying field.

"Ha! Dumbledore's figured it out! He's going to throw them all out!" Ron yelled at the three boy's departing forms.

* * * * *

"Your friend has a big mouth." Cherub said as the group entered the building.

"Cherub, I think it's safe to say that Ron can't be classified as my friend any longer." Harry said quietly.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for whatever we did that caused you to lose a friend. I promise that it was never my intention when I invited you to go outside with us." Cherub said seriously.

"I know. And I'm not mad at you guys at all. I am just disappointed in the Gryffindors." Harry said sadly.

"People will disappoint you Harry. We might even disappoint you someday. Try to learn from it, but don't let it make you bitter. That doesn't improve anything." Draco said quietly.

Widget moved to a statue of a gargoyle and whispered a word. The gargoyle moved aside to reveal a set of stairs.

"That's new." Cherub said in surprise.

"Headmaster Dumbledore's office is at the top of these stairs." Widget said and extended his arm, indicating for the boys to go on.

* * * * *

"Come in, come in. Do have a seat." Dumbledore said from behind a huge desk.

All three boys nervously took seats and waited expectantly.

"I have been told that quite a fuss is erupting as a result of you three becoming friends. What do you have to say about it?" Dumbledore asked as he focused on Harry.

"Yes sir." Harry said quietly.

"That wasn't quite the detailed answer I expected from a Gryffindor. Would you care to try again?"

Harry thought carefully before saying, "Malfoy and Nightshade were kind enough to invite me to go outside with them when we had some free time. We started talking and I realized that I had misjudged them based on some things I had been told on the train and shortly after my arrival. When I tried to explain that to Hermione and Ron they... well, they kind of thought I was under a curse or mind control or something. I can't say I really understand just why they're behaving the way they are."

"Yes, yes. That's more what I expected. Well done." Dumbledore said, then seemed to trail off into thought.

"Mr. Potter, would you put on the sorting hat? It's right over there." Dumbledore said and pointed.

Harry walked to the corner and carefully picked up the hat.

"Go on." Dumbledore prompted as he turned in his chair to watch.

"Gryffindor, as I said before." The sorting hat said indignantly.

"Yes, yes. I didn't doubt you. But I wanted to see if perhaps Mr. Potter is one of those rare few..." Dumbledore prompted.

"Not as rare as you might think. But few have wit and will to claim the burdens of two house names. A Gryffindor he will always be, but a Slytherin as well if he judges it to be what is good and right." The hat said fiercely.

"As I thought." Dumbledore said with a nod.

"How can he be in two houses?" Draco asked as he watched Harry taking off the hat.

"Well he can't of course. He will have to choose either Gryffindor or Slytherin." Dumbledore said seriously.

"Harry, you can't abandon your house. It's at the core of your hero thing to be loyal." Cherub said in a pleading voice.

"You misunderstand. Young Mr. Potter doesn't have to make a choice between which house he will continue with. He has to choose which house he will represent at any given time. Students wear their house emblem on their robes and wear scarves with the colors of their house... some even show enough spirit to adorn their wings." Dumbledore said with a wink at Cherub.

"Mr. Potter may choose which house he is representing at any given time by the emblem and colors he is wearing. Would you gentlemen happen to have sufficient Slytherin attire that you could allow Mr. Potter to borrow some until he can buy his own?" Headmaster Dumbledore asked carefully.

"Of course. I wear my colors all the time so you can borrow anything I have." Cherub said quickly.

"Thank you Nightshade." Harry said seriously.

"Then if there is nothing else..." Dumbledore said as he focused back on the scroll on his desk.

"Aren't you worried about the violence that's going to erupt when people think Harry switched houses?" Cherub asked carefully.

"There is no way to avoid what is to happen. Trust in my way of dealing with this. If young Mr. Potter will be honest in his feelings, everything will work out the way it is meant to."
Dumbledore said with assurance.

"Thank you Headmaster." Cherub said unsurely as he turned to leave.

Harry and Draco made their obligatory respectful comments then followed Cherub down the stairs.

* * * * *

"Hey Widget, thanks for waiting for us. Would you mind walking us down to the Slytherin rooms so we can get something for Harry?" Cherub asked hopefully.

"No problem. Is everything okay?" Widget asked with concern.

"Yes. At least I think it will be." Cherub said in thought.

"Do you know what you're going to do?" Draco asked Harry quietly.

"I'm not sure. It's like I'd be betraying Gryffindor one way, but I'd be betraying myself the other way." Harry said seriously.

"Harry, you heard Dumbledore. You're both. If you're really a Gryffindor at heart, then do what a Gryffindor does best. Do what you believe is right. Don't worry about what Draco or I think, or Hermione or Ron. Do what you need to do to be true to yourself." Cherub said with passion.

"Thanks guys. When you put it that way, it's already decided." Harry said in thought.

"Should we tell him the password?" Draco asked as they approached the hidden door.

"We'll ask Professor Snape. I think it should be his decision." Cherub said carefully.

"Are you guys sure about this? I mean, if the others find out you let a Gryffindor into the Slytherin Dorm it might cause trouble." Widget asked from ahead of them.

"Yes, I'm sure. If anyone objects, have them talk to me. We're doing this on orders from Dumbledore himself." Draco said in a full voice.

Widget whispered the password, keeping an eye on Harry the whole time.

The door revealed itself and opened to the group.

"I never would have guessed this was here. I think all the other houses are hidden behind portraits." Harry said as he entered.

"Too much information Potter. We not only expect you to keep our secrets, but Gryffindor's secrets too. What you don't tell us can't be used against them later." Draco said with a note of hardness in his voice.

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking." Harry said in a mumble.

"We'll have to help you with that. When you're in Slytherin, it's best to watch what you say at all times..." Draco began but was cut off.

"...except for the room rule." Cherub cut in.

"What's that?" Harry asked as he looked around at the luxurious room.

"Come to the room and we'll tell you. Widget, we'll be right back." Draco said quickly.

"I'll be waiting." Widget said as he took a seat.

* * * * *

Harry walked into the bedroom and found it to be nothing like what he expected.

"It's so bright." Harry said in surprise.

"You expected a dungeon?" Cherub asked, only half jokingly.

"Well, to be honest, yeah." Harry said timidly.

"Look at this." Draco said as he stood staring.

Cherub looked around and was surprised to find that their dressers had been moved together and another bed had been put in the space.

"Is that for Harry?" Cherub asked carefully.

Harry walked to the trunk at the foot of his bed and opened it.

"My things are in here." Harry said in surprise.

"It looks like you're going to be our roommate." Draco said with astonishment.

"Welcome to Slytherin. Let's get you your things so we can get back to flying." Cherub said and walked to his wardrobe.

"Here... oh. Unless you have wings, then my robes aren't going to work for you." Cherub said with regret.

"No need. I have robes here, and they have the Slytherin crest on them." Harry said in surprise.

"Someone must have been busy." Draco said as he looked at the robes with Harry.

"This isn't my robe. This is new. Feel it." Harry said as he pulled a freshly starched robe from the wardrobe.

"Is all your stuff here, or maybe like half of it?" Cherub asked cautiously.

Harry walked back to his trunk and looked again.

"About half. Everything with my Gryffindor colors is missing. How did you know?" Harry asked as he looked at Cherub in question.

"I think your stuff has been split between the two houses. That way you can stay either place. Your Gryffindor robes are still there and you have new Slytherin robes here." Cherub said in thought.

"Here's a Slytherin scarf. You can keep it, I have several. Now come on. I don't want to miss out on too much flying, they're probably already in the air." Draco said impatiently.

"I'll just change my robes then I'll be ready." Harry said quickly.

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go?" Draco asked as he led Harry and Cherub to the Slytherin common room.

"Sure, ready when you are." Widget said as he stood.

"Then we're back to flying class." Draco said as he walked toward the door.

"You can't do that." Widget said as he stared at Harry.

"We didn't. The sorting hat said he was both Slytherin and Gryffindor. He has a choice." Cherub said, a bit defensively.

"And you chose Slytherin?" Widget asked cautiously.

"Yes." Harry said with confidence.

"Why?" Widget asked incredulously.

"Because I've learned some hard truths. One of them is that even though I believe in what it means to be a Gryffindor, I don't agree with how they are behaving. Now I understand that I believe in what it means to be a Slytherin. The two things aren't mutually exclusive, I believe they CAN exist together. I'm going to prove it." Harry said firmly.

"Well, this should be interesting." Widget said as he led the group out into the hallway.

* * * * *

"Get down here this instant... Mr. Longbottom! I do NOT want a repeat of yesterday's incident. Do you hear me?" Madame Hooch bellowed, then mounted her broom to try and retrieve the terrified Neville.

"Hey guys." Cherub said with a small smile, anticipating the reaction.

"Harry! What are you wearing?" Hermione gasped.

"I told you! I told all of you!" Ron screamed.

"Mr. Weasley. Be quiet immediately or I will have you escorted to the Headmaster's office." Madame Hooch said as she guided Neville down to Earth.

"But, he switched houses. He can't do that, can he?" Hermione asked in a begging tone.

Madame Hooch looked at Harry carefully, then asked, "Mr. Potter, it is an infraction of the rules to wear another houses emblem. What is the meaning of this?"

"Headmaster Dumbledore had me wear the sorting hat again. It said that I could be either, I have a choice. I choose Slytherin." Harry said, trying to sound confident.

"You corrupted him. You turned him evil. *Denfizia Mariposa!*" Ron screamed as he waived his wand at Cherub viciously.

Cherub belched and spit out a butterfly.

"Is that what you were trying to do to him?" Draco asked, trying to fight down a laugh.

"That's enough! You there, Mr. Widget. Come over here!" Madame Hooch called as she waived her arm.

Widget walked to the class group cautiously.

"Mr. Weasley, it was made very clear that use of magic against another student is strictly forbidden. Accompany Mr. Widget to the Headmaster's office at once." She said to Ron, then in a lower voice said to Widget, "Tell him I'll be up directly."

"Of course. Right this way." Widget said professionally and motioned for Ron to follow him.

After a moment of silence as everyone watched Ron and Widget leave, Madame Hooch said, "One day someone besides Mr. Longbottom will get airborne before we have a disaster... no, I mean we'll have a class without a disaster. No flying! I'll be right back."

Madame Hooch stomped away toward the school as if each blade of grass she came to had offended her personally.

"Harry, how could you?" Hermione asked in an appalled voice.

"How could I what?" Harry asked with a furrowed brow.

"We were your friends. How could you abandon us. Look what they did to Ron." Hermione said in a pleading voice.

"Ron attacked Cherub... for no reason." Harry said in confusion, not understanding her problem.

"No reason! Look what they did to you. You're one of them now! You're even starting to talk like them!" Hermione said in a voice that was going up in volume as well as pitch.

Harry looked at Hermione curiously and asked, "Am I really?"

"The old Harry would be worried about Ron right now. He'd be trying to figure out what the Slytherins had done to cause this." Hermione said, back to pleading.

"But I don't need to worry about Ron and I don't need to figure anything out." Harry said simply.

"Why aren't you worried about your friend who got in trouble trying to defend you?" Hermione asked, on the edge of rage.

"What's to worry about? He attacked another student without provocation in front of witnesses. He clearly broke the rules and Headmaster Dumbledore will deal with Ron in whatever way he believes is best. I trust the Headmaster's judgment." Harry said in a logical tone.

"But he did it to protect you!" Hermione screeched.

"From what? My other friends?" Harry asked slowly.

"You can't be friends with them! They're Slytherin!" Hermione bellowed, now red in the face and on the verge of tears.

"They're people. You really need to calm down, we're in these houses to allow people of similar interests and personalities to room together. They didn't have their souls removed when they entered the Slytherin dorm, they're just like us. The Slytherin just live with a different philosophy." Harry tried to explain.

"I won't listen to your lies Harry Potter. You know they're evil, at least you used to know it." Hermione said angrily.

"Yes. I thought I knew because I listened to what you and Ron told me. When I took the opportunity to talk with these guys I found out that we're more alike than different." Harry said and smiled at Draco and Cherub who were looking back with pride.

"I don't believe you. They're evil. He stole Neville's rememberal and said some really mean things about the rest of us." Hermione said as she pointed at Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes, he was getting tired of this.

"Yes. Draco took Neville's rememberal, but you seem to forget that after a rather exciting chase, we landed and he gave it to you. No harm was done, and if you think about it, it was quite a bit more fun than standing glaring at each other while Neville was taken to the infirmary." Harry said reasonably.

"You really are one of them now." Hermione said in a disappointed voice.

"I guess I am. But only because you won't let me be anything else." Harry said in a measured tone.

Hermione looked at Harry curiously but didn't ask.

"Cherub and Draco are my friends. They've never said a word against you or Ron. They've never discouraged me from spending time with you and have gone so far as to encourage me to work on keeping your friendship, even if it means not spending time with them. The reason I'll be staying in Slytherin house for the time being is that they'll allow me the freedom to discover

who I am and encourage me to be myself. Even if that means being a Gryffindor." Harry said as he tried to will Hermione to understand.

"You're talking nonsense. Of course you're allowed to have whatever friends you want, but that doesn't include Slytherin. They must have used their dark magic on you to make you think like them." Hermione said angrily as she walked away.

Cherub and Draco walked up on either side of Harry.

"Well said." Draco commented with a nod.

"I couldn't have done better." Cherub said from his other side.

"Is anyone else ready to get into the air?" Madame Hooch asked as she walked briskly onto the flying field.

A murmur of agreement went through the assembled students.

"Madame Hooch?" Cherub asked carefully, not wanting to incur her wrath.

"Mr... Nightshade, is it?" Madame Hooch inquired curiously.

"Yes Ma'am. I was wondering if I have to use a broom." Cherub asked carefully.

Madame Hooch looked surprised by the question so Cherub extended his wings.

"Oh, my. Well, I don't recall anything in the rules stating that you *have to* use a broom. Let me see you try to fly." Madame Hooch finished, sounding sure of herself.

Cherub concentrated on the words in his mind and flexed his wings dramatically as he made the subtle hand gestures of the Leviosa Spell.

With one graceful leap, he flew into the air.

"Beautiful." Madame Hooch gasped as she watched him glide and flow as if he'd been doing it all his life.

After a minute of flying, Cherub landed gently beside Madame Hooch and asked, "May I fly without a broom?"

"Yes. I think that's a very good idea." Madame Hooch said in a distant voice, then came back to herself and said to the group more firmly, "If everyone is ready, follow me."

Madame Hooch mounted her broom and slowly rose from the ground, overly dramatizing her every movement for her students to see, so they could repeat it.

One by one the other students took to their brooms and began to fly with varying ability.

Cherub watched them go until he noticed Draco and Harry waiting beside him.

"After you." Draco said with a dramatic waive of his arm.

Cherub smiled and took flight, followed closely by Harry and Draco.

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"We need to talk." Hermione said in a growl after putting her broom away.

"Then talk." Harry said simply.

"Privately." Hermione said, with a glare at Draco.

"Hermione. Draco and Cherub are my friends. Whatever you have to tell me, you can say in front of them." Harry said seriously.

"I suppose it doesn't matter. You'll probably tell them everything I said as soon as I leave anyway." Hermione said snottily.

Harry waited, not seeing a need for a response to her comment.

"They've changed you Harry. You used to be a good person. I liked you. Now they've done this to you, made you one of them. I don't know you anymore. You don't talk to me or... I thought I could trust you, but now..." She said, then broke down into tears.

Draco, Cherub and Harry exchanged a questioning look with each other before Harry said, "Hermione, you and Ron were my first friends when I arrived here, but I don't want you to be my only friends. Draco and Cherub have never asked me not to talk to you. They've never once asked me about anything you or Ron have said to me. And they never asked me to stop being your friend. You and Ron made the ultimatum, you forced me to choose. I'd be happy having all four of you as friends. But as long as you can't or won't allow that, I'm going to stay where I'm free to be friends with whoever I want."

"We're going to be late to transfigurations if we don't hurry." Draco whispered.

"You're welcomed to walk with us if you want Hermione." Harry said gently.

Hermione glared at Harry, then stomped off toward the school.

"Lovely girl." Cherub said in a casual tone as he started walking.

"Perhaps we should invite her to have dinner at the Slytherin table sometime." Draco said absently.

Harry looked from Draco to Cherub and started laughing.

"That's what I like to see. As long as you can still laugh, everything is going to be okay." Cherub said with a smile.

"It's hard not to laugh with you guys around." Harry said as he moved to walk between the two.

* * * * *

"I can't believe McGonigal docked her own house." Cherub whispered as he walked beside Harry out of the transfigurations classroom.

"Well, in her defense, Granger was being awfully snotty. She couldn't just let it go unanswered." Harry said in thought.

"But twenty points? That could take some time for them to make up." Draco said from Harry's other side.

"I don't know, I've made 48 points myself in two days and I had a hand in the sixteen that you and T earned." Cherub said in a hushed voice.

"The Slytherins earned 64 points in two days?" Harry gasped.

"From us. The students in other years are probably earning points too." Draco said frankly.

"But I only earned those eight you helped me get, and Hermione got five of them deducted." Harry said quickly.

"Heroes *do* love a good competition don't they?" Cherub said with a smile.

"Cherub's right. It's just a game. We'll earn points when we can, but it's not important in the grand scheme of things. And besides, you're with us now. Those sixty-four points are yours too." Draco said as he patted Harry on the back.

"Are you going to kiss him now?" One of the Weasley twins sneered while the other one made kissy noises.

Cherub rolled his eyes and said, "Please leave us alone. You don't have anything to do with us."

"You're stealing members of our house..." The first said.

"...so that makes it our business." The second continued.

"I wonder, when you jerk on yours does his squirt?" Cherub asked in a serious voice.

The Weasley twins stared in shock at the graphic question.

"We're going to be late." Draco said quickly and the three boys ran off to their next class.

* * * * *

"What happened Widget?" Draco asked as he walked into the common room.

"Percy Weasley caught me when I wasn't looking. That's what I get for letting my guard down." Widget said irritably as he prodded his blackening swollen eye.

"Don't listen to him. He was busy watching out to be sure we were going to be alright when Percy clocked him." Pansy said with anger in her voice.

"Come on Widget." Draco said firmly.

"You're a first year, you can't tell me what to do!" Widget said in a grumpy voice.

"You come with me to talk to Professor Snape or I talk to him myself. Your call." Draco said firmly.

Widget nodded.

"Nightshade, Potter, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, you're with me. Parkinson, get Prang and make sure all the Slytherin are accounted for. Get as many as you can locked in where they'll be safe." Draco said in his commanding voice.

"I'll take care of it." Pansy said, then ran down the girls hallway to get the female prefect.

* * * * *

"Mr. Malfoy, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Professor Snape asked from his desk.

"Slytherin business." Draco said from the doorway, then entered followed by the rest of his group.

Widget walked in with Crabbe and Goyle on either side.

"I assume you know who caused this." Professor Snape asked seriously.

"On many levels." Cherub said as he met Professor Snape's eyes.

"Do tell." Professor Snape said as he rested back into his chair.

Cherub lifted his hand, then thought better of it and pulled out his wand and closed the door. Next he invoked a spell of silence over the room to keep from being overheard.

"On the surface level of things, Percy Weasley attacked Widget without provocation before witnesses. On the next level, the Weasley twins have been verbally harassing Potter, Malfoy and I all day, threatening violence and trying to provoke a fight, still further we have Ron Weasley who was escorted out of flying class this afternoon by Widget at Madame Hooch's request after he said some particularly cruel things about Potter... and made some unfavorable generalizations about Slytherin. If you go to the innermost level, there seems to be a hysteria growing in this school that Slytherin is trying to... well, I don't actually know what we're being accused of, but we've been found guilty by most if not all of Gryffindor." Cherub said seriously.

"Perhaps you could explain why Mr. Potter is wearing a Slytherin robe." Professor Snape asked in a suspicious voice.

"Potter, Malfoy and I talked after your class this morning. We cleared the outstanding issues between us and just spoke honestly with each other. After some discussion, we came to realize how the other Gryffindors were going to behave at the idea of Potter being our friend. After it came to Headmaster Dumbledore's attention, he had Harry wear the sorting hat again and it agreed that Harry has the Slytherin qualities as well as the Gryffindor ones. Headmaster Dumbledore gave Harry a choice of which house he would be in, he chose Slytherin." Cherub said frankly.

"I am familiar with the practice of split houses. I recall a Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw girl ten years ago. That situation caused some discord in the school and disrupted the learning environment for many weeks." Professor Snape said in thought.

"Professor, going back to Gryffindor is not an option for me, even if I wanted to. They think I've been corrupted and that I've changed into some kind of dark wizard or something. Honestly, I don't think I'd be safe there if I tried to return." Harry said quietly.

"I wasn't going to suggest that you do. I was only stating that this difficulty has presented itself before, and we survived it. Perhaps we will be able to learn from the incident. For now, I believe steps should be taken to safeguard the Slytherin students." Professor Snape finished firmly.

"Parkinson is getting Prang to gather and account for all the Slytherin and keep them in the dorm where they'll be safe." Draco said professionally.

"Well done Mr. Malfoy. And I presume that the number of your companions is another security feature."

"You presume correctly. We couldn't face down a lynch mob, but we could hold our own against some angry Weasleys if we had to." Draco said firmly.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Let's take Mr. Widget to the infirmary to have that eye attended to, then have a word with the Headmaster." Professor Snape said seriously.

Cherub released the seal on the room. Then everyone followed Professor Snape to the infirmary.

* * * * *

"Yes Headmaster, I do believe it is that serious. Although the root of the problem may be beyond our reach, I believe we can prevent further violence from erupting by removing the most disruptive influences from the school." Professor Snape said as he watched Madame Pomfrey healing Widget's eye.

"In most circumstances I would disagree with your suggestion, but things being as they are... I will call a faculty meeting. You may present it to them for their review. Perhaps they will be able to find an alternative that is less... extreme." Dumbledore said in thought.

"I will see my students safely to the Slytherin Dorm, and return before the meeting." Professor Snape said seriously.

"Yes, yes. And well done boys. It's good to see you watching out for the interests of your prefect as well as he watches out for you." Dumbledore said with pride in the boys.

"Widget is like our big brother. We couldn't ask for a better prefect." Draco said firmly.

"As it should be. Go with Professor Snape now. You should be studying for tomorrow's classes." Dumbledore said as he patted Widget on the back in passing.

* * * * *

"The freak got more bodyguards." One red headed twin said.

"But it ain't gonna help you." The other twin said with a sneer.

Both boys simultaneously threw pouches toward Cherub and his friends.

Cherub held up his hands and began chanting a variation of the Leviosa Spell mixed with the Camborie Cambolis containment spell.

"Gentlemen, stop right there." Professor Snape said as he walked from behind Cherub's group where he hadn't been seen by the Weasley twins.

Both the twins started running in opposite directions.

"Hit them in the legs." Professor Snape said as he handed Harry and Draco each a vial of potion.

Harry and Draco ran off, each following a twin.

Professor Snape looked at the floating pouches and said, "I believe they are impact sensitive. If you can put them down gently, there shouldn't be a problem."

Cherub carefully adjusted his concentration to focus on directionality for the spell and slowly guided the two pouches toward the floor.

"Widget, Crabbe and Goyle. Go to the Headmaster's office and ask anyone there to come immediately." Professor Snape said calmly as he watched Cherub ease the pouches within inches of the floor.

"When they've come to rest, alter your spell to be a full containment spell. It's no different than what you did in my potions lab." Professor Snape said in a toneless voice.

"I got mine. He's stuck outside Professor McGonigal's classroom." Harry said as he hurried to Professor Snape's side.

"Very good. Would you go with Mr. Nott and see that Mr. Malfoy is not in trouble.

"I'm right here." Draco said, out of breath.

"I got him. He's stuck to the first staircase." Draco said breathing heavily.

"I have the only solvent to that adhesive so they won't be going anywhere." Professor Snape said as he kept his focus on Cherub's handling of the pouches.

"Severus, what is the matter?" Dumbledore asked as he was followed by Professor McGonigal and Madame Hooch.

"The Weasley twins attacked this group of students as I was escorting them back to their dorm. They threw these pouches at them and we can only assume that it was something that would cause harm from the manner in which it was delivered." Professor Snape said carefully.

"What is Mr. Nightshade doing?" Dumbledore asked as he moved closer.

"He's using the Camborie Cambolis to protect us in the event of explosion or poisonous gas." Professor Snape said seriously.

"Brave lad. Let me relieve you of that burden." Dumbledore said, then made a gesture at the two pouches.

In a flash, the two pouches were suspended in a solid, transparent block.

"The students who threw these... weapons... are incapacitated." Professor Snape said as he looked up from the pouches.

"We'll deal with them in a moment. For now..." Dumbledore said and waived his arm. The transparent block and pouches disappeared.

"Would you boys return to your dorm room. Once we have this sorted, Professor Snape will be down to tell you of the outcome." Dumbledore said firmly.

"Yes sir." Widget said to Dumbledore, then turned to the boys and said, "Come along. Let's wait in the common room for the decision."

Somewhat reluctantly all the boys followed Widget away from the scene of excitement.

* * * * *

As soon as the group returned to the Slytherin dorm, all the boys except Widget went directly to the bedroom.

A few minutes later Cherub came out of the bedroom and said, "Widget, could you come here for a minute?"

Widget got up from his chair and followed Cherub down the hall.

As he walked in the room he found all the boys sitting around on beds.

Once Widget was inside the door, Draco said, "We've been talking. Since we've come here, we've all become friends. It started out with me and Crabbe and Goyle. When Nightshade moved in, we kind of clicked. Now Potter and Nott have joined us. After everything that happened today we thought we should let you know that we appreciate everything that you've done for us."

Cherub sat beside Harry on his bed and said, "We know you did some of the stuff because you're a prefect. But you didn't have to be nice about it or go out of your way for us. We were just wondering if..."

"...if you'd like to be an honorary member of our group of friends. We know you're a fifth year student and probably have lots of friends already. But we just thought that if you wouldn't mind, we could call you our friend too." Harry finished hopefully.

Widget smiled and looked down at the floor for a moment before speaking.

"Guys. I'm a fifth year student, but I don't really have any friends. In the past four years no one has taken the time to try and get to know me. If you're really serious about this, I'd be honored to be your friend." Widget said in a voice that sounded like he was about to cry.

"Then we need to fill you in on the rules of the room." Draco said seriously.

Widget looked up in question.

"What is said in the room, stays in the room. We can talk about whatever private stuff we want here and it goes no further." Draco said firmly.

"We're on a first name basis in here. Outside, it depends on who's around and what we're doing. If it's class business, then it's last names." Cherub said in a business-like tone.

"No demanding that someone not have other friends outside the group. Just because you're friends with us doesn't mean you can't have other friends too." Harry said seriously.

"Make time for work and time for play." Theodore said with a smile.

"Protect your friends." Goyle said with a growl.

"And they'll protect you." Crabbe said and glanced at Cherub.

"Wow. You guys really have it down." Widget said with a grand smile.

"It's a work in progress." Draco said with a shrug.

"So you're in?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'm in." Widget said with a contented smile.

Draco stood and walked to stand before Widget.

"Malfoy, Draco Malfoy." He said as he extended his hand.

Widget took it and firmly shook as he said, "Eldon Widget."

Chapter 6

"Is Widget in here?" The female voice asked from the door.

"Come in Karen." Eldon Widget said with a playful smile.

Karen Prang walked in with a look of fury in her eyes.

Widget held up his hands and said, "It's the rules of the room. First names only."

All the boys around the room laughed at the statement and Karen's surprised expression.

"Fine. We just got a message that you and... that one." She said pointing at Cherub.

"...And that one..." She said, indicating Harry.

"...are needed in the Headmaster's office." Karen said irritably.

"Their names are Cherub and Harry. We'll be right out." Eldon said calmly.

Karen gave a single nod of her head and left.

"She doesn't seem very friendly." Cherub observed.

"No. That's about as nice as she gets. But she's good at her job and takes it very seriously." Eldon said with a shrug.

"I guess we'd better get upstairs." Harry said as he stood.

"Make sure you have your wand handy. The halls aren't as safe as they used to be." Draco said firmly.

Harry nodded seriously and pulled his wand out.

"You too Eldon. They've already proven that they'll attack you." Theodore said in an uncharacteristic firm voice.

Eldon smiled and pulled out his wand.

"You guys watch your backs. I know they got the twins and Ron, but Percy might still be on the prowl." Draco said firmly.

"We'll be fine Draco. Why don't you guys start on the lessons while we're gone so we can cover what we'll need to know for tomorrow with you when we get back." Cherub suggested as he also pulled out his wand.

"Good idea, we're already behind on our studying." Draco said seriously.

"Come on. They're waiting." Eldon said as he led the way.

* * * * *

The group cautiously made their way to the Headmaster's office without incident.

Upon entering they were surprised to find all four Weasleys seated, glaring daggers at them.

"You sent for us Headmaster?" Eldon asked cautiously.

"Yes. Do come in and have a seat." Dumbledore said and gestured to a row of chairs before the desk.

All three boys noticed that nearly all the faculty were gathered in the room behind the row of chairs.

"This is an informal hearing to sort out the events of the past day." Dumbledore said in a thoughtful voice.

"Certain accusations have been made by the young men in defense of their actions that I feel should be addressed." Dumbledore said seriously and looked directly at Cherub.

"I'll do whatever I can to help." Cherub said carefully, not knowing what else to say.

"It has been suggested by Fred Weasley... or was it George? No matter, it was suggested that Mr. Nightshade has an allegiance to a dark wizard and is causing the disruptions of the past days to lure Mr. Potter into the service of... the dark one." Dumbledore said with difficulty.

Cherub's eyes went wide at the suggestion.

"What say you Mr. Nightshade?" Dumbledore prompted.

Cherub thought for a moment, then asked, "Am I being accused of some specific action?"

"No, not at all. We just wish to clear up this matter as expeditiously as possible, will you answer the question?" Dumbledore asked, a little more insistently.

"May I make a statement for the record before I answer?" Cherub asked carefully.

"This isn't a formal hearing. We're simply trying to determine the motives of the participants in the unpleasantness of the past days." Dumbledore said in a somewhat patronizing tone.

"May I make a formal statement for the record before I answer?" Cherub asked again, this time more forcefully.

"It is his right." Professor Snape said from the group of faculty observing the proceedings.

"Very well." Dumbledore said and glanced at Professor McGonigal. After a moment, she nodded to him that the events were being recorded.

"You may proceed with your formal statement Mr. Nightshade." Dumbledore said, much less pleasantly than usual.

"Thank you Headmaster. I simply wish to state for the record my objection to being asked to give testimony regarding my personal beliefs and affiliations. I believe such an action serves only to divide us and breed suspicion. If I can be asked to give such testimony without being accused of a crime and without the benefit of legal counsel, then how far are we from an inquisition that will end with pulling people from their houses and convicting them on nothing more than suspicion that they are in league with a force that is perceived to be evil. Laws are

written down so that all who wish to see them can do so and understand what actions society judges to be illegal. When we are judged on our beliefs, rather than our actions, it becomes a matter of judging right thoughts from wrong ones. Who among us is qualified to make those judgments and who among us is willing to allow someone else to be the judge? This completes my statement. I will answer whatever questions you have for me." Cherub finished in a calm voice.

Dumbledore nodded to Professor McGonigal to stop recording, then asked, "Are you in league with the dark wizard known as Voldemort?"

Cherub thought about his answer carefully before saying, "No Headmaster. I have never to my knowledge met him and have sworn no allegiance to him."

"Have you orchestrated or been a party to any action to cause Mr. Harry Potter to abandon his previous affiliations in favor of Slytherin?" Dumbledore asked cautiously.

"Yes, I have been party to an action that resulted in Mr. Harry Potter abandoning Gryffindor house. The action took place this morning during the second class period on the flying field." Cherub said carefully.

"What did you do Mr. Nightshade?" Dumbledore asked darkly.

"I spoke honestly with Mr. Harry Potter about my thoughts and feelings about the similarities and differences in the houses. I believe that my choice to be open and honest with Mr. Potter may have contributed to his joining Slytherin when given the choice." Cherub said slowly.

"So in essence what you are saying is that you had a conversation with Mr. Potter, discussed your beliefs and after considering your statements he changed houses?" Dumbledore asked in confirmation.

"As far as my contribution to Mr. Potter's decision, yes. But I believe there were other factors of which I have little or no knowledge that also contributed to Mr. Potter's decision." Cherub said seriously.

"Then I suppose we should ask him. What do you say Mr. Potter? Would you explain your reasoning behind your choice of Slytherin over Gryffindor?" Dumbledore asked slowly.

"May I make a formal statement before I answer?" Harry asked calmly.

"I don't see why not. Minerva?" Dumbledore said with a helpless look at Professor McGonigal. She nodded when the recording was started.

"I have taken no action by word or deed to cause injury to anyone. Yet I am here, asked to give testimony to justify my choice of houses. This entire proceeding would have been unnecessary if those who were offended by my choice had simply asked my reasoning. And I want it stated in the record that since my association with Mr. Nightshade and Mr. Malfoy became known to the Gryffindor house members, no one, not one of them has attempted to

sit down and speak with me about my choice in a reasonable manner. If they had, we might not be here now. This concludes my statement." Harry said formally.

"Now will you explain your reasoning for joining Slytherin house?" Dumbledore asked slowly, not revealing any emotion.

"I am both a Gryffindor and a Slytherin. But beyond either of those, I am a person. I was given a choice and true to my Gryffindor nature, did what I believed to be right. True to my Slytherin nature, I did what I believed to be in my best interest. And true to my human nature, I did what I wanted. What I believe is right is to go where I feel I belong, even if my friends don't agree with my choice. What I believe is in my best interest is to surround myself with the people who will empower me with their encouragement and respect. What I want is to live where I am allowed to think independently and encouraged to have as many friendships as possible. It happens that all three of those decisions led me to Slytherin house. The Gryffindors taunting me, attacking my friends and disrupting my classes only served as confirmation that I made the right choice." Harry said in thought.

"Well said Mr. Potter. I just have one further question, this for Mr. Widget." Dumbledore said and looked at Eldon carefully.

"Yes sir?" Eldon asked in a timid voice.

"Did you want to make a formal statement first?" Dumbledore asked cautiously.

"No sir, but thank you for offering." Eldon said with a smile.

"Mr. Widget. Can you give the reason for Mr. Percival Weasley's attack on you?" Dumbledore asked seriously.

"No sir. I've known Percy since we were both first years. Even though we've never been friends, I've always liked and respected him. All I can think of is that he was upset because a Gryffindor changed to Slytherin." Eldon said shyly.

"Why weren't you friends?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Because we're from different houses. Gryffindors hate Slytherin. In the past four years I've tried to be respectful and available but... there was always that barrier that I couldn't get past." Eldon said, letting a trace of the loneliness he felt slip out through his voice.

"I think we've heard enough. If there is nothing else, we will adjourn and the faculty will discuss the matter." Dumbledore said firmly.

"May I speak?" Percy Weasley asked cautiously.

"You have already made your statement, do you wish to modify your earlier remarks or add to them?" Dumbledore asked slowly.

"I just wanted to apologize to Widget. I'm sorry I hit you. I got mad..." Percy trailed off with a shrug.

"Do you accept Mr. Percival Weasley's apology Mr. Widget?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"Of course I do. We all do stupid things sometimes, isn't that part of growing up?" Widget asked with a smile.

"An integral part Mr. Widget." Dumbledore said with a chuckle.

"May we speak?" One of the twins asked in a quiet voice.

"If you wish, but keep it brief." Dumbledore said in a cautious voice.

"We thought Nightshade was evil because he's different..." One twin started.

"...I mean, when you think of someone evil, he's what they look like." The other finished.

"But he's just a kid. A smart, stuck-up kid with wings. But just a kid." The first said.

"We got caught up in the ranting and raving about 'the-boy-who-lived' being corrupted by the demon." The second twin said frankly.

"We're sorry we tried to turn you into a duck. It wouldn't have hurt you." The first twin finished quickly.

"Yeah, and if we get to stay, we won't bother you anymore." The second said seriously.

Both twins fell silent.

"Mr. Nightshade?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"I accept." Cherub said in an equal quiet tone.

"Anyone else?" Dumbledore asked, looking at Ron.

Ron glared at Harry and crossed his arms across his chest.

"Mr. Nightshade, Mr. Potter and Mr. Widget, you are free to go. You conducted yourselves well. I'm very proud of you all." Dumbledore said in a friendly voice.

"Thank you Headmaster." All the boys chorused in unison, then left the room.

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Draco asked as soon as Harry, Cherub and Eldon entered.

"It was weird. I think we were there to give the Weasleys a chance to apologize." Cherub said carefully as he and Harry sat on Harry's bed.

"Did they?" Theodore asked curiously.

"Three out of four." Eldon said as he took a seat on Cherub's unoccupied bed.

"Let me guess. Ron didn't apologize." Draco said, already knowing from Harry's expression.

"I really thought we were friends." Harry said in a lost voice.

Cherub put his arm around Harry's shoulder to try and comfort him.

Draco saw Harry's distress and moved from his own bed to sit on Harry's other side.

"Is that all that happened?" Theodore asked uncomfortably.

Draco put an arm around Harry's waist, offering his own comfort.

"Yes, except for some long winded speeches from Harry and Cherub." Eldon said with a teasing smile.

"I thought I was on trial for believing differently from everyone else." Cherub said defensively.

"I agreed with everything you said Cherub. I just think you surprised the Professors. They probably expected a bunch of whining crying little boys pointing fingers and calling names. Instead they got a pint sized lawyer and philosopher." Eldon said with a laugh.

"You must have really put on a show." Draco said with a smile.

"They were both great. When Cherub demanded to be allowed to make a formal statement for the record, I thought Dumbledore was going to drop over from shock." Eldon said, now shaking with laughter.

"I'm sorry I missed it. All we've done is study potions and transfigurations. Really dry reading." Draco said honestly.

"Greg really understands the transfigurations stuff. If you get him to explain it to you, you'll probably learn it better than reading the book." Theodore said seriously.

"Greg?" Cherub asked curiously.

"Goyle. His first name is Greg. And Crabbe's first name is Vincent." Draco said informatively.

"Oh. I guess I didn't think to ask. Do you guys mind if I use your first names?" Cherub asked carefully.

"No problem. Thanks for asking." Greg said with a smile.

Draco got a serious look and said, "Everyone. We've never really discussed anything about dating or things like that, but I need to know if anyone would have a problem with two guys... as a couple. If you're going to get freaky about it, I need to know now."

Everyone looked around at each other and shook their heads.

"Then the rules of the room apply. I'll start. I'm not seeing anyone, honestly I never even thought about it until this week. I'm kind of interested in someone, but I don't know if he likes me back, I mean, that way." Draco said with uncharacteristic timidity.

"Just say it Draco." Harry said quietly.

"Cherub, I really like you. If you're interested... I mean, if you wanted to, I'd like to, you know, date and stuff." Draco said in a rambling meter.

Cherub got a look of surprise, then regret.

"I'm sorry Draco. I really like you, but I'm... I was going to ask Harry the same thing." Cherub said in a pained voice.

Harry chuckled and said in an almost childish voice, "I was going to ask Draco."

"So why don't you three date each other?" Theodore asked reasonably.

"What?" Draco asked in confusion.

"Well, you all three obviously care about each other. You've admitted your attraction. Give it a try. I think as long as all three of you are honest, you'll be fine." Theodore said with a smile.

"You really think that?" Goyle asked curiously.

"Yes. The three of them seem complete when they're together, don't you think?" Theodore asked seriously.

"Um. Then, would you, um, think about being our boyfriend?" Goyle asked shyly.

Theodore looked from Crabbe to Goyle and back.

"You really mean it?" Theodore asked cautiously.

Goyle nodded shyly, casting his eyes down.

Theodore lifted Goyle's chin with one finger and placed a feather-light kiss on his lips.

"Why aren't you guys doing that?" Eldon asked Harry, Draco and Cherub.

"Good question." Cherub said speculatively.

"I guess that's why he's the prefect." Harry said with a smile.

"Enough talk." Draco said and moved in to kiss Harry and a moment later Cherub.

"This isn't fair to you Eldon. We've all got someone but you don't." Theodore said after breaking his kiss with Crabbe.

"If the look in Percy Weasley's eyes was any clue, I don't think Eldon will be alone too much longer." Cherub said from his three-way embrace.

"Really?" Eldon asked in surprise.

"After you told him you liked and respected him, I'd be surprised if he doesn't ask you out as soon as the hearing lets out." Cherub said seriously.

"A Weasley." Draco said with a shake of his head.

"A person Draco. I agree with you about the importance of breeding and bloodlines. But I don't think that means Percy isn't a worthy person, I think it means that Percy has more challenges to face. He's made it to prefect of Gryffindor. I think he's due some respect for that accomplishment." Cherub said reasonably.

Draco thought about the words and finally said, "If I get the chance, I'll get to know the person. If he's worthy of respect, then I'll give him respect."

"That's my Draco." Cherub said happily and moved in for a kiss.

"Guys. Feeling left out here." Harry said as they were both leaning in front of Harry to kiss.

The kiss broke and Draco said, "We can't have that."

Cherub moved in to nuzzle Harry's neck while Draco kissed him gently on the mouth.

"I think I'll go into the common room. It's getting warm in here." Eldon said as he looked at the six boys kissing playfully.

"No. Sorry Eldon. Please don't go." Cherub said as he pulled out of the three-way embrace.

"It's fine Cherub. I have my own school work to do and I'm a few hours behind. You guys have fun." Eldon said and left the room.

"I hope it works out with him and Percy. He's such a good guy, I hate to think of him alone." Cherub said as he hugged Harry and Draco.

"No matter what Percy does, we'll make sure Eldon is okay. Now come here." Draco finished with a growl.

* * * * *

"Guys?" Eldon called from the doorway.

"Come in. We're just studying." Cherub said as he looked up from his book.

"I thought you'd all be making out." Eldon said in confusion.

"We had a good snog, then got to our studies. When the work is done, we'll have time for play." Draco said seriously.

"Oh. That makes sense. Professor Snape is in the common room. He wants to speak with you." Eldon said with distraction.

"Who?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"Harry and Cherub, but I have a feeling that he's expecting all of you." Eldon said frankly.

"It's time for a break anyway." Cherub said and marked his place in his book.

* * * * *

"Gentlemen. I thought that with your involvement in the events today you'd be interested in the outcome." Professor Snape said seriously.

Complete silence fell over the room as everyone waited to hear the judgment.

"Mr. Percival Weasley has been removed from the prefect position of Gryffindor and been restricted to his room for one week." Professor Snape said without inflection.

Eldon closed his eyes and looked as if he were in pain.

"Mr. Frederick Weasley and Mr. George Weasley have been given a one week suspension and will be required to work with Mr. Filch for one month. In addition they will be on probation for the remainder of this school year." Professor Snape said formally.

Cherub nodded silently, feeling no joy in their punishment.

"Mr. Ronald Weasley has been expelled." Professor Snape said shortly.

Harry felt emptiness at the declaration.

"A total of two hundred points has been deducted from Gryffindor for allowing and encouraging such behavior in their house. It has been made clear this is the one and only warning they will receive and that any further actions taken against other houses will be dealt with in a more severe fashion." Professor Snape said firmly.

"Mr. Potter, your conduct during the hearing was outstanding and beyond what any of the faculty expected. After your display of proper conduct and maturity it has been decided that you will be allowed to try out for the Quidditch team for the seeker position. We had discussed it yesterday after Professor McGonigal witnessed your... unauthorized... flight with Mr. Malfoy but were concerned that you might not be sufficiently mature to deal with the added responsibilities. That is no longer a concern. Congratulations Mr. Potter." Professor Snape said formally.

"Mr. Nightshade. Your level of knowledge and skill with potions puts you in a unique position. I believe you still have things to learn in my class, but I am also aware that you should be encouraged to fulfill your potential with more advanced projects. To that end, the faculty have authorized a potions workshop for advanced students. Students from all houses and all years who exhibit an exceptional aptitude for potions will meet once a week to work on advanced projects that are not covered in the standard curriculum. As with Mr. Potter, your performance in the hearing assured the faculty that you would be of sufficient maturity to accept the additional responsibility. Congratulations Mr. Nightshade." Professor Snape said and nearly betrayed a smile of pride.

"Mr. Widget. Your ability to forgive someone who attacked you and convey your true thoughts of the incident impressed the faculty and most especially Headmaster Dumbledore. It was also noted that you have the respect and loyalty of those left in your charge. Headmaster Dumbledore would like to have a meeting with you next week to discuss the possibility of your assuming the Head Boy position next semester, even though that position is normally held by a seventh year student. Such a thing is a rare honor, but I can think of no one more deserving. Congratulations Mr. Widget." Professor Snape said with dignity.

"Gentlemen. Your accomplishments and decorum have brought honor to Slytherin House. Please take full advantage of these opportunities, they are all too rare." Professor Snape said seriously.

Clapping started in the group of students gathered in the common room which broke into a full ovation.

After the clapping stopped, Eldon quietly asked, "Professor Snape. Is there anything we can do to get Percy his prefect job back? Another punishment? Anything else? I think Percy might base his entire self-worth on his being prefect. It's the only thing he's ever achieved."

"What do you suggest?" Professor Snape asked with concern.

"Honestly, I think he needs to be given a punishment that has a side effect of causing him to build his self-image. Give him a task, and when he's finished he'll have something to look at and say, 'I did that'." Eldon said in thought.

"An intriguing idea. Come with me to the headmaster and perhaps we can convince him of the merits of your plan before Percival is notified." Professor Snape said quickly and led the way out of the door.

* * * * *

"Do you guys mind if I sleep in here tonight?" Theodore asked quietly.

"No problem T. You're one of us. You can move in as far as I'm concerned." Draco said sleepily, cuddled between Harry and Cherub.

"I don't think we're ready for that step yet, but thanks for the offer." Theodore said happily.

"One week ago I couldn't have imagined being this happy." Cherub said as he enjoyed just being held.

"What was it like for you? You've never said." Draco asked quietly.

"I wasn't allowed to leave Dour Oaks, the mansion where I grew up. I've never been around anyone my own age before. I honestly didn't think I'd be able to relate to anyone my age. I've only ever talked with adults." Cherub said distantly.

"Well that's something we have in common. I've spent most of my life around adults and have been expected to behave as they do. I've had some casual friends like Crabbe and Goyle... I'm sorry guys, I'm just not used to using your first names." Draco said with distraction.

"All of you can call us by our last names if you want. It sounds more natural." Goyle said in a relaxed voice.

"Except T, I like it when you call me Vince." Crabbe said gently.

Goyle nodded in agreement.

"But as I was saying, I didn't have really close friendships with others my age. I seemed to relate better to adults." Draco said in thought.

"I was raised by my muggle relatives. They knew my parents were part of the wizarding world and hated them for it. As a result, they treated me horribly. I never really fit in with the muggle children I grew up around, I always felt different." Harry said, then snuggled tighter into Draco's embrace.

"Goyle and I have known each other since we can remember. We couldn't be closer if we were brothers." Crabbe said from the bed where he and Goyle were laying on either side of Theodore.

"We've considered ourselves boyfriends for about a year now, but we didn't really feel like sharing it with anyone until now." Goyle said as he stroked Theodore's hand gently.

"When you look like we do, people don't think that you might want someone to hold you at night or just listen to what you're thinking or feeling." Crabbe said darkly.

Theodore lifted Crabbe and Goyle's hands and kissed the back of each in turn before letting them fall and just relaxing.

A knock on the door interrupted the introspective moment.

"Do you guys mind if I come in?" Eldon asked as he opened the door an inch.

"Eldon, you don't have to knock and you're always welcomed to come in... as long as you aren't worried about what you might see." Draco said with a gentle smile.

"I'll remember that. I just wanted to let you guys know what's happening." Eldon said as he sat on Cherub's unoccupied bed.

Crabbe, Goyle and Theodore sat up on Crabbe's bed where they had been relaxing and waited with interest.

"Apparently, the faculty felt it was in everyone's best interest to have Ron removed from the school immediately. He didn't even have a chance to pack his things. Elves were sent for his possessions and he was taken away in a carriage right after the hearing." Eldon said with intensity.

"I suppose that way he wouldn't have a chance to stir things up one last time before he left." Draco said speculatively.

"The twins seem to be grateful that they are being allowed to stay. From what I heard, they told the other Gryffindors that they made a mistake and are paying the price." Eldon said with contentment.

"I'm glad to hear it. I don't think I'll ever be friends with them, but it's good to hear that they're accepting responsibility." Cherub said seriously.

"What about Percy? Were you able to convince Dumbledore to let him keep his prefect position?" Theodore asked curiously.

"Professor Snape and I discussed our concerns with Headmaster Dumbledore and he decided to allow Percy to choose his punishment. He could either take the easy way out and give up his prefect position or take on the more difficult task of starting a first and second year inter-house Quidditch league. All the teams will be required to be mixed house and the focus will be on teamwork and fun. Hopefully they will learn the skills they will need to join the regular teams when they reach third year." Eldon said happily.

"I assume from your smile that he chose to start the junior Quidditch league. It sounds like a fitting punishment. To pay for his act of house based violence, he's being asked to promote inter-house relations." Cherub said with a nod of approval.

"He was happy to accept the responsibility. And the best part is that after we left Headmaster Dumbledore's office, Percy asked if I would like to work with him on the project." Eldon said and seemed almost to be floating with happiness.

"That's great Eldon. I hope it grows into something beyond business." Theodore said gently.

"I hope so too. It's a good start." Eldon said, unable to restrain his glee.

"Then I guess that after all the dramatic events of this day, everything worked out." Harry said in thought.

"It seems so. For a while I had the feeling that the houses were going to be at war with each other." Cherub said carefully.

"It could have gone that way. You have to give Dumbledore credit for the way he handled things. Even though it might not have seemed like it at the time, he was guiding events to turn out for the best for everyone involved." Eldon said seriously.

Cherub thought about the statement and couldn't help but agree.

Part 3: Nightshade

Chapter 7

The first two weeks of classes were filled with a strange but exciting mix of learning and fun. Harry and Cherub had taken to their new responsibilities with a passion and Draco used the time apart from his friends to become involved with the political and social groups within Slytherin. Draco became the social director of activities for his group of friends and saw to it that they didn't isolate themselves from their housemates. Pansy had become the unofficial voice of the Slytherin first year students within the house and to some degree within the school. Draco was content to see her assume the position knowing that Pansy looked to him for guidance when she was in doubt of the proper action.

Pansy had surprised nearly everyone in the school when she invited Darla Waynethropp, who she had met on the train, to sit with her at dinner the first evening of the second week. The students at the Gryffindor table and the Slytherin table all seemed to be on edge through the meal. The Slytherin first year students worked as a group to try and make Darla feel comfortable with them. Harry and Cherub even got her to laugh.

Hermione Granger had essentially withdrawn from everything and everyone since Ron's departure. Harry repeatedly tried to talk to her but she refused to acknowledge him. Potions class seemed unusually still without her enthusiastic waving hand at every question asked.

Harry was just talking about how DADA class gave him a migraine every day when Eldon Widget ran up to the group of friends.

"Headmaster Dumbledore wants to see Cherub in his office." Eldon said quickly.

"What's up Eldon?" Cherub asked with concern.

"I don't know. Prang gave me that message. That's all I know." Eldon said seriously.

"I guess I'm ready. I'll see you guys at lunch." Cherub said to the rest of the group as he left with Eldon.

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"You asked to see me Headmaster?" Cherub asked cautiously as he entered the room.

"Yes Mr. Nightshade. Your father has requested that you be allowed to accompany him for the weekend. Miss Prang is in the process of getting the assignments from your afternoon classes and will meet you in your dorm. Enjoy your weekend." Headmaster Dumbledore finished with a gentle smile.

Cherub turned in slow shock to see his father standing to his right.

"Hello Father." Cherub said cautiously.

"Come along. The carriage is waiting." Mr. Nightshade said shortly.

Cherub looked at Headmaster Dumbledore with worry but only received a nod of encouragement in response.

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As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Cherub noticed that Eldon was waiting for him.

"Widget, I'd like to introduce my father Gideon Nightshade. Father, this is the prefect of Slytherin, Eldon Widget." Cherub said formally.

"A pleasure to meet you sir." Eldon said in his most respectful voice and offered his hand to shake.

Mr. Nightshade shook the offered hand briefly, but didn't speak.

"Widget, would you tell Potter and Malfoy that I'm going away with my father for the weekend?" Cherub asked hopefully.

"Of course. Do you need me to get your assignments while you pack?" Eldon offered seriously.

"No. But thank you for asking. Headmaster Dumbledore already asked Prang to take care of that. Knowing her, she's probably waiting for us in the common room right now." Cherub said in a very business-like tone.

"I'll let you go then. It was a pleasure to meet you Mr. Nightshade, have a good weekend Cherub." Eldon finished in a friendly tone.

"You too Eldon." Cherub said with a gentle smile and turned to leave.

Cherub walked with his father through the hallways and down the stairs to the Slytherin dorm in tense silence.

After passing through the hidden door and through the common room, Cherub found a list of assignments waiting on his bed.

Cherub quickly gathered some casual clothes and the schoolbooks he would need into the one piece of soft luggage that he had.

The silence went from tense to oppressive as Cherub carried his leather suitcase up to the main entrance of the school.

Cherub walked out the front door and took note of the very old and lavish carriage that waited for them.

Without a word, Mr. Nightshade climbed into the carriage as Cherub handed his suitcase to the driver.

As the carriage pulled away from Hogwart's, Mr. Nightshade finally spoke, "Father asked that I come and collect you. We will be stopping for your brother then go on to meet with Father at his office."

"I have a brother?" Cherub asked in shock before he could restrain his words.

Mr. Nightshade looked at Cherub with equal measures of disapproval and disgust as he said, "Yes."

Cherub had a thousand questions that he wanted to ask, but couldn't force himself to speak.

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The rest of the ride continued in silence until the carriage came to a stop in front of a mansion that was nearly twice the size of Dour Oaks where Cherub had been raised.

An old woman guided a reluctant blond haired boy to the carriage.

After helping the boy, who might be eight years old, inside, she began to climb in when Mr. Nightshade spoke again, "No. Father specifically stated that you are to remain here."

The old woman looked at Mr. Nightshade with an expression of surprise, but only nodded her acceptance and withdrew.

"What is that?" the boy asked as he pointed at Cherub.

"It's your brother, Choab." Mr. Nightshade said sharply.

Cherub couldn't restrain his need to say, "My name is Cherub."

Mr. Nightshade again let his look of disgust be plainly seen as the carriage continued on its way.

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The father and two sons walked into the massive ancient building in silence.

After walking through a labyrinth of hallways, Mr. Nightshade finally opened a door and led the way into an office.

"Let my father know we've arrived." Mr. Nightshade said abruptly to the elderly witch sitting at a desk.

"Have a seat Mr. Nightshade. I will let you know when he's ready to see you." The witch said coldly.

After five minutes of sitting in silence, the younger boy began to squirm in his seat.

"Be still Chuffery." Mr. Nightshade said firmly.

"I gotta go." Chuffery said in a little kid's whiney tone.

"Then go." Mr. Nightshade said in almost a growl.

"I need help." Chuffery said as he continued to fidget in his seat.

"Gwendylfarb, would you take Chuffery to the lavatory?" Mr. Nightshade asked in a demanding tone.

"No." She said flatly and immediately returned her full attention to the paperwork before her.

"Choab. Take your brother to the lavatory." Mr. Nightshade said as a command.

"My name is Cherub."

Silence fell over the room as Cherub sat, waiting for his father's acknowledgement.

"I've got to go noooooow!" Chuffery whined.

Through gritted teeth Mr. Nightshade said, "Cherub, would you please take Chuffery to the lavatory?"

"Yes Father." Cherub said coldly as he stood.

"Do you know where it is Chuffery?" Cherub asked in a more gentle voice.

Chuffery looked at Cherub with fear in his eyes and hesitantly nodded.

"Show me where it is and I'll help you." Cherub said, more softly.

Chuffery hesitated a moment, then started walking down a hallway to the side of Gwendylfarb's desk.

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"I finished." Chuffery said from the bathroom stall.

"What do you need help with?" Cherub asked as he walked into the stall to find Chuffery sitting on the toilet.

"I finished." Chuffery said again, as if that explained everything.

"What do you need me to do?" Cherub asked in confusion.

Chuffery gathered some toilet paper from the roll beside him and handed it to Cherub.

"You want me to wipe your butt?" Cherub asked in astonishment.

Chuffery nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Why don't you just do it yourself?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"Nana always does it for me." Chuffery said seriously.

"Is Nana the woman who brought you to the carriage?" Cherub asked in thought.

Chuffery nodded.

"Well, I'll help you do it yourself, but I won't do it for you." Cherub said firmly.

Chuffery looked at Cherub with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Cherub handed Chuffery the toilet paper and said, "Go ahead and try."

Chuffery reluctantly reached behind him and awkwardly began to wipe himself.

Finally Cherub said, "That wasn't so hard. Next time you'll be able to go by yourself."

Chuffery stood with his pants pooled around his ankles and looked at Cherub with a lost expression.

"Go ahead. Pull up your pants." Cherub prompted.

Chuffery pulled up his pants but seemed to be having difficulty getting them fastened.

"You need to fasten the waist, then pull up the zipper." Cherub said patiently.

Chuffery fumbled with the button at the waist, but finally was able to get it through the hole. The zipper was then closed with little effort.

"Flush the toilet, then wash your hands." Cherub said, inwardly horrified at his brother's helplessness.

After several unsuccessful attempts, Chuffery was finally able to flush the toilet. From his expression you would have thought he'd just solved the mysteries of the universe.

"Come on and wash your hands." Cherub prompted as Chuffery was still looking with amazement at what he'd accomplished.

Reluctantly, Chuffery went to the sink and held out his hands to be washed.

Cherub was about to instruct him how to wash his hands, but decided that Chuffery had apparently experienced quite a bit in the past few minutes.

"Next time, I'll show you how to wash your hands for yourself." Cherub said as he turned on the water and started to soap Chuffery's hands.

"Are you really my brother?" Chuffery asked in a small, frightened voice.

"I think so. Look in the mirror, we have the same color eyes." Cherub said as he gently washed Chuffery's hands.

Chuffery stood on tippy toes to see his own eyes in the mirror, then stared at Cherub's eyes with amazement.

"I always wanted a brother." Chuffery said in wonder.

Cherub took a towel from the stack on the counter and began to dry Chuffery's hands as he whispered, "Me too Chuffery."

Chuffery reluctantly took a step toward Cherub and put his arms around him, obviously afraid he was going to be scolded.

Cherub put his arms around his brother and said, "You're the only family that I've met who wanted me."

After a long minute of hugging, Cherub led Chuffery back to the waiting room by the hand.

* * * * *

"Cherub?" Gwendylfarb asked cautiously.

Cherub stood and walked to the desk.

"Mr. Nightshade will see you now." She said with a secretive smile.

"Thank you." Cherub said with hesitation and went through the door she held open for him.

* * * * *

"Cherub, have a seat my boy." The elderly wizard said in a friendly voice that reminded Cherub of Headmaster Dumbledore.

After looking around, Cherub took the third seat in a row of chairs facing the desk.

"I'll just give you the high points to begin with and then you can ask about the things you want to know, is that alright with you?" The man asked with a gentle, inquisitive smile that put Cherub at ease.

Cherub nodded and gave a gentle smile in return.

"My son, your father, is a prick." Cherub's grandfather said frankly.

Cherub couldn't help but give a big smile in agreement.

"His wife, your mother is a loon... no, let me rephrase that. Loons are lovely creatures and your mother isn't... forgive me. My mind wanders off on tangents these days. That's part of the reason I called you here."

Cherub waited expectantly.

"Your father, 'the prick', rejected you at first sight. Your mother was... less than nurturing. In an attempt to force 'the prick' to do the right thing, I withdrew his access to all my accounts. I have provided him a monthly allowance on the condition that he watch after your well-being. I suppose that in his mind he was doing the right thing by hiring an expensive wizard to transfigure you and give you a more conventional look. But at the same time, he had the glamour put on you to hide your family resemblance. Did I mention that he's a prick?"

Cherub couldn't help but give an amused smile as he nodded.

"Yes, well then... where was I? Oh yes, when I saw his plan to keep you hidden away from the world, my immediate reaction was to take you away from his care and raise you myself, but... look at my son, he's the product of my lovely wife's child raising skills. Even though your father had the worst of intentions for you, I realized that he might actually be doing what is best for you in the long term. Thanks to 'the prick', you were able to have a more 'normal' childhood than you might have otherwise. And I took steps to be sure that you would be safe and cared for."

"Millicent works for you." Cherub said as a statement of fact.

Grandfather Nightshade looked at Cherub with surprise, then said, "I hired Millie to watch and listen. It was on her recommendation that I arranged for James to be hired. So far as he knows he was hired to be your valet. In reality, he was hired to be an example of a kind and caring man in your life. I required 'the prick' to visit you two times. When Millie reported how his visits effected you, I didn't insist on him visiting you again. Instead I presented him with a

contract to grant me guardianship over you and terminate his parental rights, he was only too happy to agree... I'm sure I've forgotten many things that you should know but that's all that comes to mind at the moment. Ask those questions that are most important to you and I'll do my best to answer."

Cherub's mind was a whirl; he concentrated and finally was able to think of one question he would like the answer to.

"Where is my mother?"

"I'm sorry my boy. I honestly have no idea. When we found that she was pregnant with Chuffery, we had to keep her under observation every minute of her pregnancy to keep her from transfiguring. After he was born, she seemed to come back to her senses then the next thing we knew, she was gone. No one has seen or heard from her in nine years."

Cherub nodded in thought.

"My boy, my health is failing. I have seven children and your father is the best of the lot."

Cherub looked at his grandfather in disbelief.

"That's right, this family has more pricks than a cactus. Of all my descendants, you're the only one worth a damn."

"What about Chuffery?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"The child has no mind of his own. He has been trained to behave and obey to the point that he wouldn't step out of a burning fire unless you told him to do so."

Cherub looked at the floor and considered the statement.

"Cherub my boy. I'm giving everything to you."

"Excuse me?" Cherub asked as he looked up in surprise.

"My vaults, my business holdings here and in the muggle world, my property, everything will be yours. Of course, with you being eleven years old, you can't own property, but Albus said he'd watch after your interests until you come of age. And Mr. Klegg will be seeing after the business side of things. After today, you shouldn't be bothered with more than the occasional meeting with Mr. Klegg, two or three times a year I should think." Grandfather Nightshade said in thought.

"Albus?" Cherub asked carefully.

"Albus Dumbledore. The headmaster of Hogwart's. He and I shared a room when we went to school. He's my oldest and dearest friend. He contacted me nearly two weeks ago, quite upset on your behalf. I explained as best I could and he agreed to keep me apprised of your situation. I must say that I'm very proud of you. You are academically strong, have good friends and are quite powerful in your magic. It makes me think that if I had fostered out my own children rather than leave them to the loving attention of my dear wife Griszelda they

might have turned out worth something... There! go again. There is no time left for regrets." Grandfather Nightshade said and waived his hand over a crystal orb on his desk.

"Andrew, would you come in? We're ready."

A moment later a middle-aged man with a kind face walked in through a side door that Cherub hadn't noticed before.

"Andrew, this is my grandson Cherub, Cherub, this is my business manager Andrew Klegg." Grandfather said in introduction.

Cherub stood and took Mr. Klegg's offered hand to shake.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you. I feel like I know you already, Aristotle has told me about everything you've ever done. My favorite story is when you were eight and were able to make your own flying potion and enchant your own broom. I don't think I've ever heard anyone speak with so much pride as your grandfather did that day." Mr. Klegg enthused.

"Thank you." Cherub said as he sat down in shock.

"Andrew, I've told Cherub why he's here. Would you tell him about the decisions he has to make? My mind keeps wandering and this is too important to take the chance of doing it improperly." Grandfather Nightshade said seriously.

"Yes, of course. There are currently fourteen family households living on monthly stipends from the Nightshade accounts. Do you want them maintained?" Andrew asked in a strict business tone.

"You're asking me?" Cherub asked in surprise.

"Yes. As of two o'clock this afternoon all businesses, properties and holdings of the Nightshade family were put in trust in your name. I will manage your business affairs until you are of age to do so yourself. It is your grandfather's wish and my intention to conduct the business in accordance with your wishes. What would you like to be done with the family members who live off the family fortune without making any contribution?" Andrew finished and waited patiently.

"Is one of those fourteen households my father's?" Cherub asked in thought.

"Yes. His permanent residence is in Paladanshire, he shares that residence with your brother Chuffery, four household staff and two elves." Andrew said in thought.

"Is there any way you can make a contract or something that he has to sign to keep getting money?" Cherub asked seriously.

"Yes, of course. In fact, your Grandfather made him sign such a contract some time ago to protect you." Andrew said with a look of intrigue.

"I want you to draw up a contract to get Chuffery away from him. I don't think Chuffery is beyond help if he has someone who will encourage him." Cherub said passionately.

"What do you want done with Chuffery?" Grandfather Nightshade asked curiously.

"I want him moved to Dour Oaks... Is there any way we can make arrangements for me to be able to return to Dour Oaks every weekend and on holidays?" Cherub asked, his mind racing with plans.

"I'll speak to Albus, I shouldn't think there would be any problem with that." Grandfather Nightshade said seriously.

"And I can arrange a carriage to be at your disposal for when you wish to return." Mr. Klegg said in thought.

"I would like for Mrs. Puckett to be retired. Find her a nice house and make sure she has a comfortable wage and a house elf to look after her." Cherub said as if he were working down a mental checklist.

"I was taken to believe that she was a thief and had threatened your life on more than one occasion." Grandfather Nightshade said carefully.

"True. But she is barely able to care for herself and has no one else to look after her interests. I don't ever want to have to see the horrible old thing again, but I don't want to see her penniless on the street either. Regardless of her flaws, she devoted years of her life to looking after me and deserves a proper retirement." Cherub said firmly.

"I will see to it Mr. Nightshade." Mr. Klegg said as he made a note on the clipboard he was holding.

Cherub looked at his grandfather, then realized that Mr. Klegg was calling him Mr. Nightshade.

"I'd like to see Millicent put in charge of the house. Give her the freedom to hire whatever staff she needs including house elves. Make sure that she is paid well for her new position." Cherub said forcefully.

Mr. Klegg nodded as he wrote.

"If he is willing, I would like James to serve as valet for Chuffery. Make sure he is paid well for his services. In fact, since taking care of Chuffery is probably going to be a challenge, at least in the beginning, offer James a substantial signing bonus if he agrees. That way if he and Catty decide to get married, they'll have enough money to do it properly." Cherub said in a calculating voice as he was obviously thinking out loud.

"Very good sir." Mr. Klegg said as he wrote furiously.

"When you write that contract for my father to sign, be sure there is a clause that forbids him from any contact of any kind, either direct or indirect with Chuffery until he reaches the age of majority. Any failure to abide by the terms of the contract will result in him being immediately and completely locked out of all Nightshade accounts, properties and holdings." Cherub said firmly and noticed his grandfather smiling at him in approval.

"Is there anything I should know about my other relatives?" Cherub asked in a determined voice.

"None of them are of any consequence. One of your cousins, December Nightshade, has chosen to live in the muggle world and is beginning to show promise as an artist. Besides her, none of them have ever earned a wage or accomplished anything more remarkable than depleting their accounts." Mr. Klegg finished in a voice filled with disappointment.

"I see. Would you remind me about December when things have settled down. I'd like to see her work and speak with her." Cherub said seriously.

"Yes sir." Mr. Klegg said immediately.

"As far as the rest of the family, I doubt that cutting them off from the family money will accomplish anything positive. I want them all to receive contracts that clearly state that any and all Nightshade business is going to be handled by Mr. Klegg until further notice. Any attempt to contact me, directly or otherwise, will have an adverse effect on their monthly allowance." Cherub said in thought.

Grandfather Nightshade laughed and said, "You have the right instincts my boy. It took me years to learn how to deal with the family leaches. You're going to start out with them lined up at attention."

Cherub smiled at his grandfather's praise.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll be right back." Mr. Klegg said and hurried through the side door.

"I suppose it's about time to bring your father in and let him know what's going on."

Grandfather Nightshade said in a tired voice.

"Would you like me to handle it Grandfather?" Cherub asked carefully.

"No my boy. I've been looking forward to this for too many years. Sit back and enjoy the show."

Grandfather finished with an amused smile.

The side door opened and Mr. Klegg walked directly back to his chair beside Grandfather Nightshade's desk.

"Mrs. Puckett will be out of the house by nightfall. I took the liberty of authorizing her to be able to choose the city of her choice in which to retire provided that it is not within 100 miles of Dour Oaks or Hogwart's. Millicent and James will be at Dour Oaks when you arrive this evening. They are only aware that Mrs. Puckett has been retired and they are being asked to be available. I thought you might enjoy extending the job offers yourself." Mr. Klegg said quickly.

"Am I going to Dour Oaks tonight?" Cherub asked in confusion.

"I had assumed you would. I doubt you'll want to experience what your father considers hospitality, and you are signed out from Hogwart's for the weekend. If you would rather stay in a hotel, I'll make those arrangements immediately." Mr. Klegg said, almost frantically.

"No, no. I'm just not used to someone anticipating my needs. I think going to Dour Oaks will be fine. I appreciate your foresight. And it's hard to believe you were able to get all that accomplished in the two minutes you were out of the room.

"In truth, I floored Millicent and told her about Mrs. Puckett, then asked if she and James could be available." Mr. Klegg said in a smile of accomplishment.

"Gwendylfarb, send in 'the prick' and his son." Grandfather Nightshade said into the crystal ball.

"Right away sir." Gwendylfarb said immediately.

* * * * *

Gideon Nightshade walked into the room in a huff, obviously put out by being made to wait. Chuffery trailed behind him timidly, then froze with an expression of fear at the sight of his grandfather.

"Come sit by me Chuffery." Cherub said in a kind voice.

Chuffery jerked his head around at the sound, then ran to sit in the chair beside his brother.

"Gideon, please have a seat so we can conduct our business." Aristotle Nightshade said in a firm and commanding voice.

Gideon reluctantly sat down, obviously irked by his need to obey his father's command.

"As I'm sure you know, my health is deteriorating. The time has come for me to pass control of the family fortune to someone better able to maintain the best interests of the Nightshade family name." Aristotle said slowly.

A blaze of hope fired in Gideon Nightshade's eyes.

"Of all my descendents, there was only one choice for heir to my estate." Aristotle said, obviously enjoying the coming announcement.

Gideon moved to the edge of his chair, waiting to hear the words.

"Therefore, as of two o'clock today, all assets of the Nightshade family have been transferred..." Aristotle said, ever more slowly, drawing it out.

"...To my grandson, Cherub Uriel Nightshade." Aristotle finished and awaited the reaction.

"You what?" Gideon asked in a gasp.

"I gave everything to Cherub." Aristotle said, enjoying the flashes of emotions flying across Gideon's face.

"You... you can't! It's a monster! That thing drove my wife insane! You can't! I'll appeal! You aren't in your right mind!" Gideon ranted.

"Mr. Klegg?" Aristotle said with a contented smile.

"The original contract naming Cherub Nightshade as sole heir to the Nightshade properties and holdings was formally submitted to the ministry four years ago. The decision was made at that time when no one was in doubt of Mr. Nightshade's mental faculties." Mr. Klegg said calmly.

"It's not old enough to own property! I'm it's father which means the money is mine until it reaches majority." Gideon said in an angry voice as he stood.

Chuffery was shrinking down in his chair in fright.

"Come here and let me hold you." Cherub whispered and guided Chuffery onto his lap.

Within seconds Chuffery was relaxed and holding Cherub in a tight embrace.

"*It*, as you have come to call Cherub, has all the family assets in trust until he reaches majority. His interests are to be administered by Albus Dumbledore, and the business is to be managed by Mr. Klegg. You signed away any legal rights to Cherub many years ago and have never shown a moments remorse for doing so. And one further thing, *It* can cut off all your money with one word to Mr. Klegg." Aristotle said in a cold voice that chilled everyone in the room.

"You can't." Gideon said in a whisper as he fell into his chair.

"I did." Aristotle said firmly.

Cherub looked at his grandfather, holding back his own comments.

"If you'll be willing to listen, your son can tell you under what terms you can continue to receive your monthly allowance." Aristotle said and smiled at Cherub to take over.

"Thank you Grandfather." Cherub said as he shifted to hold Chuffery more comfortably.

"I understand that you signed your parental rights over to Grandfather in exchange for a monthly allowance. I'm willing to make that same deal with you in regard to Chuffery. Sign over custody and agree to have no contact with him and your money will continue without interruption." Cherub said in a strictly business tone of voice.

"Sign over custody to who? You're too young and he's too old." Gideon said, grasping at any idea to make the situation other than what it was.

"Does it matter? You'd sign him over to Voldemort for the right number of galleons. The terms of this agreement are not negotiable. You are free to take Chuffery and walk out that door right now, but realize that when you do, you won't have a home to return to because I own that. You won't have access to your vault, because I own that too." Cherub said firmly.

Gideon stared at Cherub in shock.

"I will have your answer now or the offer will be withdrawn." Cherub said coldly as he rubbed Chuffery's back.

"I'll do it." Gideon said in a low, defeated voice.

"Good. As you pointed out, I am underage so any contract that I make with you isn't legally binding. Mr. Klegg will see to preparing one that is." Cherub said forcefully then turned to Mr. Klegg and asked, "How long will it take to prepare the contract?"

"It will be ready in less than two hours." Mr. Klegg said in a professional voice.

"In two hours you will return here and sign the contract. After that business is concluded, I can think of no reason you should have to contact me or my brother again. But if for some reason you do need to contact one of us, you may contact Mr. Klegg and if he deems it a valid reason, he will forward your request for contact to me." Cherub said firmly, then paused for effect.

"We're done, you may leave." Cherub said with an icy voice.

Gideon looked at everyone in the room. Then stood on shaking legs and walked to the door.

With one last look at his father and sons, he left the room.

* * * * *

Aristotle Nightshade looked at his grandson with boundless pride.

"Are you doing okay Chuffery?" Cherub asked with concern.

"My tummy is hungry." Chuffery said in a small voice.

"I think my tummy could do with some food too. Let's ask Grandfather where a good place is to eat around here." Cherub said with a smile in his voice.

Aristotle blinked and said, "Yes, of course. I'm sure all of us could use a good meal. I'll ask Gwendylfarb to get us a table at Madame Chinchbug's. She serves the most delightful variety of dishes from around the world."

"What would you like to eat Chuffery?" Cherub asked quietly.

Chuffery looked at Cherub with confusion.

"Do you have a favorite food?" Cherub tried again.

Chuffery nodded shyly.

"Will you tell me?" Cherub coaxed with a gentle smile.

Chuffery scooted to Cherub's ear and whispered, "I like basketti."

Cherub smiled and asked, "Do you know if Madame Chinchbug's has spaghetti?"

"My boy, if one of her best customers asks for it, she will." Aristotle said with a grand smile.

"Good. Make sure she has enough for two, I'm going to eat spaghetti with my brother." Cherub said as he hugged Chuffery tightly.

"Excuse me, but have you considered who you would like to be Chuffery's guardian?" Mr. Klegg asked carefully.

"Yes, you'd better get out your clipboard." Cherub said as he snuggled Chuffery again.

Mr. Klegg picked up his clipboard and nodded to indicate that he was ready.

"My first choice for guardian for Chuffery is Professor Severus Snape. He is one of the few people I can say that I completely trust. If his duties permit, he would be welcomed at Dour Oaks to discuss the matter anytime this weekend. Also, I would like for you to contact Headmaster Dumbledore and ask if Mr. Harry Potter and Mr. Draconis Malfoy would be allowed to join me at Dour Oaks for the weekend. If he approves, see that an invitation is extended to them and suitable transportation is waiting when they are ready to depart... and tell them to bring their brooms. Chuffrey's things will need to be collected from his old home and transported to Dour Oaks. I'd like him to have my old bedroom and I'll have the master bedroom. Also, I left my suitcase in my father's carriage, please see that it is retrieved and forwarded to Dour Oaks." Cherub said in thought.

"Right away sir." Mr. Klegg said seriously as he stood.

"Thank you Mr. Klegg." Cherub said with a smile.

"Gwendylfarb has made the reservations and made sure that two orders of spaghetti will be available for my grandsons." Aristotle said in a happy voice.

"Thank you Grandfather. Thank you for everything." Cherub said with a contented smile as he coaxed his brother to stand.

"You carry me?" Chuffery asked quietly.

"I'm sorry Chuffery, I'm only two years older than you. I don't think I can." Cherub said with apology.

Chuffery nodded and started shuffling toward the door.

Cherub felt his heart ache at having to deny his brother such a simple request for affection.

In a flash of insight, Cherub said "I know how I can do it! Come back here Chuffery."

Chuffery turned around with excitement.

Cherub made a few gestures in front of Chuffery while concentrating on the words of the Leviosa Spell, then picked Chuffery up easily.

"Albus said you were quite powerful. He mentioned something about an impressive Camborie Cambolis Spell that you were able to use while under attack." Aristotle said as he stood with difficulty and slowly made his way to the door.

Cherub smiled and said, "That day I realized just how much I still need to learn. Camborie Cambolis is one of a few spells that I know without hesitation. If I had had even a moments hesitation that day you would be talking to a duck right now."

"It's good to hear that you understand the importance of learning and practice. Too many glide their way through their studies thinking the objective is scoring well on the next exam. They don't see that the most important thing is to learn. Properly used, exams are a method of determining what areas need to be covered more fully for the ultimate purpose of learning." Aristotle said as he led the way through the labyrinth of hallways.

"But for some, exam scores are the only motivation they have for learning anything at all. At Hogwarts the Gryffindors are extremely competitive. Without exam scores, they wouldn't see a purpose. The Slytherin have the opposite problem. We tend to focus on the learning to the point that we study beyond the scope of the assignment. When we take the exams, we overthink the questions and end up doing more poorly than we would have without studying at all." Cherub said with a smile.

"You seem to have devoted much thought to the subject." Aristotle noted.

"My friends and I discussed it earlier this week. Harry is both a Gryffindor and a Slytherin so he has a unique viewpoint that gets us into a lot of detailed discussions. Eldon, another friend called Harry and I a half-pint philosopher and lawyer." Cherub said with a chuckle.

"After seeing the way you conduct business, I must agree with your friend. It pleases me to know that you have friends who provoke thought and discussion. I assume your friends are of the upper social class?" Aristotle asked curiously.

"They are. I wouldn't refuse a friendship based on class. But for whatever reason, we of the upper social strata seem to be drawn together." Cherub said in thought as they exited the building.

"So seems the natural order of things. People who complain about the upper classes being unwilling to accept the lower classes don't understand that people tend to gravitate to what is familiar. When you've been raised with old money, you feel a kinship with others who were raised with those same values." Aristotle said as he preceded Cherub and Chuffery into the carriage.

"I'm sorry Grandfather, but I don't entirely agree. My friend Harry Potter comes from a proud old family, but his parents were killed..."

"...I'm familiar with the story. Most tragic." Aristotle said with a nod.

"Yes. But he was raised by muggle relatives who had a hatred of anything to do with magic. He didn't know anything about magic or the wizarding world until he received his Hogwarts letter." Cherub said seriously.

"Do tell." Aristotle said with interest.

"Harry and I are as comfortable together as Draco and I. We were raised differently and yet feel that kinship you were talking about. The only thing we've been able to come up with is

old bloodlines. It's the only thing all of us have in common, not just us three, but the seven of us who are friends." Cherub said in a considering voice.

"You may be right my boy. My friends and I grew up in a different time. All of us were children of privilege in an age when etiquette and protocol ruled every nuance of your life. All of us had identical upbringings because that was just the way it was done in those days." Aristotle said in a distant voice.

"I think we're here." Cherub said as he looked out the carriage window.

"Oh, yes, I do drift away at times." Aristotle said with a chuckle.

"Are you okay Chuffery?" Cherub asked as he lifted Chuffery out of the carriage.

"m'scared." Chuffery said in barely a whisper.

"What are you scared of buddy?" Cherub asked with immediate concern.

"That stuff you said to daddy." Chuffery said quietly.

"Come on in the restaurant and tell me about it." Cherub said in a soothing voice.

"A problem?" Aristotle asked curiously.

"I think he realizes what just happened with father. I'm going to try and explain it to him." Cherub said as he walked beside his grandfather.

"Bon jour Madeline." Aristotle said in a smooth voice to a well dressed woman just inside the door.

"Ari, you're looking as good as ever. Who is this you have with you?" Madeline asked, letting her gaze linger on Cherub's wings for a moment.

"These are my grandsons Cherub and Chuffery." Aristotle said with pride in his voice.

"What fine young men. Well, no need for you to be standing in the doorway, follow me, Gwendylfarb made sure to get you a private table so you wouldn't be disturbed." Madeline said and led them through a doorway to a small dining room with two tables.

"Your meals have already been ordered, so just sit back and enjoy. Marissa will be just outside the door if you need anything." Madeline said and rushed out of the room.

"I knew Madeline's mother... I think I may have changed Madeline's diaper." Aristotle said in thought.

Cherub smiled, then turned his attention to Chuffery who was in his lap.

"When I go home tonight, I'm going to take you with me. Is that okay with you little brother?" Cherub asked carefully.

"Did Daddy sell me to you?" Chuffery asked in a shaky voice.

Cherub tried to think of a way to answer the question honestly that wouldn't destroy his brother.

"Grandfather Nightshade and I thought it would be a good thing for you to live with me. Giving our father money made it so he would let you." Cherub said uncertainly.

Chuffery considered Cherub's words then asked, "Is Nana going to live with you too?"

Cherub smiled and said, "No Chuffery, you're old enough now that you don't need a Nana anymore. You're going to have someone a whole lot better than a Nana."

Chuffery pulled back to look at Cherub's whole face before asking, "Who's better than a Nana?"

"His name is James and he's a valet. What that means is that he's there to help you when you need it, but he lets you do things for yourself too." Cherub said carefully.

Chuffery looked at Cherub curiously.

"When James was my valet, he would ask me if I wanted him to run my bath water. If I said yes, he would go do it for me, but if I said no, I could go do it myself when I was ready to. He also showed me how to tie my own tie and a bunch of other things." Cherub explained.

Chuffery got a look of dawning comprehension followed by a smile.

"You're going to grow up little brother, and I'm going to do whatever I can to make it fun for you." Cherub promised as he hugged Chuffery tightly.

Aristotle watched his grandsons with love and pride. After a lifetime of mistakes and regrets, he found his redemption in the most unlikely place.

Chapter 8

"Nana always cuts it up." Chuffery said as he looked at his plate of spaghetti.

"Well if you want to cut it up that's fine. But if you don't that's fine too." Cherub said quietly.

Chuffery reached for his spaghetti with his fork, then pulled it back suddenly.

"What if I make a mess?" Chuffery asked in panic.

Cherub smiled and said, "Let me show you how I do it."

Very slowly and carefully, Cherub demonstrated winding a single strand of spaghetti onto his fork.

"Do you think you can do that?" Cherub asked with a smile.

Chuffery picked up his fork and was finally able to catch a single spaghetti noodle. With painstaking effort, he wound the spaghetti until it was all on his fork.

"Now eat it." Cherub said and demonstrated by taking a bite.

Chuffery followed his brother's example and was soon happily chewing his spaghetti.

"You're very good with him. I dare say now that I've seen you in action, I can't help but believe that you'll be able to raise him into a fine young man." Aristotle said happily then took a small bite of his own spaghetti.

"Thank you Grandfather. I honestly believed that my own childhood was one of the worst things that could be done to a person, but after talking with Harry and Draco, I realize that we each have our own challenges to face and overcome. I look at Chuffery and see what he has to overcome and I have to do whatever I can to help him." Cherub said as he kept his gaze on Chuffery who was becoming more confident in his spaghetti eating abilities.

"He's making a mess." Aristotle said in comment, not upset by it at all.

"I'll give him a whole pot of sauce to play in if it will keep that smile on his face." Cherub said tenderly.

Chuffery looked up to see his grandfather and brother watching him.

"You have some sauce on your chin." Cherub said gently.

Chuffery had a look of terror at the statement, as if he expected to be severely scolded.

"Calm down Chuffery, that's why you have a napkin, just wipe it off." Cherub said quickly, concerned by his brother's drastic reaction.

Chuffery picked the napkin up from his lap and stared at it.

"Watch me." Cherub said seriously.

Chuffery turned his undivided attention to his brother.

Cherub dipped two of his fingers in the sauce on his plate and put a big smudge of sauce diagonally across his mouth and chin.

"Do I have some sauce on my face?" Cherub asked Chuffery seriously.

Chuffery giggled and nodded.

"Then here's how I fix it." Cherub said and made a show of wiping his mouth and chin clean.

"Can you do that?" Cherub asked hopefully.

Chuffery nodded, then proceeded to wipe his mouth and chin thoroughly.

"Now you look as good as new." Cherub said with a smile.

"What's on your face?" Chuffery asked as he pointed.

"You mean my scar?" Cherub asked curiously.

Chuffery looked at Cherub in confusion, not understanding the word.

"I guess I was hurt a long time ago and it left a mark. I don't know what happened." Cherub said and looked at his grandfather in question.

"After your birth, your mother was quite mad. She would transfigure herself into all manner of creatures and terrorized the members of the house. The mark on your cheek is from the one and only time she ever found you. I believe she was some form of cat when she did that. After that attack, you were moved to Dour Oaks." Aristotle said as he drifted off in thought.

"Why didn't Father have her sent to a mental hospital where she could get some help?" Cherub asked with concern.

"Because 'the prick' believed that it would bring shame to the family name. He thought that given time she would return to normal. It seemed to work for a time, but when she became pregnant with Chuffery... well I told you about that. It's hard to say if a mental hospital would have helped, but it certainly would have been preferable to doing nothing." Aristotle said distantly.

"So Father sacrificed Mother's sanity in favor of the family pride?" Cherub asked in confirmation.

"Yes. 'The prick' was always quite good about pointing out how others failures would make the family look bad. He just didn't seem to notice that his own behavior was worse by far." Aristotle said sadly.

"I'm just curious. Does father have any concept of 'shame' or 'regret'?" Cherub asked in honest curiosity.

Grandfather Nightshade smiled at the question and said, "No my boy. He doesn't. I didn't realize that until he was well into adulthood. You've made quite an astute observation given your limited exposure."

Cherub gave a slight smile as he said, "I've had quite a few years to formulate different theories about why my parents hated me. I never guessed about mother's insanity, but the possibility that father might be a prick did occur to me."

"Trust me, I've dwelt on the question of your father for many years. You have your life ahead of you and your brother to watch after. Focus on those with a future, your father has no desire to become anything better than what he is." Aristotle said with regret.

Cherub looked over at Chuffery who now had a full beard of spaghetti sauce framing a glowing smile.

"I think this is a two napkin job." Cherub said and noticed a napkin at the second table. With a gesture and a thought, the napkin flew to his waiting hand.

Chuffery looked at Cherub in awe.

"What?" Cherub asked, wondering 'what now?'.

"You done magics like Nana." Chuffery said in amazement.

"Of course. Haven't you ever seen anyone but Nana do magic before?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery shook his head, which slung little spatters of spaghetti sauce in all directions.

"Hold still a second." Cherub said and began to wipe Chuffery's face.

"Leave that to me Cherub." Aristotle said with humor in his voice.

Cherub pulled back and saw the smeared mess of sauce nearly from one ear to the other on Chuffery's smiling face.

Grandfather Nightshade pulled an old wand out of his robes and pointed it at Chuffery.

After a few mumbled words, the spaghetti sauce disappeared.

Cherub looked from Chuffery's clean face to his grandfather in question.

"When you have children, there are certain spells you need. Remind me and I'll show them to you after dinner." Grandfather Nightshade said as he put his wand away.

"I would like that, thank you Grandfather." Cherub said with respect.

"Granpa done magics too!" Chuffery said as he felt his face.

"That's right Chuffery, we are wizards, just like you're going to be." Cherub said with a smile.

Chuffery looked at Cherub with disbelieving eyes.

Cherub thought for a second, then got a smile and pulled his wand out of his pocket and said, "Watch what I'm about to do."

Chuffery focused all his 9-year-old attention on Cherub.

Cherub waived his wand at a napkin on the neighboring table and said, "Denfizia Mariposa."

Chuffery squealed in delight as a butterfly fluttered out of the napkin.

"Now you try it." Cherub said and handed his wand to Chuffery, handle first.

Chuffery stared at the wand in his hand, then at his brother.

"The words are 'Denfizia Mariposa', just point the wand at that napkin and say them." Cherub said seriously.

Chuffery pointed the wand and said, "Den... Den..."

"Denfizia Mariposa." Cherub whispered carefully.

Chuffery waived his wand much as Cherub had done and said, "Denfizia Mariposa."

A butterfly emerged from the napkin and began to happily flutter around the room as Chuffery followed it's every move.

"You did that Chuffery. You just used magic of your very own. Maybe we can stop by Olivander's and get you your own wand on the way home tonight?" Cherub said with hope.

"If you wouldn't mind, I would be honored to buy you your first wand." Grandfather Nightshade said with a peaceful smile.

"What do you say Chuffery? Would you like Grandfather Nightshade to buy you your very own wand?" Cherub asked happily.

Chuffery nodded ecstatically.

"Let's finish this meal so we can be on our way. Olivander's isn't open all night you know." Grandfather Nightshade said seriously.

"I'm done." Cherub said and laid his napkin on his plate.

Chuffery copied Cherub's action and said, "I'm done."

Grandfather Nightshade smiled at the two boys and said, "I suppose my meal is finished as well."

Cherub and Chuffery watched their grandfather expectantly.

Aristotle looked at the boys curiously, then realized what they were waiting for.

"I'm done." Grandfather said and put his napkin on his plate.

Chuffery hopped off his chair and was bouncing with anticipation.

"May I have my wand back Chuffery?" Cherub asked quietly, not wanting to sound harsh.

"Can I do it again? Pleeeeeeeeeease?" Chuffery begged.

"No Chuffery, you may not." Cherub said firmly and held out his hand.

Reluctantly Chuffery handed over the wand.

"But in just a few minutes we're going to buy you your own wand and you'll be able to use it whenever you want." Cherub continued.

Chuffery looked at Cherub, then his Grandfather to find them both nodding.

Chuffery hugged Cherub tightly, not knowing how else to show his gratitude.

* * * * *

"Aristotle? Oh dear me. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this evening?" The shopkeeper asked in shock.

"It's good to see you again Olivander, it's been too many years. I've come to get my grandson his first wand." Aristotle said with a gentle smile.

"Oh my yes. A fine looking young man..." Olivander trailed off as he looked at Cherub curiously, then asked, "Weren't you in about a month ago?"

"Yes sir... I looked a little different then." Cherub said shyly.

"Of course! I remember you now. I sold you a muggle wand." Olivander said with a smile.

"A muggle wand?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"Yes, yes. Most wands are enchanted to act as a channel for a wizards power, sort of a control or focal point. Your wand does nothing. It is just for show. You don't need it, but since Hogwart's requires you to have one, you have it as a prop." Olivander said in a lecturing tone.

"But why do you call it a muggle wand?" Cherub asked curiously as he pulled out his wand to look at it.

"Because it has no magic. It hasn't been enchanted in any way. What you have there is simply a wooden stick. " Olivander said seriously.

"But Chuffery was able to use it to do magic." Cherub said seriously.

Olivander looked carefully to the slightly younger boy clung to Cherub's side.

"He certainly is your brother. Aristotle, your grandsons are quite special. They carry the raw talent that their father could never harness and the exact control of their mother. I should think they could be capable of great things given the proper upbringing." Olivander said with eyes that seemed to look into their souls.

"Olivander, my time on this plane of existence is nearly done. Cherub has volunteered to see to the needs of his brother. It is my hope his guidance will be enough to allow Chuffery to reach his full potential." Aristotle said seriously.

Olivander got a sad look in his eyes as he looked at Aristotle, then he said, "Let me get something to give your grandson a head start. I won't be a moment."

Cherub shifted Chuffery around so that he could give him a proper hug and asked, "Did you hear what Olivander said? You're going to be a big strong wizard when you grow up."

"Like you?" Chuffery asked from the hug.

"I'll be right there with you Chuffery. I'll become a great wizard so I can show you how it's done." Cherub said peacefully.

"Here we are. Chuffery was it?" Olivander asked as he removed a wand from a dust covered box.

Chuffery disentangled himself from Cherub and walked to stand before Olivander.

"Try this. Just give it a waive." Olivander said gently as he presented the wand, handle first to Chuffery.

Chuffery took the wand and waived it as he had waived Cherub's in the restaurant.

"Quite a nice technique." Olivander said as he looked at Chuffery consideringly.

"What's the 'denny' words so I can make a butterfly?" Chuffery asked Cherub hopefully.

"Denfizia Mariposa." Cherub said quietly, enjoying the fact that his brother was wanting to do something without being told.

"Denfizia Mariposa!" Chuffery said happily and waived his wand at a display stand beside the counter.

A burst of two dozen butterflies of all different colors fluttered up from the stand and swirled through the air.

"Now say 'Magico Quellum'." Olivander instructed with a smile.

Chuffery waived his wand and happily said, "Magico Quellum!"

All the butterflies vanished with little winks of light.

"The enchantment on this wand somewhat limits his magic and allows any spell he casts to be undone with that one magical phrase. When he has learned sufficient control, you can bring him back by and I'll give him a wand suited to his ultimate potential." Olivander said happily.

"Is there nothing for my grandson Cherub? The boy should have a proper wand." Aristotle said seriously.

Olivander looked at Cherub in thought and said, "Perhaps. This may take a few moments. I'm not entirely sure where I put it."

"Chuffery, when we get home I'll show you a few spells that you can do to practice with your wand. For now you may use the 'Denfizia Mariposa' to get used to it." Cherub said with a gentle smile at his brother's excitement.

* * * * *

By the time Olivander returned to the front of his shop, it was infested with every manner of butterfly known to be.

Olivander chuckled at the sight and said, "It warms my heart to see the young take such delight in magic. Too soon we forget to enjoy the wonder and beauty of it."

"Quite right." Aristotle said warmly.

"Young Mr. Nightshade. Try this wand to see if it suits you." Olivander said and held the wand for Cherub to take the handle.

"It's heavy." Cherub commented.

"Give it a try." Olivander said anxiously.

"Luminae Aurora." Cherub said calmly and made a swirly motion with his wand.

A fountain of sparkles erupted before him, exploding outward in slow motion.

"That's pretty!" Chuffery exclaimed with wide-eyed wonder.

"Remind me when we get home and I'll show you how to do it yourself." Cherub said with a smile.

"Does the wand feel comfortable?" Olivander asked seriously.

"Fine. I can feel the enchantment, what does it do?" Cherub asked curiously.

"Hand the wand to your grandfather." Olivander said with a smile.

Cherub did as instructed.

"Aristotle, go ahead and use Cherub's wand." Olivander said with a smile of anticipation.

"Fengrem..." Grandfather Nightshade began to say when the wand disappeared.

Cherub felt in his pocket to find the wand there waiting for him.

"Good, good. It likes you." Olivander said with approval.

"Likes me?" Cherub asked carefully.

"This wand has more than an enchantment. It has a consciousness. Since it likes you, it will help you. It won't allow anyone else to use it and if misplaced, will return to you of its own will." Olivander said happily.

"Can it talk?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"I shouldn't think so. But anything is possible. Your wand can enhance your spells, refine your aim and in certain circumstances, provide defense against offensive magics used against you." Olivander said in a proud voice.

"Is it something like the enchantment of the Hogwart's sorting hat?" Cherub asked curiously as he looked at the wand.

Olivander thought about the question and said, "I suppose you could say they are brothers. Similar enchantments with different purposes."

"Speaking of brothers, I should be getting mine home soon." Cherub said with a smile.

"Do you remember the words to undo the butterfly spell?" Cherub asked Chuffery carefully.

"Magico Quellum!" Chuffery said abruptly and shook his wand like an eraser at the butterflies. In a wink all the butterflies vanished.

"Lovely. Just lovely." Olivander said in appreciation.

"Put it on the Nightshade account my friend, we must be going." Aristotle said in a tired voice.

"Yes, of course Aristotle. May your journey ahead bring you wonders and delights." Olivander said gently.

"Yes, yes. May yours as well." Aristotle said and moved to the exit.

"Thank you Mr. Olivander. My new wand is great, here, you can have your stick back." Cherub said and handed Olivander his original wand.

"Thank you young Mr. Nightshade. Take care of that wand. It should be the last one you'll ever need." Olivander said with a gentle smile.

Chuffery followed Cherub to the doorway when Cherub stopped him.

"Do you like your new wand?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery nodded happily.

"Then it would be proper for you to thank Mr. Olivander for taking the time to find you a good one." Cherub said patiently.

Chuffery turned around shyly and said, "Thank you Mr. Olivander. I like my wand a lot."

"You're very welcome Chuffery. Come and see me again when you get your Hogwart's letter and I'll set you up with one more like your brother's." Olivander said with a smile.

Chuffery nodded and turned to join his brother at the door.

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Cherub got into the carriage and noticed his Grandfather's sullen expression.

"Is there a problem Grandfather?" Cherub asked in concern and he automatically put an arm around his brother.

"No my boy. I just have something to say before you travel on to your home." Aristotle said, trying to put cheer into his voice.

Cherub glanced to see Chuffery examining his new wand.

"I summoned you today because I can feel my spirit growing restless, ready to move on. It had been my hope that I could resist the pull of the next life until you were a bit older, but it was not meant to be." Aristotle said in a distant voice.

"I just met you Grandfather, I don't want you to go." Cherub said with tears in his eyes.

"I know my child. But we cannot change what is to be. Andrew knows of my wishes when I move on. There will be no ceremony or memorial. Anyone who wanted to pay respects to me

has had nearly a hundred years to do so. Just know that you have made me very proud and given me hope for the family I've devoted my life to protecting. You've filled my last hours with peace and love. It's more than I could have hoped for, more than I dreamed. When I leave this carriage, I shan't be seeing you again. Hold the memory of this day as the wonderful thing it is. I shall carry it with me into the next life and cherish it as my most valuable treasure... Eating spaghetti with my grandsons..." Aristotle trailed off with a gentle chuckle.

"I promise Grandfather. I'll see that the family is taken care of." Cherub said seriously.

"Chuffery is your only family now. Leave the rest to face what comes on their own. My meddling in their affairs over the years in an attempt to correct my mistakes has caused far more harm than good. Perhaps letting things progress without interference may yet allow one of them to awaken from the superficial existence they have become trapped in and strive to be something more. Perhaps not." Aristotle said gravely.

The carriage came to a stop outside a grand mansion.

"One last thing Cherub, perhaps the most important thing." Aristotle said seriously.

Cherub looked his grandfather in the eyes, devoting his full attention.

"I know you've carried the hurt about your father, and you've every right. You may feel cheated by him, cheated of your childhood and cheated of the love that every child deserves. But it's done and past. Don't let it consume you. Consider this my final wish and final words of advice to you. The best revenge is to live well." Aristotle said firmly.

"I'll remember Grandfather. I love you." Cherub said, tears now freely falling down his cheeks.

"I love you too my boy, both of you." Aristotle said and soon had his arms filled with both his grandsons.

"I love you granpa." Chuffery whimpered.

"Listen to your brother Chuffery. If you do as he says, you'll have a happy life." Aristotle said with a smile.

Chuffery nodded into his grandfather's chest.

"Now off with you. The two of you have a new life to begin." Aristotle said firmly as he sat his grandsons aside and exited the carriage.

Cherub watched his grandfather slowly walk to the front doors of the grand mansion to be greeted by one of the household staff.

"Goodbye." Cherub whispered as the carriage pulled away.

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"Yes?" Millicent said cautiously as she answered the door.

"Hello Millicent. I forgot that I've changed a little since I left, I'm Cherub."

Millicent looked at him carefully, then a smile came over her face.

"Master Choab, it's good to see you. You look wonderful." Millicent said and hugged him.

"I prefer to be called Cherub now."

"Oh, of course." Millicent said and straightened, a little ashamed by the display of emotion.

"Millicent, I'd like you to meet my brother, Chuffery." Cherub said and pulled Chuffery from behind him where he'd been hiding.

"Your brother? Master Cho... Cherub, what a wonderful surprise!" She said with a grand smile.

"I think so too. I'm going to take Chuffery into the sitting room. Would you and James join us?" Cherub asked gently.

"Yes, right away." Millicent said happily.

"Come along Chuffery. I want to show you your new home." Cherub said as he took his brother's hand.

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Chuffery sat silently in the sitting room, looking at all the unfamiliar things around him.

"Master Choab?" James asked cautiously from the doorway.

"It's me James. Please call me Cherub. Come in." Cherub said gently.

James walked in, looking curiously at Cherub and Chuffery.

"James, I'd like you to meet my brother Chuffery. Chuffery, this is my friend James." Cherub said peacefully.

Chuffery and James shared equal looks of wonder at each other.

Millicent walked into the room and stood beside James, awaiting Cherub's instructions.

"Both of you, please sit down." Cherub said and indicated the comfortable chairs opposite the couch he was sitting on.

James and Millicent cautiously took their seats and waited.

"Quite a few things have happened today, too many to tell honestly so I'll just tell you the end result." Cherub began.

"Grandfather Nightshade transferred all the family property and holdings into my name today. My father is no longer welcomed at Dour Oaks and has no authority over me or my brother." Cherub said carefully.

"It was my decision to retire Mrs. Puckett. Although she might have been able to manage a while longer, there was no reason she should have to. She will be well taken care of and it is my hope that she will enjoy her new found freedom." Cherub said seriously.

"Millicent, if you would be willing to accept, I would very much like for you to have the responsibility of the Head of Household position. Should you choose to take it, you would receive a substantial increase in salary and have the authority to hire whatever help you feel is appropriate, which includes the hiring of house elves if you like." Cherub finished in a businesslike tone.

Millicent blinked in astonishment, then said, "Yes... yes, thank you."

"Good. Mr. Klegg will get with you about the particulars sometime soon. If you have any concern about the salary or anything else, just let me know and I'll see to it." Cherub said firmly.

"Yes sir." Millicent said automatically.

Cherub smiled at being called sir, then turned his attention to James.

"I am aware that you were intending to leave Dour Oaks with Catty after I left for Hogwart's. If that's still your intention, you may go with my blessings and best wishes. But circumstances have changed since I left and I hope you'll consider staying on." Cherub said seriously.

James sat with rapt attention.

"Chuffery has need of guidance and supervision. I can think of no one better to provide those things than you James. I will be attending Hogwart's and not be here to see after him myself, as much as I would like to. If you'll be willing to be Chuffery's valet, I'll authorize a 5,000 galleon bonus and a substantial increase in your current wage." Cherub finished with a smile.

"Oy! That's more than 'alf my wage last year!" James yelled in surprise.

"You're worth it James, and quite a bit more. Should you and Catty decide to get married, the guest cottage will be yours for as long as you want it. Please consider the offer carefully and speak with Catty about it if you'd like. I don't want you to feel pressured into anything." Cherub said seriously.

"Begging your pardon Master Choab... Cherub. But I am a wizard who can do little more than a basic spell and my education is barely adequate. There aren't many opportunities for someone like me. I don't need to speak with Catty about this, I'd be daft to pass on this and I know she'll agree with me." James said honestly.

"You have something far more powerful than magic or education James, you have a good and caring nature. Without you in my life I doubt I would have been able to enjoy the friendships I have developed at Hogwart's or been worthy of the trust my Grandfather has placed in me. You have my greatest respect and admiration. Please discuss it with Catty and let me know of your decision tomorrow." Cherub said gently.

"Yes Master Cherub." James said with pride in his voice.

"Now on to other matters. Chuffery will be living here now. I have instructed that his belongings be brought here and that he is to have my old bedroom. My things are to be moved into the master bedroom." Cherub said seriously.

"When the things arrive, I'll see to it." Millicent said immediately.

"Thank you Millicent. I have also invited two friends to stay with us over the weekend. And one of my Professors may be stopping in. I don't know that he will be able to stay the night, but please have rooms prepared for all three just in case." Cherub said in thought.

Millicent nodded seriously.

"Let Catty know about the additional guests so she can prepare enough food, and ask her to get in the necessary ingredients to make spaghetti. It's Chuffery's favorite food and I'd like for him to be able to have it when he wants." Cherub said and squeezed his brother's shoulder.

"Yes sir." Millicent said immediately.

"Arrange for a tutor, Mr. Higgenbottom if he's available, to come and see to Chuffery's studies beginning next week. I'd like for him to have the advantage of a good education by the time he's ready to attend Hogwart's." Cherub said in thought.

Millicent nodded again.

"James, for the time being, I'd like you to instruct Chuffery in the use of magic. When he's progressed beyond what you're comfortable teaching him, find a tutor who can help him. Perhaps Mr. Higgenbottom could suggest someone." Cherub said with a smile.

"Yes sir." James said warmly.

"Chuffery, would you like to show James and Millicent your butterfly spell?" Cherub asked his brother quietly.

"I forgot the words." Chuffery said with a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"Denfizia Mariposa." Cherub whispered, making sure to draw out the words to emphasize the correct pronunciation.

Chuffery waived his wand at the floral centerpiece on the coffee table and said, "Denfizia Mariposa."

A flurry of butterflies erupted from the centerpiece and began to fly around the room.

Millicent and James watched the beautiful sight with grand smiles.

"Very well done Chuffery. Do you remember how to undo the spell?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery nodded.

"Go ahead." Cherub prompted.

"Magico Quellum." Chuffery said with a smile and waived his wand like a practiced wizard. All the butterflies vanished in twinkles and sparkles.

"Very well done Chuffery. What a beautiful spell. You'll have to show me how to do it." James said with a smile.

Chuffery looked at James in wonder.

"James knows quite a few spells that I know you'll like, but I learned that one at Hogwart's... actually, it was a spell someone used against me, but he was trying to do something else." Cherub explained.

"Defensia Oriposa." Millicent said with a nod.

"What does it do?" Cherub asked with interest.

"It temporarily blocks one's ability to use magic. It leaves one defenseless against another's spells." Millicent said seriously.

"How awful. You say this was cast against you? Are you having trouble at Hogwart's Master Cherub?" James asked with concern.

"No James. The student who cast it against me was expelled. All he managed to do was make me cough up a butterfly. It was actually quite funny." Cherub said with a smile.

"Please be careful Master Cherub. You're very dear to us and we'd hate to see anything bad happen to you." Millicent said seriously.

"Thank you both. I have a group of good friends who watch out for me. We all take care of each other." Cherub said peacefully.

"I'm so glad to hear that. I was concerned for you, knowing that you never had the chance to play with other children." James said quietly.

"I was concerned too James. But most of my friends grew up the same way. It's part of what forms our bond of friendship." Cherub said with a smile.

A chime from the entry hall drew everyone's attention.

"I'll see to that." Millicent said and hurried from the room.

A moment later Millicent returned and said, "A group of men with Master Chuffery's belongings are here. They said that they were instructed to move the current contents of the room, then bring in the new contents. Then they'll pack Mrs. Puckett's belongings and take them away."

"Would you see to it Millicent? James and I are going to show Chuffery around the house." Cherub asked kindly.

"Yes Master Cherub." Millicent said happily.

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James led the way as Chuffery and Cherub followed.

Chuffery watched and listened as James conducted a tour, explaining the function of the different rooms and pointing out the features of each room as they passed through.

Cherub let his mind drift during the tour, just enjoying the look of wonder and excitement on Chuffery's face as he experienced each new thing.

"The young Master's room is prepared." Millicent said to the group who were just leaving the owlery.

"Do you want to see your room Chuffery?" James asked with a gentle voice.

Chuffery nodded happily.

The group went upstairs and entered the room that had been Cherub's only two weeks earlier.

Cherub reflected on the fact that it seemed like a lifetime ago that he had been in there.

Chuffery let go of Cherub's hand and ran to a box of toys located under the window.

"Your brother seems to be a wonderful boy." James said quietly.

"He is. But he's going to need a lot of attention. When I met him, he was afraid to speak or move without permission. I don't think he's ever been allowed to do anything for himself or make any decisions." Cherub said in a matching quiet tone.

"I noticed that he's unusually still and quiet." James said with concern.

"I trust that you'll be able to get him past that. Just be the example of a good person that you always were for me and I'm sure he'll be fine." Cherub said with a smile.

"You've changed so much. Not just your look, but you. When you left I was concerned that you would follow the dark path... you seemed so... angry." James said with difficulty.

"I was. I was looking at the world through a child's eyes and seeing myself at the center of everything. When I arrived at Hogwarts I met some good people who helped me to see that the world is a bigger place than I realized. Thanks to your example, I was able to care about others and find that my place in the world is what I make it to be. Not the center and not on the outside looking in, but participating and living in it." Cherub said in an introspective voice.

"I did that?" James asked in wonder.

"Yes, that and much more." Cherub said with a smile.

"Master Cherub, Mr. Klegg is on the floo in the sitting room." Millicent called from the doorway.

"Will you stay with Chuffery?" Cherub asked carefully.

"My pleasure." James said tenderly as he watched Chuffery going through his box of toys.

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"What can I do for you Mr. Klegg?" Cherub asked as he took the seat before the fireplace.

"Good evening Mr. Nightshade, I just wanted to brief you on the matters we discussed earlier.

"Please call me Cherub."

"If you will call me Andrew."

"Agreed. What news do you have for me Andrew?" Cherub asked casually.

"Your father signed the contract. Mrs. Puckett will be staying in a hotel tonight, and leaving for the South of France in the morning to approve the house we've selected for her. I'm sure you're aware of the arrival of the belongings of your brother and your suitcase. Professor Snape graciously accepted your invitation to discuss Chuffery's guardianship and said he would come to Dour Oaks to meet with you on Sunday. Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy accepted your invitation for the weekend and will arrive mid-morning tomorrow... and have requested to bring another guest." Andrew finished with a note of apprehension.

"Did they say who?" Cherub asked curiously.

"A Miss Granger. They were insistent that they would not be able to attend without her. I took the liberty of extending the invitation to her, but I can withdraw it if you would rather." Andrew finished quickly, the concern evident in his voice.

"No. I don't mind her coming, I'm just surprised. Is there anything else?" Cherub asked, sensing that Andrew was holding something back.

"I'm afraid so. Your Grandfather's health has taken a serious turn. I'm afraid he's not expected to survive the night." Andrew said gravely.

"He knew it was coming Andrew. Please try to be happy for him, he was able to find his peace and is looking forward to moving on to his next adventure." Cherub said calmly.

Andrew's face in the fire looked at Cherub with astonishment, then said, "You just said nearly word for word what he told me when I last spoke to him."

"That's because I understand. His work here is done, he's ready to go, let our best wishes go with him." Cherub said serenely.

Andrew nodded and said, "Cherub, if you ever want to talk about him, I'm here for you. I've known Aristotle for nearly forty years and I'd be glad to share some of his stories with you."

Cherub smiled and said, "I think I'd like that Andrew. I can't think of any better way of honoring Grandfather's memory. Please come to Dour Oaks some weekend when we can sit and talk as friends."

"I'll do that Cherub. Take care of your brother and try to enjoy your weekend." Andrew said weakly.

"You too Andrew." Cherub said quietly.

Goodbyes were exchanged and the fire returned to its normal glow.

Cherub remained sitting and stared into the flames, letting his thoughts wander.

* * * * *

"Master Cherub?" James asked from the sitting room doorway.

"Yes James?" Cherub asked as he looked away from the fire.

"Master Chuffery is ready for bed, would you like to say goodnight to him?"

Cherub smiled and stood as he said, "I'd love to."

Cherub walked with James to the bedroom. As Cherub entered, James waited by the door.

"Hey little brother. How do you like your new bedroom?" Cherub asked quietly as he approached the bed.

"It's nice. And James is nice. He showed me how to run the bath water and make it not too hot and let me do it all by myself." Chuffery said with enthusiasm.

"Well, I think James is going to be here for a long time to take care of you so you'll have a chance to learn a lot more things from him." Cherub said as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"I love you Cherub." Chuffery said in a whisper.

Cherub leaned in and hugged Chuffery gently as he whispered, "I love you too Chuffery."

"Will you be here when I wake up?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"I'll be sleeping in my room just down the hall. Do you see that rope right over there?" Cherub asked and pointed to a very decorative rope hanging from the ceiling.

Chuffery nodded.

"If you need anything during the night, just pull on that rope and a few minutes later someone will be here to help you." Cherub said seriously.

Chuffery nodded.

"Good. You get some sleep, then tomorrow we'll have all day to play and do magic and spend time with my friends." Cherub said with a smile.

Chuffery nodded again.

"Good night little brother." Cherub said and leaned in to kiss Chuffery gently on the cheek.

"Good night Cherub." Chuffery said and closed his eyes.

As Cherub got up from the bed, he made a subtle gesture to the lamp and it went dark.

From the doorway, he gave one last look at his brother before closing the door.

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"Would you like me to draw your bath Master Cherub?" James asked gently as they walked away from Chuffery's room.

"No, thank you James. I'll be doing it for myself from now on. Your only job is to look after the needs of my little brother." Cherub said seriously.

"I don't expect you to serve me or my friends, we have other staff who can attend to that. You don't have to try and keep Chuffery out of our way or anything like that, but if he doesn't want to be involved in whatever we're doing, be available to watch after him. I have a feeling that he's going to be very needy for a while and it will be more than enough of a job for you." Cherub said frankly.

"Yes. From what I saw tonight, I think you may be right." James said with concern as they entered the sitting room.

Cherub motioned for James to have a seat.

"He didn't know how to wash himself or use the faucets." James said quietly.

"I had to teach him to wipe his butt." Cherub said seriously.

James got a pained expression as he said, "How could anyone think they were helping a child by making him so dependent?"

"I don't know James, but it's up to us to undo the damage." Cherub said seriously.

"Would anyone like a nice cup of tea?" Catty asked from the doorway, carrying a tea service.

"Yes, thank you Catty, that would be lovely. Would you care to join us?" Cherub asked and gestured to the seat beside James.

Catty nodded hesitantly, sat down the tea service and took the offered seat.

"Would you like to tell her?" Cherub asked James with a smile.

"Millicent already told me that Mrs. Puckett's been retired and she been given her job." Catty said quickly.

"No love. Master Cherub has offered me a job." James said as he looked into her eyes.

"But... We were going to leave... so we could be together." Catty said with tears in her eyes.

"Shhh... Let me finish." James whispered and took hold of her hand.

Catty tried to put on a brave face as the tears began rolling down her cheeks.

"I'll only take the job if you agree. Master Cherub will pay me a 5,000 galleon bonus for taking the job and give me a rise in pay besides." James said softly.

Catty looked at James with wide eyes.

James slipped from the chair and came to rest on one knee.

"And if you'll be my wife, the guest house will be our home for as long as we want to live there." James said as he looked deeply into Catty's disbelieving eyes.

Cherub felt his wand vibrating in his pocket.

He pulled out the wand and it seemed to waive itself, pulling Cherub's hand along with it.

In a sparkle of magic, a golden ring with a dozen tiny diamonds embedded in it appeared on the edge of the coffee table beside James.

"Thank you Master Cherub." James said with a smile and picked up the ring.

"Catty, will you marry me?" James asked hopefully as he held up the ring for her to see.

Catty couldn't find her voice, but nodded forcefully, desperately fighting to hold in her tears.

James gently lifted her hand and slipped the ring on her finger.

"Congratulations." Cherub said in a whisper as he got up and walked out of the room.

"Thank you." James said in a hoarse whisper as tears fell down his cheeks.

Cherub watched James and Catty come together in a kiss as he closed the sitting room door and smiled.

He looked at the wand in his hand and said, "Olivander said you were smart but he didn't mention how much of a romantic you are."

The wand gave a brief tingle in Cherub's hand which he knew to be the wand's laughter.

Chapter 9

Cherub woke to the sight of the predawn light in his window.

He smiled at the sight and let his mind drift over the myriad of experiences of the past few weeks and how full his life had become.

Reluctantly, he got out of his bed and went to his closet to find something to wear. The sudden realization came over him that he was going to need to get new clothes, or at least have his old ones altered to accommodate his wings.

Reluctantly he went to the clothes that had been unpacked from his suitcase and retrieved one of the two sets of casual clothes he brought for the weekend.

After attending to morning business, he went to Chuffery's room to see if he was still sleeping.

A smile fell across Cherub's face as he watched his brother sleeping peacefully.

Cherub couldn't find the will to wake him so after a few minutes of just watching, he retreated into the hallway and made his way to the sitting room.

"Good morning Mr. Nightshade." Millicent said happily.

Cherub looked at her curiously and hesitantly responded, "Good morning Millicent."

"Catty is preparing your breakfast as we speak. James will be going up to wake Master Chuffery in a few minutes." Millicent said, glowing with happiness.

Cherub couldn't help but smile at her in return.

"Catty and James told me what you did for them. Thank you Mr. Nightshade. They both said it was the most perfect moment in their lives thanks to you." Millicent beamed.

"It was my pleasure, I was honored to be present at such a beautiful moment... Why are you calling me Mr. Nightshade all of a sudden?" Cherub asked curiously.

"Catty, James and I were talking last night and decided that since you are now the owner of Dour Oaks, you should be given the proper respect that comes with it." Millicent said seriously.

Cherub nodded in understanding and said, "I was given Dour Oaks and the rest of the Nightshade holdings, I didn't earn it. I didn't do anything to earn respect. Let the staff know that I don't expect them to call me Mr. Nightshade, nor will I until I've accomplished something to make me worthy of the family name. However, if any of the staff choose to call me Mr. Nightshade, I will humbly accept it for the honor it is."

"It's a big name to grow into. Just so you know, we're all proud of you and have no doubt that you will continue to make us proud." Millicent said with her beaming smile back in place.

"I'm going to the family dining room to await breakfast, if Catty is in as good a mood as you this morning, I'm sure it will be extraordinary." Cherub said as he stood.

"I'm downright grumpy compared to Catty." Millicent said with a huge grin.

* * * * *

"Good morning Chuffery, did you sleep well?" Cherub asked with a smile.

Chuffery walked to the table to take the seat beside his brother and nodded.

Before Cherub could say another word, Catty and James walked into the dining room carrying heavy laden silver trays.

"How many people did you think were eating this morning?" Cherub asked in surprise.

"I couldn't help myself Mr. Nightshade. I started making breakfast and the next thing I knew all this was made." Catty said happily as she arranged the food before the two boys.

"It looks wonderful. Did Millicent tell you about our visitors this morning?" Cherub asked as he began making selections from the abundance of food before them.

"Oh yes. Would you like to go over the menu after breakfast?" Catty asked with a huge smile.

"No thank you Catty. I've lived here long enough to know that anything you make will be excellent. Oh, I forgot to tell Millicent, we will be having one more visitor today and another joining us for dinner tomorrow." Cherub said in thought, then noticed that Chuffery was just sitting, looking at the food.

"I'll tell her straight away. Enjoy your breakfast Mr. Nightshade." Catty said happily and hurried out of the room.

James stood at attention, ready to attend to any need the boys might have.

"Is there any food here that you would like Chuffery?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery looked at his brother with pleading eyes and nodded.

"Then do like I've done and make your selections. If there's something that you don't know what it is, then just take a little to see if you like it. If you don't, then you don't have to eat it." Cherub explained carefully.

Chuffery looked at Cherub's plate, then proceeded to pull the exact same selection onto his own.

"I'm going to have some tea with my breakfast, what would you like?" Cherub asked casually as he slowly filled his cup.

Chuffery mumbled something that Cherub couldn't hear.

"What was that again?" Cherub asked and leaned closer.

"Milk." Chuffery said in a whisper.

Cherub looked around and saw two varieties of juice but no milk on the table. That wasn't unusual since Cherub didn't like milk.

"James, would you please get Chuffery a glass of milk?" Cherub asked carefully.

James nodded and left the room.

"If there's anything else you'd like, just tell me and we'll get it for you. You don't have to like the same things I do." Cherub said seriously.

A moment later James returned with a glass of milk and sat it by Chuffery's plate.

Just as Chuffery was reaching for the glass of milk, Cherub asked, "Did you really want that milk?"

Chuffery stopped his reach then nodded hesitantly as he looked at Cherub.

"Then what do you think would be the proper thing to do?" Cherub asked, hoping Chuffery would figure it out.

Chuffery thought for a moment, then got a smile.

"Thank you James." Chuffery said in a voice that was more accomplishment than appreciation.

James smiled and nodded.

After Chuffery had eaten a few bites of food, Cherub said, "We pay James and the others to work for us. They cook our food and take care of us because it's their job. One day you might have a job working for someone else. Just think about how much better your job will be if your employer asks you politely and thanks you when you've done something."

"Nana said I don't ever have to work. I get to be just like Daddy." Chuffery said slowly.

Cherub stifled the scream of protest that welled up in him and calmly said, "You may choose not to work. Our family has enough money so you can do that if you want. I hope you'll find something that you enjoy doing and get a job doing it. Who knows, maybe one day you'll work for me?"

Chuffery stopped his eating and looked at Cherub curiously, then broke into a smile.

"And just maybe, someday I'll work for you." Cherub continued, matching Chuffery's smile with his own.

"Can I work for you now?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

Cherub considered the question carefully, then had an idea.

"Tell me Chuffery, can you read?" Cherub asked slowly.

Chuffery nodded quickly.

"Good, then I think I need to hire you to be my reader. When breakfast is finished, James can take you to the library to select a book. When you've found a good one, you can bring it back to the sitting room and read it to me." Cherub said in a serious voice.

"But what if it's a big book?" Chuffery asked with worry.

"Then you can read it to me a little at a time. Next time we go to Diagon Alley, I will pay you what I owe you for reading to me and you can use the money to buy whatever you want." Cherub said with a cheerful smile.

Chuffery seemed to be frozen in place.

"Are you okay Chuffery?" Cherub asked carefully.

Tears started forming in Chuffery's fear-filled eyes.

Cherub looked at James to find an equal look of concern.

"James, would you leave us alone for a moment?" Cherub asked slowly.

With a nod, James quietly left the room.

"What's wrong Chuffery? You know you can tell me anything, right?" Cherub asked in a gentle voice.

"Nana said it was bad." Chuffery said in a whisper.

Cherub couldn't resist the urge and pulled Chuffery into a hug.

Chuffery struggled against the hug for a moment, then stopped struggling and started crying.

"Just tell me what's wrong so I can help." Cherub whispered and rubbed Chuffery's back.

"You're not going to get mad and sell me like daddy did, are you?" Chuffery asked in a voice so low it could barely be heard.

"No Chuffery, I'll never sell you. This will be your home for ever and ever." Cherub said gently, wanting to take away his brother's pain and fear.

"My pee-pee got hard." Chuffery whispered in an ashamed voice.

Cherub didn't reveal any reaction, but continued to hold Chuffery carefully.

Finally Cherub said, "It's okay Chuffery, you're a boy. That's supposed to happen."

"But Nana said I was being bad when my pee-pee got hard." Chuffery said seriously.

Cherub thought about the statement as a fire of anger began to build within him.

"Are you mad at me now?" Chuffery asked, and his body began to shake in fear.

"Shhh. No little brother. I'm not mad at all." Cherub said and pulled out of the hug enough to give Chuffery a kiss on the cheek.

Chuffery looked in wonder at his brother, not understanding what was happening.

"Chuffery, your pee-pee getting hard is part of being a boy. Nana probably thought it was bad because she was never a boy. That's why it's better to have James and I to look after you. We understand stuff like that and know that it isn't bad or dirty at all." Cherub tried to explain.

Chuffery looked at Cherub with relief.

Cherub smiled at the easing in Chuffery's fear.

"Sometimes you get hard for no reason at all, and sometimes it happens when you think about something or someone. It's not bad. It happens to me too." Cherub said seriously, holding Chuffery's gaze.

"You get a hard pee-pee too?" Chuffery asked in wonder.

"That's right Chuffery. Like I said, it's part of being a boy. And as you get older, it happens more and more." Cherub said seriously.

"Does James get a hard pee-pee too?" Chuffery asked with wide-eyed wonder.

"Yes he does. In fact, if you didn't get a hard pee-pee sometimes, I'd be worried. It's a healthy thing." Cherub said and pulled Chuffery back into the hug.

"But Nana said I was being bad. She'd bathe me in cold water till it went away." Chuffery said in a whimper.

"Nana is gone now. You don't ever have to worry about her again. I tell you what, if you want to, even though it's not bath time, we can go right now and take a nice warm bath together. I'll show you that it's okay, my pee-pee might even get hard too. You'll see that there's nothing wrong with it." Cherub said gently.

Chuffery nodded into Cherub's shoulder.

"Come on. Let's take a bath." Cherub said with a gentle smile.

As they walked out the dining room door, Cherub noticed James waiting with a look of concern.

"Chuffery and I are going to take a bath in my bathroom. He's been raised by a woman who thought erections were dirty and wrong. This may take some time." Cherub said seriously as he held Chuffery close to his side.

"Would you like me to join you?" James asked carefully.

"Only if you want to, and only if Catty wouldn't mind. I wouldn't want to do anything to come between you two." Cherub said seriously.

"Catty knows I love her first and always, but she understands that I love you in a very different way and this is my way of showing you. A boy needs to know that he's loved." James finished quietly.

"Thank you James. And I love you too." Cherub said with a lump in his throat.

"I'll just tell Catty that you're finished with breakfast and be up to join you in a moment." James said as he walked toward the kitchen.

"Thank you James." Cherub said in a quiet voice, then proceeded toward the stairs.

* * * * *

"You told me last night that you could turn on the water and get it to the right temperature all by yourself. Would you like to show me?" Cherub asked gently as they walked into his bathroom.

"Yeah!" Chuffery said loudly and ran to the tub.

"Chuffery, you should probably get out of your clothes first so you don't get them wet." Cherub said gently.

Chuffery stopped in his tracks and turned to look at Cherub in deep thought, then started pulling at his shirt, trying to get it over his head.

"Slow down Chuffery. We've got all morning. If you need help with something just let me know." Cherub said with a chuckle.

Chuffery slowed his pace slightly, but continued to fight the shirt.

After a moment of amused watching, Cherub began to undress himself.

"I've set out some fresh clothes for Master Chuffery on your bed Mr. Nightshade." James said as he walked into the bathroom.

"James, I'm going to feel awfully uncomfortable being called Mr. Nightshade when we're all naked. Would you please call me Cherub while we're in here?"

"I think I would like that Cherub." James said gently as he began to unbutton his shirt.

Cherub turned at the sound of running water.

"You're doing fine Chuffery. Let me know when the water is ready." Cherub said with a proud smile.

Chuffery adjusted the faucets with as much seriousness as any nine year old could manage.

"You look very different with wings Cherub. How did that happen?" James asked curiously as he pulled off his trousers.

"I was born with them. Father got an expensive wizard to transfigure me to hide them before I was moved to Dour Oaks." Cherub said as he pulled off his underwear.

Cherub looked to see how Chuffery was doing and found him frozen in astonishment.

"What's wrong Chuffery?" Cherub asked quietly.

"James's pee-pee got a mustache." Chuffery said in awe.

Cherub smiled and said, "That's what happens when you grow up. Mine doesn't have a mustache yet, but it has a whisker or two."

Chuffery forgot about the bath water and hurried to closely inspect his brother.

"I see one! It's right there!" Chuffery said pointing to a lone pubic hair.

"It's easy to see now that I have black hair. When I was blonde, you couldn't see it." Cherub said as he guided Chuffery toward the tub.

"You had blond hair?" James asked curiously as he followed.

"Yes. The same color as Chuffery's. And my wings were white, well, more like a dirty off-white." Cherub said as he eased into the tub, then said, "You got the bath water just right Chuffery. This feels great."

"Yes, you did it perfectly Chuffery." James said in praise.

"If you used to have hair like mine... is mine going to turn black too?" Chuffery asked in deep thought.

"No Chuffery, I changed my hair color to black." Cherub said simply.

Chuffery got a look of deep concentration, then asked, "You didn't want hair like mine?"

Cherub immediately realized that he had to answer the question delicately.

"I didn't even know I had a brother when I decided to change my hair color. There is a professor at Hogwart's who has black hair like mine is now. I liked the way his hair looks so I changed mine to be like his." Cherub said carefully.

Chuffery looked Cherub in the eyes as he thought about what he was being told.

"If I knew I had a wonderful little brother with blond hair I probably would have kept it." Cherub continued, getting the sense that he might have avoided a disaster.

"Can my hair be like yours?" Chuffery asked cautiously.

Cherub thought about the question and finally answered, "If you really want it to be, I can make the potion to change your hair color."

Chuffery nodded with certainty.

"When we're done with our bath we can go make the potion. I'll let you help me." Cherub said absolutely.

Chuffery smiled, then looked at James curiously.

"What is it Chuffery?" James asked cautiously.

"Your pee-pee got real big." Chuffery said with hesitation.

"Remember that I told you it happened to James and I too?" Cherub asked seriously.

"But it got real big!" Chuffery said as he pointed.

Cherub smiled and said, "When you get older, that will happen to you too. I bet even now, your pee-pee is bigger when it's hard than when it's soft."

Chuffery looked down at his stiff little member, then at James and nodded.

"If you'd like, James could show you how to properly clean it. I doubt that Nana knew what she was doing." Cherub said slowly.

Chuffery looked at James in question.

"It's important to clean yourself properly. If you'll come over here, I'll show you how to pull back the foreskin." James said seriously.

Chuffery hurried to James' side.

Cherub rested back and watched as James demonstrated on himself, then coached Chuffery.

* * * * *

Movement caught Cherub's attention and he turned in time to see his wand slip halfway out of his folded clothes.

"Are you feeling left out?" Cherub asked in a relaxed voice.

The wand didn't move.

"Well you might as well come over here." Cherub said with a smile as he opened his hand.

In a flash of magic, the wand was in his hand.

"Why do you need your wand Cherub?" James asked curiously.

"I don't at the moment, but he was feeling left out." Cherub said as he sat the wand on the edge of the tub.

"Your wand feels?" James asked cautiously.

"Yes. He's a special wand. I'm still getting to know him but I can tell you he has a sense of humor and is a romantic." Cherub said with a smile.

"Can my wand come be with yours?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"Of course, I'm sure my wand would appreciate the company. Where is your wand?" Cherub asked as he looked around.

"I left it in my room." Chuffery said with disappointment.

"Maybe next time." Cherub said as he relaxed in the warm water.

"There it is!" Chuffery said happily as he pointed.

"I guess my wand **was** lonely... I feel funny calling him 'wand', do you think he should have a name?" Cherub asked in a relaxed voice.

"I think you should name him Herbert." Chuffery said firmly.

Cherub looked at Chuffery curiously, then said, "I think maybe he should be allowed to choose his own name."

The wand turned itself on the tub side to point at Chuffery.

"Does that mean you want to be named Herbert?" Cherub asked dubiously.

The wand turned itself in a circle and came to a stop pointing at Chuffery again.

"I guess that means my wand is now named Herbert." Cherub said in a somewhat disbelieving voice.

"Cherub?" James asked cautiously.

"Yes James?" Cherub responded, turning his full attention to James.

"Does this seem normal to you?" James asked cautiously.

"What's that?" Cherub asked, lost by the statement.

"You left here a skinny brown haired boy. You returned two weeks later as a black haired boy with wings. You have more money than you could spend in three lifetimes, you have a brother that you never knew you had and you have a magic wand named Herbert. Doesn't this seem the least bit odd to you?" James asked seriously.

Cherub thought about the question and finally said, "When you put it that way, it does sound like something an amateur writer would make up. But these are the cards I was dealt, I have no choice but to play them the best I can."

Chuffery splashed the water before him, looking a little bored.

"But for right now I have a tub full of water, a cute brother and a cute valet to focus on. The rest of the world can just take care of itself for a while." Cherub said with a smile at his tub partners and moved toward them.

"Okay Chuffery, I think it's time we did some bathing." Cherub said with a gentle smile.

Chuffery looked at Cherub curiously.

"James is the one who taught me how to bathe myself. He's going to tell us what to do. If you don't know what he's telling you, look at me and you'll see me doing it." Cherub said with a smile.

Chuffery seemed to be excited by the idea.

James handed Chuffery and Cherub each some soap and a wash cloth, then took one of each for himself.

James spoke in a clear voice, "We're going to work from the top down..."

* * * * *

"Well, you got to see a few hard pee-pees in there. Do you still think it's bad?" Cherub asked as he pulled on his clothes.

"No. It was nice. Can I still have hair like yours?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"Of course. James, will you help us?" Cherub asked with a smile.

"I'll watch if you don't mind. I never had much of a talent for potions." James said quietly.

"This is an easy one. It takes longer to prepare for it than it does to brew it." Cherub said as he finally got his shoes tied.

"Can you help me?" Chuffery asked weakly.

"Would you like to learn how to tie your shoes now or later?" Cherub asked and waited.

"I want to make my hair like yours now." Chuffery said seriously.

"Then James can show you how to tie your shoes later." Cherub said and knelt down to tie Chuffery's shoes.

"I can get that Mr. Nightshade." James said quickly.

"I don't mind doing it James. Besides, this is the easy job. Teaching Chuffery to tie his shoes is going to be the challenge." Cherub said with a smile.

"I'm not dumb." Chuffery said in offense.

"I wasn't saying that you were Chuffery. Learning to tie your shoes is difficult at first, at least it was for me. It is much easier for me to tie your shoes for you than try and teach you to do it yourself." Cherub said seriously.

Chuffery thought about the statement, then asked, "Did Nana tie my shoes so she wouldn't have to teach me?"

Cherub shook his head and said, "I think Nana tied your shoes so you would need her. She did everything for you so you would always need her to be there doing things for you."

Chuffery looked at Cherub, frozen in deep thought.

"I'll always want you around too. But if I show you how to do things for yourself, then I'll know you're here because you want to be, not because you have to be." Cherub said seriously.

"Is Nana bad?" Chuffery asked cautiously.

"I don't know Chuffery. I know that she was wrong to not teach you things. And she was wrong to tell you that something as natural as a hard pee-pee is something bad. But I don't know if she was a bad person or if she was trying to do the right thing the wrong way. I'll probably never know." Cherub said honestly.

"Can we fix my hair now?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"Yes. Come along Chuffery. We're going to do it right now." Cherub said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Mr. Nightshade?" Millicent asked from the doorway of the potions lab.

Cherub looked up from his work and was shocked to see her pale and trembling.

"Your Grandfather..." She trailed off with tears gliding down her cheeks.

Cherub closed his eyes and asked, "Is he gone?"

"Yes. An hour ago." Millicent said in a trembling voice.

Cherub walked to her and pulled her into a hug.

"It was his time. He knew it and was ready. I promise Millicent, he was happy." Cherub said in a gentle voice.

"Thank you... He loved you so much..." She trailed off in tears.

"James. Do you think you can finish the potion? It just needs to brew for a few minutes. I need to talk to Chuffery." Cherub said quietly.

"Yes Mr. Nightshade. I'll bring it when it's ready." James said sadly.

Cherub let go of Millicent and held his arms open to Chuffery.

"Come here Chuffery. We need to talk." Cherub said carefully.

Chuffery walked to his brother with hesitation and confusion.

"Come into the next room where we can sit down." Cherub said gently and guided Chuffery to walk with him.

* * * * *

"Grandfather Nightshade passed away this morning." Cherub said gently as he held Chuffery in his lap.

Chuffery looked at Cherub with confusion.

"He died." Cherub said, wanting to protect his brother, but feeling it was more important for him to understand.

Chuffery buried his face in Cherub's shoulder and started to cry.

"He loved us Chuffery. That's why he made sure we ended up together." Cherub said as his own tears fell.

"Nana always said Granpa was mean cause he wanted her to go away." Chuffery said into Cherub's shoulder.

"Chuffery, you need to decide who you think is mean and nice for yourself. Nana can't decide that for you and neither can I." Cherub said quietly as he rubbed Chuffery's back.

"Granpa was nice. He ate basketti with us and bought me my wand and made it so I could live with you." Chuffery said seriously.

"I think so too Chuffery. It's okay to be sad that he's gone. I'll be here to hold you whenever you need me." Cherub said as he hugged Chuffery tightly.

Chuffery nodded and let his tears fall without restraint.

* * * * *

"Mr. Nightshade?" James asked hesitantly.

"Yes?" Cherub responded, still hugging his brother.

"The potion is finished." James said and presented a beaker to Cherub.

"Thank you James. I know you don't like potion making. I appreciate you taking over for me." Cherub said honestly.

"It was no burden. The part of potion making I dislike is the preparation." James said with a smile.

"Chuffery, are you still sure you want hair like mine?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery nodded and sniffed back his tears.

"If you drink this, your hair will be like mine in about five minutes." Cherub said and held out the beaker to Chuffery.

"I love you Cherub, I want to be just like you." Chuffery said seriously, then drank the potion.

"You need to drink it all." Cherub said quietly, not wanting to sound harsh.

Chuffery kept drinking until it was all gone.

"That wasn't bad was it?" Cherub asked with a smile.

Chuffery nodded that it was.

"Well you won't have to drink it again unless you want to change your hair to another color." Cherub said with a smile.

"Would you like something to drink to get the taste out of your mouth?" James asked gently.

"Yes. Please." Chuffery said with a smile at James.

As James hurried out of the room, Cherub said, "That was very polite Chuffery. I'm proud of you."

Chuffery handed Cherub the empty beaker and snuggled into Cherub's embrace.

* * * * *

"Mr. Nightshade, your guests have arrived." Millicent said from the study doorway.

"Show them to the sitting room, we'll join them in a moment." Cherub said and shifted Chuffery off his lap.

"I guess we got so comfortable we forgot about your hair." Cherub said as he looked at his brother's jet black hair.

"Can I see?" Chuffery asked as he looked around the unfamiliar room quickly.

"Yes. Come over here and I'll lift you up." Cherub said with a smile at his brother's enthusiasm.

"Wow!" Chuffery said as he saw his reflection.

"Cute little guy isn't he?" Cherub asked with a smile.

"I look like you now... can I have wings too?" Chuffery asked in hope.

"I'll have to get back to you on that. I haven't found a wing potion yet." Cherub said as he put Chuffery back on the floor.

"I wanna see some more." Chuffery said indignantly.

"We have guests Chuffery. Come to the sitting room so we can greet them." Cherub said firmly.

"You... you want me to go too?" Chuffery asked in wonder.

"Of course. You're my brother. I always want you around." Cherub said as he held out his hand. Chuffery immediately took the offered hand and happily followed his brother out of the study.

* * * * *

"Hello everyone." Cherub said as he walked into the sitting room.

"Hi Cherub. How are things with your father?" Harry asked immediately.

"As good as can be." Cherub answered honestly, then pulled Chuffery from behind him.

"Everyone, this is my brother Chuffery Nightshade. Chuffery this is Draco, Harry and Granger." Cherub said formally.

Hermione flashed an aggravated look at Cherub but said nothing.

"You failed to mention that you had a brother." Draco said cautiously.

"I didn't know. Our father isn't one for sharing information." Cherub said as he guided Chuffery to take a seat with him on the couch.

"Mr. Nightshade?" Catty asked from the sitting room doorway.

"Yes Catty?" Cherub responded automatically.

"Would your guests like a snack after their journey?" Catty asked carefully.

Cherub glance to see Harry and Draco's nods and Hermione's disinterested stare.

"Yes, would you set it up in the gazebo. It's too nice a day to spend all of it inside." Cherub said with a smile.

"Right away Mr. Nightshade." Catty said and hurried out.

"You ask your staff to call you Mr. Nightshade?" Draco asked curiously.

"No. I just asked them not to call me Choab anymore, they came up with that themselves. Let's go outside and have a snack. When we come back in I'll show you your rooms. Your things will be brought in by then." Cherub said and stood.

Chuffery stayed nearly glued to his brother's side as they left the sitting room.

"This is the nicest house I've ever been in." Harry said as they walked down the hallway.

"Well, it's the only house I've ever been in so I have nothing to judge it against." Cherub said casually.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Oh, I guess you haven't heard the story. When I arrived at Hogwart's I didn't look like this. My father had some spells put on me to make me look plain... come in here." Cherub said and diverted them into the study.

"Here's what I looked like before." Cherub said and handed Hermione a picture.

Chuffery moved from Cherub's side to see the picture for himself.

"That don't look like you." Chuffery said in confusion.

"I know Chuffery, Father didn't want me to look like him." Cherub said with a note of coldness in his voice.

Hermione put down the picture and looked at some others on the desk.

"You don't have any pictures of your parents?" Hermione asked curiously.

"No. I met Father three times, yesterday being the third and hopefully last." Cherub said and pulled Chuffery back to his side in a hug.

"What about your mother?" Hermione asked, a tone of concern in her voice.

"I've never met her. I've never even seen a picture of her." Cherub said and led the group out of the study.

* * * * *

"It really is beautiful here." Harry said as he looked around the wide open yard, then took a finger sandwich from the tray.

"I guess so. I hope you brought your brooms, I plan to do some flying this weekend." Cherub said with a smile.

Harry and Draco nodded as Hermione got an uncomfortable look.

"You may use my broom Granger. I obviously won't be needing it. Although it isn't the latest model, it will still do the job quite well." Cherub said frankly.

"Thank you." Hermione mumbled.

"So tell me what happened after I left. Last I heard, Granger would rather not be in our company." Cherub said casually.

"Um. Well, at dinner last night, Professor Quirrel came in screaming about a troll loose in the school." Draco said in thought.

"Darla had mentioned that Hermione was in the girls bathroom..." Harry interjected.

"So Harry had to do his hero thing and we went to get Granger out of the bathroom." Draco said with a glance at Hermione.

"While we were in there warning her, the troll came in." Harry said next.

"They're Gryffindors alright. Harry and Granger took down that troll in two minutes." Draco said in an impressed voice.

"It seemed longer from my point of view." Harry said with a very 'Malfoy' expression on his face.

Draco smiled at the expression and said, "Your point of view was on the troll's back with your wand stuck up its nose."

"Then Hermione did this really good Leviosa spell on the troll's club and hit it in the head." Harry said with excitement.

"I leave the school for one night..." Cherub said in wonder as he shook his head.

"Tell him about Professor Snape." Hermione said darkly.

"Well, Professor Snape had a cut on his leg, but it didn't look like something that the troll did, it was more..."

"It was done by a dog. A big, three headed dog." Hermione said firmly.

Cherub looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione trying to figure out what they were talking about.

"You know how they told us to not go to the third level... I kind of did." Harry said shyly.

"So did I." Hermione said insistently.

"At different times. There's a three headed dog up there guarding a trap door." Harry said seriously.

"And we think the troll was let into the school as a diversion so someone could try and get past the dog while everyone was out of the building." Draco said in summary.

"And you suspect Professor Snape?" Cherub asked, sounding more hurt than concerned.

"No. I mean, Granger does, I think it's Quirrel." Draco said seriously.

"What do you think Harry?" Cherub asked carefully.

"I think it doesn't matter which one it is. We need to assume that either or both of them are in on this. We will need to get past that dog when both of them are occupied somewhere else." Harry said with a calculating look in his eyes.

"Well, just so you know. I trust Professor Snape completely. But I'll go along with what Harry said as long as you aren't going to plan to harm Professor Snape." Cherub said seriously.

Movement caught Cherub's eye in time to see an owl swoop down and drop a letter into his lap.

"A love letter?" Draco asked with a playful look.

"Doubtful." Cherub said with a smile and opened the letter.

Cherub my boy,

I am writing this letter immediately following the most delightful evening I can remember. I had a lovely dinner with my grandsons, then to make the evening complete, I took my grandson Chuffery to buy him his first wand. I know my time is short, but I couldn't darken that wonderful evening by telling you the complete truth.

You're a smart boy, you may have seen through my deception already, but in case you need confirmation of your suspicions... yes. I manipulated you into accepting Chuffery. It was on my insistence that Chuffery was brought to the office and the dreaded nanny was left home. Gwendylfarb was to let you wait in the waiting room until you had a chance to get to know Chuffery. When she saw you leading him from the lavatory by the hand, she knew it was time.

Had I simply asked you to assume responsibility for your brother, you might well have refused. Please forgive a meddling old grandfather. It was my last chance to try and put right some of what I let go so horribly wrong. That is all the confession I have to make. Everything else I told you was the complete truth.

The pages that follow are the spells I mentioned that every parent should have.

Please know that I have always loved you and have always been proud of you,

Give my love to Chuffery,

Aristotle Nightshade

Cherub,

This was on your grandfather's desk when he had his attack. His last thoughts were of you. He wasn't able to finish the last spell, but Gwendylfarb and I completed it for him. I hope they are of use to you.

Andrew.

Cherub looked up from the message with tears in his eyes.

"What is it Cherub? Bad news?" Draco asked with concern.

"Our Grandfather died this morning, he was writing this letter when he collapsed." Cherub said in a shaky voice.

"Cherub! Why didn't you say something sooner?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"I'm okay, really. I just met him for the first time yesterday. He new it was nearly his time to die and wanted to... say goodbye, I guess." Cherub said in an unsure voice.

Draco got a distant look for a second, then asked, "Was your grandfather Aristotle Nightshade?"

"Yes." Cherub said, then motioned for Chuffery to come to him.

"From what my father said, Aristotle Nightshade had so much money and property that no one could keep count of it all. Apparently, he never brought any of his children into the family business and kept all the power to himself." Draco said in distant memory.

"From what I know of it, that's right." Cherub said quietly as he hugged Chuffery tightly.

"I hate to sound greedy, but do you think he left you anything?" Harry asked curiously.

Cherub smiled and said, "Yes, he told me yesterday."

"What did you get? Wait, let me guess, this house, that's why you invited us here isn't it?" Harry asked as he looked around again.

"Yes, he gave me the house." Cherub said peacefully.

"Wow. Eleven years old and you have your own house... I need to mention this to my father." Draco finished in a calculating tone.

"He gave me everything." Cherub said in barely more than a whisper.

"What?" Harry asked with wide eyes.

"All the Nightshade holdings, properties, businesses, and vaults." Cherub said absently.

After a long silence, Chuffery wiggled off Cherub's lap and went to grab another sandwich.

"You... Own all of it?" Draco asked in wonder.

"Well, technically it's in trust for me, but yes. Just about anything associated with the Nightshade family is mine." Cherub said quietly.

"What are you going to do now?" Draco asked in stunned disbelief.

"Fly. Care to join me Draco?" Cherub asked hopefully.

"Um. Sure. I need to change." Draco said absently.

"What about our favorite Seeker?" Cherub asked with a smile.

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Harry answered with distraction.

"What do you say Granger? Would you like to fly with us?" Cherub asked as he stood.

"Why did you even bother to invite me? You don't want me around and you don't want me to fly with you!" Hermione said angrily.

"Well, since you asked, you were invited because Harry and Draco said they wouldn't come without you. As far as wanting you around, I can't really say, I never had the opportunity to get to know you. Since Harry claims you as a friend, that's good enough reason for you to be

here. And as far as wanting you to fly with us...I offered because I thought you might enjoy it. It seems a lovely day for flying." Cherub finished in a reasonable voice.

"But you don't like me because my parents are muggles. You think I'm so worthless you won't even call me by my name." Hermione said in tears.

"Granger, I do believe in the importance of bloodlines and breeding, but that doesn't mean I would exclude someone from being a friend simply because of their parentage, no more than I would automatically be friends with someone because they came from an old family. As for calling you by your name, it is a gesture of respect to call you by your family name until I am invited to do otherwise." Cherub said seriously, then noticed that Harry, Draco and Chuffery were watching the exchange in silence.

"Oh." Hermione whispered.

"Granger, you are a guest in my home. I will offer you every courtesy while you are here to make you comfortable. If you would like to join us flying, you would be welcomed, if you would like to rest after your journey this morning, I'll show you to your room. If you have any other ideas, just tell me and I'll see to it." Cherub said as he looked her in the eyes.

"Please call me Hermione." She said quietly.

Cherub smiled and said, "Of course. Would you like to fly with us Hermione?"

"Yes." She said in a shy whisper.

"Then I'll show you your rooms." Cherub said gently.

* * * * *

"This room is beautiful." Hermione said in wonder.

"I'm glad you like it. Harry and Draco's rooms are just across the hall. Mine is through the double doors at the end of the hall and Chuffery's is to the right of mine." Cherub said in a pleasant voice.

Harry and Draco went to their rooms as Cherub led Chuffery to his room.

"It's a warm day. Would you like to wear short pants while we're outside?" Cherub asked gently.

Chuffery craned his neck to look up at his brother and nodded.

"Then go pick out what you'd like to wear. I'll help you with your shoes when you're ready." Cherub said as he took a seat in the chair by Chuffery's bed.

Chuffery stopped his motion and asked, "Are you going to wear short pants too?"

"No Chuffery, it wouldn't look right with a button-up shirt. I'll just wear this." Cherub said seriously.

Chuffery walked away from his dresser and stood beside his brother.

"Does this mean you would rather not wear short pants?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery nodded.

"Then give me a hug and we'll go see if the others are ready." Cherub said gently.

Chuffery immediately moved in to give Cherub a tight hug.

"Ooof. You're pretty strong Chuffery. I keep forgetting that you're nine years old." Cherub said as he returned the hug.

Chuffery continued the hug without comment.

* * * * *

"What kind of broom is it?" Hermione asked carefully as she inspected the broom she was handed.

"Well, to tell you the truth, it was purchased to sweep the pantry. When I saw the new broom, I got the idea that I wanted it and hid it until I was able to make the flying potion to enchant it." Cherub said with a shy smile.

"You enchanted it yourself?" Hermione asked in awe.

"Yes. Mrs. Puckett was a little put out by my taking it, but even she seemed to admire that I was able to enchant a broom." Cherub said as he thought about her expression when she saw him flying on her new broom.

"Mrs. Puckett?" Harry asked curiously.

"She used to be the head housekeeper. She's retired now." Cherub said absently.

"I expected you to have the Nimbus 2000." Harry said honestly.

"Well, I suppose I could if I wanted. But until five weeks ago I had never gone to the shops and seen the latest brooms. I've always been content with this one." Cherub said quietly.

Draco didn't wait for further conversation. In a quick move he took to the air.

Harry saw the movement and was after him in a flash.

Chuffery watched Harry and Draco with childish wonder.

"Are you going to join us?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"Yes, just give me a minute to get Chuffery ready. Then I'll give you a tour of the property." Cherub said happily.

Hermione accepted his answer and took off on the broom, more slowly than the boys.

* * * * *

"Would you like to fly with the others Chuffery?" Cherub asked carefully.

"Can I really?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"Well, since we don't have anymore brooms, I'll carry you, but we'll be flying." Cherub said slowly.

Chuffery nodded with excitement.

"Give me a second to make you lighter, then we'll go." Cherub said and positioned Chuffery before him.

After making the now familiar gestures, Cherub lifted Chuffery into a hug.

"Now hold on tight." Cherub said and spread his wings.

With little effort, he pushed off from the ground and was soon in the air.

Chuffery let out a squeal of delight.

Cherub put his arms around his brother and held him tightly.

"If anyone would like, I'll take you on a tour of the property." Cherub said as he joined his classmates in the air.

"That sounds great." Harry said happily.

"Go ahead Nightshade, we'll follow." Draco said with a contented smile.

"This way."

* * * * *

"That was fun." Chuffery said as he nuzzled Cherub's neck.

"I'm glad you liked it. One weekend soon I'll get you your own broom so I can show you how to fly for yourself." Cherub said as he walked toward the house, still carrying Chuffery.

"You have a beautiful home Cherub. I guess if you had to be stuck in a place all your life, this is better than most." Harry said as he and Draco followed immediately behind.

Hermione followed alone, listening to everything.

"As I've said, I have nothing to compare it to. But I can imagine worse places." Cherub said as he entered the house.

"Maybe you could come to visit my relatives sometime. Then you'd appreciate what you have." Harry said offhandedly.

"Oh I do appreciate it Potter. I'm used to it and comfortable with it, but I understand that I have more than most and am grateful for all of this. Until yesterday, I lived here because my family wanted to keep me somewhere remote and hidden. It was theirs and I owned nothing. Now that this is all mine I can't even describe the sense of responsibility that comes with it." Cherub said seriously.

"Mr. Nightshade?" Millicent asked from behind the group.

"Yes?" Cherub asked casually.

"An informal lunch will be served in the family dining room when you are ready." Millicent said in a gentle voice.

"Thank you Millicent. We will go and wash up for lunch and be down directly." Cherub said with a kind smile.

Millicent nodded and withdrew.

"I'm surprised that I'm hungry already. I guess all that flying really took it out of me." Draco said as he took the lead to go upstairs.

Hermione was looking for a place to put down the broom she was still carrying.

"Hermione, if you'd like, you can keep that broom in your room. That way you'll be able to find it when you want to. If you leave it anywhere down here, it's likely to end up in one of many broom closets. I've spent many afternoons searching for that broom." Cherub said with a smile.

Hermione mumbled a thank you and followed the group up the stairs.

* * * * *

"Okay, now that we've had some play time. Suppose you tell me why you're here." Cherub asked as soon as the group were all comfortably seated.

"You invited us." Draco said casually.

"Come off it Malfoy. When I left Friday, Hermione couldn't stand the sight of any of us, Harry looked like he was in pain every time he saw her. And you weren't the least bit interested in any of it. Now you refuse to visit my home without her. Just tell me how you got from there to here." Cherub said as he gathered selections from the feast before them.

"We told you about the troll..." Harry began.

"That explains how the ice got broken. But it still doesn't fit." Cherub said firmly as he looked Harry in the eyes.

"After we were done talking to the Headmaster, we got to talking." Harry said quietly.

"Go on." Cherub said seriously, then noticed that Chuffery was sitting quietly, staring at the food.

With a simple gesture, he indicated for Chuffery to help himself.

"Okay. It's really simple I guess. The three of us compared notes and have an idea of what the three headed dog is guarding." Harry said quietly and received an icy stare from Hermione.

Cherub looked from Hermione to Harry and said, "Unless I need to know, I get the sense that Hermione would rather you not tell me what that is."

Harry glanced at Hermione, then said, "Well, we're not sure anyway. What it ends up being is that we think we'll have a better chance of figuring everything out if we work together and we needed some time to sit down and talk."

Cherub nodded in thought, then finally asked Hermione, "So you haven't been convinced that we didn't corrupt Harry?"

She gave a shy smile before saying, "Sometime since we arrived, I think I accepted that you aren't evil. But I'm still not sure about you corrupting Harry."

Cherub smiled and said, "It's progress."

"Now what we need to do is decide what we're going to do next." Draco said seriously.

"I think I need to talk with Hagrid." Harry said in thought.

"I can ask a few questions around Slytherin and see if anyone knows anything." Draco said with a look of deep concentration.

"I can do that with Gryffindor." Hermione said seriously.

"Do you guys need me to do anything?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"You've already done it. Inviting us here, away from Hogwart's, is more of a help than anything I can think of." Draco said seriously.

"You never know who's listening or watching there. I've heard that Ravenclaw has actually taken to following some of us and tracking our movements." Harry said darkly.

"Why would they do that?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Because our little upset a few weeks ago had the potential to become an all out house war. The big brains at Ravenclaw want to keep an eye on events so that if another blowup is about to happen, they can get their people to safety. They shouldn't be a problem for us. They won't go to the Headmaster with what they've learned unless someone is in danger. They're completely motivated by self interest." Draco said seriously.

"How do you know all this?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"Ravenclaws aren't the only ones with spies." Draco said with his trademark 'Malfoy' grin.

Hermione actually chuckled at the action.

"So is there anything else major on the horizon?" Cherub asked, sensing that something was bothering Harry.

"Yes. Actually, I need your help." Harry said quietly.

"You've got it. You know that." Draco said immediately.

Harry smiled and said, "You might not like some of what I'm about to say Hermione, but I need to let the guys know what's happening."

Hermione cautiously nodded.

Chuffery tugged on Cherub's arm.

"Yes?" Cherub asked.

"Can I have some juice?" Chuffery asked in a small voice.

"James is by the door. If you wave to him, he will come over and ask you what you would like."
Cherub said quietly.

Chuffery scooted in closer, as if to whisper in Cherub's ear, but instead, kissed him on the cheek.

Cherub smiled and sat back up in his chair.

"Gryffindor's spirit has nearly been broken. They've lost faith in their leaders, they've been dealt a setback in the house cup points that seems unrecoverable and have the feeling that all of Hogwart's is looking down on them." Harry said seriously.

Draco and Cherub considered the statement and couldn't disagree.

"The dust has settled from the 'upset' and the Gryffindors are beginning to realize what went wrong. The problem is that they lack any strong leadership to lead them to something better."
Harry said without emotion.

"You?" Draco asked cautiously.

"That's what I want to discuss with you. All three of you. You're my closest friends and I need your honest opinions about the decision I'm about to make." Harry said and looked down at his food in thought.

"You're planning to switch houses." Cherub said in realization.

"Going back to my true house." Harry said to his plate.

"You mean it?" Hermione asked in wonder.

Harry nodded, evidently not happy with the choice.

"I think I get it." Draco said, drawing everyone's attention... except Chuffery, his attention was completely devoted to serving himself another helping of food.

"You're the-boy-who-lived, the pride of Gryffindor. Now that the house has basically fallen, you'll step in and put them back in order. Basically be a figurehead, someone they can rally behind." Draco said seriously.

Harry nodded, still looking unhappy.

"Won't they see you as a traitor?" Cherub asked in thought.

"The Weasleys can help me with that. In the hearing I said that I didn't agree with the way the Gryffindors were behaving. I think the Gryffindors will respect that I chose to move when I couldn't support the actions of my house." Harry said in thought.

Cherub nodded in agreement and said, "Reinforcing the idea that you did what you believed to be right."

"And beyond that, my time in Slytherin has helped me understand what it is to be a leader. It's important for a Gryffindor to follow their heart, but jumping in blindly and following your heart, especially when you don't have all the facts, can lead you into trouble. Using what I've learned in Slytherin, not only can I try to exemplify the best qualities of Gryffindor, but also make well thought out decisions that are in my house's best interest." Harry said seriously.

"I can see you've thought about this a lot." Draco said as he absently picked at his food.

"I've been thinking about it since Darla sat with us at dinner. Although there was some tension for the obvious reasons, she seemed almost relieved to be away from her own table. That bothered me. We're in these houses to be around people who share our philosophies so we can support each other and hopefully inspire the best in each other. It occurred to me that Darla might be ashamed of her house and relieved to be associated with Slytherin, however briefly." Harry said in thought.

"I think you're right." Hermione said weakly.

Everyone looked to Hermione to expand on her statement.

"I think half the people at the Gryffindor table that day were jealous of Darla. I know when she came back to the dorm that night, she was more popular with everyone." Hermione said in a distant voice.

"When are you going to do it?" Cherub asked, realizing that it had already been decided.

"I'll change into my Gryffindor robes as soon as we return... I'll be sleeping in the Gryffindor rooms from now on." Harry finished with regret.

"Oh." Draco whispered.

"I can't be seen as ambiguous by Gryffindor. They have to know that I am with them, that they come first. To do that... I have to put their needs before whatever I might want." Harry said in a low voice.

"You don't want to leave them?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"Draco and Cherub are my friends. I love sharing their room... but Gryffindor has to come first." Harry finished firmly.

"Heroes." Draco muttered with a shake of his head.

Cherub nodded in agreement.

"So what do you need me to do?" Hermione asked Harry cautiously.

"Be yourself. Tell the truth. Do what you believe is right." Harry said seriously.

"Then why did you ask me to discuss this with you?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"Because you needed to see for yourself that this wasn't some Slytherin plot planned by Draco and Cherub. It's likely that somewhere along the way, someone will suggest that I'm a puppet being controlled by Slytherin. I think it's a good idea if you're witness to everything."

"Very Slytherin thinking." Draco said with a smirk.

"Thank you." Harry said with an answering smile.

"What about the Slytherin House Quidditch team?" Cherub asked in thought.

"I'll resign. Face it. The teams are so uneven at the moment the games are hardly worth watching. It may be my own arrogance talking, but if Gryffindor will accept me as Seeker, we should be able to hold our own against the other houses." Harry said distantly.

"If that were to happen, I think Gryffindor would have the most spirited cheering section." Cherub said with a nod.

"And the rise of the Gryffindor Quidditch team could be a rallying point to the rest of their house; working toward victory after being so near defeat." Draco said in a calculating voice.

"It sounds like it could work." Hermione said in thought.

"So what do you need us to do?" Cherub asked Harry hesitantly.

"Talk me out of it." Harry said quietly.

Cherub nodded sadly.

"Why would you want them to talk you out of it?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Because once Harry switches back to Gryffindor, he probably won't be able to spend time with us." Draco said in a sullen tone.

Hermione looked from Draco to Harry in confusion.

"We're friends Hermione. We enjoy each other's company. Even though we all understand and agree that this needs to be done, that doesn't make it easy. There's a selfish part in each one of us who wants to forget the plan and be able to just hang around together and have fun." Cherub said regretfully.

"The time may come when we can. But I have a feeling it won't be anytime soon." Harry said sadly.

"Then we'd better enjoy this weekend. We are going to need to build up enough memories to get all of us through the days ahead." Cherub said, trying to sound confident.

"Yes. And first thing on my list is to enjoy this meal that I've been ignoring. It looks wonderful. Your cook is quite good." Draco said with a forced smile.

"James? Will you be sure to tell Catty that we appreciate her lunch?" Cherub asked with a smile.

"Yes Mr. Nightshade." James said formally but was unable to contain his smile of pride for his fiancé.

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"Mr. Klegg has come to see you Mr. Nightshade." Millicent said from the sitting room doorway.

"Andrew, come in. I'd like you to meet my friends Harry Potter, Draconis Malfoy and Hermione Granger, and of course you know Chuffery. Guys, this is Andrew Klegg, my business manager." Cherub said as he stood to shake Andrew's hand.

"A pleasure to meet all of you." Andrew said in a quiet voice.

"How are you doing Andrew?" Cherub asked as he indicated a chair for Andrew.

"As well as I can be." Andrew said quietly.

"What brings you here today? I thought you'd be attending to Grandfather's affairs." Cherub asked carefully.

"Everything was done well in advance. I'll have some things to file with various Ministry offices on Monday, but otherwise all my work is done." Andrew said in his businesslike tone.

"Then what brings you here today?" Cherub asked again.

"I remembered what you said yesterday about wanting to see December Nightshade's work and did some checking. She has a showing at a small gallery in London tonight. I thought you and your guests might like to attend." Andrew said with a small smile.

Cherub looked at Andrew carefully and said, "As much as I would like that, I don't think my appearance would be accepted among the muggles."

Andrew gave a full smile and said, "That's why I came in person. I am quite capable of putting a glamour on you to hide your wings for the evening."

"Really? I thought that type of glamour was difficult to conjure due to the invisibility factor. You're not just altering my appearance." Cherub said in interest.

"Well, the spell isn't without its challenges, but even though I don't get as much practice as I used to I am quite adept at glammers." Andrew said pleasantly.

"What do you say guys? Would you like to go to an art gallery in London?" Cherub asked, liking the idea the more he thought about it.

"I don't have anything to wear." Hermione said with regret.

"I don't think that will be a problem. We have all afternoon to get ready. I'm sure Millicent will be able to come up with something." Cherub said casually.

"We only brought casual clothes." Draco said cautiously.

"I think you can both wear something of mine. We're about the same size. None of my clothes here have been altered for my wings, so I'm the one who'll have to search for something." Cherub said calmly.

"Why do you have formal clothes if you didn't leave the house?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Mrs. Puckett always insisted on having a formal Sunday dinner. She felt it was a good way to learn proper dining etiquette." Cherub said in thought.

"You may have to help me with the etiquette thing, I'm not really used to it." Harry said nervously as Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Not a worry Mr. Potter. This affair won't be nearly that formal. I believe that what Cherub wears as casual attire should be sufficient for this evening. This isn't a major gallery and Miss Nightshade isn't a well known artist so I anticipate a more relaxed atmosphere." Andrew said calmly.

"So what do you think? Should we go?" Cherub asked as he looked at his classmates.

Everyone seemed to be in agreement, then Cherub noticed Chuffery looking at him timidly.

"Chuffery, we're going to London to an art gallery this evening. You may go with us if you would like, or you may stay with James if you would rather." Cherub said seriously.

Chuffery scooted closer to his brother on the couch and said in almost a whisper, "I want to go with you."

"Good. I hope we'll all have fun." Cherub said and hugged Chuffery gently.

"Are you sure he isn't going to be bored? I mean, an art gallery doesn't sound like too much fun for a kid." Draco said hesitantly.

"Chuffery is only two years younger than we are. I can't see any reason he shouldn't be included in anything we do." Cherub said, making a conscious effort to keep any trace of offense out of his voice.

Harry, Draco and Hermione looked at Chuffery with surprise. They had all assumed him to be younger due to his more childish manner.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll just have a word with Millicent and James so they can prepare your things." Andrew said as he stood.

"Would you send James in here when you finish?" Cherub asked quietly.

"Of course, I'll be right back." Andrew said and left the room.

"I've never been to an art gallery before. This should be exciting." Hermione said with a smile.

"I've never been around muggles before. I may need your help to behave properly." Cherub said with concern.

"It's not that hard. Just don't talk about magic and don't call them muggles to their faces." Harry said with a smile.

"And remember not to use any magic at all. The ministry of magic is very strict about the underage use of magic in muggle communities." Draco said seriously.

"It shouldn't be a problem. But I think Chuffery should leave his wand at home, just so he isn't tempted." Cherub said in thought.

"Chuffery has a wand?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Yes. If you asked him, he might show you a spell." Cherub said with a smile at his brother.

"Chuffery, would you like to show us a spell?" Hermione asked in a voice that was obviously geared toward a young child.

Chuffery leaned close to Cherub and asked, "What is the 'denny' words?"

Cherub smiled and whispered the words to Chuffery.

With all the flourish of a practiced wizard, Chuffery pulled out his wand and clearly said, "Denfizia Mariposa."

The centerpiece of the coffee table once again erupted in butterflies to the delight of everyone present.

"How beautiful." Hermione said as she watched the display.

"He just got his wand last night so he hasn't had a chance to learn any other spells." Cherub said with a smile of pride at his brother.

"Magico Quellum." Chuffery said with a grand waive of his wand and all the butterflies vanished in sparkles.

Draco got a curious look and asked, "That isn't a standard spell."

"No, it's an enchantment on his wand. He can dispel any spell that he casts with that one phrase." Cherub said as he hugged Chuffery with one arm.

"If he can do magic this well at nine years old, he should be outstanding by the time he goes to Hogwart's." Harry said in thought.

"Well, I hope to give him an advantage in spell casting and potions. But he will still have plenty to learn." Cherub said with a relaxed smile.

"You're going to teach him potions?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yes. We have an excellent potions lab and an extensive library. I plan to show him enough to be able to do a basic potion himself, then if he shows an interest, he can work at his own pace. I'll be home on weekends to answer any questions he might have." Cherub said casually.

Andrew entered the room followed by James.

"You wanted to see me Mr. Nightshade?" James asked formally.

"Yes. As Andrew told you, we will be going out tonight. If you and Catty would like to take the rest of the evening off after we leave, Chuffery and I will attend to our guests tonight." Cherub said with a gentle smile.

"Yes. We would like that very much Mr. Nightshade. Thank you." James said with cheer in his voice.

"Then it's settled. You two have a good evening." Cherub said warmly.

James gave a single nod and withdrew from the room.

"They told me what you did last night." Andrew said with a smile.

"It wasn't that much." Cherub said with a shrug.

"It was to them." Andrew said warmly.

"Come on. Give." Draco said impatiently.

Cherub smiled and said, "James and Catty were going to leave so they could be together. Under the household rules of my father, household staff couldn't... fraternize. If they were caught they would be immediately fired. Last night I offered James a higher wage and removed that restriction."

"And offered them the guest house, gave James a substantial bonus and provided a ring for him to propose with." Andrew added with a kind smile.

"Well, they belong together. I've been watching them sneaking around for nearly three years. I'm just glad I was able to help." Cherub said with a blush.

Hermione looked at Cherub curiously, but didn't say anything.

* * * * *

"Come in here a minute while Hermione is getting ready." Cherub said and led Harry and Draco into his bedroom.

Once inside, a three-way hug was established immediately.

"Harry, I'm going to miss you so much." Cherub said, letting his regret be heard in his voice.

"That goes for me too Harry, I don't know how such a goody-goody Gryffindor was able to get to me so completely, but you did it." Draco said in pain.

"I know guys. And while I'm alone in my bed in the Gryffindor rooms, I'll be thinking of you both. Wishing I was with you." Harry said as tears began to fall from his eyes.

"Cherub and I can wait until you have Gryffindor put back together. You can come back when you're ready." Draco said hopefully.

"I wish it were that simple. I really do. The problem is, the light of that hope shining before me might distract me from doing what is best for my house. I can't have that distraction, and besides, it wouldn't be fair to you. If things work out someday that we can be together

without hurting our houses, then we can start fresh. I love you both, more than I've ever loved anyone. But as far as us being boyfriends..." Harry trailed off, unable to talk past the lump in his throat.

Cherub whispered to complete the thought.

"...it's over."

Part 4: December

Chapter 10

"Granger... Hermione... you look great." Cherub said in astonishment.

Hermione blushed at the praise.

"Wings is right. You look very nice. I feel underdressed now." Draco said as he looked at Hermione appreciatively.

"You'd better watch out guys, you'd risk your Slytherin reputations if it got out that you were admiring a Gryffindor." Harry said in a playful voice.

"Good point." Draco said and pretended to lose interest.

Cherub smiled and said, "Yes. Thank you Harry... By the way Draco, you look lovely this evening."

All four classmates broke into laughter at the statement.

"Are you ready for me to do the glamour?" Andrew asked as he walked into the room.

"Ready when you are." Cherub said happily.

Andrew pulled out his wand and began chanting a very complicated spell.

Within two sentences, Cherub was completely lost as to what he was doing and could only stand still and admire Andrew's mastery of spell casting.

Long minutes passed as Andrew continued his spell. All four students were enthralled by the complexity of the spell and the ease with which Andrew was casting.

In a final crescendo of words, Andrew made a complicated gesture with his wand and the magic was released.

Silence fell over the room and Cherub finally had to ask, "Did it work?"

"It's perfect." Draco said in astonishment.

"If I didn't know you had wings, I wouldn't be able to guess." Harry said as he walked behind Cherub to look at his back.

"You matched the color of his shirt perfectly... it's seamless." Hermione said in wonder.

"Glamours were my specialty when I went to Hogwart's. I often thought of doing something with it after graduation, but practicality demanded that I take up a more lucrative career." Andrew said gently.

"Then are we ready to go?" Draco asked, finally snapped out of his daze.

"Not yet. We're waiting for Chuffery." Cherub said casually.

"Do you think he's having trouble?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"No. James is helping him. I'm sure he'll be along any minute." Cherub said with assurance.

As if on cue, Chuffery and James walked into the sitting room.

"You look great Chuffery. We're going to have to get dressed up more often." Cherub said as he looked at his brother consideringly.

"He's right Chuffery, you look very nice." Hermione said with a gentle smile.

"You're pretty." Chuffery said as he looked at Hermione carefully.

Cherub looked at Chuffery's expression and felt a wave of panic when he recognized what was happening.

"My p..." Chuffery began to say but Cherub grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out of the room.

* * * * *

Chuffery stared at Cherub with fear and confusion.

Cherub recognized the look and said in a soothing voice, "I'm not mad at you Chuffery. I just forgot to tell you something earlier and it's important that I tell you now."

Chuffery looked at Cherub hesitantly.

"While we're with other people, we don't talk about pee-pees, butts or anything we do in the bathroom. Can you remember that?" Cherub asked carefully.

Chuffery nodded shyly.

"I'm sorry if I scared you, but I thought you were just going to tell Hermione that she made your pee-pee hard." Cherub said with a smile.

Chuffery shyly nodded again.

Cherub hugged him tightly and said, "It's okay to have a hard pee-pee, but it's not okay to talk about it with everyone. You can talk with James or I about it when we're alone. Is that okay with you?"

Chuffery nodded again, this time looking much relieved.

"Good. Then let's go to London." Cherub said happily.

"You look funny without wings." Chuffery said as he stared at Cherub's back.

"Yes. I think so too." Cherub said and put out his hand for Chuffery.

* * * * *

"You have a very nice carriage Mr. Klegg. It's very comfortable." Draco said, obviously trying to make conversation.

"It belongs to the Nightshade family. My own carriage is too small to carry all of us comfortably, and since Cherub and Chuffery are going to visit their cousin, it seemed justified." Andrew said pleasantly.

"So what is your cousin like?" Hermione asked, trying to keep some sort of conversation going.

"I have no idea. I've never met any of my family but Father, Grandfather and Chuffery." Cherub said simply.

With that being said, the conversation was effectively killed and the group continued their journey in silence.

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"Remember Chuffery, we don't talk about magic or muggles while we're here." Cherub said seriously as the carriage made its way down the London streets.

"Or pee-pees or butts or things you do in the bathroom." Chuffery said seriously.

The tense silence they had endured finally erupted into laughter as everyone, even Andrew, found the statement to be incredibly funny.

"That's exactly right Chuffery." Cherub said with a smile as he hugged his brother happily.

The group stepped out of the carriage and were surprised to find that it appeared to be a limousine from the outside.

"It might have seemed odd to drive up in a carriage." Andrew said with a shrug.

Cherub automatically took Chuffery's hand and followed behind Andrew to the front door of what appeared to be someone's home.

As they approached the door, it was opened by a doorman.

"We're here to see Miss Nightshade's works." Andrew said to the doorman.

"Yes. Welcome, come right in." The doorman said happily.

"Thank you." Chuffery said as they passed.

Cherub gave his brother an appreciative squeeze at the polite gesture.

* * * * *

Hermione gasped and turned away from the painting she was looking at.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked as she started to walk away.

Hermione couldn't talk, she was blushing over every inch of exposed skin and hiding her face in her hands.

Cherub and Harry looked at the picture that had embarrassed her and tried to figure out what was wrong.

"It's just a flower." Cherub said in confusion.

"It looks kind of funny." Harry said as he tilted his head to look at it from a different angle.

Draco walked up and joined them.

"Are you guys into looking at dirty pictures now?" Draco asked curiously.

Harry and Cherub turned at the same time to look at him in question.

"It's a vagina... a big one." Draco said as he looked at the picture queasily.

Harry and Cherub looked at the picture again.

"Oh... ewww." Cherub said as he realized what he was seeing.

"I kind of like it." Harry said with a timid smile.

"Oh Potter." Draco said with a sigh and shook his head as he walked away.

A moment later Cherub followed, leaving Harry staring at the picture looking at it first one way, then another.

* * * * *

"I think your cousin might be a lesbian." Draco said as he stood by Cherub and Chuffery in front of a picture of six naked young women, frolicking in a fountain.

"Maybe she just can't draw penises?" Cherub speculated.

Draco got an amused look and said, "I suppose that's a possibility... only you would think of that."

Cherub smiled at Draco, then put an arm around Chuffery and asked, "How are you doing Chuffery?"

"Them pictures don't have no clothes on."

Cherub gave Chuffery a quick squeeze and said, "That's right. Some people think that people without clothes are nice to look at. How do you think those girls are feeling in the picture?"

A woman approached to look at the painting as Chuffery said, "I think the little girls are having fun playing in the water, but the oldest one feels bad because she's too old to play."

Cherub looked at the picture again, trying to see what his brother saw.

"That's exactly right young man." The woman said from behind them.

Cherub, Chuffery and Draco turned to see a woman in her late twenties, dressed simply, but elegantly.

"You've just given the best summary of this painting I think I've ever heard." The woman said to Chuffery with a warm smile.

"I'm December Nightshade." She said as she looked at the three boys before her.

"She's got a name like mine!" Chuffery said with excitement.

The woman gave Chuffery a curious look.

"December Nightshade, I'd like for you to meet Chuffery Nightshade." Cherub said formally.

"A Nightshade? Here?" December said in shock.

"We came to see your work." Cherub said with a shrug.

"And you are?" December asked cautiously.

"I'm Cherub Nightshade, and this is my friend Draconis Malfoy." Cherub said in a pleasant tone.

"A Malfoy too?" December asked with wide eyes.

Cherub gestured to Harry to come over.

"December, this is our other friend, Harry Potter." Cherub said, getting a sadistic little thrill from heaping one shock on top of another.

"THE Harry Potter?" December asked in a gasp and looked as if she were about to faint.

"You can just call me Harry if you want." Harry said shyly.

December took a deep breath and steadied herself before a concerned look came over her face and she asked, "Are you guys here alone? Did any of your parents come with you?"

Cherub didn't fully understand her apprehension, but understood enough.

"No. We are here with an adult, but he isn't going to spread the word of where to find you." Cherub said quietly.

December seemed to wilt with relief and said, "Then I'm happy to have you here. And I'm overjoyed that you appreciate my art."

"The only family I've ever met was my father and grandfather. When I heard about you I wanted to meet you." Cherub said seriously.

"Your father?" December asked, then looked Cherub in the eyes.

"You're Gideon's aren't you?" December asked cautiously.

"Yes." Cherub said flatly, seeing no reason that he should act thrilled by the fact.

"How is Uncle Gid these days? Still pointing fingers and thinking he's above everyone else because he's the oldest?" December asked with a hint of anger in her voice.

"Yes, but he may have come down a few notches in the past twenty-four hours." Cherub said with a timid smile.

December looked at Cherub with interest.

"When Grandfather passed away, Father didn't receive anything." Cherub said with a devilish smile.

"Oh my... I didn't know about Grandfather, but that's good news about your father. Please tell me he was left penniless and thrown into the gutter." December asked hopefully.

"No. I believe there are laws against littering. But he's being kept on a short leash. He's receiving a monthly allowance... as long as he behaves himself." Cherub said happily.

"Even better... you don't have to do without things because of him do you?" December asked with concern.

"No. Father sold me and my brother for the price of the allowance. We have other guardians now, people who actually *like* kids." Cherub said happily.

"That's great to hear. I'm glad to see you didn't inherit your father's pompous ass. Magda can watch the front for a while, come back and talk with me for a few minutes. I haven't heard anything about the family in years." December said hopefully.

"We need to let Hermione and Andrew know where we'll be." Cherub said seriously.

"I'll find them." Harry said and ran off before anyone could suggest otherwise.

* * * * *

"Oh, I see you found her." Andrew said with a smile.

"Mr. Klegg?" December asked with a look of horror.

"Please December, call me Andrew. Don't worry about me telling anyone where you are, I work for Cherub now so he's the only one I would tell." Andrew said gently.

December looked from Andrew to Cherub and asked, "He works for you?"

"Grandfather left everything to me." Cherub said shyly as he held Chuffery close.

"Oh really?" December asked as she led the group into the back room.

"Grandfather didn't seem to have a very high opinion of the rest of the family." Cherub said carefully.

December let out a loud laugh, then said, "I guess that's one way of putting it. Everyone else in the wizarding world thinks the Nightshades are a high and mighty family and Grandpa Ari is selfish for not spreading the wealth amongst his children. What they don't know is that all his children are a bunch of idiots."

"Grandfather said my father was the best of the lot. If that is true, I think you're being too kind to my aunts and uncles." Cherub said as he took a seat on a comfortable couch.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who sees it. My own family threw me out when I decided that I wanted to live with my lover, Magda." December said frankly.

Draco flashed a 'told'ja so' look at Cherub.

"Fortunately, living among muggles has inspired me to discover my other talents and my art is really starting to catch on." December said happily.

"I noticed that Harry was particularly interested in one of your paintings, and you heard Chuffery's analysis of the girls at the fountain." Cherub said, amazed at how comfortable he felt with his cousin.

"Yes. And now that I know you're a Nightshade, that makes it even more special. It's always been my hope that my work might be the catalyst to bring an appreciation of art for something beyond the monetary value to a member of my family." December said happily.

"Well, I think it's safe to say you've done that. Even though we were only looking at them a few minutes, they inspired thought and discussion." Cherub said with a smile and glance at Draco.

"I'm just curious, Uncle Gid and Aunt Lyd were both blond. Did you two change your hair color?" December asked with a speculative look.

Cherub smiled and said, "Yes, in fact, we changed Chuffery's hair this morning."

December's eyes seemed to glaze over for a second, then she said, "Hold still for a second. I'm going to get something."

Cherub looked at everyone sitting around the comfortable little room and asked, "Is everyone having fun so far?"

"Actually, I am. Your cousin is quite amusing." Draco said with a smile.

"I find your cousin's outlook to be much like that of Aristotle's. I am content in her company." Andrew said peacefully.

"That's got to be the best compliment you could have paid me." December said as she hurried back into the room carrying a camera.

"Would you two mind if I take a few pictures? I just love the contrast between your hair color and your skin... and your eyes. I think I would like to use you for a painting." December asked hopefully.

"Do we have to be naked?" Chuffery asked Cherub with concern.

Cherub shrugged and looked at December with question.

"No cutie, you don't have to get naked. I just want a few pictures of your faces so I can be sure to get the facial details right." December said with a smile.

Cherub nodded at Chuffery, then they both nodded at December.

"You don't need to pose for me or anything. Just look at me." December said, then snapped the picture.

"Now look into each other's eyes." December instructed.

She snapped the next picture, then said, "Now look up."

She snapped another picture, then said, "Last one. Look at each other's knees."

Cherub tried to keep the laughter out of his expression as he did as he was told.

"Would you mind taking one of all of us?" Cherub asked as she began to lower the camera.

"All?" She asked hesitantly.

"Harry, Draco, Hermione, Chuffery and I?" Cherub asked hopefully.

December stopped and got a speculative look.

"I'll take your picture, but please let me pose you." December said in thought.

Cherub nodded and motioned for his friends to join him on the couch.

"Cherub, move to the right side of the couch and put Chuffery on your lap." December said and scooted back from the couch and looked through her camera.

"Draconis, put your right arm around Cherub's shoulder and hold Chuffery's right hand with your left hand." December said in thought.

"Chuffery needs to scoot a little to the right to keep the shadow off Cherub's cheek, just a little." December said professionally.

"Hermione and Harry, sit next to Draconis on the couch, side by side and look at each other."

After a moment of considering, she said, "Harry and Hermione, switch places and do the same thing."

They did so and looked at each other. December hurried to Harry and fussed with his hair a little to emphasize his scar.

"Hermione, take Harry's left hand. Harry, put your right hand on Draconis' knee." December said in concentration.

After looking through the camera she said, "Harry, move your hand a little higher up Draconis' leg."

Harry moved his hand an inch or so higher.

"Perfect. Now Cherub, tell me, is Draconis your friend?" December asked in a leading tone.

"My best friend." Cherub said with a smile.

"Hold that expression. Draconis, does Harry's hand make you feel a little nervous?" December asked quickly.

"Well... I guess that's one word for it." Draco said with a look of hesitance.

"Perfect. Hold that look. Hermione, do you trust Harry?" December asked with excitement.

Hermione got a peaceful look and said, "Yes."

The picture snapped, followed by two more.

"I'm not usually one for photography, but I think this will be a masterpiece. Where should I send the prints?" December asked as she put down her camera.

"All of us except Chuffery are students at Hogwart's, you can owl them to us there." Harry said as he removed his hand from Draco's leg.

"I don't have access to owls." December said with a note of regret.

"I will give you an address that you can post them to. Just address them to my attention and I will see that everyone gets one." Andrew said with a peaceful smile.

"Thank you Mr. Klegg. I should be getting back into the gallery. I'm hoping to sell a painting or two tonight so I can buy some more supplies... and pay rent." December finished quietly.

"December, if you need some money to finance your art career, I'll be willing to..." Cherub began to say.

"Thank you Cherub, but it wouldn't work. It's the struggle that inspires me. If you paid my way, I wouldn't be able to put any emotion into my paintings." December said seriously.

"I understand. Then why don't we go look around the gallery again. Perhaps we could find a painting or two that we'd like to buy." Cherub said in thought.

"I know which one I want." Harry said with a smile.

Cherub and Draco both gave identical eye rolls as they stood.

"Come along, I'd hate for any of my adoring public to get away without meeting me." December said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Chuffery, would you like to have this picture at home?" Cherub asked as they stood before the picture of the girls at the fountain again.

Chuffery nodded and said, "I think Millicent would like it."

Cherub smiled and hugged his brother.

"Potter bought 'the flower'." Draco said as he approached.

"You can't be serious. Where will he put it?" Cherub asked in disbelief.

"He thinks it will liven up his room at Gryffindor." Draco said as he tried to restrain a smile.

Cherub fought to hold in a chuckle, but couldn't as he said, "I'd love to be there to see the looks on everyone's faces."

"Especially Professor McGonigal's." Draco said, not even trying to keep from laughing.

Cherub held Chuffery close as he broke down into full laughter.

"Shhh. We're in a public place." Hermione scolded as she approached.

"Don't worry Hermione, I have a feeling that this place needs more laughter. Just as long as you aren't making fun of my painting, that is." December said as she approached from the other direction.

"No, not at all." Cherub said, trying to regain control.

"We were just anticipating the reaction to Harry's purchase when he displays it in his dorm at Hogwarts." Draco said with a grand smile.

"He isn't!" December asked in a gasp, then started to chuckle as Draco nodded.

"Which house?" December was barely able to ask.

"Gryffindor." Cherub said, pulled back into the laughter.

Hermione and Chuffery were even beginning to be effected by the infectious laughter.

December had tears in her eyes as she let out a hearty laugh at the thought.

"Is... is McGonigal... still head... of Gryf... Gryffindor?" December asked, barely able to speak.

Draco and Cherub nodded with tears of laughter in their eyes.

December dashed away from the group and into the back room, bellowing with laughter.

"It's been ages since I've heard December laugh like that. Thank you." An elegant red-head said as she approached.

"It was our pleasure." Cherub said with a smile.

"I am Magda Belfleur. It's wonderful to see a group of young people taking an interest in art." Magda said warmly.

"Our main reason for coming was to meet my cousin, December. But now that we're here, I think we're all enjoying the paintings." Cherub said honestly.

"Your cousin... then you're?..." Magda trailed off, looking for the correct words.

Cherub nodded.

"Oh my. Well, December always seemed to be apprehensive about her family finding her. I'm glad it didn't turn out as badly as she expected." Magda said uncertainly.

"She's probably right to be concerned. The rest of the family won't hear where she is from us." Cherub assured.

Magda gave a warm smile and said, "I'm glad she has someone in her family that accepts her. Even though she doesn't say it, I know the rejection of her parents shook her to the core."

December walked out of the back room wearing a smile.

"I've just met your cousin dear. You have a delightful family." Magda said happily.

December stopped in her tracks and got a considering look, then said, "You know Magda, I think I can honestly say that you're the first person to ever say those words to me."

Cherub gave a full smile and said, "Well Chuffery and I are honored to be your family. I hope now that we've met, we will be able to behave like a proper family and keep in touch."

"I would like that." December said with a smile.

"I'm busy at Hogwart's during the week, as you can imagine, but perhaps one weekend when you both are free you could come to Dour Oaks as my guests. It could be like a holiday for you." Cherub said warmly.

December looked at Magda with question and received a nod.

After a look around to see that no one was listening, December asked, "You *do* realize that Magda isn't a witch?"

Cherub smiled and said, "I had assumed as much. As long as our occasional use of magic won't be offensive to you. Both of you will be welcomed in our home."

"I don't know where Dour Oaks is." December said uncertainly.

"Just get in touch with Mr. Klegg and he'll make arrangements for you to visit." Cherub said with assurance.

"Yes. That will work. We'll let you know when we're free for a weekend, it sounds like a wonderful idea." December said happily.

"Good, now that that's settled. Chuffery would like to purchase this painting as a gift." Cherub said and indicated the fountain picture.

"Oh, how nice!" December said with delight.

"It is one of my favorites." Magda said with a smile.

"Andrew can arrange payment if that's alright with you December?" Cherub asked gently.

"Yes, of course. Would you like to take it now or have it delivered?" December asked in a professional tone.

"What do you think Chuffery? Would you like to give it to Millicent tonight or have it delivered later?" Cherub asked seriously.

"Tonight. I don't want to wait." Chuffery said with a grand smile.

"You said Millicent?" December asked curiously.

"Yes, why?" Cherub asked with concern.

"Oh, I'm just going to put a personalized message on the back of the canvas to her. If I ever become a famous artist, it increases the value of the painting." December said as she walked to the painting and carefully took it down.

"I think Millie will love it." Andrew said from behind the group.

"I think so too. It was Chuffery's idea to get it for her." Cherub said proudly.

"There, I'm going to take it in back to wrap it for travel." December said with a smile.

"Thank you December." Cherub said warmly.

* * * * *

As the group got into the carriage, all of them were in high spirits.

"Thank you for suggesting this Andrew. It was wonderful." Cherub said happily.

"Yes, I never expected that going to an art gallery would be so much fun." Hermione said with a smile.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Would you like to stop somewhere for a snack before we return to Dour Oaks?" Andrew asked with a voice of contentment.

"I think a snack would be lovely. Do you think we could get into Madame Chinchbug's?" Cherub asked as he hugged Chuffery gently.

"I'm sure Madeline will be able to find a place for us." Andrew said, then moved to the front of the carriage to tell the driver of the change in plans.

"I never expected to have fun this weekend. I was sure I was going to be miserable the entire time." Hermione said honestly.

"I'm glad we were able to change your plans then. It's nice to be able to enjoy the company of friends outside Hogwarts, I feel more free to be myself." Cherub said speculatively.

"Friends?" Hermione asked cautiously.

Cherub realized what he said, then nodded as he said, "If you want to be Hermione. Now that I've had some time to get to know you, I can see why Harry considers you a friend."

Hermione considered for a moment, then said, "I need to know something first."

"Ask anything you like." Cherub said seriously.

"I need to know why Harry left us to clean up the mess in potions class on the second day." Hermione said seriously as she looked at Harry.

"Because I don't like being bullied." Harry said simply.

"What?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"I had fully intended to stay and help you clean up. I never even considered otherwise until Ron *told* me that I couldn't go with Draco and Cherub. It may be a personality flaw, but I can't stand to be bullied. If he would have asked, or even said nothing I would have stayed, but as soon as he ordered me to stay... I couldn't help it. I had to defy him to prove that he couldn't tell me what to do." Harry said honestly.

"I didn't think of that." Hermione said quietly.

"When I left the classroom, Cherub and Draco were kind enough to allow me to join them. They showed me courtesy and respect... I started to question some of the things I believed up to that point." Harry continued.

Hermione nodded in thought.

"We talked. All of us shared our thoughts about a variety of things and I realized that Cherub and Draco aren't that different from us. They just base their actions on thinking more than feeling." Harry said frankly.

"And everything Ron and I said after that was like us trying to bully you into coming back." Hermione said in deep concentration.

"Yes. If you could have calmed down and listened to me, we could have resolved everything easily. But as long as you couldn't respect me enough to listen to me, I couldn't stay in Gryffindor. If the sorting hat hadn't made it's declaration about me belonging in two houses, I probably would have withdrawn from you and become isolated from everyone in Gryffindor and visited with Cherub and Draco when I was able." Harry said in thought.

"I think I understand. You weren't behaving the way we expected, so we thought the Slytherin had done something to lure you away, when in reality, we were driving you away." Hermione said seriously.

"Yes. Tell me honestly. What kind of example could I be to Gryffindor if I allowed myself to be so easily dominated?" Harry asked as he looked around the carriage at everyone.

"But allowing Ron's demands to influence your behavior isn't that much different." Cherub said in thought.

"Maybe not. But I can see that now. At the time, I was driven only by my feelings, now I better understand the importance of recognizing my motives before I act." Harry said as he looked Cherub in the eyes.

Hermione nodded at the statement and said, "I think that's a lesson a lot of us need to learn."

"That's the main reason I'm switching houses." Harry said honestly.

"We're here." Andrew said into the silence that followed.

* * * * *

As Cherub walked into Madame Chinchbug's he couldn't help but say, "Bon jour Madeline."

Andrew watched Cherub with pride, enjoying the fact that he was automatically taking charge of the situation.

The elegantly dressed woman looked at him in surprise, then did a double take at Cherub's apparent wingless state.

"We went to London, I had to hide them." Cherub said with a shy smile.

Madeline nodded and said, "I'm sorry to hear about Ari, he was a dear, sweet man."

"Thank you Madeline. He held you and your family in high regard. He even mentioned that he changed your diaper once." Cherub said with a teasing smile.

"Oh, that Ari." Madeline said with a chuckle.

"Do you happen to have a table available?" Cherub asked with a gentle smile.

"Of course Cherub, come with me. You can have the same dining room as yesterday if you like." Madeline said pleasantly.

"That would be nice."

The group followed Madeline to the small dining room and took their seats.

"Marissa will be in to take your orders in a few minutes." Madeline said as she sat menus at each place.

As soon as Madeline left the room, Harry said, "This is a really nice place."

"Yes, my Grandfather took us here last night. He thought highly of it." Cherub said in a subdued tone.

"He mentioned that you three had spaghetti. That delighted him no end." Andrew said with a smile.

"It was quite good. I think we all enjoyed it." Cherub said and glanced at Chuffery.

A shy nod was Chuffery's only response.

"What should we have?" Harry asked as he looked at the menu.

"If you would like, I could just order the snack feast. It's a selection of snack foods prepared for the number of people attending. There's enough variety that everyone can have something they enjoy and it gives you the opportunity to try new things." Andrew said informatively.

"That sounds like a good idea to me." Cherub said as he sat down his menu.

Everyone else seemed to agree, then Cherub thought to ask Chuffery.

"Would you like to try some different foods, or would you like to have spaghetti again tonight?"

Chuffery looked around the table and whispered, "Basketti."

"Do you think they could put a serving or two of spaghetti in with the feast?" Cherub asked Andrew casually.

"I'm sure they will if you ask." Andrew said with a smile.

Cherub remembered what his grandfather said about being one of Madame Chinchbug's best customers and smiled in return.

* * * * *

The meal was interspersed with general conversation about professors, studies and the goings on at Hogwarts.

The trip back to Dour Oaks focused primarily on what needed to be studied in preparation for Monday and it was decided that the next morning would be devoted to study.

Upon arriving at Dour Oaks, Andrew remained in the carriage and said his goodbyes, accepting a hug from each of the children as they disembarked.

As Cherub left the carriage, the glamour left his wings. Cherub noticed and gave Andrew a last smile and wave before walking to the front door.

"Did you have a good evening?" Millicent asked in a cheerful and welcoming voice as she opened the front door.

"A wonderful evening Millicent. Chuffery even bought something while we were out." Cherub said and indicated the wrapped painting he was carrying.

"How nice." Millicent said with a delighted smile.

"Come in the sitting room and we'll show it to you." Cherub said as he led the way.

* * * * *

"Oh, it's lovely. It shows such a counterpoint of emotions, maturity and frivolity, joy and longing..." Millicent said as she looked at the painting carefully.

"Look at the message on the back." Cherub said with an impish grin.

Millicent carefully moved to the back of the painting and read:

Millicent,
Chuffery saw this painting and thought you would enjoy it.
He's a perceptive child, so I have no doubt that you will.
I hope it brings you joy.
December Nightshade

Millicent looked at Chuffery in surprise, then ran to hug him.

"Thank you Chuffery, it's wonderful." Millicent said joyfully.

Chuffery was speechless but returned the hug with an expression of bliss.

"I'm glad you like it Millicent. Chuffery was sure you would." Cherub said with a glow of happiness.

"Yes. Yes, it's wonderful. It's such a beautiful painting, and it's even more beautiful because Chuffery bought it for me." Millicent said as she continued to hug Chuffery tightly.

"Do you have any idea where you'd like to put it?" Cherub asked with a smile.

Millicent slowly released Chuffery from the hug, then gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek as she whispered, "Thank you Chuffery."

Cherub noticed the look on Chuffery's face and had no doubt that his little brother was not only incredibly happy, but also having 'pee-pee' issues.

Millicent got a considering look, then said, "If you have no objection Mr. Nightshade, we could put it in the entry hall. I believe the color would compliment the room more than the floral picture that is in there now."

Cherub smiled and said, "I think you're right. If Harry and Draco will help me, we can put it up right now."

The group moved as one into the entry hall and quickly took down the rather common picture of a vase of flowers and replaced it with Millicent's gift.

"Oh yes. Quite lovely." Millicent beamed.

"It's like it was made for this room." Hermione said with appreciation.

Draco, Cherub and Harry stood back and looked at the picture carefully.

"What do you think?" Millicent asked hesitantly.

"Oh, it's beautiful. I was just noticing how it draws your attention immediately. It's become the focus of the room." Draco said in thought.

"Yes. That's it exactly." Harry said with a nod.

Millicent smiled with pride as she stood with the boys and looked at the picture.

* * * * *

"If you will excuse me, I'm going to get Chuffery ready for bed." Cherub said as they left the entry hall.

Millicent stepped forward and gave Chuffery a quick kiss on the cheek before saying, "Thank you again Master Chuffery, I love my gift."

Chuffery smiled with pride.

"Go on. This will give us a chance to talk about you." Draco said with a smile as he made a 'shoo' motion.

"Yeah, take your time." Harry said with a chuckle.

Cherub laughed and led Chuffery away by the hand.

* * * * *

"Go ahead and start your bath water." Cherub said as he watched Chuffery undressing.

"Will you bathe with me?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

Cherub thought about it for a few seconds before saying, "Of course I will. But we have guests, so I won't be able to take too long."

Chuffery finished undressing and started the water in the tub.

Cherub took his time undressing, as he watched his brother getting them each some soap and a wash cloth.

He made a point of setting Herbert, his wand, on the edge of the tub so it wouldn't feel left out.

Memories of the frightened, dependent boy of the day before filled Cherub's mind as he eased into the tub of warm water.

"The water is just right Chuffery." Cherub said with appreciation.

Chuffery smiled with a look of accomplishment.

"Did you have fun today?" Cherub asked casually as he picked up the soap and wash cloth.

Chuffery nodded with excitement as he took his own wash cloth and soap.

Cherub felt as if he were looking in a mirror as Chuffery mimicked his every motion as he washed himself.

"I'm very proud of you Chuffery. You behaved very well today. You're the perfect brother." Cherub said in a distant voice.

Chuffery looked surprised by the statement, then moved to give Cherub a hug.

Cherub enjoyed the feeling of his brother hugging him, skin to skin and knew that this was pure love.

The hug lingered for long minutes until Cherub finally said, "We'd better finish and get you to bed. I don't want the others to have to wait too long."

Chuffery kissed Cherub on the cheek, then eased away to finish his washing.

* * * * *

As the brothers were drying themselves, Cherub said, "Did you notice that you bathed yourself tonight?"

Chuffery looked at Cherub curiously.

"You ran the water, washed yourself and now you're drying yourself. You don't need someone to help you anymore." Cherub said happily.

Chuffery got a look of regret and fear.

"Don't worry Chuffery. I'll bathe with you as long as you want me to. I'm just saying that now you have a choice. You don't *need* someone to bathe you. If I'm here with you it's because I want to be, not because I have to be." Cherub said carefully.

Chuffery smiled with relief and hugged his brother again.

Cherub lifted his naked little brother and carried him to the bedroom.

* * * * *

"So what did I miss?" Cherub asked as he walked into the sitting room.

"Not much, I think all of us are fighting to stay awake." Harry said with a sleepy look.

"Well I don't have anything else planned tonight. If you want to turn in, we can get up early in the morning and get our studies out of the way in time to do some flying." Cherub suggested.

"That sounds good to me." Draco said quietly.

"Me too." Hermione said and stood.

"Then it's settled. No one is going to wake us up in the morning, so just come down to the family dining room when you're ready for breakfast." Cherub said as he led the way upstairs.

"Sounds like a plan." Draco said absently.

"Goodnight." Hermione said as they approached her room.

"Goodnight Hermione, sleep well." Cherub said gently.

"You too." Hermione said with a small smile and went into her room.

Cherub made a 'come on' motion and continued on to his bedroom.

* * * * *

"You guys are welcomed to sleep in my room tonight if you want... this may be our last time." Cherub said seriously.

Draco nodded sadly.

Harry looked unsure but finally said regretfully, "One last time."

All three boys began to undress. They stripped to their underwear then looked at each other in question.

Normally they would change into pajamas at this point, that being the proper thing to do at Hogwart's.

Cherub gathered his courage and pulled his underwear down and off.

Draco followed Cherub's lead and was soon naked too.

Harry looked at Draco and Cherub hesitantly and finally lowered his own underwear.

No words were spoken as Cherub climbed into his massive bed. Harry and Draco followed him in, leaving Harry in the middle.

Cherub made a gesture to the lamp and the room fell into darkness except for pale moonlight shining in through the window.

Draco carefully snuggled into Harry's left side, allowing his entire body to come in contact with Harry's bare skin.

Cherub rested his head on Harry's shoulder and aligned himself along Harry's right side.

Harry kissed Draco's cheek, then turned and kissed the top of Cherub's head.

This was not a night for passion, it was a night for togetherness.

Perhaps their last.

Chapter 11

Cherub woke to the wonderful feeling of Harry and Draco in his bed.

He opened his eyes to find Draco looking at Harry with a sad expression.

Cherub's heart broke as he realized that this might be the last time they would ever wake this way.

"I love him." Draco whispered.

"Me too." Cherub whispered in return and felt a tear falling down his cheek.

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Cherub and Draco both watching him.

"I'm sorry." Harry said, letting all of his regret be clearly heard.

"I know. So am I." Draco said sadly and leaned down to give Harry a gentle kiss.

Cherub laid back down to snuggle into Harry's shoulder.

"I wish..." Harry began to say, but couldn't continue.

"I know." Draco said again and laid down to take the opposing position from Cherub.

Silence fell over the room as all three held close, not wanting the precious moment to end.

* * * * *

"Cherub?" A young voice called into the room.

"Come in Chuffery." Cherub said and wiped the tears from his eyes.

Chuffery saw Cherub's tears and became worried and fearful.

"Come on Chuffery, everything is fine." Cherub assured as he extended an arm to his brother.

Chuffery climbed on the bed and snuggled into his brother's embrace.

"Why are you sad?" Chuffery asked in a small, frightened voice.

"It's a long story Chuffery and I really can't talk about it now. Please just hold on to me and give me a kiss and I'll feel better." Cherub said quietly.

Chuffery gave Cherub a kiss on the cheek and hugged him tightly.

"We'd better get up. We've got some studying to do." Draco said with regret.

"Yeah." Harry muttered.

Draco reluctantly got out of the bed and started dressing with the clothes he had worn the night before.

"Draco is naked!" Chuffery gasped.

Cherub smiled and said, "Draco and Harry are my friends, so it's okay for us to be naked together sometimes."

Harry got out of the bed and tried to hide himself as he gathered his clothes that he had dropped on the floor.

Chuffery got a considering look before asking, "Is Draco and Harry your boyfriends?"

Cherub felt a stab of pain before saying, "Yes, today they are."

Chuffery looked at his brother curiously, but didn't question any further.

"We'll meet you downstairs." Draco said as he pulled on his shirt.

"We'll be there in a few minutes." Cherub said quietly.

Draco left the room, followed by Harry.

"I love you Chuffery." Cherub said as he held his brother tightly.

"I love you too Cherub." Chuffery said sincerely.

Cherub gave his brother a long kiss on the cheek, then climbed out of the bed.

"Why was you naked with Harry and Draco?" Chuffery asked as he watched Cherub dress.

"Do you remember how good it feels to hug when we're in the bathtub together?" Cherub asked casually.

Chuffery nodded seriously.

"Well we needed that kind of hug last night. It made us all feel better to be able to hold each other." Cherub said as he pulled on his shoes.

Chuffery thought about the words, but didn't say anything.

"Come on. I'm sure Catty has something ready for breakfast." Cherub said with a tender smile for Chuffery as he held out his hand.

Chuffery hurried off the bed and took Cherub's hand to follow.

* * * * *

"I don't understand." Hermione said in a huff.

"I know. It's hard to explain. When you've done it a few times you just get used to the timing." Cherub said with frustration.

"You said you have a potions lab here. Can we just brew this potion to see what the book is talking about?" Draco asked in an aggravated tone.

"I think that's a good idea. We've studied everything else and I don't think going over and over this reading is going to explain it any further." Cherub said and closed his book.

"Chuffery, we're going to brew a potion, would you like to come with us?" Cherub asked in a more gentle tone.

Chuffery looked up from the book he was reading and shook his head.

"We'll be in the potions lab off the study if you change your mind." Cherub said with a small smile.

Chuffery nodded and looked back at his book.

* * * * *

"Professor Severus Snape is here for you Mr. Nightshade." Millicent said from the potions lab doorway.

"Please show him in here Millicent." Cherub said as he watched the cauldron carefully.

"I can see it, the texture changed just then." Hermione said as she watched.

"Stir it, it feels different too." Cherub said and handed the stirring spoon to Hermione.

"It's kind of like it's thicker." Hermione said in thought.

"Good morning class." Professor Snape said as he walked into the potions lab.

"Good morning Professor." All four said in unison.

"I must say, when I was invited to visit your home, I believed you would be somehow unlike you are in class." Professor Snape said as he looked around the well equipped lab.

"We are **dressed** differently." Draco said with a smile.

"There is that." Professor Snape said as he walked to see what they were working on.

"We were studying for class tomorrow and were having difficulty with the way the book described the series of reactions in this potion." Cherub explained as he backed away from the cauldron.

"I must admit that you aren't the first to voice that failing in the book. I'm glad to see that you've gone to such lengths to achieve understanding." Professor Snape said with approval.

"One does what one can." Cherub said in a haughty voice.

"Would you have a moment to discuss why I have been invited?" Professor Snape asked more quietly.

"Yes. Come into the sitting room and we'll discuss it." Cherub said and led the way out.

* * * * *

As they walked to the sitting room, Cherub spotted Millicent in the entry hall, looking at the picture.

"Millicent, would you please have Chuffery join us in the sitting room? When last I saw him he was in the library." Cherub asked with a smile.

"Right away Mr. Nightshade." Millicent said quickly and hurried away.

Cherub led the way into the sitting room and gestured to Professor Snape to have a seat.

"You have a lovely home Mr. Nightshade. When I first encountered you, I was in doubt that you were related to the legendary Nightshade family." Professor Snape said slowly.

"I was trying to be unobtrusive. Before the wings, that was somewhat possible." Cherub said with a smile.

"I suppose it was." Professor Snape said with a hint of humor under his words.

Chuffery walked into the room and took a seat by Cherub.

"Professor Snape, this is my brother, Chuffery Nightshade. Chuffery, this is one of my teachers, Professor Severus Snape." Cherub said formally.

"Hi." Chuffery said shyly as he stayed close to Cherub's side.

"Good morning young man." Professor Snape said with a considering look at Chuffery.

"I'm sure Mr. Klegg filled you in on most of this already. Our father has given up his parental rights to Chuffery, and to me for that matter. If I were of legal age to do so, I would gladly assume guardianship of Chuffery, however that is not possible. The next best thing I could think of to do is ask you to assume legal responsibility for Chuffery until I am able to do so." Cherub said carefully.

"What do you see as my practical role in this agreement?" Professor Snape asked seriously.

"That would be at your discretion for the most part. Chuffery has been moved into this house and I have a household staff who are quite capable of taking care of him. A tutor will be hired this week to see to his studies and he has a valet for companionship and guidance. If you do not wish to be an active part of his life, I see no reason that you should need to do more than stop by to check on his well being every so often. If you prefer a more active role, then you may visit as often as you like we could even have a room prepared for you so you could stay the night. The only limitations I will insist on is that Chuffery not be moved out of this house. This is his home until he chooses otherwise." Cherub finished in a firm voice.

Professor Snape looked at Cherub, then Chuffery before saying, "So, should I agree to your proposal, I will be Chuffery's legal guardian. He will in essence become my child."

"Yes." Cherub said seriously.

"And what happens if my thoughts on child rearing differ from yours?" Professor Snape asked carefully.

Cherub thought about the question, then asked, "Would you ever punish a child by inflicting pain?"

"No. Never." Professor Snape said without hesitation.

"That being the case, if my opinions differ from yours, I will voice my concerns, but ultimately support your decisions." Cherub said carefully.

"Have you discussed this with Chuffery?" Professor Snape asked quietly.

"Not in any detail. I thought it best to know your feelings on the matter before I tried to explain what was going to happen." Cherub said and gave Chuffery a gentle hug.

"I discussed this matter with Headmaster Dumbledore at some length. Since he is your guardian, we felt that we should be united in our vision regarding both your futures." Professor Snape said seriously.

Cherub nodded in understanding.

"It is my intention to be involved in both your lives in the following manner. Saturday will be a day for the three of us to go on outings, visit shops, go to the countryside, perhaps go to the coast if the weather is favorable. Those pursuits may carry on into the evening. If not we may go to enjoy some theatre or attend a social gathering." Professor Snape said carefully, looking for a reaction.

"I will accept your offer and have a room here so I may spend Saturday night. Sunday will be for our relaxation. We may choose to read, or work on potions... strictly for fun mind you, or perhaps just talk." Professor Snape said in his 'classroom' voice.

"Sunday afternoon, Headmaster Dumbledore will join us and stay for dinner. After dinner, we will return to Hogwart's together." Professor Snape said seriously.

"It's going to be hard on Chuffery to be alone after doing so much all weekend." Cherub said as he held Chuffery close.

"If you have other suggestions, I would be willing to consider them. Headmaster Dumbledore and I worked for many hours trying to find a way to give you and Chuffery a family." Professor Snape said intensely.

"A family?" Cherub asked in surprise.

"Yes Cherub. A family. Albus and I are going to do everything in our power to give you both the family you should have had all along." Professor Snape said with a note of tenderness.

"You called me Cherub."

"Yes. And outside Hogwart's you may call me Severus if you like, or Uncle Severus if that is more comfortable. Cherub, you don't have to raise your brother alone. You don't have to make all the decisions by yourself. You don't have to be strong all the time." Severus said in a gentle voice.

Cherub's eyes filled with tears as he nodded.

Severus walked over to Cherub and gave him a gentle hug.

"Are you going to be my new daddy?" Chuffery asked in confusion.

"I suppose you could say that." Severus said with a small smile.

"When we're alone like this, can we call you Dad?" Cherub asked hopefully.

"Yes, and if you have no objection, I will call you my sons." Severus said warmly.

Cherub noticed that Chuffery had a slight look of confusion.

In a low voice, Cherub tried to explain, "Our Father didn't want us. He sold us when he had the chance. Severus wants us, he asked to be our Dad."

Chuffery smiled happily at Severus and hugged him tightly.

"The little guy's got quite a grip doesn't he?" Cherub said with a smile.

Severus gently put a hand on Cherub's shoulder and guided him into the hug.

* * * * *

"What about my friends?" Cherub asked suddenly.

"I believe they are still in the potions lab. I would expect them to be in there for another thirty-five minutes at least from the potion they were working on." Severus said seriously.

"No. I mean, in all those plans you were making, my friends weren't included." Cherub asked with concern.

"Oh, I see. That's difficult. To accomplish including your friends in our plans you'd need the Headmaster's approval and a member of staff, perhaps even a member of the faculty to supervise. I dare say, it might be impossible." Severus said seriously.

Cherub looked at Severus in confusion, then saw the teasing grin trying to break out on Severus' face.

"You were joking?" Cherub asked with disbelief.

"It has been known to happen Mr. Nightshade." Professor Snape said in his 'classroom' voice.

Cherub hugged Severus tightly and said, "I wish this had happened last week. Now that you're here it's too late to fix everything."

"Pray tell, what has gone so horribly wrong that it can't be fixed?" Severus asked with concern as he held a brother in each arm.

"Well... um... Draco and Harry and I... we kind of..." Cherub stammered.

"Are boyfriends. The whole school knows, go on." Severus said firmly.

Cherub pulled out of the hug and looked at Severus in horror.

"Maybe not the whole school. Perhaps just the head of Slytherin house who was told by the prefect." Severus said with a 'gotcha' smile.

"Widget told you?" Cherub asked with concern.

"Only to ask my advice. He wasn't betraying your trust, he was protecting your interests." Severus said with assurance.

Cherub nodded and said, "Harry is going back to Gryffindor."

"It is his choice to do so... Wait, did he break up with you to change houses?" Severus asked suddenly.

"Yes. I understand why he's doing it... but it hurts Dad. How can I make it stop hurting?" Cherub asked as he hugged Severus tightly.

"Do you love him?" Severus asked in nearly a whisper.

"I love them both." Cherub said as a sob escaped.

"Are you absolutely certain?" Severus asked seriously.

"Yes." Cherub whispered.

"Then come along." Severus said as he straightened his posture, signaling that he was ready to be let go.

"What are you doing?" Cherub asked in confusion as he wiped his eyes.

"Dad is going to fix this." Severus said firmly, and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"Mr. Potter, a word with you." Professor Snape said severely.

Harry snapped to attention and walked to stand before Professor Snape.

"It has come to my attention that you are going to return to Gryffindor." Snape said coldly.

"Yes Professor." Harry said with a trace of fear in his voice.

"And in doing so, you are going to sever your relationship with Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Nightshade." Professor Snape continued sternly.

Harry turned to see Hermione's reaction but was stopped by Professor Snape's next words.

"I thought I would never meet a person with more cruelty than James Potter, but the son surpasses the father." Snape said with venomous intensity.

Harry looked at Professor Snape with wide disbelieving eyes.

"Your father and his Gryffindor friends taunted and teased me with the utmost cruelty our entire time at Hogwart's..." Snape said and leaned in to look Harry straight in the eyes.

"...But even they wouldn't be so unbelievably heartless as to profess friendship and love, then just walk away when the relationship became inconvenient." Snape continued in a whisper.

"I... I didn't." Harry began to say.

"You should do well out in the world Mr. Potter. If you can throw away love with so little regard for others, you shouldn't have any problem with trivial things like morals or legalities. I dare say, you might rise to the highest levels of the ministries one day... provided you don't turn your back on any of your victims." Snape said with an icy firm voice.

"I... But..." Harry stammered as tears began to fill his eyes.

"Yes Mr. Potter? You had something to say?" Professor Snape asked patiently.

"Gryffindor needs me. If I'm with Draco and Cherub then Gryffindor can't trust me." Harry blurted out.

"And what do you believe Gryffindor needs you to do?" Professor Snape asked carefully.

"To lead them so they can rebuild. Help them get back to where they were before. Make them strong again." Harry said with a plea for understanding in his voice.

"Where they were before was on the brink of madness with paranoia, vigilanteism and cruelty. And it is your wish to make them strong again? To lead them? You have surprised me yet again Mr. Potter. I believed you to be a heartless beast, but I didn't imagine you to have the megalomaniacal dreams of becoming the dictator of a crazed hoard of barbarians." Snape said with menace in his eyes.

"I wasn't..." Harry said, then thought about what Professor Snape was saying.

"I was..." Harry said in realization, then looked at Professor Snape with fear.

After a long moment of silence, Professor Snape said, "Prioritize Mr. Potter. Deal with the most important things first. Take Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Nightshade somewhere private to talk. When you have things resolved, we will talk again."

Harry looked at Draco and Cherub and motioned them to follow.

* * * * *

"So how bad did I screw up guys?" Harry asked as he sat on the edge of Cherub's bed.

"No worse than we did. We helped you make this decision." Cherub said seriously from Harry's right.

"And if you think about it, we actually only made one major mistake, all the rest came from that." Draco said reasonably.

Harry turned to his left to look at Draco in question.

"We didn't talk to Professor Snape about it sooner." Draco said seriously.

"Where does this leave us?" Cherub asked with worry.

"Professor Snape said it best, you guys have to be my first priority. I was being stupid. As soon as I started feeling good about myself, I thought I could take on the whole world single-handed. And that was my real mistake. I was throwing away everyone who gives me advice and support. Whatever I decide to do, you guys have to be there with me. There's no way this can work otherwise." Harry said seriously.

"What about next time?" Cherub asked quietly.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked with concern.

"If you broke it off once, what's to stop you from doing it again?" Cherub asked with pain at saying the words.

"I don't know Cherub. I could promise you that I wouldn't do it again, but even I'm having trouble trusting me now." Harry said quietly.

"Without trust, it won't work." Draco said flatly.

"It takes time to build trust, so we'll give it time. For right now, faith will have to do." Cherub said with a hopeful look at Harry.

Draco smiled and said, "I can accept that."

"Are you guys sure?" Harry asked with worry.

"We have faith in you Harry. So make whatever promise you're going to so we can get you back to Professor Snape for your next butt chewing." Cherub said with a smile.

"Okay, here it goes." Harry said and took a deep breath.

"I promise that no matter what happens next, I will love you both, I will listen to your advice and I will be there when you need me." Harry said as a solemn vow.

"It works for me." Cherub said with a nod.

"Good one Potter." Draco agreed.

"I have a promise to make too." Cherub said quickly.

Draco and Harry waited expectantly.

"I promise that I will love you both, be there when you need me, listen to your advice, and get help when all three of us are screwing it up." Cherub said with a smile.

"You told Professor Snape!" Harry said in realization.

"If you beat him over the head with the obvious long enough..." Draco said with a smile.

"I was hurting and needed help. I stand by my decision." Cherub said firmly.

Harry thought about it and finally said, "Yeah, I guess we don't know it all."

"But sometimes we forget that." Cherub said with a smile.

"My turn." Draco said seriously.

Cherub and Harry waited.

"I promise to love you both, listen to your advice, be there when you need help, and to refuse to accept whatever lame excuses either of you come up with to try and break us up." Draco said firmly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Cherub asked playfully.

"It means that next time Potter comes up with a plan that involves us breaking up, I promise to say 'no'." Draco said with a smile.

"That would have saved a lot of trouble." Harry said with a nod.

"Then I guess we're done. It's fixed isn't it?" Cherub asked as he looked from Draco to Harry.

"As far as I'm concerned." Draco said frankly.

"Yeah. Sorry guys." Harry said shyly.

"One quick kiss, then you're up for round two with Snape." Draco said with a smile.

Harry was pulled into a hug and given a deep kiss by Draco, then Cherub.

"Thanks for sticking with me guys." Harry said shyly as they started toward the door.

"That's what friends do." Cherub said offhandedly.

* * * * *

"I trust that all is resolved?" Professor Snape asked regally as he stood before Harry.

"Yes Professor. Thank you." Harry said shyly.

Cherub and Draco walked into the sitting room and took seats on either side of Chuffery.

"Then perhaps we could sit down and discuss what is to be done for Gryffindor." Professor Snape said with icy authority.

Cherub leaned in and asked, "Are you okay Chuffery?"

Chuffery leaned in and gave Cherub a kiss on the cheek.

Cherub hugged him quickly and turned his attention to Professor Snape.

"We think the problem may have to do with the Gryffindors feeling instead of thinking out their actions." Harry said seriously.

"A common misconception." Professor Snape said in an even tone.

"Then I don't understand why Gryffindors act the way they do." Draco said as he sat forward in his chair.

"How do they act? Mr. Malfoy?" Professor Snape asked in the same cold chopped tone he used in class.

"They're heroes. They jump in and fight for what they believe is right. They make sacrifices to protect others..." Draco trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

"If Chuffery were put into Gryffindor without the benefit of the sorting hat or being told what it means to be a Gryffindor, how do you think he would behave? Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape asked in a measured tone.

Harry thought about the question and finally said, "I guess the longer he was there, the more likely he would be to start acting like them. Constant exposure to their beliefs would eventually cause him to identify with them."

"Correct. Now extrapolate all that we have just discussed and formulate a hypothesis."
Professor Snape said seriously.

Harry thought carefully about what Professor Snape told him before they went upstairs, and what they just discussed.

"Over time, various behaviors have crept into Gryffindor and become accepted as 'Gryffindor Qualities'. Each successive year of students have passed them on, sometimes altering them from what they originally were. The farther you get from the origin of Hogwart's the more abstracted the concept and ideals become until we arrive at a time when the house can no longer sustain itself because the attitudes and behaviors are counterproductive to the well-being of the house." Harry said in thought.

"So you end up with a house full of people trying to live up to abstract concepts of what is acceptable and reasonable." Hermione speculated.

"Correct." Professor Snape said with approval.

"So when someone like Ron shows up who has problems dealing with his anger. His distorted view of the world is encouraged rather than being recognized as a problem." Draco said in surprise.

"And the Gryffindors fed his paranoia and encouraged his erratic behavior rather than seeking help for him." Cherub said in wonder.

"So what happened to Ron was our fault." Harry said in a lost voice.

"It appears that the Gryffindors exacerbated an existing problem." Professor Snape said with a nod.

"It seems the worst qualities of each of us were encouraged. I was so sure that I was right." Hermione said in a distant gaze.

"I was working under the assumption that Gryffindor was without problems when we arrived and that what happened the first two weeks caused all this." Harry said in deep thought.

"And if your assumption had been correct, your original plan might have had a chance of working, though at a terrible personal cost." Professor Snape said seriously.

"It's sorted Uncle Severus, leave it be." Cherub said quietly and didn't notice the curious looks from Harry, Draco and Hermione.

After a long minute of silence, Harry finally asked, "So how do we fix it?"

"By example, Mr. Potter." Professor Snape said reasonably.

Harry looked at Professor Snape with question, then at Draco and Cherub.

"You have friends in both houses!" Hermione said suddenly.

"The process has already started. Miss Parkinson invited Miss Waynethroppe to the Slytherin table for a meal this past week. Perhaps the Gryffindors should extend the same courtesy." Professor Snape said with a smile.

"We go to the same classes, there's no rule that says we can't study together." Harry said in wonder.

"Wait, I agree that this sounds nice, but how does it fix the problem?" Cherub asked in confusion.

"Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape prompted.

"Because my time in Slytherin helped me get back what Gryffindor is missing. Gryffindors aren't meant to jump in without thinking. But generations of Gryffindors being told to jump in first, ask questions later has led to what we have now... And Slytherins aren't meant to ignore their feelings!" Harry finished in a flash of realization.

"The common belief is that Slytherin disregard their feelings in favor of their reasoning." Professor Snape acceded.

"So was Harry acting like a Slytherin or a Gryffindor when he came up with his plan?" Draco asked curiously.

"Mr. Potter is quite capable of using the worst qualities of both simultaneously." Professor Snape said in a serious voice.

"Hey! I asked you guys before I did anything! It wasn't just me." Harry said playfully.

"So let me get this straight. All we have to do is be friends and everything will be okay?" Cherub asked in confirmation.

"Some encouragement for your two houses to do the same would be beneficial." Professor Snape said casually.

"Which house should I be in?" Harry asked the group.

"You should sleep in Slytherin." Draco said immediately.

"But you should sit with Gryffindor." Hermione said reasonably.

"Headmaster Dumbledore said that you can be either, you just have to change your colors." Cherub said casually.

Chuffery snuggled into Cherub's side, wanting attention.

"If you guys will excuse me, I think my brother would enjoy some flying." Cherub said with a smile.

Harry, Draco and Hermione all looked up at the suggestion.

"There will be sufficient time to discuss serious matters later. Proceed." Professor Snape said seriously.

Faster than a Quidditch Snitch, all the children were out of the room.

Chapter 12

"Professor Snape?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape responded coldly as he watched the other children flying around the backyard.

"Were you telling the truth about my father?" Harry asked with a note of fear in his voice.

"Although I may have been overly dramatic in certain of my statements and reactions to make a point, I assure you that I in no way embellished on the actions of your father, Mr. Black or Mr. Lupin. If anything, I underplayed the events." Professor Snape said firmly.

"So that's why you don't like me." Harry said distantly, not meaning to say it out loud.

"You are the image of your father. I see you and all the years of trying to forget those days are undone. Although I make an effort not to seek retribution on you for the actions of your father, there are times that my hostility finds its way to the surface." Professor Snape said in an introspective tone.

Harry thought about the words, and finally said, "I'm sorry Professor Snape. I'm sorry my father treated you badly."

Professor Snape kept his gaze fixed on the sky as he said, "You have nothing to be sorry for Mr. Potter. His choices and actions were not yours. For that reason, it is I who should apologize to you. I suppose it is my own failing that I seem to be unable to deal with those unresolved feelings from the past."

"Maybe what you did today will help you to do that." Harry said in thought.

"How so Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape asked curiously.

"By stopping me from going through with my plan to rebuild Gryffindor into what it was before, you may have broken the cycle. Instead of getting revenge for what you endured, you've seen to it that others won't have to go through the same thing in the future." Harry said seriously.

Professor Snape closed his eyes and thought about the statement a moment before saying, "Perhaps Mr. Potter. Perhaps."

* * * * *

"Where did you go Harry?" Cherub asked as he landed with Chuffery in his arms.

"Professor Snape and I were discussing my father. It seems the histories of former Gryffindors are as distorted as anything else. All this time I thought I was following in the shadow of a bigger-than-life hero. It turns out that he was a person just like us. He did some good, brave things, but he wasn't perfect and wasn't loved by all." Harry said, then glanced at Professor Snape.

Chuffery ran to Severus and gave him a warm hug.

"Did you have fun Chuffery?" Snape asked in a voice filled with warmth.

"It was fun. Cherub even did loopy-loops." Chuffery said with a giggle.

Severus ruffled Chuffery's hair and said, "Yes. I was watching. If you'll go in and wash up, I believe we will be having lunch shortly."

Chuffery got on tippy toes and pulled Severus down slightly to give him a kiss on the cheek before running into the house.

"I wasn't going to ask about the 'Uncle Severus' thing until later, but now I'm really curious." Harry said frankly.

"Uncle Severus is going to be Chuffery's legal guardian. He's also going to step into the role of parent, since Chuffery needs that stability in his life." Cherub said in thought.

"As grown up as I like to act, it's too much for me sometimes. I'm not ready to be responsible for everything in my life. So Uncle Severus has offered to let me be a kid for a while longer and let him make the decisions and deal with the problems." Cherub said, a bit shyly.

Harry looked at Cherub with question and concern.

Professor Snape noticed Harry's look and explained, "He isn't giving up anything except the burdens he is too young to be expected to carry. Headmaster Dumbledore will oversee the administration of his holdings to see that everything is properly handled. I will make the decisions having to do with Cherub and Chuffery's home and education. Cherub and Chuffery will be free to focus on their studies and other pursuits of childhood."

"Thank you Uncle Severus." Cherub said warmly and hugged Professor Snape tightly.

Professor Snape laid a hand on Cherub's head and said, "It's my pleasure Cherub. Now go in and wash up for lunch."

Cherub mimicked his brother's earlier action and gave Professor Snape a quick peck of a kiss on the cheek before hurrying inside.

"Mr. Potter, would you retrieve the others and tell them to wash up for lunch?" Professor Snape asked seriously, trying not to show any reaction from Cherub's kiss.

"Yes Uncle Severus." Harry said with a mischievous grin before mounting his broom to leave.

Professor Snape allowed a small smile to escape before turning with a swish of his robes and walking into the house.

* * * * *

"Headmaster Dumbledore will be joining us for dinner this evening." Professor Snape announced as he was seated at the table.

Hermione and Draco looked at Professor Snape in shock.

"After the meal, we will return to Hogwart's together. So be sure to have your belongings packed before dinner so they can be put in the carriage." Professor Snape said calmly.

Millicent, Catty and James walked into the dining room carrying plates of food, placing them before each person at the table.

"Thank you James." Chuffery said with a smile as he was given his plate.

Cherub smiled at his brother's politeness and said, "Yes. Thank you Catty, this looks wonderful."

A course of agreement went around the table as everyone received their food.

"Although I am aware of your academic standing in my class, I am curious to know how all of you are doing in your other classes." Professor Snape said before taking a bite of his food.

"I think we're all doing well Professor Snape..." Harry began to say.

"Severus, please. You may return to calling me by my title when we return to Hogwart's." Professor Snape said carefully.

"Of course Uncle Severus." Harry said, then looked to see if Professor Snape was going to raise any objection.

The only reaction was an almost imperceptible nod.

"As I was saying, we are all doing well. I think we are at the top of our classes." Harry continued.

"Except for transfigurations. Theodore Nott and Greg Goyle both had perfect scores on the last exam. The rest of us missed at least one question." Cherub said seriously.

"I couldn't believe Goyle scored higher than I did." Hermione said in a low voice.

"He has a talent for transfigurations. When he reads the text, it makes perfect sense to him. I suspect its something like Cherub's ability with potions." Draco said, trying to ignore the derogatory implication in Hermione's statement.

"I don't have any special ability with potions, just an interest and years of practice. I think what Greg has is a natural talent. He can explain the reading in a way that is easy to understand." Cherub said seriously.

"Do you think he would mind if I asked him some questions when I have trouble understanding the reading?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"I think he would be flattered. You might even talk to him about forming a transfigurations study group. I know a lot of us have difficulty with it." Draco said in thought.

"That would be good... I just don't know how the other Gryffindors would react." Hermione said hesitantly.

"Invite them. After that, it's out of your hands." Cherub said before taking another bite of food.

"These potatoes are quite good. Your cook is very talented." Professor Snape said with appreciation.

"Yes, Catty used to help Mrs. Puckett, the old head housekeeper, with cooking. Mrs. Puckett's cooking was dreadful and Catty's contributions to the meal were sometimes the only edible food I would get." Cherub said quietly.

"It's good to know that Chuffery will be well fed while we're away at school." Professor Snape said seriously.

Cherub smiled at his brother and nodded with agreement.

"I want to go to school too." Chuffery said quietly.

"I know Chuffery. As soon as your Hogwart's letter comes, you'll be able to go to school with the rest of us." Cherub said slowly.

"Until then, you need to concentrate on your studies so you'll be ready for Hogwart's." Professor Snape said seriously.

"When will you be coming back?" Chuffery asked in a small voice.

"We will be returning Friday evening to stay next weekend. But I was thinking that if no one objects, Chuffery and his valet could come to Hogwart's to attend Wednesday's Quidditch game." Professor Snape said seriously.

"That would be great. Would you like that Chuffery?" Cherub asked with excitement.

Chuffery nodded quickly.

"I will see to the arrangements. Miss Granger, I had meant to ask earlier, are you feeling any ill effects from your encounter with the troll on Friday?" Professor Snape asked curiously.

Hermione froze in mid bite, then quickly swallowed before saying, "No. I'm fine. I was just a little scared is all."

"You seemed to have been quite subdued for the past few weeks, I'm glad to see your mood improved." Professor Snape said casually.

"Um... yeah. We talked about things and I'm feeling a lot better." Hermione said shyly.

"It is good that you are able to resolve these issues yourselves. The faculty notice these things and have the desire to offer assistance, but are for the most part unified in the belief that students should be left to sort out their difficulties on their own. Otherwise, we would be encouraging your dependence on us to solve your problems for you. Though satisfying in the short term, it leads to problems when you leave Hogwart's." Professor Snape said in a distant tone.

"That must be difficult. To have to watch and care about what's going on but not interfere. I don't know if I could do it." Harry said introspectively.

"I am not always able to resist the temptation. As you recall Mr. Potter, this very day I was unable to restrain myself from making my point of view known." Professor Snape said seriously.

"If I am to call you Severus, then you should call me Harry."

"As you like."

"I appreciate that you gave us your point of view. If you hadn't I would be facing a very lonely, unhappy future at Hogwart's." Harry said seriously.

"I am pleased that I was able to spare you that Harry." Professor Snape said, the tone of his voice stating clearly that he knew the lonely, unhappy life intimately.

"Any happiness Cherub, Draco and I enjoy in the future is in large part thanks to you." Harry said, then looked quickly to see Hermione's reaction.

"Chuffery told me that you three slept naked together last night." Hermione said with a smile.

"Mr. Malfoy, how have you been adjusting to being away from your family?" Professor Snape said quickly, obviously trying to change the subject.

"You know, I haven't noticed any problem. My family has always been somewhat distant. Being away at school isn't that much different from being at home. I still have the sense that my parents are just an owl message away, just like always." Draco said in thought.

"How fortunate. Many first year students have difficulty being away from their families for the first time. One of the primary functions of the houses of Hogwart's are to give something resembling a family structure, to provide some sort of comfort and guidance." Professor Snape said seriously.

"It's worked very well in Slytherin. Widget and Prang are excellent examples of what we are trying to become." Cherub said in a considering voice.

"Percy and Monica are good too. I'm glad Percy was able to keep his prefect position. He's really a great person." Hermione said with a gentle smile.

"You can thank Mr. Widget for that." Professor Snape said seriously.

"What?" Hermione asked in surprise and looked around.

Draco looked at the others and decided to tell the story.

"Originally Percy was going to lose his position and be grounded for a week. Widget talked to Professor Snape and Headmaster Dumbledore and talked them into giving Percy a different punishment."

"Why?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Because Widget has known Percy since they were both first years and he knew how much it would hurt Percy to lose the prefect position. And since that whole thing happened, they've started to become friends." Draco said seriously.

"Percy doesn't know, does he?" Hermione asked carefully.

"No, I don't think so. And I don't think we should tell him. I think the last thing Percy and Widget need is a sense of obligation between them. Right now, they're just two people who share an interest in Quidditch." Draco said firmly.

Hermione nodded.

"What would you like to do this afternoon?" Professor Snape asked as he put his napkin on his empty plate.

"I hadn't really thought about it. Does anyone have any ideas?" Cherub asked as he looked around.

"Can we do magics?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

Everyone looked at each other with question before Professor Snape finally said, "I think that would be a wonderful idea Chuffery."

"We have an extensive magic library. Now that I have a better understanding of the basics, there are a few things I'd like to try." Cherub said seriously as he stood.

"I would like to practice a few of the spells for class this week." Hermione said as she got up to follow.

"Do you have your wand Chuffery?" Draco asked as he also stood.

Chuffery pulled out his wand and happily waved it for all to see.

Professor Snape was the last to stand.

With a peaceful smile, he followed the group out of the room.

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"I did it!" Chuffery called with excitement as he stood before an erupting shower of sparkles.

Professor Snape put a hand on Chuffery's shoulder and said, "You did that perfectly Chuffery."

"Good job Chuffery. I don't know that spell, would you show me how to do it?" Harry asked with a smile.

Chuffery nodded quickly and ran to Harry's side.

Professor Snape moved to stand beside Cherub and said, "Your brother is quite special. I believe with the proper encouragement and guidance, he will be a powerful wizard one day."

"Maybe. But for right now, I just want him to be a happy kid." Cherub said seriously.

"It is good to know that you have your priorities in the proper place Cherub. All too often children are forced to behave as miniature adults. Together we will walk the fine line of giving him responsibilities to foster his sense of importance and accomplishment without robbing him of the joy and innocence of childhood."

"I don't think we are going to have any problem reconciling our philosophies of child rearing." Cherub said with a smile.

"That is good to know since you, yourself are a child and will be treated as such." Professor Snape said seriously.

Cherub discretely put an arm around Professor Snape's waist and whispered, "Thanks Dad."

* * * * *

"Headmaster Dumbledore has arrived and is in the sitting room." Millicent said from the library doorway.

"Is it that late already?" Cherub asked as he looked at the clock.

"We still need to pack." Draco said quickly.

"We still have some time before dinner. Go and pack now, then come down to the sitting room and visit with Headmaster Dumbledore for a while." Professor Snape said reasonably.

"Will you help me pack Chuffery?" Cherub asked hopefully.

Chuffery nodded quickly.

"Come on." Cherub said and held out his hand.

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"I don't want you to go." Chuffery said quietly as Cherub put items into his suitcase.

"I know. I would rather not go either but I have to." Cherub said quietly.

"Daddy Sevrus said that James and I can see you on Wednesday." Chuffery said in a mumble.

"That's right. You're going to get to see Harry play Quidditch. I'll talk to Dad and see if you and James can join us for dinner that evening, I'd like to introduce you to my other friends." Cherub said as he closed his suitcase.

"You have lots and lots of friends." Chuffery said proudly.

"They're your friends too Chuffery. Harry, Draco and Hermione all like you a lot." Cherub said honestly.

Chuffery looked at his brother with wide eyes.

"I don't just love you Chuffery, I like you too. That means we're not only brothers, but friends too." Cherub said carefully.

Chuffery jumped off the bed where he'd been sitting and ran to pull Cherub into a hug.

"I tell you what, why don't you write me a letter tomorrow. James can show you the proper way to address it to me at Hogwarts. You can tell me everything that you're doing. When I get your letter, I'll read it and write one back to you. That way maybe I won't miss you quite as much." Cherub said as he hugged Chuffery fiercely.

Chuffery nodded into Cherub's chest.

Cherub kissed the top of Chuffery's head, then gave one final squeeze, signaling the end of the hug.

"Come on, I want to introduce you to Headmaster Dumbledore." Cherub said as he took his brother's hand.

* * * * *

"What a fine looking young man. Chuffery is it?" Headmaster Dumbledore said in a booming voice.

"It's okay Chuffery. Headmaster Dumbledore is nice." Cherub said quietly.

"Everyone, do sit down. We aren't at the school. Let's not stand on ceremony." Dumbledore said happily.

"How was your trip Headmaster?" Cherub asked cautiously, trying to make conversation.

"It was delightful. I can't remember when I last had the experience of sitting quietly and watching the scenery pass me by. Quite relaxing." Dumbledore said pleasantly.

"I was expecting you earlier in the day Headmaster, was there a problem?" Professor Snape asked carefully.

"You must call me Albus. I fully intend to call you Severus. To answer your question, there wasn't a problem as much as a concern." Dumbledore said as he looked at the group consideringly.

After a long moment of thought, Headmaster Dumbledore said, "I suppose this situation concerns most everyone here."

Everyone looked around at the vague statement, trying to think of which of many situations to which the Headmaster might be referring.

"I received a visitor today. A ministry official, in fact." Headmaster Dumbledore said gravely.

Everyone sat closer, listening with rapt attention.

"Hogwarts is under no obligation to even consider their request, but they have made a most convincing argument." Dumbledore continued.

"What argument might that be Albus?" Professor Snape asked cautiously.

"It has been suggested that we may consider reversing our decision to expel Mr. Ronald Weasley." Dumbledore said carefully.

Silence filled the room as everyone considered the statement.

"Mr. Weasley has undergone a series of evaluations and a cause has been established for his behavioral problem. In the interest of preserving Mr. Weasley's privacy, that cause won't be discussed, it isn't relevant to this discussion. But it is believed that with regular counseling sessions and the proper supervision, Mr. Weasley will be able to overcome his issues."

Dumbledore said slowly.

"Surely he would receive the best help in a clinical setting." Professor Snape said seriously.

"Not necessarily. Three independent professionals have evaluated Mr. Weasley and come to the same conclusion. If he is to overcome his anger and gain control of it, he *must* do so at Hogwart's. In his mind it is his great failure and the source of his ruination. If he can return and succeed, it will be of more benefit than years of therapy." Dumbledore said carefully.

"How are you defining success?" Cherub asked speculatively.

"A very intelligent question Mr. Nightshade." Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Please call me Cherub while we're here." Cherub said quietly.

"Yes, yes of course Cherub. And to answer your question, success is defined as Mr. Weasley becoming a contributing, self-confident, functioning member of the Hogwart's community." Dumbledore said seriously.

Cherub nodded in thought.

"You want us to be his friends." Draco said without emotion.

"In an ideal world, I would ask you to do so. However, this being reality, it isn't that easy. Mr. Weasley must form his own friendships and work to maintain them. What I am going to ask of you four, five including Severus, is to ease the way for him. There is bound to be rumor and speculation regarding his return. I am not so naive as to think an announcement by me at breakfast will do much beyond ensuring that every person in the school is aware that Mr. Weasley is once again amongst us." Dumbledore said carefully.

"What do we do if he has trouble?" Harry asked quietly.

"Notify me immediately and I will contact his counselor. Mr. Weasley will be meeting with his counselor daily after classes." Dumbledore said in thought.

"So it's been decided." Professor Snape said seriously.

"Yes Severus. Occasionally we receive a student that has such problems that he is unable to integrate into our school and we are forced to turn him away for the benefit of the rest. But I honestly believe that Mr. Weasley is not to that point... yet. If we simply ease his path in the beginning, it is my hope that he will be able to find the proper way for himself." Dumbledore said seriously.

"Mr. Nightshade." Millicent said from the sitting room door.

"Yes Millicent?" Cherub asked with distraction.

"Dinner will be served in the formal dining room." Millicent said quietly.

"Thank you Millicent." Cherub said with a smile.

"Good. Good. I'm quite hungry after that carriage ride." Headmaster Dumbledore said with a smile.

"Then please allow me to show you to the formal dining room." Cherub said gently.

"Thank you my boy. Aristotle was quite proud of you, you know." Dumbledore said as he stood.

Cherub smiled and said, "And he claimed you as his best and dearest friend."

"That makes you and Chuffery my grandsons after a fashion doesn't it? Come along Chuffery, help your Grandfather Albus to the formal dining room." Dumbledore said gently.

Chuffery hurried to join his brother at Headmaster Dumbledore's side.

"It's right down this hall." Chuffery said quickly as he took the lead.

Cherub smiled in contentment as he walked beside 'Grandfather Albus'.

* * * * *

"I'll see you on Wednesday." Cherub said quietly as he held Chuffery in his arms.

"I'm going to miss you a lot." Chuffery whimpered.

"I'll miss you too little brother. Remember to write to me tomorrow. I'll be waiting for your message." Cherub said seriously.

"I promise. I'll write you a really big letter." Chuffery said earnestly.

Cherub smiled and said, "I'll be happy with whatever you send me."

Chuffery nodded into Cherub's shoulder.

"Listen to James and Millicent and do as they say and remember that you are not to go flying. I'm going to get you a new broom and teach you how to fly safely." Cherub said firmly.

"Cherub? We need to be going." Harry said hesitantly.

"Give me a kiss. I've got to go." Cherub said as tears formed in his eyes.

Chuffery held Cherub tight and gave him a big smacking kiss on the lips.

Cherub laughed and said, "I think that was a big enough kiss to last me till Wednesday."

Chuffery got a speculative look and said, "If you need another one before Wednesday, Harry and Draco can give you one."

Cherub smiled and gave Chuffery one final squeeze before handing him over to James' care and climbing into the carriage.

As the carriage pulled away, Cherub looked at his brother and remembered the reluctant blond haired boy he'd met two days before.

Cherub lifted his hand in a final wave goodbye as he saw his brother jumping and waving goodbye in the distance.

Part 5: Ron

Chapter 13

He looked at the majestic sight of Hogwart's and felt an inner tremble of fear.

The words of Madame Crustemple, his counselor came to his mind, reminding him that he was a person with his own value and reason for being.

After a deep inhale to brace himself, he stepped off the carriage and waited as the driver unloaded his trunk and bags.

"There you go mate, you're on your own now." The driver said cheerfully.

'On my own.' Ron thought to himself darkly and picked up what he could carry.

* * * * *

"Hi Percy, could you take me to the Headmaster's office? I'm supposed to talk to him as soon as I get here." Ron asked shyly.

Percy looked at his youngest brother and tried to give a convincing smile as he nodded and led the way.

"You can leave your bags here, I'll watch over them." Percy said as he stood at the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

"Thank you." Ron said in a whisper.

Percy watched as Ron forced himself to walk up the stairs.

* * * * *

"Come in Mr. Weasley, have a seat. We'll be ready to begin in just a moment." Headmaster Dumbledore said with an irritating amount of cheer.

"Thank you Headmaster." Ron mumbled as he took a seat.

A moment later Ron heard movement behind him and saw Hermione, Harry, and two Slytherins walk into the room.

"I have already talked with the others about your return to Hogwart's and they offered to help you." Dumbledore said happily.

Ron looked in question at the four students seated in a row beside him.

"Your bed is just like you left it. We can get you moved back in before breakfast." Harry said with a friendly smile.

Ron couldn't find his voice so he nodded his acceptance.

"Is there anything else we need to do Headmaster?" The Slytherin with wings, Nightshade, asked.

"No my boy. I believe all is well. Just help young Mr. Weasley to catch up with the studies he missed. His professors understand his absence and are giving him time to come up to speed." Dumbledore said happily.

A long moment of silence fell over the room until Headmaster Dumbledore said, "Oh, yes, of course. You are excused."

A chorus of "Thank you Headmaster." Came from all present before they left the room.

* * * * *

"We can get his things Percy. Thank you for watching them." The winged Slytherin said as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Ron couldn't hear what his brother said in reply, but he couldn't miss the dark glance that Percy gave him before he left.

"Is this everything you brought?" the other Slytherin, Malfoy, asked as they walked toward the stairs.

"No. My trunk is outside." Ron mumbled.

"Will you help me get it Harry?" Nightshade asked hopefully.

"Yeah. We'll meet you in the room Ron." Harry said as he hurried off with Nightshade.

Ron looked with question at Hermione.

"Come on Ron. We don't have a lot of time." Malfoy said seriously.

Ron followed reluctantly, wondering what had happened to change things so completely.

* * * * *

Silence fell over the Gryffindor common room as they entered.

"Harry will be here with Cherub in a few minutes with Ron's trunk." Hermione said to the group.

Fred and George Weasley looked at each other, then left the room without a word.

"I don't know where your room is Ron, would you lead the way?" Malfoy asked quietly.

Ron nodded in thought as he led the way to the room he had shared with Harry.

He opened the door, and for a moment, it was like he never left. Everything was exactly as he left it. Not one thing was moved from the time he was last here... not one thing.

"Harry doesn't live here anymore does he?" Ron asked as he led the way in.

"No. He sleeps at Slytherin. But he's going to sit with us in classes now." Hermione said, trying to sound cheerful.

Ron looked at her curiously, then started to unpack his bags.

"Do you need any help with that Ron?" Malfoy asked in a very civilized and helpful tone.

"No, thank you." Ron mumbled.

"Here's the trunk." Harry said as he backed into the room.

"It's heavier than it looks." Cherub said from the other end of the trunk.

"It's quite old. They made them heavier back then." Ron said automatically.

"It's getting late. Just put on your class robes and you can unpack the rest later." Harry said as he walked to his own wardrobe.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Putting on my Gryffindor robes. For the rest of the school day, I'll be representing Gryffindor." Harry said casually.

"But you came in wearing Slytherin colors." Ron said in confusion.

"I had to wear something." Harry said as he finished getting ready.

"Is everyone ready to go?" Hermione asked cheerily.

Nods of affirmation went around the group.

"Then we're off to breakfast. Draco, would you and Cherub like to join us at the Gryffindor table this morning?" Hermione asked pleasantly.

"We would be honored to accept. Perhaps you and Ron could sit at the Slytherin table with us at lunch." Draco said smoothly.

"They're going to sit with us?" Ron asked with a squeak.

"Of course. They're our friends." Hermione said with a smile.

"Since when?" Ron asked cautiously, and reached for his wand.

"Since we talked. Don't get all nervous about it Ron. No one is going to try and corrupt you or change your mind about anything. If you'll just act with proper courtesy and respect toward everyone, you'll get along fine." Hermione said seriously.

Ron nodded as he looked at the floor.

"We've been invited to sit at the Slytherin table at lunch today. Would you like to accept?" Hermione asked in a firm steady voice.

Ron looked hesitantly at Draco and said, "Yes, Thank you for inviting us Malfoy."

"Ron, my friends call me Draco."

Ron looked at Draco curiously.

Draco shrugged and said, "Whenever you're ready."

"By the way Ron, that goes for me too. You may call me Cherub." Nightshade said with a smile.

"Really?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Sure. Come on. We don't want to miss breakfast." Cherub said and hurried out of the room.

"It's going to be fine Ron. We're all going to help you." Hermione said quietly.

* * * * *

The great hall was unusually quiet as everyone was watching the two Slytherins, Harry Potter and the expelled boy eating at the Gryffindor table.

"Ron, have you thought about how you're going to catch up on what you've missed?" Draco asked casually.

"Um, not really. I've kind of had other things on my mind." Ron said slowly.

"I can imagine." Draco said with a tone of sincerity.

"What we've been thinking is that we can get the best people in each subject to work with you and help get you up to speed on everything." Cherub said with a smile.

"That makes sense." Ron said cautiously.

"So that means Cherub will work with you in potions." Draco said seriously.

Ron looked at Cherub and nodded hesitantly.

Hermione will help you in spell casting." Harry said next.

"Cherub equals my grades, but his technique is different than the professor's. It's better that I teach you." Hermione said with a superior smile.

Cherub flashed her a dirty look, but didn't say anything.

"Harry teaches you flying." Draco said happily.

Ron looked at Harry with surprise.

"Greg Goyle is going to work with you on transfigurations." Cherub said seriously.

"He's the best in the class." Hermione said in a whisper.

"And you'll just have to read the book for Dark Arts. Professor Quirrel's lectures haven't given us any information at all." Harry finished simply.

"When will we do all this?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Well, we'll have to get the professors to approve certain things, but if possible we'd like to do potions tonight, spell casting tomorrow, transfigurations on Thursday and flying during flying class each day this week." Draco said seriously.

"What about Wednesday?" Ron asked cautiously.

"There's a Quidditch game. Harry's going to be playing so we're all going to be there to cheer him on." Cherub said seriously.

Ron looked at Harry with wonder.

"I'm seeker." Harry said shyly.

Ron nodded, then thought to ask, "For which house?"

"Um, I'll have to get back to you on that." Harry said hesitantly.

Ron looked at Harry with surprise.

"I'm going to talk to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. If they'll take me on as seeker, I'll represent Gryffindor the rest of the term... most likely the rest of my time at Hogwart's. If they refuse, I'd be stupid to leave the Slytherin team where I'm already in the seeker position." Harry said, then smiled as the food appeared before them.

Ron noticed two girls get up from the Gryffindor table and walk to the Slytherin table.

"What's going on with that?" Ron asked Hermione curiously.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Hermione bubbled.

"I'm starting to feel like I'm going to pass out. Could you just tell me what's going on?" Ron asked in a pleading voice.

"Sure Ron. As long as you're willing to listen, I'll be happy to tell you anything you want to know." Hermione said seriously.

"That goes for all of us Ron. All we're asking is that if you ask a question, be willing to listen to the answer and try to understand." Cherub said seriously.

Harry and Draco nodded their agreement.

"Why are the Gryffindors and Slytherins sitting at each others tables?" Ron asked apprehensively.

"Because they want to." Draco said seriously.

Cherub nodded.

"Because we've shown them that it's okay to have friends in other houses." Hermione said with a reproachful look at Draco.

"I didn't lie." Draco said in his defense.

"He's got you there Hermione." Harry said happily.

"Okay, so does this mean that the houses don't mean anything anymore?" Ron asked in confusion.

"No. Not at all. The houses still mean something, they just don't mean everything. We're allowed to have friends in other houses. We can visit with each other, study together... even get to know each other's family." Hermione finished with a smile at Cherub.

Ron gasped and looked from Hermione to Cherub and back.

Before Ron could ask, Hermione playfully slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Cherub is NOT my boyfriend. I met his younger brother this weekend."

Cherub looked from Draco to Harry and received a nod from each.

"Ron. I know there's a lot of new stuff happening at once, but... here's some more. Harry, Draco and I are boyfriends." Cherub said in a steady clear voice, so as not to be misunderstood.

"You... three... you can't... I mean... three..." Ron stammered, then fell silent.

"You broke him." Draco said in a considering voice.

"I suppose you could have done it better?" Cherub asked in playful gruffness.

"Well, you could have built up to it." Harry interjected.

"Oh yeah... Ron, nice weather we're having. How's your family? By the way I'm boyfriends with your best friend and worst enemy... I don't think it would have made much difference." Cherub said as he tried to hold in a smile.

"You..." Ron gasped.

"Do you think we need to take him to Madame Pomfrey or the Headmaster or something?" Harry asked with concern.

"I think he'll be fine in a minute. You've got to admit, he has had quite a few changes to deal with." Cherub said as he tilted his head and tried to look into Ron's eyes.

"What do you see?" Draco asked curiously.

"I don't think anybody's home." Cherub said hesitantly.

"Oh, don't worry about that, it's a Weasley thing, they all have that look." Draco said seriously.

Hermione gave Draco a slap on the arm, and not a playful one.

"I'm being good. Weasley jokes are fair game." Draco said with a scowl.

"Ron needs understanding and patience, not insults." Hermione said firmly.

"You help him your way and I'll help him mine." Draco said seriously.

"You're boyfriends?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"And he's back." Cherub said in a voice of relief.

"You were just worried you'd get in trouble for breaking him within half an hour of his arrival." Draco said snippily.

"No I wasn't! I was just... Okay... maybe I was." Cherub said and sneered at Draco, which slowly morphed into a full smile.

"They're like this more and more often." Harry said with a shake of his head.

"Are you okay now Ron?" Hermione asked carefully.

"I need to sit down." Ron said in a distant voice.

"You are sitting down." Hermione said with concern.

Ron looked around with worry and his gaze stopped on Harry.

"You're really... like that?" Ron asked in a helpless voice.

"Like what?" Harry asked slowly.

"I think he means gay." Draco said frankly.

"Oh, um. I guess since I have two boyfriends... yeah. That would make me pretty gay, wouldn't it?" Harry asked in a considering voice.

"If you insist on wearing a label, then I suppose that one is as good as any." Cherub said in thought.

"But the three of you... you have... I mean... you stick your..." Ron trailed off helplessly.

"Let me get this one Cherub. Maybe we'll get him through breakfast without a coma." Harry said with a smile.

"Show me how it's done, boy-who-lived." Cherub said and sat back in his chair to watch.

"Ron." Harry began, trying to draw Ron's minuscule thread of attention.

"Cherub, Draco and I love each other." Harry said slowly.

"I have an idea what you were about to ask." Harry said as he held Ron's eyes.

"What the three of us do in private is no one else's business." Harry said carefully, trying to be sure that Ron was understanding.

"We. Are. In. Love. Please be happy for us. If you were in love I'd be happy for you." Harry said seriously.

Ron blinked twice, then hesitantly nodded.

"Two points for Potter. Well done." Draco said with a smile of appreciation.

"But you're... it's wrong. You can't." Ron said as he was becoming more and more agitated as he looked from person to person.

"Ron!" Harry said firmly.

Ron hesitantly turned his attention to Harry.

"Do you want me to be honest with you?" Harry asked seriously.

Ron hesitantly nodded.

"I thought so. That's why we told you. If there is to be any chance of us being friends, then we have to be honest." Harry said more quietly.

Ron nodded again.

"We're not asking you to be gay. We're not asking you to like the fact that we're gay. We're just asking you to deal with it and move on." Harry said seriously.

"How?" Ron asked in a whisper.

"Do you know now that I'm gay?" Harry asked carefully.

Ron hesitantly nodded.

"Do you know what that means between you and me?" Harry asked carefully.

Ron shook his head nervously.

"As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't have anything to do with the relationship between us. I have two boyfriends, the last thing I'm going to do is go looking for someone else. You're safe. What it means to you, only you can say." Harry said firmly.

"You'd better eat. It's getting late." Cherub said quickly.

"Thanks wings. The last thing I need is to be starving in DADA." Harry said and began quickly eating his food.

"Eat something Ron. It's probably going to be a difficult day." Hermione said with sympathy.

"It's going to get worse?" Ron asked with a whimper.

"There. Did you see it?" Draco said with excitement as he pointed at Ron.

"What?" Cherub asked curiously.

"It was the old Ron. I saw him." Draco said with certainty.

"Is that a good thing?" Cherub asked carefully.

Draco stopped all activity for an instant, then said, "I don't know."

"Ron. Everything is going to be fine. We'll be having potions class next and you'll see." Harry said gently.

Ron nodded reflexively.

"Ron! Eat!" Hermione said firmly.

Ron immediately began to eat, watching Hermione cautiously out of the corner of his eye.

* * * * *

"Potter, there's a delivery for you at Gryffindor, we put it in your room." Percy said in the hallway after breakfast.

"Thank you Percy, that would be my painting." Harry said happily.

Percy gave his brother a cautious glance, then walked away.

"Your brother doesn't seem to be too supportive of you." Harry said as they walked toward the potions lab.

"I was kind of rude to my family after I got sent away." Ron said quietly.

"Wow. You'll have to tell me what you said sometime. I can think of a few people I'd like to stay away from me." Harry said as he led the way into the potions lab.

Ron looked at Harry with confusion at the statement.

"I'll talk to you again after class. Don't worry. You're teamed with Hermione." Harry said as he took his seat beside Draco.

"Good morning Class." Professor Snape said as he walked briskly into the room and directly to his desk, not expecting a response.

"Good Morning Professor." Hermione, Cherub, Draco and Harry said in unison.

Professor Snape looked at the students, then turned his face down toward his class notes to hide his smile.

"It appears that Mr. Weasley has rejoined our class after an extended absence. In the interest of helping Mr. Weasley, today we will review each lesson beginning with the second day. You may use your class notes and textbooks to aid your memory. Day two. Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked in his cold, chopped tone.

Hermione smiled at Professor Snape and said in a clear, confident voice, "The preparation of an ingredient..."

* * * * *

"I can't believe how much we've learned in that class." Harry said to Hermione and Ron.

"And I understand every bit of it. It is amazing." Hermione said with a smile.

"I'm glad he decided to review today. I think I can catch up now." Ron said in wonder.

"Ron." Cherub called as he hurried to catch up to the group.

"Professor Snape gave his permission for us to use the potions lab tonight. We can go through the lessons you've missed and pick two or three potions to brew so you can get the practical experience." Cherub said quickly.

"Thanks." Ron said in surprise.

"No problem Ron. Just trying to help." Cherub said with a smile.

"Is there anything I need to know for spell casting?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Only to sit by Hermione. She steals the show, no one will even notice you." Cherub said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"And so could you if you'd do the spells the way the professor taught us to." Hermione said in a superior voice.

"I taught myself. I've been doing spell casting for years. Why should I learn a completely different way of doing something that I do already?" Cherub asked reasonably.

"You are NOT going to pull me into this argument with you. I'll do it my way and get the higher grade, while you stick to your moral high ground and get deductions for improper method." Hermione said snippily.

"I'll do that. I have enough successful spells to make up the difference." Cherub said, matching her tone.

Ron was looking back and forth, feeling like he wanted to run and hide from the sounds of bickering and fighting.

"Ron." Harry said quietly from beside him.

Ron turned and was surprised to see Harry standing with him and Cherub and Hermione ahead of them.

"You spaced out for a second there. Are you okay?" Harry asked with concern.

"Yes. Their fighting just bothered me." Ron said honestly.

"They've been doing that since yesterday afternoon. They're both brilliant students and love to pick at each others faults. It's kind of funny when you think about it." Harry said with a smile.

"You mean they weren't serious?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"No way. If Hermione were really serious, she'd be crying and if Cherub were really serious, he'd be talking in a... low... dangerous... voice." Harry said, demonstrating Cherub's icy angry voice.

Ron smiled at the demonstration.

"Come on, it's about time for class." Harry said and led the way.

* * * * *

"Just when I thought he couldn't get anymore boring, he does." Cherub said as he walked from the classroom, blinking his eyes.

"I think I've been conditioned to fall asleep at the sound of Professor Quirrel's voice. If he said 'good morning' to me in the hallway, I'd probably nod off." Hermione said in aggravation.

"I think I fell asleep with my eyes open." Draco said seriously.

"Harry, can I talk to you for a minute?" Ron asked suddenly.

"Sure Ron. Come to the dorm with me. I want to look at my painting." Harry said as he rubbed his forehead, trying to ease his throbbing headache.

"Remember that we're eating at the Slytherin table today. We'll be saving you seats." Cherub said firmly.

"Got it wings. We'll be down in a few." Harry said, then changed direction to go to the Gryffindor rooms.

* * * * *

"Okay. What did you need to talk about Ron?" Harry asked when they were finally alone in the room.

"I'm not really sure what I'm trying to ask." Ron said as he flopped onto his bed.

Harry looked around the room and found the perfect place to hang his new painting.

"I guess what I want to know is why all of you are being so nice to me. I mean, is it an act?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Maybe a little." Harry said as he started unwrapping his painting.

"What?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Headmaster Dumbledore talked to us yesterday and told us you were coming back. He said that you would probably have trouble at first and it would be helpful if we could ease the way for you." Harry said as he looked at his painting with appreciation.

"So we talked last night and decided to treat you as if you were already our friend. We realize that you may choose not to be friends with all of us, but we thought that by showing you what it's like to be our friend, you might just decide to go along with it." Harry said, then took down the painting that was occupying the spot he wanted.

"But if you're just pretending... then its like you're lying to me." Ron said darkly.

"Ron. I'm telling you the truth right now. All of us have told you the truth all morning. We can't just say that we're friends and it be so. It takes commitment from both sides to make a friendship. The four of us are taking a chance and being open to the possibility of being your friend. All you have to do is decide if that's what you want. If it is, then be a friend in return." Harry said as he put the picture in place.

"Is this straight?" Harry asked as he backed away from the picture.

Ron looked at the picture and gasped.

"Ron?" Harry asked as he tried looking away, then at the picture again.

"It's a..." Ron said with wide eyes.

"It looks bigger than it did in the gallery." Harry said introspectively.

"Harry, it's a woman's... you know." Ron said in a whisper.

"Vagina." Harry said as he walked to the other side of the room to look at it.

"You can't hang that in here. You'll get us in trouble." Ron said with full worry.

"It's art. Just look at it. It's almost like it's alive." Harry said with a smile.

Ron glanced at the painting, then hid his face in his hands.

"Come on Ron. You're the straight guy, you're supposed to like looking at these things." Harry said as he took his morning class books out of his bag and laid them on the bed.

Ron spread his fingers to glance at the painting again, then closed them quickly.

"Come on. Everyone's waiting on us." Harry said happily and walked to the door.

"You're going to leave it like that? Someone might see it!" Ron said with concern.

"I thought about hanging it in the common room. But I'm afraid something might happen to it."

Harry said seriously as he waited for Ron.

With one brief glance at the painting, Ron shuffled past it to the door.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Ron?" Cherub asked in a friendly tone.

"Fine I guess." Ron answered slowly.

"I think my painting bothered him." Harry said as he took his seat.

"You're not the only one." Cherub said in a mumble.

Draco nodded.

"Theodore, Goyle and Crabbe, this is Ron Weasley." Cherub said clearly.

"Hi Ron. Cherub told us you went a little bit crazy for a while. I'm glad you were able to get past it." Theodore Nott said frankly.

Ron looked at Theodore with wide eyes.

"Did you want us to not talk about it Ron? I mean, everyone knows you got booted and that you're back. No one that I've talked to thinks anything bad about you because of it." Cherub said honestly.

Ron looked at Cherub with disbelief.

"Ease up on Ron or you're going to put him into another one of those coma things." Draco said seriously.

Cherub rolled his eyes but let it go.

"Are you really doing okay Ron?" Hermione asked with concern.

Ron looked at her honest caring and said, "It's harder than I thought it was going to be. I thought I was ready to face everything, but I don't think I am."

"Well, you don't have to face it alone. We're here to help you, all you have to do is let us." Hermione said softly.

"If you'll just tell us what's giving you problems, we can work as a team to help you." Draco said seriously.

"You can count us in on that too." Theodore said, then looked at Crabbe and Goyle to receive nods of agreement.

"I feel like everyone's watching me." Ron said quietly.

"They are." Draco said as if it were obvious.

Ron looked at Draco with fear.

"He's not a Slytherin. He doesn't do the spotlight thing well." Harry said in a stage whisper.

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." Draco said and looked down in concentration.

"Look Ron. No one is going to mess with you, mainly because you're with us. You've got the leaders of the first year students in the two strongest houses looking out for you. We've got you covered on making up what you've missed. All the professors are going to give you time to catch up. You've got a whole bunch of people right here who are willing to be your friends if you'll let them. What more do you want?" Cherub said seriously.

Before Ron could answer, the food appeared.

"A bit fancy for lunch." Draco said as he looked at the wide variety of food before them.

"I suppose it's good to switch it up a bit for the sake of variety." Cherub said in a considering voice.

"Quite a nice variety of fresh fruit today too." Harry said as he started making selections.

"Thank you Cherub." Ron said in a distant voice.

Cherub smiled and said, "No problem Ron. Now you'd best be getting some food before Granger takes all the good bits."

Ron looked at Hermione suspiciously, then started grabbing food as if he hadn't eaten in a week.

Several people at the Slytherin table laughed, more at the expression on Hermione's face than Ron's action.

Across the room at the Faculty table, two men sat side by side and smiled at the antics of the children.

Chapter 14

A flurry of owls entered the great hall carrying messages for the students.

Cherub smiled as he saw an owl coming for him.

"There's one for me!" Hermione said in surprise.

"I've got one too!" Harry said happily.

"I've got two." Hermione said in delight as a second letter dropped into her hands.

"Me too!" Harry said as he plucked his letter out of mid air.

Cherub opened his letter and smiled at his brother's rambling story about how he woke up and ate breakfast.

"Chuffery said that I'm pretty." Hermione said proudly.

"I wouldn't get too big a head about it Granger. He said that I'm pretty too." Draco finished with a somewhat bewildered expression.

"He said that I'm nice." Harry said in a disappointed voice.

Draco opened his mouth, ready to deliver a stinging remark when he realized that Harry was really hurt.

"Potter." Draco said firmly, drawing Harry's despondent gaze from the letter.

"Malfoy's have the best of everything. The best clothes, the best homes, the best parties and of course, the best boyfriends. I won't shower you with endless compliments because there is no need. I've chosen you, therefore you must be attractive." Draco said in his most dignified voice.

"Harry?" Cherub said quietly.

Harry turned his wondering gaze toward Cherub.

"I'm not 'A' Nightshade, I am 'The' Nightshade, and you are my boyfriend. You are going to have to reconcile yourself to the fact that you must be quite attractive to have both of us." Cherub said seriously.

"Guys. People can hear you." Hermione said nervously.

"Good. It will save me from having to make an announcement." Draco said simply.

Harry looked at Draco with shock.

"I'm not only going to be your boyfriend behind closed doors where no one can see us Harry. I'm proud of you, and proud to be your boyfriend... aren't you proud of me?" Draco finished with a note of concern.

Harry smiled and said, "Absolutely. Now more than ever."

"Ron, do you still feel like everyone is watching you?" Cherub asked with a smile.

Ron shook his head.

"Oh, this is beautiful." Hermione gushed as she took an 8x10 photograph out of the second envelope.

Cherub, Draco and Harry each hurried to open their own.

Ron looked at the picture Hermione was holding and stared with wide eyes.

"That's Chuffery, Cherub's little brother." Hermione said as she pointed.

"He's a kid." Ron said quietly.

"Well, he's nine, but he looks younger." Hermione said honestly.

Ron looked carefully at the picture, then at Harry, Draco and Cherub, all seated in a row, looking at the pictures.

"You see it, don't you?" Hermione asked.

"They're in love." Ron said in a small voice.

"That's what we've been trying to tell you." Hermione said gently.

Ron smiled and said, "I think it's great."

"Thank you Ron." Harry said in relief.

Ron smiled a grand smile in return.

* * * * *

"Do you have a minute?" a boy, taller but thinner than Cherub asked shyly as the group walked out of the great hall.

Cherub looked at the boy curiously and noticed that he was wearing a Ravenclaw crest on his robe.

"Sure, I've got plenty of time before flying. What can I help you with?" Cherub asked in a gentle voice.

The boy motioned for another boy who was watching them from just outside the doors to the great hall.

"I'm Prentice, this is Jolie. We heard... Is it true that you have two boyfriends?" Prentice asked hopefully.

Cherub looked at the boy's frightened, hopeful expression and said, "I don't know how you heard so quickly, but yes, it's true."

Prentice let out a sigh of relief, then said, "Jolie and I want to be boyfriends, but... we don't know how. Can you help us?"

Cherub smiled and led the boys toward the door that opened to the outside.

"What do you want to do that you're not already doing?" Cherub asked carefully.

"We want to do boyfriend stuff. I mean, I heard some stuff, but some of it sounded wrong and I didn't want to take a chance of hurting Jolie." Prentice said seriously.

"Okay guys. There isn't time to tell you everything right now. But if you'll answer a few questions, maybe I can help." Cherub said seriously.

Prentice and Jolie nodded and paid their full attention.

Cherub looked around and guided them away from other students before asking, "Do you hug each other?"

"Yes. We like that." Prentice said with a smile.

"Good. What about kissing?" Cherub asked quietly.

"We kiss, but I'm not sure we're doing it right." Prentice said seriously.

"Do you both enjoy it?" Cherub asked cautiously.

Both boys nodded enthusiastically.

"Then you're probably doing it right. When we have more time, I'll give you a few ideas of different things to try. What about wanking?" Cherub asked carefully, wishing he had a less vulgar word to use.

Prentice and Jolie looked at him in confusion.

Cherub made the universal hand gesture, and realization came to both their eyes.

"Oh yes. We've done that." Prentice said with a scarlet blush.

"To each other?" Cherub asked carefully.

Prentice and Jolie both looked at Cherub with wonder.

"You'll need to do that. Just a hint, get some lotion, you'll love it." Cherub said with a smile.

"What else?" Jolie asked with excitement, speaking for the first time.

"Why don't you two do that and tell me how it goes. I'm busy after class today, but if you can get with me after dinner tomorrow night, I'll be able to tell you some new things and give you hints on what you already know." Cherub said seriously.

"We'll be there. Thank you Nightshade." Prentice said quickly.

"Please, both of you call me Cherub... in fact, would you two like to sit with me at the Slytherin table tomorrow for dinner? That way you could meet my boyfriends." Cherub asked hopefully.

"Really? That would be... I mean, Jolie, do you want to?" Prentice asked hopefully.

Jolie nodded quickly.

Something caught Cherub's eye. He smiled as he noticed that Jolie had a Hufflepuff emblem on his robe.

"I'll see you at dinner tomorrow then. It's nearly time for class now. You two have fun." Cherub said happily.

"We will." Prentice said with a giggle.

* * * * *

"Madame Hooch, would you mind if I used the class time this week to help Ron catch up with the rest of the class?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I think that's a very good idea Mr. Potter. Just be sure that you're teaching him safety before you teach him that fancy flying you're so well known for." Madame Hooch said sternly.

"I promise, safety first." Harry said as a solemn vow.

Madame Hooch nodded once, then walked to the gathering of other students to outline their flight plan for the day.

"I know how to fly." Ron said quietly.

"I know. But it's best if I cover what she's taught us anyway. That way you'll be ready if she asks." Harry said seriously.

"I'm sorry about, you know, before." Ron said quietly.

"Headmaster Dumbledore told us there was a reason you acted as you did. That's all we needed to know." Harry said as he led Ron farther away from the others.

"But what if it happens again?" Ron asked anxiously.

"Then we'll take you right up to Headmaster Dumbledore and he'll call your counselor straight away." Harry said frankly.

"You know about her?" Ron asked with wide eyes.

"I didn't know it was a her, but we were told you would be seeing a counselor after classes each day." Harry said simply as he stopped and looked around.

Ron looked as if he were going to have a panic attack on the spot.

"Ron, if I had an injured knee, would you want to stay away from me, or would you want to walk beside me to catch me in case it gave out?" Harry asked seriously.

"It's not the same." Ron said in an aggravated tone.

"Why not? Let me walk with you to help you if you slip. I know you'd do the same for me." Harry said as he tried to look Ron in the eyes.

After a long moment of thought, Ron finally nodded.

"Good. Now let's go up about ten feet and hover."

"Are you okay Cherub?" Hermione asked with concern as she walked into the infirmary.

"Fine. Is Professor McGonigal coming?" Cherub asked with irritation.

"She said she had to get something for you and she'd be here as soon as possible. What happened?" Hermione asked gently.

"Neville's transfiguration spell went wrong and rebounded on me." Cherub said in a grumpy voice.

Hermione looked at Cherub carefully and finally realized that he had his hands hidden under the table.

"Can I see?" Hermione asked carefully.

"As long as you promise not to tell everyone." Cherub said darkly.

Hermione nodded, her promise showing in her eyes.

Cherub pulled his hands out to reveal his elongated thin arms and long thin hands which ended in razor sharp talons.

"How could Neville do that?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"I was wearing an amulet to transfigure my hands so they look normal. He hit the amulet and killed the charm." Cherub said as he put his hands back under the table.

"So that's what you really look like?" Hermione asked in wonder.

"That's right. My mother transfigured into a harpy while she was pregnant with me. That's how I got the wings and the hands." Cherub said as he felt depression washing over him.

"How horrible. Why would she do that? Didn't she know that would happen?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

"I don't know if she knew or cared. From what I've been told, when she got pregnant, she went insane. After my birth, she got a little better, but when she was pregnant with Chuffery, she went crazy again. After he was born, she ran away and no one's seen her since." Cherub said in a distant voice.

"I had no idea. I mean, I overheard a few people speculating on why you have wings, but I never would have imagined..." Hermione trailed off.

"What did they say?" Cherub asked curiously.

"What?"

"What ideas did they come up with for my wings? I'd like to know." Cherub asked with a curious smile.

"Okay. But some of them aren't too nice." Hermione said in warning.

"Neither is the truth." Cherub said honestly.

"Well, one idea was that your father impregnated a vulture." Hermione said seriously.

"No, my father wouldn't do that, a falcon maybe, but not a vulture, too common." Cherub said in his haughty voice.

Hermione smiled and said, "It was suggested that you're a half-demon."

"My father impregnating a demon... I could see that." Cherub said with a nod.

"From what I've heard of him, I can too." Hermione said with a chuckle.

"What else?" Cherub asked with a smile.

"A failed magical experiment." Hermione said, this time without humor.

Cherub looked her in the eyes and thought about it.

"Of course, you know the truth. So it doesn't matter." Hermione said quickly.

"I know what I've been told. In my family, truth is a rare commodity." Cherub said seriously.

"Do you think it might be true?" Hermione asked with concern.

"I think that it is a possibility. Now that I'm aware of it, I can be on the lookout for evidence." Cherub said in a cold voice.

"Here we are. I have already put the enchantment on the amulet so you simply have to put it on." Professor McGonigal said pleasantly.

Cherub hesitantly took the bracelet and slipped it onto his wrist.

Soon his hands returned to their usual appearance.

"Very good. We should be returning to class now. They should be finished with the reading assignment." Professor McGonigal said quickly.

Cherub got up and started walking toward the door when Hermione said, "Thanks for telling me."

Cherub smiled at her and said, "You too."

* * * * *

Ron made his way into the infirmary filled with apprehension.

"Hello Ron, did you have a good day?" Madame Crustemple asked pleasantly.

Ron thought about the question for a moment before saying, "Yes. I think I did."

* * * * *

"Where is everyone?" Cherub asked as he walked into his bedroom to find Draco sitting on his bed.

"Well, Harry is trying to get his Quidditch thing straightened out, T, Crabbe and Goyle are in the library with Darla and Pansy. Ron is with his counselor, and I think Widget is with Percy." Draco said in thought.

"We're alone!" Cherub said with surprise.

Draco got a mischievous smile and said, "We are."

"Do you think Harry would mind if we started without him?" Cherub asked as he walked to stand before Draco.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind at all." Draco said as he stood.

Cherub pulled Draco into a firm hug and kissed him deeply.

A minute later, Draco asked, "Is something wrong? You seemed to need that kiss worse than usual."

"Yeah. It's just been a long day for me." Cherub said seriously.

"Did the thing that happened in transfigurations hurt you?" Draco asked with concern.

"No. I just hurried out so no one would see my hands." Cherub said as he held Draco tightly.

"That's what I thought. So what's wrong?" Draco asked as he eased Cherub to sit on the bed.

"Just all of it. As long as you'll hold me I'll be fine." Cherub said peacefully.

"You never have to worry about that. I'm here for you." Draco said warmly.

"I'm here for you too, you know." Cherub said in a whisper.

"I know. It's hard for me to let it loose. I know when I need you, that you'll be here for me." Draco said quietly.

Cherub kissed Draco gently, then pulled back to look in his eyes.

"I do have a question." Draco said hesitantly.

"I have lots of answers." Cherub said with a gentle smile.

"You remember when the three of us got together, how you said that you knew all about... everything. You know, sex." Draco said seriously.

"Yes. I wasn't bragging, I just wanted you both to know that I wasn't guessing or making it up." Cherub said in a more serious tone.

"On the day before classes, I asked if I could call you 'cherry'..." Draco trailed off.

"Oh. Yeah." Cherub said quietly.

"You've never talked about how you know all that stuff, but you've done it, haven't you?" Draco asked with concern.

"Most of it. The rest I've been told in great detail." Cherub answered quietly.

"I'm not going to ask you about it. I know you'll tell me if you want to. But there is one thing I really need to know." Draco said with worry.

"What's that?" Cherub asked, feeling concern at Draco's tone.

"Were you made to do anything you didn't want to do? I mean, were you forced?" Draco asked cautiously.

Cherub smiled and said, "No Draco. I was never forced at all. I was shown how to have sex and make love in the most gentle and wonderful way you could imagine. It was so special that when we're ready, I want to be able to share everything that I learned with you and Harry the same way."

Draco smiled and said, "I'm glad. It sounded like someone took advantage of you when you were too young to know better."

"No. It was perfect. I wish everyone could learn about sex the way I did." Cherub said with a peaceful smile.

"By doing?" Draco asked with a full smile.

"It's better than following step-by-step instructions." Cherub said with a giggle at the thought.

Draco pulled Cherub close into a hug and said, "I'll never let anyone hurt you or Harry if I can prevent it."

"Thank you Draco. Everything that was bothering me seems alright now." Cherub said peacefully.

* * * * *

Ron walked into the great hall to find the first students preparing for dinner.

"Can we talk?" Percy asked in a low voice.

Ron looked up at Percy with a trace of fear, but nodded and followed.

When they got out into the hall and away from other students, Percy said, "You really hurt Mom and Dad a lot."

"I know." Ron said quietly.

"They said that you're still not quite right and we're supposed to keep an eye on you." Percy said firmly.

Ron looked at Percy with renewed fear.

Percy noticed his youngest brother's expression and shook his head as he said, "Wait here."

Ron nodded as Percy hurried back into the great hall.

A minute later Percy returned with someone Ron vaguely recognized.

"Ronnie, this is Eldon Widget. He's a prefect like me. I've told him everything that's happened here and at home... everything." Percy emphasized.

Ron nodded his understanding.

"I don't know how to talk to you anymore Ronnie. Maybe if you talk to Widget about things and he talks to me, we can find some way that we can talk to each other again." Percy said in frustration.

Ron looked from Percy to Widget and nodded.

"I'm going to my table now." Percy said firmly and walked away.

"Thank you Percy." Ron called out.

Percy stopped in mid-step and turned with a look of question, then a brief smile crossed his face.

"Don't worry Ronnie. We can just talk about things and maybe we'll figure something out." Widget said in an easy going tone.

Ron nodded shyly.

"Come on in and have a seat with me. It's still a few minutes before dinner." Widget said warmly.

"Yeah. Thanks." Ron mumbled.

* * * * *

"I've got to do potions work with Ron this evening." Cherub said with regret.

"That's okay. I promised Crabbe that I'd work with him on spell casting tonight." Draco said casually as they walked out of the Slytherin rooms.

"Is he having trouble?" Cherub asked with concern.

"Just on one particular spell. He can't seem to get the gesture right. I'll work with him." Draco said with assurance.

"What have you got going tomorrow?" Cherub asked carefully.

"Pansy and I are going to discuss some Slytherin things." Draco said in a bored tone.

"I've got to give love lessons." Cherub said weakly.

"You what?" Draco asked suddenly.

"I met a couple of guys who are in love and haven't been told anything at all about sex." Cherub said seriously.

"Ouch. At least my dad had 'the talk' with me before I left." Draco said with a smile.

"From the way you described what he told you, it's a wonder you were ever conceived. You're poor mother." Cherub said with a shake of his head.

"Yes. Do you think I should tell him about foreplay when I visit for the holiday?" Draco asked with a smile.

Cherub thought about it for a second, then said in a conspiratorial whisper, "Maybe you should tell your mother."

Draco started laughing so suddenly and so hard that he choked.

* * * * *

"Percy is really worried about you Ronnie, he just feels like you betrayed your whole family when you told the family secrets." Widget said carefully.

"I know." Ron said quietly.

"Why don't you tell me your side of it. Like Percy said, I know everything that he knows. But maybe if you tell me why you did it, I can help Percy understand so he can feel comfortable with you again." Widget said seriously.

"I don't know if I can explain it. Everything got to be too much. I thought I was finally away from all the secrets and lies. I came to Hogwarts and thought that here I could find some real, honest people who I could be friends with and be happy. I met Harry on the train and he was nice. I mean, he's the-boy-who-lived, he's got to be a real good honest person, right?" Ron asked in a begging tone.

Widget nodded cautiously.

"Then I saw him being drawn away, into Slytherin. Malfoy and Nightshade lured him away... and when he came back. He was one of them. I mean... that's how I was feeling then. Now... I've spent some time with Draco and Cherub and they've been nothing but nice to me." Ron finished quickly.

"But then, you saw your good, decent friend being changed, corrupted, turned against you. Right?" Widget asked carefully.

"Yes. I attacked Cherub, if I'd gotten that spell right I would have hurt him. I'm so glad I messed it up." Ron said quietly.

"Then you were in the hearing." Widget prompted.

"I was so angry. I was wishing I'd been able to hurt him, hurt all of them for what they did to Harry." Ron said in a low voice.

"Then you were sent home." Widget said in a leading tone.

"My father was upset because I'd been sent back and started yelling at me, making me feel small and afraid... then something snapped. I couldn't stop myself... I yelled back. Something inside me that I didn't even know I had just let loose with everything I thought and felt and every single thing I'd kept hidden. I don't even know how long that lasted, the next thing I remember is being in a doctor's office." Ron said distantly.

"So now Percy feels that anything you see him do, anything he tells you, anything you even suspect about him is going to be yelled out for the world to hear if you lose it again." Widget said simply.

Ron nodded in thought.

"Do you think he can trust you?" Widget asked carefully.

"I want him to be able to, I just don't know how he can. I can't even trust myself." Ron said quietly.

"We don't have to find the answer today Ronnie. We've just shared what you're feeling and what Percy's feeling. It's probably best if we all think on it for a while and talk again later. Just keep in mind that he's trying. He hasn't given up." Widget said seriously.

"Thank you Widget. It really helps to know that." Ron said as he looked up into Widget's eyes.

"Cheer up, the guys are here." Widget said with a smile.

Ron turned in time to see Draco and Cherub walking into the dining room.

"Eldon! How are you doing today?" Cherub asked with a grand smile.

"I'm fine Cherub. You seem unusually happy." Eldon said with a smile.

Cherub smirked at Draco and said, "It's his fault. He started talking dirty to me."

Draco tried to look innocent, but it couldn't hold up for two seconds before he broke up into laughter.

"Really guys, what's so funny?" Eldon asked, drawn unwillingly into their laughter.

"I promise you Eldon, you'll be much better off not hearing about it before dinner." Cherub said through his giggles.

"You goofballs sit down. You're friend could use a good dose of your cheer." Eldon said with a smile at Ron.

"Hey Ron. Is everything going okay?" Cherub asked happily.

"Um. Yeah, I guess. Are you alright? I mean, did Neville hurt you?" Ron asked with concern.

"I'm fine now." Cherub said with a smile.

"Why are you guys so happy?" Ron asked curiously.

"We just got to laughing about something right before we walked in." Cherub said with a smile.

"What was it?" Ron asked curiously.

"If Harry's painting bothered you then I'm fairly sure you won't want to hear it before eating." Cherub said seriously.

"Um. Oh. It's about sex?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"Yes. If you really want to know, ask me after dinner and I'll tell you." Cherub said with a smile, then waved as Harry and Hermione walked in.

* * * * *

Ron sat through dinner quietly and watched the people around him talking and eating, generally having a good time.

Afterward, he and Cherub walked to the potions lab with Professor Snape.

"I trust you will leave the potions lab in the condition you found it?" Professor Snape asked with a tone of warning in his voice.

"Of course. Thank you for doing this. We'll have Ron caught up with everyone else before the end of the night." Cherub said in contentment.

Professor Snape opened the door and said, "I have no doubt in your ability or your word, so I will consider it done."

Ron barely heard Cherub's whispered response, "Thanks Dad."

* * * * *

"Well, now all you have to do is let it brew." Cherub said seriously.

"That wasn't so difficult. Everything we covered in class is making more sense now that I can see it for myself." Ron said as he carefully stirred the potion.

"That's one of the reasons why we're here. The other is that you need the practice. No matter how many times you read it, you can't really *know* certain things unless you do them." Cherub said in thought.

"I can see that. Like this stirring technique. I never would have thought it would make a difference *how* you stir the potion." Ron said seriously.

"I think after this, you'll be up to speed with everyone else. Anything you missed, Hermione can fill in for you." Cherub said as he started looking through the potion book again.

"Can I ask you a question?" Ron asked apprehensively.

"Anything." Cherub answered immediately and looked up from his book.

"Why are you being nice to me? I mean, are you just doing it because the Headmaster asked you to?" Ron asked as he kept his gaze focused on the potion.

"No. I'm doing it for Harry." Cherub said in a soft voice.

Ron looked up from the potion in question.

Cherub noticed the look and continued, "I was with Harry when things went badly between you, I was in the hearing. I saw how much losing your friendship hurt him. I love Harry and I'll do whatever I can to make him happy."

Ron nodded slightly and focused back on his potion before asking in a small voice, "So you're willing to put up with 'low class rabble' for Harry?"

Cherub gave a pained smile as he said, "Ron, I'd be lying if I said that there would be much of a chance of us being friends otherwise. As snobbish as it sounds, we come from different worlds, different classes. I really believe that if it were not for Harry, we wouldn't have enough in common to become even casual friends."

"We're both the same age and take the same classes. We're not really that different." Ron said into the cauldron.

"Ron. I was raised completely different from you. You had parents, brothers and sisters, friends, and a life outside your home. I grew up in a mansion with a household staff that took care of me. We were raised with completely different values and philosophies. I don't claim that the way I grew up is better, but I doubt we could overcome those differences and become friends if not for Harry." Cherub said carefully.

"So you don't think I'm inferior?" Ron asked and looked up from the cauldron.

"No Ron. Not inferior, just raised very differently from me." Cherub said with a gentle smile.

Ron nodded and looked back into the cauldron.

A knock on the door interrupted the introspective moment.

"Cherub, Draco wanted me to give you a message." Eldon said as he walked in.

"What is it Eldon?" Cherub asked with concern at Eldon's serious voice.

"He said to tell you that he needs you." Eldon said firmly.

"What's going on?" Cherub asked with a thread of panic running through him.

"His father is here. I don't know what else is going on, but we heard them screaming all the way in the common room. Then Draco asked that I get you and Harry and give you that message." Eldon said seriously.

"Have you already told Harry?" Cherub asked quickly.

"Yes. He's on his way."

"Will you help Ron finish this potion?" Cherub asked as he put his notes and potion book into his bag.

"Of course." Eldon said and walked to Ron's side.

"Sorry Ron..." Cherub began to say.

"Go on. He needs you." Ron said in understanding.

Cherub gave a smile as he hurried out of the room.

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"Cherub, would you secure the room so we may speak privately?" Draco asked casually.

Cherub only thought about the request for an instant before realizing that Draco was probably asking him to secure the room as a demonstration of power. In the interest of helping Draco, he began working a locking spell on the door, then weaving his best privacy spell throughout the room.

"We can speak freely now." Cherub said slowly and noticed that Harry was already in the room.

"Father came to tell me that I'm not living up to the Malfoy name. I asked you to come so I could enlighten him." Draco said in a cold voice.

"What can we do?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"Father believes I am disgracing the family by not being at the top athletically and academically. He has heard that a first year student was allowed to play on the house Quidditch team and it was not me. He also knows that I do not have the highest overall grade of all first year students. He is here to motivate me to work harder." Draco said with an icy glance at his father.

Cherub looked at Harry with disbelief.

"Father, let me tell you some facts that may have eluded you." Draco said in a cold voice.

Lucious Malfoy had a look of anger that seemed to be on the verge of erupting.

"Harry is the first year student who plays on the house team. I have no desire to be on the Quidditch team at this time. Likewise, I am satisfied being one of the top five first year students at Hogwart's. Cherub has the highest overall grade. Such diversions are great fun, but I have been working to establish myself in the political structure of Slytherin and Hogwart's. At this point in time, any actions taken by first year Slytherin will be brought to me for approval. I am involved in the decision making process for all first year students." Draco said seriously.

"What does this have to do with anything?" Mr. Malfoy asked irritably.

"Harry, Cherub and I function as one. Harry is our public face. Everyone knows him, he is quite popular and his Quidditch only improves his standing. He is also arguably the leader of the first year Gryffindor students and likely to become the leader of our overall year. Cherub is our academic. He devotes the majority of his attention to studies then imparts his findings to Harry and I. I am their leader. I coordinate our public actions and oversee that we are all represented in the most favorable light." Draco said, holding his father's gaze.

"What I am saying is that Harry and Cherub's achievements don't diminish me. We work collectively and each of our achievements are enjoyed by us all." Draco finished seriously.

Lucious thought for a moment before saying, "Those are just words. Easily said, but ultimately meaningless. I believe in actions."

Draco looked at his father without expression.

"You ordered your prefect to summon your companions as if he were a common house servant and he obeyed. You sent these two a message to come and they came without question. It proves your claim of being a leader better than the most dramatic speech. I withdraw my earlier complaints." Lucious said calmly.

"Thank you Father." Draco said formally, then continued, "They are also my boyfriends."

Mr. Malfoy looked at his son in shock before saying, "You can't. You are going to destroy the family."

"How will I do that?" Draco asked curiously.

"You have to marry well to maintain our place in society. You have to provide an heir. To throw away your legacy on a ball player and this winged-creature is out of the question. I won't allow it! You will be disowned and disinherited." Mr. Malfoy said firmly.

"This ball player, as I have said, is the leader of Gryffindor's first year students and has enough influence to do just about anything he wants in that house. He is also known by everyone in the wizarding world as the-boy-who-lived." Draco said firmly.

"Harry... Potter?" Mr. Malfoy asked in surprise.

"Correct." Draco said coldly as Harry casually moved his hair to show the scar on his forehead.

"But..." Mr. Malfoy began to say as he looked at Cherub.

"My other boyfriend has more money than you do. He is the sole heir to the Nightshade family estate." Draco said seriously.

"Cherub Nightshade?" Mr. Malfoy asked in a whisper.

Cherub nodded.

"So you see Father. My social standing won't suffer due to my association with Harry and Cherub. As far as providing an heir, I'm sure that when the time comes, we can find a woman of sufficient breeding who will gladly accept the chance to become a part of the Malfoy family by being a mother to my child. That is, if I'm not disowned and disinherited. Your other choice would seem to be going home to mother and 'doing your duty as a husband', and make a child to replace me." Draco said seriously.

Mr. Malfoy stared at Draco as if looking right through him.

"Cherub, if he disinherits me, will you see that I'm not thrown out in the street like a beggar?" Draco asked gently.

"Just say the word and I'll buy you your own house, wherever you want." Cherub said with a smile.

"I'll remember that." Draco said happily.

Chapter 15

"While I'm here do you want to talk?" Eldon asked Ron quietly.

Ron thought for a moment, then said, "I don't know."

"I don't know if it will help, but I could tell you what Percy told me." Eldon offered cautiously.

"Yeah, I guess." Ron said quietly.

"Well, Percy said that he's your big brother the way that Charlie is with the twins. You and he have a special bond, that's why you telling his secrets hurt him so much." Eldon said in thought.

"I just told the truth. What's so wrong with that?" Ron asked defensively.

"What's wrong is that it wasn't your truth to tell. Percy knows that the only way you could have known that he was thinking of moving away and changing his name is if you read it in his journal. He never told anyone and never actually planned to do it. The journal was his way of getting his feelings worked out." Eldon said seriously.

"But he said he was ashamed of our family. He was even going to dye his hair." Ron said in a whine.

"Haven't you ever been ashamed of your family? I mean, I have." Eldon said simply.

"Yeah, I guess." Ron said in a mumble.

"Percy loves your parents and would never do anything to hurt them. But sometimes I guess being a Weasley isn't the easiest thing in the world to be." Eldon said frankly.

Ron gave a whole-hearted nod of agreement.

"He wrote those thoughts in his journal so he could put them in order and deal with them. When you read his journal without permission, you violated his trust. When you told his secrets... you hurt him and your parents very much. He still loves you, but he's finding it very difficult to trust you." Eldon finished quietly.

"Yeah." Ron said in a whisper.

"Come on, this potion is done. Let's get this mess cleaned up so you can get out of here." Eldon said gently.

"Thanks for talking to me Widget." Ron said quietly.

"You know how Harry and the guys have kind of made you their friend?" Eldon asked slowly.

"Yeah." Ron answered hesitantly.

"Well, I'm their friend too, so I'd be happy to do this for them. But on top of that, I'm also Percy's friend. That means that everyone in this school who I call a friend wants you to be okay. And now that I'm getting to know you, I want that too." Eldon finished with a smile.

"Okay, thanks." Ron said shyly.

* * * * *

After a long silence, Lucious absently said, "It couldn't be that easy."

"Why not?" Draco asked simply.

Lucious turned away from the three boys and stared into a distant place of thought.

After a long moment of silence, Draco hesitantly asked, "Father?"

Lucious turned and looked at his son with sad, hollow eyes.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked with actual concern for his father.

"I gave up everything I wanted... for the family." Lucious said in a distant voice that was so low it could barely be heard.

Cherub began to realize what Lucious meant and said, "Your father must have faced a similar choice, and chosen his duty."

Draco looked at Cherub with disbelief, then looked again at his father.

Lucious shook his head to dispel the torrent of thoughts and said, "Those days are long since past. Regardless of what might have been, I am faced with the consequences of my choices."

"You mean me." Draco said in a dark tone.

Lucious looked at his son with an appraising eye and finally said, "Not all consequences are undesirable."

"Then you aren't going to disown me?" Draco asked cautiously.

Lucious thought for a moment, then said, "For the moment, let us say that I am not planning on your mother and I making a replacement for you. I need some time to evaluate your situation and forecast the permutations. If I find no insurmountable problems, then I will endorse your relationship."

"Thank you Father." Draco said formally.

"However, I do expect you to at least equal Mr. Nightshade and Mr. Potter in their academic and athletic prowess. Your relationship is not adequate reason to allow others to surpass you. You are a Malfoy, anything less than excellence is unacceptable." Lucious said firmly.

Draco thought about the words, then reaffirmed his straight posture and said, "Yes Father. I understand."

Lucious gave a quick nod, then turned and walked to the door.

Cherub quickly dispelled the lock and silence spells to allow Mr. Malfoy to leave.

* * * * *

"Are you just about done?" Cherub asked as he walked into the potions lab.

"Finishing up the cleaning. Ronnie made the potion perfectly." Eldon said with a smile.

"Thanks for covering for me Widget. I really appreciate it." Cherub said as he started wiping down the countertop.

"Is everything okay?" Eldon asked with concern.

"You know, I think it is." Cherub said speculatively.

"I'm glad, it looked like it was going to get ugly there for a few minutes." Eldon said seriously.

"It had the potential to go that way, but Mr. Malfoy was willing to listen to reason. That made things a lot easier." Cherub said as he finished wiping the countertop and looked around.

"Are you just about done Ron?" Cherub asked as he walked to the wash sink.

"Just putting things away." Ron said casually.

"Thanks for cleaning up so well, Professor Snape is holding me responsible for the condition of the lab." Cherub said honestly.

Ron looked at Cherub curiously before asking, "Why did you call him dad?"

Cherub glanced at Eldon, then looked fully at Ron as he said, "That's something I would rather you didn't spread around."

Ron nodded seriously.

"Okay, Professor Snape is my brother's legal guardian. When we're alone, my brother and I call him dad. We've never really had a father so it makes us feel better... and I think Professor Snape likes it too." Cherub said quietly.

Ron thought about the words, then asked, "Why didn't you have a father?"

"I'll tell you about it sometime. But right now, I think you'd better be getting back to Gryffindor. We all have some studying to do for tomorrow's classes and you're the only one who has an excuse to be behind." Cherub said seriously as he led the way to the potions lab door.

Ron looked at Cherub curiously as he performed the locking spell.

"I use the potions lab for my advanced class so I have the lock." Cherub said at Ron's look.

Ron nodded as the group walked away from the lab.

* * * * *

"There you are!" Harry said happily as Ron walked into their room.

Ron looked at Harry with surprise as he said, "I thought you would be with your boyfriends."

"Well, I will be later, at least for a little while. But now it's time to study for classes." Harry said seriously.

"Really? I mean, I just thought you'd want to study with Cherub and Draco." Ron said hesitantly.

"I usually do, but since you need to study too, I decided to study with you. Unless you would rather study alone?" Harry asked with honest curiosity.

"No. I was just surprised, that's all. It'll be good to study together... Do you think Hermione could study with us?" Ron asked slowly.

"Not tonight. She has a spellcasting study group in the library. She'll probably be studying with you the rest of the week." Harry said as he gathered his books.

Ron looked up at the painting, then turned away to gather his own books.

"Did everything go okay in the potions lab?" Harry asked curiously.

"Um, yeah. All the potions stuff is fine... I just... I talked with Widget about Percy." Ron said quietly.

"Eldon told us that you kind of blew up at your parents and said some stuff to upset... well, pretty much your whole family. But that's all I know. If you want to talk about it, I won't mind." Harry said honestly.

Ron looked at Harry speculatively, then said, "No. I think I've talked about it enough for today. I think it would be nice to talk with someone who isn't involved in it for a while."

"Okay. Then let's get to some serious studying. Do you want to start with potions?" Harry asked with a smile.

"Sure." Ron said, happy to be able to think about something other than his problems for a while.

* * * * *

After the Spellcasting study group was over, the group of friends returned to their room in the Slytherin dorm.

"Guys, I was just wondering if everyone's okay with what's going on with Ron." Cherub asked as he looked up from his transfigurations book.

"Honestly, I'm not comfortable with him. If I weren't helping Harry, I wouldn't want to be around him." Draco said in thought.

"I know what you mean. He seems so... needy. It's hard for me to keep from telling him to behave with dignity and present himself to the world with self-assurance." Cherub said frankly.

"With low self-esteem it's nearly impossible for him to do that." Eldon chimed in.

Everyone looked at Eldon curiously.

"I don't think he had much self-esteem to begin with. Now that he's had a breakdown and isolated himself from his family, he has none." Eldon said seriously.

"So what can we do to snap him out of being so whiney and pathetic?" Theodore asked as he looked around the room.

Cherub smiled and said, "Don't hold it back T, tell us how you really feel."

"My father wouldn't let me leave the house if I behaved like that. The Nott family name is too important to him to allow anyone, even me, to disgrace it by publicly indulging in self-pity." Theodore said honestly.

"Do you think his parents ever taught him how to behave properly?" Crabbe asked curiously.

"My guess would be 'no'. I think he's been taught manners and such. But I think he's been denied any sense of etiquette, bearing, dignity or social grace." Theodore said seriously.

"But without an old bloodline or social status, how can he learn something like that? I mean, maybe he can't." Goyle said in thought.

"I've got an idea. But it's not something we can do ourselves." Draco said distantly.

"What have you got?" Cherub asked with interest.

"Just an idea. I need to talk with Headmaster Dumbledore to see if it's even possible." Draco answered with distraction.

"Is there any reason we can't do it right now?" Cherub asked casually.

"Would he be willing to speak to us this late?" Draco asked, directing his question to Eldon.

After a quick glance at the clock, Eldon said, "He would be in his room by now. But if it's something that could help Ron, he would probably welcome the interruption."

"Then let's go before it gets any later." Draco said with determination.

Cherub pulled Draco into a gentle hug and whispered, "I love you."

After a brief but firm kiss, Draco and Eldon left to talk to the Headmaster.

* * * * *

"It's watching me." Ron said as he glanced at the painting yet again.

"How could it be watching you? It doesn't even have eyes." Harry said as he looked at his painting with admiration.

"I don't know, but it's like no matter where I am in the room, it's following me." Ron said uncomfortably.

Harry looked at Ron curiously and said, "It's strange that you're bothered by a muggle painting when all through Hogwart's there are pictures that actually *do* look at you."

"Well, I think we're just about done here. I need to spend some time with Draco and Cherub." Harry said as he closed his classbooks.

"Are you going to spend the night down there?" Ron asked quietly.

"Yeah, unless you need me to be here." Harry said with distraction

Ron looked at Harry for a long silent minute, then said, "I have a lot to think about. Even though it would be nice to have you here with me tonight, I think I'd better take some time to think things through."

Harry nodded and said, "I'll see you in the morning Ron. Don't worry, you survived the first day. It gets easier from here."

"Yeah." Ron whispered and followed Harry to the door.

"Good night Ron. It's good to have you back." Harry said sincerely.

"Thanks Harry, I think it's good to be back." Ron said matching his tone.

Ron shut the door behind Harry, then walked to gather his class books for the following day.

"And you can stop watching me." Ron said firmly to the painting as he passed.

* * * * *

After a long meeting with the other faculty Heads of House, Professor Snape made the familiar journey down the corridor to check on his students before turning in for the night.

A whimper from the shadows almost went unnoticed, but Professor Snape did notice and walked over to investigate.

"Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape asked uncertainly.

Harry looked up at Professor Snape with desperate, helpless eyes.

"Come along, we're nearly to your room." Professor Snape said in his classroom voice.

Harry shakily gathered himself up and walked with Professor Snape the few remaining feet to the Slytherin rooms.

* * * * *

"What happened to Harry?" Pansy asked with immediate concern.

"Mr. Potter seemed to be in need of assistance. Help me get him to his room." Professor Snape said quickly.

Pansy immediately ran to Harry's other side and helped Professor Snape guide the incoherent boy to his bedroom.

* * * * *

"What's wrong with Harry?" Cherub asked as he ran to Professor Snape and Pansy to help Harry to his bed.

"I found him in this state in the corridor outside. Since I can detect no signs of physical or magical trauma, I thought perhaps your presence might be of most benefit to him." Professor Snape said slowly.

"Harry, tell me what's wrong." Draco said as he gathered Harry into his arms.

"Everything." Harry said in a whimper.

"Thank you Professor Snape. He's able to talk, so I think we'll be able to take care of him." Draco said seriously.

"Seek me out should you need my assistance." Professor Snape said regally as he allowed his expression of concern to fall away.

"We will. Thank you for helping Harry." Cherub said with a genuine smile.

Professor Snape gave an almost imperceptible nod and turned with a swish of his robes to exit.

"I'll be in the common room if you need me for anything." Pansy said in a timid voice.

Draco looked at her and gave a small smile of gratitude and a nod.

Pansy left the room quietly with one last concerned look back at Harry.

* * * * *

"What is it Harry? Can you tell me what's wrong?" Draco asked in a gentle voice.

"Everything. Classes, Gryffindor, Quidditch, Studies, Ron..." Harry trailed off as tears began to fall down his cheeks.

"Overload." Cherub said from Harry's other side.

"We should have seen it coming. Our little Gryffindor tries to take on the world single-handed. It's up to us to remind him that he doesn't have to do it alone." Draco said with tender eyes directed at Harry.

"I think I know what he needs right now." Cherub said quietly.

"You get the shirt and I'll get the pants." Draco said with a nod.

Cherub smiled as he realized that he and Draco were on the same wavelength.

"Do you guys want us to leave?" Theodore asked quietly from Crabbe's bed.

"Only if this is going to bother you. We're just going to cuddle with Harry for a while." Draco said as he pulled off Harry's shoes.

"Oh. Okay. But just say the word if you're uncomfortable with us being here." Theodore said cautiously.

"You got it T." Cherub said as he pulled off Harry's shirt.

"Pajamas?" Draco asked as he pulled down Harry's pants.

"No, just leave him in his boxers. I think he needs the contact." Cherub said seriously.

"Right." Draco said as he started to undress.

"What?" Harry asked in confusion as he watched Cherub and Draco removing their clothes.

"Don't worry Harry, everything is going to be fine." Cherub said in an assuring voice as he folded his pants.

"Why do I get stuck against the wall?" Draco asked as he crawled into the bed.

"Because my wings take up too much room. The only way all three of us can fit in one of these little beds is if I let my wings hang over the side." Cherub said as he snuggled into the bed beside Harry.

As soon as Harry was aware that he was sandwiched between his boyfriends, he immediately wriggled around so he could pull them both into a tight, desperate hug.

"We missed you too." Draco said gently.

"I was coming back here and... it's like everything caught up to me. It's too much. I can't do everything." Harry said as fresh tears began to fall.

"That's right Potter, you can't do everything." Draco said with tenderness in his voice.

"But we can." Cherub said, then pressed a kiss to Harry's cheek.

Harry shifted back to look at Draco and Cherub with question.

"All the pressure of studying and our extra duties is a lot to deal with. And now you're taking care of Ron on top of everything else and it's too much." Cherub explained quietly.

"But I didn't even see Ron until after he worked with you in the potions lab." Harry said in confusion.

"It's not Ron that's the problem. It's all of it. You're trying to go too many directions at once and now you're having a little meltdown." Draco said in a soft voice.

"That's right. You're trying to be everything to everyone and it's pulling you apart." Cherub said with concern.

"So what can we do to fix it?" Harry asked in a helpless whisper.

"This." Draco said and moved in for a gentle kiss.

When the kiss ended, Harry looked at Draco with confusion.

"Let me try." Cherub said with a smile, then started to nuzzle Harry's neck.

Harry's eyes rolled back as he felt a rush of arousal wash over his body.

"That's got it." Draco said with a smile.

"Now try again." Cherub said as he pulled away.

Draco gave Cherub an amused smile, then dove in to give Harry a full, deep kiss.

After a long minute of kissing, Draco pulled back and asked, "Feeling better?"

Harry got a goofy smile on his face as he said, "Feeling great."

"Good. I think we just need to take some time to ourselves like this and you'll be able to deal with everything else." Draco said as he drew his fingertips gently down Harry's chest.

"How does that help?" Harry asked in confusion.

"You've got to take a break from the stress Harry. You've got to take some time to enjoy the moment and indulge your feelings. I mean, you're a Gryffindor, you're going to do all those things because they need to be done. Nothing we say will change that." Cherub said gently.

"So we'll work it into our schedules that at certain times each day, we'll get together and just be together." Draco said as he looked deeply into Harry's eyes.

"Okay, I think I've got it. Sorry guys. I don't mean to be such a wimp." Harry said shyly.

"Draco can tell you that I wasn't very far from my own meltdown today. That's why it was so easy to tell what was wrong with you just now." Cherub said honestly.

"Why didn't you call me? I would have helped." Harry said with concern.

"That's our little Gryffindor." Draco said with a fond smile.

"Draco took care of me. Now all we have to do is make sure that there isn't going to be a next time for either of us. Let's make sure we set aside some time each day to be 'together time' for the three of us." Cherub said seriously.

"That sounds nice. Kind of like a little vacation in the middle of the day." Harry said with a peaceful look in his eyes.

"That's exactly what it is. We'll try it out tomorrow and see how it goes." Cherub said, then laid his head down and snuggled into Harry's side.

"We need a bigger bed." Draco said as he snuggled into Harry's other side.

"Aren't you guys going back to your own beds?" Harry asked in a soft voice as he enjoyed the sensation of being snuggled from both sides.

"No. We need this tonight. All of us." Draco said as he laid a gentle kiss on Harry's bare shoulder.

"T and the guys won't mind and I know Eldon will be okay with it." Cherub said as he closed his eyes.

"I love you both." Harry said in contentment as his eyes drifted shut.

Draco watched as Harry and Cherub drifted into sleep. Finally he gave into his own tiredness and drifted into a peaceful slumber.

* * * * *

"Good morning Ron, how are you doing today?" Cherub asked cheerfully as they met at the dining hall door.

"I'm good. Where are Harry and Draco?" Ron asked curiously.

"They'll be here in a minute. They're getting Harry's schedule for the day sorted out." Cherub said with a smile.

"Um, would you guys like to sit with me at the Gryffindor table?" Ron asked hesitantly.

Cherub looked at Ron curiously, and realized that Ron was poised for rejection, expecting the worst.

"Yes Ron. Thank you, we'd be happy to accept." Cherub said with a genuine smile.

Ron's answering smile in return was beaming with happiness and accomplishment.

"Good morning guys." Hermione said as she walked with Cherub and Ron to the Gryffindor table.

"Good morning. How are you today Hermione?" Cherub asked cheerfully.

"To tell you the truth, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed. The schoolwork, study groups and everything are really weighing down on me. I couldn't get to sleep because I couldn't stop thinking about everything." Hermione said tiredly.

"It sounds like you need a vacation." Cherub said, considering just how much he should say to Hermione and Ron.

Hermione smiled at the statement and nodded in agreement.

Cherub noticed Harry and Draco walking into the room and waved to get their attention.

"Hey guys. How are you this morning?" Hermione asked as Harry and Draco approached.

"Really good." Harry said with a peaceful smile.

Hermione looked at Harry with surprise and said, "It looks like you got a good night of sleep. You actually look well rested."

Harry smiled at Draco and Cherub before saying, "I had the most relaxing sleep that I can remember."

"You'll have to tell me your secret..." Hermione trailed off as she realized what the looks they were exchanging meant.

"Ewww." Ron said as he also noticed the exchanged looks.

"There's nothing 'ewww' about it Ron. The three of us slept in the same bed. It was wonderful and comfortable and the best sleep I think I've ever had." Harry said firmly.

Ron looked at Harry with surprise.

"Ease up on Ron. We've never told him what we do and don't do, so it's not his fault that he jumped to the wrong conclusion." Cherub said seriously.

Harry looked at Cherub for a second in thought, then looked to Ron with apology.

"I'm sorry Ron. Cherub's right, you had no way of knowing." Harry said shyly.

"And just to keep from any further misunderstandings, all we do is kiss and hug each other a little. We love each other and that's how we show it." Cherub said frankly.

"Oh, okay. I guess that isn't too gross." Ron said in thought.

"No, it's really nice when you're feeling stressed out to have someone there to hold you and care about what you're feeling." Harry said with a soft smile.

"That sounds really nice." Hermione said in a distant voice.

"It is. I can't imagine trying to handle everything alone now that I've found these guys." Cherub said with a genuine smile directed at Draco and Harry.

"It gets pretty lonely trying to face everything by myself." Hermione said with a look of deep thought.

"I'll try to help if you want." Ron whispered hesitantly.

Hermione glanced at Ron to find a look of honest concern.

"I wouldn't want to add to your problems Ron." Hermione said quietly.

"I think my biggest problem is that I can't stop thinking about my problems. Maybe helping you with yours could give me a break from mine." Ron said hopefully.

Hermione gave a tentative smile and said, "We could give it a try."

Ron smiled, then realized that Harry, Draco and Cherub were watching them.

A moment of panic washed over Ron as he looked cautiously at his three friends.

Cherub gave a big smile and said, "Don't worry about it Ron. We'd never tease you about something like this."

"Except that I still owe you one big 'Ewww'." Harry said with a smile.

"I'll remember." Ron said with a relieved chuckle.

The food appeared and stopped any further conversation.

Part 6: Chuffery

Chapter 16

As breakfast ended, Cherub encouraged Harry and Draco to follow him out of the dining room.

"I forgot to ask last night, what was your idea about how to help Ron?" Cherub asked carefully.

Harry looked at Cherub and Draco with interest.

"Oh, that." Draco said with a considering look.

At Cherub and Harry's impatient expressions he hesitantly continued, "I just thought that Ron might benefit from spending some time in the company of muggles."

"Why?" Cherub asked with surprise and confusion.

"Well, from everything I've heard, muggles are boring and really irritating. Maybe if he spent some time around some of them he might see his own worth. Rather than seeing himself as a member of a minor wizarding family, he'll see that he really is fortunate just because he's a wizard." Draco said in thought.

Harry considered the statement as Cherub asked, "What did Headmaster Dumbledore say when you asked him about it?"

Draco smiled and said, "He didn't really give me an answer, he just kind of nodded and said, 'Well done Mr. Malfoy'."

Harry and Cherub giggled as they easily envisioned Headmaster Dumbledore's expression as he said that.

* * * * *

"I'm done!" Chuffery said with a voice filled with accomplishment.

James looked at Chuffery with a loving smile, then looked over the letters Chuffery had written to Cherub and his friends.

As he read, he began to chuckle at some of the illustrations that Chuffery had drawn in each letter to try and explain how to tie his shoes.

"Is it okay?" Chuffery asked with apprehension.

James looked at Chuffery's concerned expression and forced himself to become more serious as he said, "The letters are very good and I'm sure everyone will love them."

Chuffery beamed at the praise and began to bounce with enthusiasm.

"I think we should go owl these letters right now so your brother and his friends will get them at lunch." James said as he stood.

Chuffery gathered up the letters and hurried to James' side.

* * * * *

"Did you pay attention to what I did when I sent the messages yesterday?" James asked casually as they walked down the hallway.

"Uh huh." Chuffery said with enthusiasm.

"Then I think that you can owl the letters all by yourself today. I'll just stand aside in case you have any questions." James said with a smile of anticipation at Chuffery's probable response.

"REALLY? I can do it all by myself?" Chuffery asked in wonder.

"Yes, all by yourself. I'll be right here if you need me." James said with a warm smile as he stopped just inside the doorway of the owlery.

* * * * *

"Mr. Potter, a word with you?" Professor Snape said as the other students were taking their seats.

Harry walked to Professor Snape's desk and waited with an expectant expression.

"I just wanted to be sure that there were no ill effects left over from last night's incident." Professor Snape said seriously.

Harry considered the question for a moment, then gave a peaceful smile as he said, "I'm going to be fine. We've figured out what caused the incident and are taking steps to see that it doesn't happen again. Thank you for your help."

"Your assurance that the situation is in the process of being resolved is all the thanks I require. Please take your seat so we may begin."

Harry nodded and almost missed the wisp of a tender smile cross Professor Snape's face for an instant.

* * * * *

"I thought we could go for a walk outside this morning. Do you think that is something you might enjoy Master Chuffery?" James asked gently.

"Yeah! Can we go for a walk in the woods?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"Yes. I suppose we could do that." James said in a considering voice.

Chuffery bounced with happiness and started toward the door.

"You'll need to change into some long pants before we go. We wouldn't want your legs to get scratched or anything." James said in a gentle and caring voice.

"Okay." Chuffery said happily, then a considering look came over his face.

"Is there a problem?" James asked with concern.

"I don't think I remember how to tie my shoes." Chuffery said in a small, disappointed voice that sounded to be on the verge of tears.

James smiled as he said, "I don't expect you to learn everything the first time I show you. Come on upstairs and you can show me how much you remember, then I'll help you with the rest."

Chuffery's smile returned and he happily ran to James' side to go up and change.

* * * * *

"You've done it now Nightshade." Draco said with his 'Malfoy' grin firmly in place.

"What's that?" Cherub asked as he carefully wrote the label for his potion.

"I think you've just made everyone else in the class hate you by blowing the grading curve." Draco said with delight.

Cherub looked around the room at the students all working on their potions and noticed several disgusted stares aimed in his direction.

"Most fourth year students couldn't make a 'Dream Keeper' potion if you walked them through it step-by-step and gave them a week to do it. You just cooked one up in a one hour class." Draco said with a mischievous grin.

"The whole point of the class today was about knowing and testing your limits. This was the most complicated potion I had a chance of getting right. My 'Dream Keeper' is no more or less of an accomplishment than Ron's 'Spot Remover' potion." Cherub said seriously, then turned to face Draco fully.

"In fact, I think Ron's potion might be more of an accomplishment because I'm confident in my ability. I get the feeling that Ron has never made a potion completely on his own before. By the way, how did yours turn out?" Cherub finished curiously.

"Mine? Oh, I won't know for a few more minutes. If it becomes transparent, then I've made magical ink that can only be seen by the light of the full moon. If not... then I've just made a bottle of green goop." Draco said as he looked at his opaque green potion.

"I thought you were going to do a 'Reveal' potion." Cherub said absently as he began cleaning up his work area.

"I was until I saw that Granger was doing the same thing. That inspired me to try something more difficult." Draco said with a smile.

"That's very 'Malfoy' of you." Cherub said with a chuckle.

"Thank you." Draco said with a slight bow.

"Look at that." Cherub said as he pointed at Draco's potion bottle changing color.

Draco looked at the bottle and smiled.

"Now they can hate you too."

* * * * *

"What's it like in there?" Chuffery asked with excitement as they approached the wooded area.

"I have no idea. Your brother was always afraid of these woods. Even now he won't go near this part of the property." James said casually.

"Cherub never went here?" Chuffery asked in wonder.

"That's right. So far as I know, no one has been in these woods for many years. We'll be the first to explore it." James said seriously.

"Are you scared?" Chuffery asked as he stopped at the edge of the tree line.

James smiled and said, "No, actually I'm just curious. Do you have your wand?"

"Uh huh." Chuffery said and pulled his wand out to show it.

"So do I. If we encounter anything dangerous, I'm sure we can delay it long enough for us to get away." James said with assurance.

Chuffery reluctantly nodded, then the pair slowly walked into the unknown.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Ron?" Harry asked with concern as they left the potions class.

"Professor Snape says I'll be okay by the end of the day. And he said that my accident proved that my 'Spot Remover' potion worked so I'll get full credit." Ron finished with a big happy smile.

"You look really different without freckles." Cherub said as he glanced at Ron consideringly.

"Yeah. I always thought I'd look better without freckles but..." Ron trailed off.

"The freckles give you character. Without them you look pasty... kind of washed out." Cherub said in thought.

"Yeah. That's it." Ron said seriously.

"I'll catch up to you guys in class. I've got some stuff that I need to take care of right now." Draco said quickly as the group approached the staircases.

"I'll save a seat for you." Cherub said with a smile as he watched Draco walk off in a different direction.

"Would you guys like to have lunch at our table today?" Hermione asked hopefully as she moved to Ron's side.

"I'm sorry Hermione. We can't today." Harry said with regret.

"Big plans?" Hermione asked curiously.

"We'll find out at lunch. Draco is planning something and we don't know what it is." Cherub said casually.

There was a moment of silence before Ron finally said, "With Malfoy planning it, I bet it's going to be something really evil or really romantic."

The group stopped in surprise at Ron's statement.

"And since Hermione and I aren't invited, it's probably romantic." Ron said in thought.

Cherub and Harry both smiled at Ron's conclusion as they continued toward their next class.

* * * * *

"LOOKIT!" Chuffery said as he and James walked into a clearing in the woods.

"Just look Master Chuffery. That's a circle of toadstools. It's considered very bad luck to disturb a place like this." James said seriously.

"Why?" Chuffery asked as he backed away from the toadstools.

"Because toadstool rings are rumored to be the sacred meeting places for the fairy folk." James said as he looked around carefully.

"Are there fairies here?" Chuffery asked with excitement.

"I don't really know. But I think it's best that we leave before we find out." James said and extended his arm to indicate the path they arrived on.

"Why?" Chuffery asked seriously.

"Because this is their place and we weren't invited to be here. Fairies have good reason not to like wizards and we might frighten them." James said in thought as he led the way out of the clearing.

After a long silent moment of waiting for the next 'Why?', James turned to find that Chuffery was nowhere to be seen.

* * * * *

Cheers erupted from the class as Hermione successfully enchanted a wooden ball to bounce on command.

"Beginners luck." Cherub grumbled as he looked at the inert ball sitting on the table before him.

"Miss Granger has just demonstrated the importance of precise pronunciation..." The professor said, then turned to Cherub and continued, "...and method."

Cherub rolled his eyes, but made no further comment.

"I believe this achievement warrants five points for Gryffindor. The rest of you may use the remainder of the class time to attempt to duplicate Miss Granger's feat." The Professor said with delight.

The muttering of spell casting rose up around the room as Cherub turned to Hermione and reluctantly said, "You really did a good job on that spell Granger. Would you mind helping me with mine?"

Hermione nearly glowed with accomplishment as she said, "Sure Cherub, I'd be glad to help you. Why don't you show me how you're doing it and we'll compare notes?"

Cherub gave her a gentle smile of thanks for not rubbing it in, then began to demonstrate his enchantment spell.

* * * * *

The gap in the trees seemed to vanish as Chuffery approached.

"Hi." a small voice said from behind him.

Chuffery turned and looked around for the source of the voice.

"Down here." The tiny voice said with a giggle.

Chuffery looked down to see a teeny tiny little girl with transparent wings sitting on one of the toadstools.

"Hi." Chuffery said with a smile as he carefully sat down in the grass in front of her.

"My daddy says that big people like you hurt little people like me." The little winged girl said seriously.

Chuffery thought about the statement, then carefully said, "I don't know anything about little people, but there's all kinds of big people. Some are nice like me and my brother and James. And some big people are bad and hurt people and they don't care if they're big or little. And..."

The little winged girl sat silently, waiting for him to finish.

"...I think that some big people aren't really bad, but they hurt people because they just don't know any better. I think maybe my Nana was like that." Chuffery finished in deep thought.

The little girl seemed to come to a decision, then asked, "You wanna see my trick?"

Chuffery nodded with excitement.

The winged girl leapt into the air and whizzed around the clearing a few times leaving trails of multi-colored sparkles cascading in her wake.

Chuffery giggled in delight at the sight of the magical sparkles drifting slowly to earth.

"That was really pretty. Do you wanna see my trick?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

The tiny girl came to rest on her toadstool again and nodded with excitement.

"Denfizia Mariposa!" Chuffery said as he waived his wand toward the surrounding trees.

All manner of butterflies erupted and swirled into the air.

The little girl giggled and clapped with delight at the beautiful sight.

"I'm Larien." The little girl said while keeping her attention on the colorful display.

"I'm Chuffery." He said with a smile at her impressed expression.

Larien giggled at the sound of his name, then suddenly stopped and looked into the trees.

"Larien! There are wizards in the woods. You need to come with..." A voice called, then suddenly stopped.

* * * * *

"Master Chuffery?" James called, then waited to see if he could hear any response.

"Master Chuffery!" James called again, this time a little more loudly.

Panic washed over James as he hurried back down the path to look in the clearing where they had just been.

But as he walked, he realized that the path didn't open into a clearing anymore.

He walked up and down the path, trying to find something, anything that would show him where the clearing had been. But nothing he saw gave him any clues.

"CHUFFERY!"

* * * * *

A tiny man flew into the clearing and came to rest on the toadstool beside Larien.

"Chuffery, this is my daddy. His name is Lolindir." Larien said shyly.

"Hi." Chuffery said quietly, concerned by the look of worry on the tiny man's face.

"Oh Larien, you don't know what you've done." The tiny man said with pain.

"We didn't do nothing bad. We were just talking." Chuffery tried to explain.

The little man looked at Chuffery consideringly, then said, "Showing herself to a wizard puts all of us in danger."

"I won't hurt you. I promise!" Chuffery said desperately.

After a moment of consideration, Lolindir finally said, "Maybe you won't. But you knowing that we're here is too dangerous to allow."

"Please don't hurt him daddy! He's nice." Larien begged.

Lolindir looked at his daughter and a loving smile came across his face.

Chuffery looked on helplessly, not knowing what he should do.

"I won't hurt your friend. But now that he knows where we live, it's too dangerous for us to stay here." The little man explained.

"Why daddy? Chuffery wouldn't hurt us. I know he wouldn't." Larien said quickly.

"I know baby. But some wizards like Chuffery hunt us down to... use us... in their spells." Lolindir said in a pained voice.

"Chuffery wouldn't ever do that, would you Chuffery? Tell Daddy you wouldn't do that!" Larien begged desperately.

"No. I wouldn't ever. I promise." Chuffery said quietly, knowing that it had already been decided.

"It doesn't matter. We can't take the chance of even one wizard knowing where we live." Lolindir said with a sad look at his daughter.

"I'm sorry." Chuffery said to Larien in a whisper.

"You didn't do anything wrong." Larien said sadly.

"Say goodbye to your friend Larien. We need to gather our things and be well away from here before nightfall." Lolindir said seriously.

"I just have to get Dee Dah, then I'll be ready." Larien said as she looked at her father.

"I'm sorry baby, but Dee Dah belongs here in these woods. We can't take her with us." Lolindir said with regret.

"Oh daddy! I can't leave Dee Dah. She needs me!" Larien said and began to cry.

Lolindir's heart broke at the sight of his daughter's anguish, then he got an idea.

"Maybe your friend Chuffery could take care of Dee Dah for you?" Lolindir said seriously.

"Would you Chuffery? She's really nice like you are. I know you'll like her!" Larien said hopefully.

"Yes. I'll take care of her. Just tell me what I have to do." Chuffery said immediately.

"I'll show you in a minute. I'm not sure how she survived until my daughter came along, but Dee Dah really does need someone to take care of her." Lolindir said seriously.

"I promise that I'll take the best care of her that I can." Chuffery said as a vow.

"I'll go get her!" Larien said quickly and flew away.

"I'm really sorry." Chuffery said again, not knowing what else to say.

Lolindir looked up at the regret in Chuffery's eyes and said, "I know. This isn't your fault and it isn't Larien's. In a perfect world, wizards and faeries could be neighbors in harmony. But the world isn't perfect... I love my family and would do anything to protect them. It's just too big a risk to take with their lives. Someday I hope you'll understand."

Chuffery thought about the words, then whispered, "I think I understand it now. Since my mommy ran away and my daddy sold me and my grandfather died, my brother is my only family. I think maybe losing some people you love makes you want to protect the others even more. I'd do anything to keep my brother safe."

"I'm glad Dee Dah is going to have a good person like you to take care of her. That way I'll be able to tell my Larien that her best friend is safe and well cared for." Lolindir said distantly.

"Come on Dee Dah. Chuffery is waiting." Larien said in an urging tone.

"Please hold still for a few seconds Chuffery. I'm going to show you how to take care of Dee Dah." Lolindir said as he fluttered into the air.

Chuffery held still as the fairy circled and dived over his head.

"That should do it." Lolindir said as he came to rest on the toadstool again.

"What did you do to me?" Chuffery asked as he felt a magical sensation wash over him.

"It's fairy magic. I just gave you the 'Wood Lore'. Now you'll know how to feed and care for Dee Dah... and any other woodland creature you might encounter." Lolindir said with a smile.

Chuffery looked around and suddenly everything seemed familiar. Every tree, every plant, and every insect were known to him.

"Chuffery, this is Dee Dah!" Larien said proudly as she rode into the clearing on the back of a giant slug.

"Hi." Chuffery said as he looked at the slimy creature carefully.

"She's scared of you." Larien said in a mock whisper.

"Don't worry Dee Dah, I'm nice. I promise." Chuffery said with assurance as he put his hands down where she could inspect them.

After a moment of grazing around the edges of Chuffery's hands, she kind of oozed up into his palms.

"She's still not sure. But she's going to try to like you." Larien said with a giggle.

"We have to be going Larien. There is another wizard searching the woods for Chuffery." Lolindir said as he lifted into the air.

"Goodbye Chuffery. I'm glad I got to meet you." Larien said shyly.

"I'm glad too. And don't worry about Dee Dah, I promise that I'll take really good care of her." Chuffery said with a sad smile.

"Chuffery, would you please not tell the big wizard that you've seen us? Just tell him that you found Dee Dah, then got lost for a few minutes." Lolindir said seriously.

"I won't ever tell anyone about you... Ever. I swear." Chuffery said as tears filled his eyes.

"Thank you Chuffery. If Larien were destined to meet a wizard, I'm glad that it turned out to be you. I'm going to release the spell on this clearing now so the big wizard can find you. Have a long and happy life." Lolindir said, then made one quick circle of the clearing before darting into the trees and disappearing.

* * * * *

"Chuffery!" James called out in a panicked scream.

"James?" Chuffery said as he stepped out of the clearing.

"Where have you been Master Chuffery?" James asked, shaking with adrenaline.

"Right there." Chuffery said as he pointed.

James looked into the clearing that hadn't been there a moment before, then noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

"Master Chuffery. Please hold very still, there's something on you." James said seriously as he drew back to swat the huge, slimy slug off Chuffery's shoulder.

"No. That's my friend. Her name is Dee Dah." Chuffery said as he turned away and shielded Dee Dah with his body so James wouldn't hurt her.

"Dee Dah?" James asked as he slowly lowered his hand.

"Yes. And she's my friend. She's going to live with us and I'm going to take care of her." Chuffery said forcefully, then whispered to Dee Dah, "Don't worry. James is really nice. He just doesn't know you yet."

James looked at the huge slimy thing on Chuffery's shoulder, then gave an involuntary shiver of revulsion at the sight.

"Master Chuffery, you need to understand that Dee Dah is a wild animal... insect... well, something, and it shouldn't live in the house. If you take it away from it's home in the woods, it will probably get sick." James tried to explain.

"No she won't. She'll just tell me what she needs and I'll get it for her." Chuffery said seriously.

"You can understand it?" James asked reluctantly.

"Uh huh. Can we pick up some leaves for her to eat on the way back home? That way she can have lunch at the same time we do." Chuffery asked hopefully.

"You're the young master of the house." James said with another shiver of revulsion, then continued, "But you'll have to explain this to your brother."

"Okay! Come on James. Both of us are getting hungry. Let's go!" Chuffery said happily.

James followed quietly as Chuffery happily led the way up the path, stopping occasionally to pick leaves for his new friend.

* * * * *

"I think my headaches are getting worse." Harry said as he held his hand firmly over his scar.

"Maybe you should talk to Madame Pomfrey about it. She might be able to give you something that will help." Cherub said with concern as the trio walked out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

"Will you two meet me by the South door? I've got to go get something." Draco said quickly.

Cherub smiled and said, "We'll go anywhere you want if it means we get to spend some time with you."

"Good. Hold that thought and meet me at the South door. I'll be right there." Draco said in a rush.

"What do you say Harry? Can we do that?" Cherub asked playfully.

"Yeah. I think we can." Harry said with a gentle smile.

Draco broke into a brief but full smile for an instant, then started running away.

"I really do love him." Cherub said as he watched Draco go.

"I love you both." Harry said seriously as he turned to look at Cherub.

Cherub saw a glimmer of something in Harry's eyes just as Harry quickly turned away and started walking for the South door.

"Potter, wait." Cherub said quickly.

Harry turned to look at Cherub with a little hesitation in his expression.

"Harry, I love you too. I guess I don't say it to you as much as I say it to Draco... I just kind of figured that you knew." Cherub said shyly.

"It's okay Cherub. I know you love Draco first, I'm okay with that. Really." Harry said quietly.

Cherub thought about the words for a moment, then finally responded, "I love Draco differently than I love you. I can't really compare the way I love you to the way I love Draco. I just have the feeling that Draco needs to hear it more than you do. I don't know if that makes sense."

Harry smiled and said, "It makes perfect sense. And I agree with you, I think Draco does need to hear it more often than I do... But I still like to hear it sometimes."

"I love you Harry." Cherub said quietly.

"I love you too Cherub." Harry responded in the same tone.

"Now let's go see what Draco came up with." Cherub said with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. I bet it's going to be something over the top." Harry said with a chuckle.

"Would a Malfoy do anything less?" Cherub asked with a smirk.

Harry chuckled and nodded his agreement.

Cherub and Harry started walking down the hall again, each wondering what Draco was up to.

After a moment of walking in silence, Cherub said, "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know what?" Cherub asked with an impish grin.

"What?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"I love you." Cherub said with a full glorious smile.

Harry chuckled and said, "I love you too, but I've heard it enough for today. You can tell me again tomorrow."

"No way. I love you and I'm going to keep on telling you until you believe it." Cherub said firmly.

"I believe it!" Harry said defensively.

"Good."

There was a long moment of silence as the pair walked down the hallway until it was broken by Cherub whispering, "I love you."

Harry smiled and whispered, "I love you too."

Chapter 17

"Come along, it's right this way." Draco said impatiently from the doorway at the end of the hall.

"What's 'right this way?'" Harry asked suspiciously.

"A midday repast worthy of a nobleman." Draco said haughtily.

Harry and Cherub shared an amused look at Draco's uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

"Come along then." Draco said urgently, then took off running down the path.

* * * * *

"We're going to Hagrid's?" Harry asked cautiously as they approached the cottage.

"No, we're going *past* Hagrid's." Draco said as he left the path and started walking toward a stand of trees.

"We're not supposed to go into the woods." Cherub said as a tremble of fear worked its way up his spine.

"We're forbidden to enter the woods on the other side of the school. Widget told me about this place and said it's alright." Draco said, then stopped.

"What are we supposed to be seeing?" Harry asked as he looked around.

"See the path? I want you to go in first. It'll be better if you see it without me standing in front of you." Draco said impatiently.

"Um, I'm really not good with places like this." Cherub said nervously.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked with concern, momentarily forgetting his excitement.

"I just... I don't like being in woods or forests... I don't like it at all." Cherub said, and the anxiety could clearly be seen in his eyes.

"It's okay Cherub. We're just going right there. We're not going in very far at all. You'll be able to see out of the forest the whole time." Draco said quietly.

"Cherub." Harry said seriously, to draw his attention.

"I'll go in first and check it out for you so you don't have to worry about it." Harry said confidently, then gave Draco a quick smile before walking down the path.

Cherub watched Harry go, then glanced at Draco and said, "Maybe I can do it if you two are with me."

"It's going to be fine, I promise." Draco said gently.

"Come on Cherub. You're not going to believe this." Harry said with boyish excitement.

Draco could see that Cherub seemed to be stuck, so he gently put an arm around him to encourage him to walk.

After a few steps, Cherub stopped and said, "I can't."

"Okay." Draco said quietly.

Cherub looked at Draco with question.

"If I knew you were afraid of the forest, I wouldn't have planned this. I just wanted to do something special for just the three of us." Draco said gently.

Cherub could see the sincerity in Draco's eyes and quietly said, "Let's try again."

Draco looked at Cherub appraisingly for a moment, then nodded.

Cherub forced himself to take a step, then another.

"Isn't this fantastic?" Harry asked cheerfully.

Cherub had been so focused on making himself walk that he had lost track of his surroundings.

"It's beautiful." Harry said as he moved in to give Draco a joyful hug.

Cherub looked at the small clearing.

Sunlight was dappling in through the leafy covering, making everything seem beautiful and magical.

There was a picnic lunch laid out on a blanket in the small open space.

"It *is* beautiful." Cherub reluctantly admitted.

Draco smiled, then gestured downward to a blanket and a collection of covered dishes.

"So, what's for lunch?" Harry asked happily.

"There's only one way to find out. Tuck in." Draco said with a smile, then looked at Cherub with concern.

Cherub's attention was focused on the thin veil of branches that were obscuring his view of the 'outside world'.

"Are you going to be okay?" Draco asked in a whisper.

After a moment to consider, Cherub turned to face Draco and said, "Yeah. But if we went any deeper into the trees, I couldn't do it..."

"Sit down and try to enjoy the food." Draco said gently.

"Yeah. Maybe eating will take your mind off of it." Harry said as he distributed empty plates for all of them.

Cherub thought about the words for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

"Yeah. As long as I'm here with you guys, I know it won't be a problem."

* * * * *

"I was beginning to think I'd have to go and hunt for you two." Catty said in an amused voice.

"We took a walk in the woods and it took longer than expected." James said hesitantly.

"Is everything alright?" Catty asked with concern at James' worried expression.

"I made a new friend." Chuffery said happily as he indicated the huge slimy slug on his shoulder.

James cringed at the sight, once again fighting down the urge to swat the hideous thing away to protect his young charge.

"Oh, she's lovely!" Catty enthused.

James turned and looked at his fiancée with surprise.

"What's her name?" Catty asked as she squatted down to be closer to Chuffery's eye level.

"Her name is DeeDah." Chuffery said happily.

"Well, I made a nice big salad to go with your lunch. I bet she'd love to have some with you." Catty said as she carefully reached out to gently pet DeeDah on the back with her index finger.

Chuffery listened carefully for a moment, then said, "DeeDah says thank you, and that she'd like to have some of your salad."

Catty withdrew her hand and said, "Then why don't you three come in and get washed up?"

"Come on James." Chuffery said as he took off running toward the house.

"How can you bear to touch that disgusting thing?" James asked Catty as they walked toward the house at a slower pace.

"Because when I was a little girl, nearly Chuffery's age, I used to love playing with all manner of creepy crawly things. They fascinate me." Catty said with a grin.

James looked at his fiancée, with surprise, then began to wonder what other things he didn't know about the woman he intended to marry.

* * * * *

"What is *that*?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Jellied tongue." Draco said with a smile.

Harry stared at the wobbly concoction on the platter before him, then shrugged and said, "If you say it's okay, I'll try it. I'll try anything once."

Draco snickered and said, "Oh Potter, I'm going to remember that you said that."

Harry realized what Draco meant and blushed slightly before turning his attention back to the gelatinous dish.

With knife in hand, he approached the dish, then stopped.

Harry made a face and stuck his tongue out at the jelly, then cut himself a respectable portion.

Draco chuckled with delight at the action, then noticed Cherub's distant gaze focused on the 'outside world' beyond the thin veil of trees and undergrowth.

* * * * *

"So how are things looking today? Any better?" Hermione asked between bites of food.

Ron considered for a moment, then quietly answered, "I think so. But I just have this feeling..."

At Hermione's inquisitive stare, Ron finally continued, "...It's like, something's wrong. I look around and see what's happening and I have this feeling that... this isn't how things are supposed to be."

Hermione considered the words, but couldn't think of anything to say that would put Ron at ease about what he was feeling.

"My counselor says that it's just a manifestation of an 'early life trauma', but... I don't know, it seems so real, you know, like I can almost see it." Ron said distantly.

"So is this feeling that things are all wrong what's causing your problems?" Hermione asked cautiously, hoping that her asking wouldn't upset him.

After a moment of distant thought, Ron looked at Hermione as if just realizing that she was there.

"Oh, um... yeah. I think so." Ron mumbled, then forced a smile onto his face as he continued, "It must be a Gryffindor thing. I see something wrong and I feel like I have to make it right."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you set things back to right. Maybe together we can make it so things are okay for you." Hermione said with a gentle smile.

After a moment of searching Hermione's eyes, Ron gave an honest smile and quietly said, "Thank you. If I can figure out how to make things right, I'll let you know."

* * * * *

"Why are you so afraid of the forest?" Harry reluctantly asked as casually as if he were discussing the weather.

Cherub stared out of the clearing for a moment, appearing not to have heard the question.

When Harry was about to ask again, Cherub quietly said, "I don't know."

At Harry's inquisitive stare, Cherub reluctantly whispered, "I've always been terrified of the forest... for as long as I can remember."

"Don't worry about it, Wings. I think everyone has something that they're afraid of. The important thing is that you didn't back away from it." Draco said casually.

Cherub nervously glanced at Draco with question, then his gaze returned to the wide-open world outside their clearing.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid. In fact, it keeps you from making stupid mistakes. But letting your fears rule you and prevent you from doing the things you need to do is a path to mediocrity." Draco said frankly.

Cherub thought about the words and finally gave a small nod of agreement.

"How did you arrange all of this Draco? It couldn't have been easy." Harry asked, obviously trying to change the subject from Cherub's discomfort.

Draco chuckled to himself, then said, "Believe it or not, Prang was the one who suggested it."

"Prang? Karen Prang?" Cherub asked, momentarily diverted from his fears.

"Yeah. She was there when I was telling Widget that I wanted to do something special to break up the routine and she came up with the picnic idea." Draco said with a smile.

"Do you think that means that maybe she has a special someone that she has picnics with?" Harry asked speculatively.

"Maybe." Draco said thoughtfully, then continued, "Although I can't imagine who..."

"It should be easy enough to find out." Harry said with a distinctly 'Malfoy' smirk.

At Draco's questioning gaze, Harry continued, "We just have to be on the lookout for someone with frostbite."

Draco blinked at the statement, then broke into laughter.

"You'd better watch out Harry. Your reputation as a 'goody goody Gryffindor' could suffer if the wrong person heard you say something like that." Draco chuckled.

"That's why I'll only say it when it's just the three of us." Harry said with a sly grin.

"As much as I don't want to rush your incredibly thoughtful gesture, we need to finish up. It will be time for flying class soon." Cherub said as he kept a watchful eye on the open space beyond their clearing.

"*Au contraire mon frère!*" Draco said with triumph as he took a small jeweled box out of the pack he had been carrying.

"What's that you've got there, Malfoy?" Harry asked with a grin, knowing from recent experience that whatever it was had to be what Draco had been waiting to reveal.

"A way that we can enjoy our lunch at a leisurely pace and enjoy each other's company for a while without having to worry about hurrying back to class." Draco said happily.

"You got us excused from flying class?" Cherub asked absently as he strained to look through the trees and bushes surrounding them.

"I'd expect that muggle thinking from Potter, not you." Draco said honestly.

"I'm right here, you know." Harry reminded him.

"I know." Draco said with a grin, then explained, "I only meant that you grew up in the muggle world with muggle problems and muggle solutions. It wouldn't surprise me if you'd automatically assume that I had somehow arranged for us to be excused from classes."

"Well, now I assume that you've made some other sort of arrangement... something magical, perhaps?" Harry asked in a coaxing tone.

"This, what I have in my hands, is an elder wizard's time rune." Draco said proudly.

"Which elder wizard does it belong to?" Cherub asked as he reluctantly turned his attention back toward his companions.

"None, that I know of. That's just the name of the thing. It creates a time bubble. I found it a year or so ago at Diagon Alley and never really had an excuse to use it before. I tend to strive to get most things over with, not draw them out." Draco said as he opened the bejeweled box and revealed its contents to his companions.

"So, how does it work?" Harry asked curiously.

"It's easy. We just set it where we want time to be stretched and put it back when we're ready to let time flow normally again." Draco said as he took a small bean-shaped stone out of the box.

"That sounds pretty easy." Harry said hesitantly.

"Yeah. Let me set it, then we can get back to enjoying our meal." Draco said as he closed the box, then placed the bean-shaped stone in an indentation on the lid.

Cherub slightly nodded his agreement to the plan as he couldn't help but look deeply into the forest surrounding them.

* * * * *

"I made a special salad just for DeeDah. It has all types of green leafy vegetables and I shredded a little Velvet Shank in there too... you know, for flavor." Catty said as she placed the plates of food on the family dining room table.

"Velvet Shank?" James asked cautiously, not entirely sure that he wanted to know what it was.

"It's a type of tree fungus." Catty said seriously, then added, "You can have some too if you like Master Chuffery. It's completely harmless."

"Can I?" Chuffery asked with excitement.

"Of course. I'll be right back." Catty said gently.

"DeeDah says to thank you. And that she really likes Velvet Shank." Chuffery said with a smile.

"I'm glad. Go ahead and start and I'll be back in just a minute." Catty said before leaving.

James watched Chuffery devoting his full attention to DeeDah and had the feeling that even though it was good for Chuffery to have a pet, that nothing good would come of this day's events.

* * * * *

"Stop that!" A woman's voice abruptly called, seemingly from nowhere.

As the trio looked around, they were surprised to find one of the teachers from the school making her way through the trees, toward their picnic.

"What are you doing here, Mrs. Trelawney?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"Abomination! Why don't you go back where you belong and leave us alone?" Mrs. Trelawney demanded to know as she stopped at the edge of their clearing.

"Hey! What'd I ever do to you?" Cherub asked in a wounded tone.

"You've messed up the entire dynamic between these two. They're supposed to be commanding rival factions, preparing for a grand confrontation. Instead you've got them cuddling together like lovers." Mrs. Trelawney said angrily.

"I did that? Wow. I wonder how much more I can upset you by waging peace and promoting love." Cherub finished with a smirk.

"Their feelings don't matter, of course. But their actions do! If they don't fight each other, they won't be prepared to face off against the evil that continues to threaten us to this very day." Mrs. Trelawney said urgently.

"So I made you lovers instead of fighters... apparently." Cherub told his companions.

"Thanks, Wings. I don't think that being disgusted and sneering all the time would be a good look for me." Draco said, finishing with a 'Malfoy' grin.

"I think you could pull it off, but I'd much rather see you looking at me with love smoldering in your eyes rather than hatred." Harry interjected.

"Your insignificant pathetic feelings don't matter! The two of you are destined to cause the final destruction and death of the one who can't be named." Mrs. Trelawney said venomously.

"What am I destined for?" Cherub asked curiously.

"Nothing! You're supposed to be dead!" Mrs. Trelawney spat.

"So, because I'm alive, I've somehow changed Potter and Malfoy's destiny?" Cherub asked speculatively.

"It's not too late. If you can stop this stupid romantic nonsense and each raise up an army and motivate them to fight, then we can still be prepared when the 'dark one' rises again." Mrs. Trelawney said passionately.

"I'm sorry. We've already promised not to take part in any plots or plans that involve us breaking up. That is not an option." Harry said firmly.

Draco and Cherub wore matching smiles of pride as they nodded with agreement.

"Using divination, I have access to every secret thought, every moment that you thought was private, every situation that could even be *perceived* as improper..."

"Excuse me, guys." Cherub said as he reached across them to remove the stone from the timerune. As he did, Mrs. Trelawney vanished from in front of them.

"What did you just do?" Harry cautiously asked.

"I think you need to give that timerune back to the elder wizard. I'm not sure what that was, but I don't think it was a timeslip. That was something else." Cherub said uncertainly.

"So that, what Mrs. Trelawney was going on about, it wasn't real, was it?" Harry cautiously asked.

"I suppose that would depend on how you define 'real'. I'm not sure if what we just saw had anything to do with our timeline or dimension or whatever it is." Draco said speculatively.

"But in some timeline or dimension, there's a place where we hate each other and Cherub is dead." Harry said with a hollow sounding voice and a devastated look at Cherub.

"And there's probably another such place where we never even met. It serves no purpose for us to fixate on a reality other than our own." Draco said firmly.

"If the timeslip didn't work, then we're probably late for flying." Cherub said in sudden realization.

"If we're late, then we're late. We'll apologize and move on." Draco said without concern.

"Let's gather this up and go."

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"So, Master Chuffery, what do you think of the Velvet Shank?" Catty asked curiously.

"I don't know. I mean, it's kind of bitter and... I don't know the words... like dirt, but not like dirty... I don't know if that makes any sense." Chuffery said with difficulty.

"I think the word you're searching for may be 'earthy'." Catty cautiously suggested.

"I'm not sure if that's what I mean or not, but it sounds like what I mean." Chuffery said carefully.

"You didn't say, do you like it?" Catty asked curiously.

"When I eat the little thin bits with a bunch of salad with it, then it's good. I just wouldn't want to eat a mouthful of it." Chuffery said frankly.

"Then that's just as it should be. The Velvet Shank is an ingredient in the salad mix, it's not meant to be the dominant flavor, or even a noticeable one. If I made the salad right, then you should be able to detect a curious earthy undertone that rounds out the overall flavor profile." Catty patiently explained.

"Yeah. I just tasted a little bit by itself to see what it tasted like. When I eat it with the whole salad, it's another one of the flavors." Chuffery said happily.

DeeDah looked up from her small bowl of salad at Chuffery, and then Catty, before turning her attention back to her own Velvet Shank.

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"That thing Trelawney was saying..." Harry slowly said as they started walking.

"It has nothing to do with us." Draco said shortly.

"Actually, if you think about it, it may." Harry insisted.

"How do you mean?" Cherub asked with interest, feeling much better since they were out of the forest.

"She said that Draco and I raised up armies to stand against 'you know who'." Harry said slowly.

"Actually, I think from the way that she said it, you raised up armies against each other, then turned them against 'him'." Cherub said frankly.

"It doesn't matter." Harry said dismissively, then asserted, "If we're to stand a chance against 'him', then we will probably need to make preparations."

"What happens if we don't fight?" Cherub cautiously asked.

"We die... probably. At least, that's how these sorts of things tend to go." Draco said frankly.

"He'll probably defeat me and use my body to try and take over the world or destroy it or whatever evil endgame he's been planning all along." Harry said seriously.

"Oh yeah. You're 'The Boy who Lived', aren't you? So there's that whole mythology that comes into it." Cherub said speculatively.

"If we let it." Harry added seriously.

After a long silent moment of walking, Draco finally asked, "Do you have a plan that might make things turn out differently?"

"I don't know if this is going to be of any help, but I think that if we take this seriously, starting right now, that we can prepare ourselves for battle before the enemy forces can gather against us."

"What do you think we should do?" Cherub asked cautiously.

"I think that initially, each of us should play to our strengths. Cherub, you have a better idea than most on how to find historical accounts and official documents. I wouldn't be surprised if you could find out about some of the ancient magics being used.

"Draco could do what he does best and see what he can find out about the things that people don't 'officially' know about how to resolve this situation. While Cherub is looking for what we're supposed to know, Draco will be looking for what we aren't.

"And if 'The Boy Who Lived' started asking questions from the higher-ups in the administration, he might be able to shake loose some useful information... perhaps even a vaguely worded prophecy or obscure pictoglyph." Harry said carefully.

Cherub laughed, then said, "That sounds about right."

"Gentlemen, I assume you have a good reason for being late to class." Madame Hooch said firmly as they walked onto the flying field.

"No Ma'am. Not a *good* one." Harry said honestly.

"We had a magical backfire that threw us late. I'm sorry Madame Hooch, we won't let it happen again." Cherub added repentantly.

After a moment to consider, Madame Hooch finally said, "I doubt that you will suffer any ill effects from missing a few minutes of practice. Take to the air, we're doing laps."

"Yes Ma'am." The three boys said in unison.

Harry and Draco walked toward the stand of brooms as Cherub unfurled his wings and flew just above them.

As Harry and Draco were about to take off, the three boys heard Madame Hooch call out, "Mr. Longbottom! What are you doing there...?"

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As James was finishing his lunch, Chuffery quietly said, "DeeDah wants me to tell you that there are things worse than death."

"What's that supposed to mean?" James asked with surprise at the dire statement.

"She wants to be sure you know, because she's one of them." Chuffery said frankly.

James hesitantly looked at the slimy slug oozing over the edge of a plate of salad to find her looking back at him.

"Be sure to let me know if there's anything at all that DeeDah needs to be comfortable here." James said cautiously.

Chuffery listened for a moment, then said, "She said that she'll let you know if she needs something."

"Of that I have no doubt." James said wearily.

"After lunch, can I show DeeDah my room and all my things?" Chuffery asked hopefully.

"Yes. Of course. In fact, while you're doing that, I'll see to arranging tutors for you, both academic and magical." James said, sounding a bit more relaxed.

"I thought you were going to teach me magic." Chuffery said honestly.

"I'll teach you what I can, but with any luck we'll also be able to find someone to teach you more advanced spells, like your brother's." James said cheerfully.

"DeeDah says that after I've learned some more magic, that there's some spells that she can teach me." Chuffery said happily.

The smile fell off James' face as he looked at the monstrous slug with concern.

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"For some reason I always thought that being late for class would be a lot bigger deal than that." Harry said honestly as he joined Cherub and Draco in the air.

"This is one of the benefits of behaving responsibly and treating people with respect. They're more willing to trust that we were acting properly and might have encountered an unforeseen obstacle."

"I just don't want anyone to get the feeling that we're abusing their trust." Cherub said frankly.

"First of all, you don't get to control how anyone else feels, so don't use other people's feelings to give you an excuse not to take action when necessary." Draco said seriously.

Harry nodded, then thought to ask, "And second?"

"We weren't abusing anyone's trust. When we were asked, we told the truth." Draco said simply.

"Only a Malfoy would do something as devious and underhanded as resort to the truth to gain special privileges." Cherub said with a grin.

"Our rivals can't fathom how we can maintain such an elaborate ruse." Draco timidly admitted.

"...as the truth?" Harry asked with a laugh.

"It's something that would never occur to them to try." Draco said simply.

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"Is everything alright? You guys are never late for anything." Ron asked with concern as he fought to divide his attention enough to stay airborne.

Harry waited long enough for Hermione to be able to participate before answering, "In the midst of our lunchtime romantic getaway, we were interrupted by someone telling us that we're supposed to hate each other."

"You two are supposed to be hating each other, I'm supposed to be dead." Cherub said frankly.

"Who would say such a horrible thing to you?" Hermione asked with concern.

"It doesn't matter. I'm not sure if the person we saw actually exists." Cherub said honestly.

"At least not in this timeline." Harry helpfully added.

"Were you three opening dimensional doorways during your lunch break?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"Not intentionally. We used a little magical device that was *supposed* to anchor time in one place for a bit so we wouldn't have to hurry back." Harry explained.

"Seeing as you were late, I'm guessing that didn't work." Hermione said in a leading tone.

"No. We had someone who appears to have been from another version of reality telling us how horrible we are for not hating each other." Harry said frankly.

"And for being alive." Cherub quietly added.

"That really bothered you, didn't it?" Draco asked with concern.

"I guess it did." Cherub reluctantly admitted, then explained, "My birth has never really been looked upon as a joyous occasion. Now to have someone come out and say that I'm a mistake that should never have been born... it just stirs up some old feelings."

"Your boyfriends are the heir to the Malfoy dynasty and 'The Boy Who Lived'. Regardless of your beginning, you've done well for yourself. You don't need to bother with some old biddy who's bent out of shape because you didn't cause *her* preferred future to be realized." Draco said seriously.

"You know, that's a good point. Who is she to say which future is right and wrong?" Harry asked challengingly.

"She's the Divinations teacher. Out of everyone, she might actually have the most legitimate reason for being upset with the way the timeline is unfolding." Cherub said speculatively.

"Either way, I say that we treat her as the harbinger of a force preparing to rise up against us and take her warning seriously." Draco said firmly.

"Excuse me? What are you talking about?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"A storm is coming. One way of dealing with it would have been if Draco and I each had raised armies who were prepared to fight each other at our command. That way, if we were confronted

by a force greater than both of us, we could choose to combine our forces against them." Harry carefully explained.

"But if they're not fighting each other, then we won't have our people organized to defend against an attack which, at least in some timelines, is coming soon." Cherub added.

"And if you think about it, whether we get attacked or not, it won't hurt for us to recruit as many people as we can to help defend us against *whatever* might want to attack us." Draco said reasonably as he led the group into a slow banking turn at the edge of the flying field.

"As long as 'whatever' includes 'you know who', then I think that everyone will be able to commit to helping us." Cherub said seriously.

"We're going to need to be clear from the beginning about who's in charge. I mean, I'm sure that all of us will take up leadership roles, but we need to have one person who is seen as our 'leader'."

"Like a figurehead?" Hermione reluctantly asked.

"I'm talking about Potter. He's 'The Boy Who Lived', for this to work at all, he *has to* be the one in charge." Draco said frankly.

"I'm going to need all of your help if we're going to make this work." Harry said anxiously.

"That being the case, we should find a way to divide our people so that we can attack from different directions with different tactics." Cherub said seriously.

"If Granger can get the Gryffindores to go along with it, I should be able to manage the Slytherin." Draco said with a challenging glance in Hermione's direction.

"I have some contacts in the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw houses, so if we need their help with anything, I have someone I can ask." Cherub announced as the group eased into another slow turn.

"Let them know that we'd really like for them to commit 'fighters' to the cause before anything else. If we just end up with their moral support, we'll take what we can get." Harry said in a calculating tone.

"If you give them a way to signal their support without having to actually do anything, they're going to do it. Start with the 'big ask' then let them talk you down from there. Anything you're able to get will be better than 'moral support'." Draco said frankly.

"It makes sense." Hermione reluctantly admitted.

Even Ron nodded his agreement.

"And 'that', my friends, is what Slytherins do." Cherub declared with boundless pride for *his* Draco.