

Grayson Adams

L'Homme au Masque de Fer

My key slid into the lock of Alphonse's apartment in eastern downtown Paris. After not hearing from my childhood friend for about a month, I no longer had a choice. If it had only been a couple weeks or even three since I had last spoken to Al, I wouldn't be doing this. A month, though? Something must've been wrong.

The door swung open, and I braced myself for whatever mental breakdown plagued my friend this time. To my surprise, the inside of the tiny apartment was still. Quiet. There was neither the usual crying nor drunken hysterics characteristic of my friend's periodic breakdowns. I passed the familiar entryway, the wall crowded with bizarre archeological specimens and family photos. If I looked for it, I would've seen the picture of the two of us as children on our bikes—a lanky, bespectacled kid with his rough, curly-haired sidekick out to hunt for stag beetles.

Then, I stepped through the kitchen, gagging on the putrid smell of expired milk and moldy leftovers from the dozens of dirty dishes stacked on every conceivable surface. These were often the chores that Al neglected first. From the kitchen, I scanned the compact lounge area, if it could even be called that, which had a single loveseat and a TV we would often use to watch VHS tapes Alphonse rented from the store down the street. Everything was intact.

"Al?" I called, but there was no answer.

"Alphonse? It's Jaq. You okay?"

Still, there was nothing but silence, and my eyebrows came together in concern. This wasn't like Al's usual breakdowns. Sure, he could be unstable at times, but he was always predictable. He was the guy who wanted to be an archeologist ever since he found an old, rusty nail buried in the sandbox at our local elementary school. It was good that he found it, too, or the damn thing would've given someone tetanus.

Near the couch, I approached the side table littered with spare change and crunchy leftover restaurant mints and notes scribbled on random scraps of paper to reach Alphonse's answering machine. When I pressed play, I heard a montage of messages from Al's mother, myself, and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, wondering where the hell he was. I hoped this disappearance wouldn't cost Al his dream job, but the Muséum was curiously tolerant of his strange antics. Maybe they knew that genius often goes hand in hand with madness. In Al's case, it absolutely did. He was the brightest person most of us would ever know.

With a sigh, I decided it was time to check his room. The last time I was in it, I found a two-century-old femur lying on his bed like it was the most normal damn thing in the world. He wasn't always in touch with reality, but that's part of what made him as bright as he was. Someone with a mind of his caliber probably couldn't deal with the gloomy world we live in for extended periods of time.

When I pushed the door open, I felt prickles of dread on the back of my neck. What was once Al's desk was broken apart into splinters of wood, accompanied by down feathers from his pillow and jagged shards of glass from the mirror that once stood by the door. Every precious artifact he owned was knocked to the floor, scraps of white collared shirts covering them. Only a single thing remained untouched: a video camera, and it stood out like a beacon above the sea of debris.

It was like a scene out of a war movie. My head spun.

"Holy shit. Holy *shit*."

My eyes darted around the room, wondering who the hell could have done this. Alphonse had broken a few things in drunken fits, but nothing like this.

I hesitated before entering the room. It wasn't every day someone found their best friend's room in complete ruins. I started to worry about him, like *actually* worry about him. He had pulled a few stunts in his day, like when he was 12 and ran away from home. After days of biking around our small town, I found him half-dead, "camping" under a tree. But this was different. It felt malicious.

When I stepped in, I was glad I hadn't removed the steel-toed shoes they made me wear for construction work because glass was *everywhere*. The air was thick and humid, and I could smell a faint trace of something metallic. I swallowed hard. I had been here a million times, so why did it feel like a different universe?

I searched the broken objects around his room, and to my relief, there was no blood, which I was half expecting. Nothing made me think Al was in immediate danger. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding.

With the room searched, I grabbed the video camera from its stand and opened it, glass cracking underneath my weight. I knew that Alphonse often kept video diaries of discoveries he made in his field of archeology to show his colleagues at the Muséum, so it didn't seem important until I remembered something noteworthy.

About a month ago, while working in the Bastille district, I came upon a dingy metal box about the size one would keep their shoes in. At the time, my crew was digging a trench for a new oil and gas pipeline. Naturally, everyone was interested about what was in the box, but none of us could pry the damn thing open. Thinking it may be of historical value due to its proximity to where the Bastille once stood, I convinced my team to let me hand it over to Alphonse. After all, this was his expertise, and I knew he would go wild for it.

I pulled out the tape, wondering if it could contain any clues about where Al was. The timeline seemed to coincide, so I thought, fuck it. Might as well give it a shot, right?

In the lounge area, I plugged in a VCR that could play the special type of tape the video camera used. When everything was set up, I pressed play and sat down on the faded loveseat.

The date showed September 3rd, 1997, 8:36 pm.

Alphonse, his thick glasses reflecting the light in his room, appeared on screen with his goofy-looking smile, the one that he wore when he was doing what he loved.

"My friend Jaq brought me something special today!" he said, showing the metal box to the camera.

"Since it was found in the Bastille area, it may contain something exciting! Okay, let's see if I can get this open..."

The video stopped, only to start again, the time now 9:12 pm.

"I found something remarkable! I can't believe it! Look! An iron mask like in the old stories of the Bastille!"

He zoomed in on the mask, now sitting on his desk. The antique, corroded metal gleamed under the lamplight, facing the camera directly. Instead of holes where the eyes and mouth should've been, there were only "X" shaped indentations roughly pounded into the metal. To me, it looked like the type of twisted thing people would use to royally fuck up someone they didn't like back in the dark ages. Or something. This wasn't my expertise.

"I think pretty much everyone in France is familiar with L'Homme au Masque de Fer, but I find the history around it truly fascinating!" Alphonse said, sitting down in a chair facing the camera with his back to the mask resting on the desk behind him. Of course he found it

fascinating. I knew him well enough to know when I was in for a history lecture, so I sat back into the loveseat with a sigh. Here we go again.

“The Bastille was constructed in 1370 and used as a fortress until 1417, when it became a prison. As everyone knows, it was demolished during the revolution in 1789, but one of the most interesting parts of its history was the mysterious prisoner who wore an iron mask! To this day, historians don’t know who the prisoner was, though there have been many speculations. L’Homme au Masque de Fer was a prisoner in the Bastille from 1698 to his death in 1703 and was never once seen without his mask. Many details surrounding this man, whoever he was, are spooky and almost read like a ghost story,” he paused, and I knew it was only to add drama. Al was always a drama king.

“Not only do we not know who the prisoner was, but the Marquis de Louvois requested a cell with two sets of doors so no one could hear or see him, and his guards were ordered to kill him on the spot if he spoke about anything other than his immediate needs. This man either knew something no one could ever know, or he was very, very dangerous. Why did they go to such lengths to keep his identity a secret? Had he gone insane? Was his very existence a sin in this crazy world?” Al was out of breath by the time he posed his last question. “Could this be the same mask Jaq found while working?”

Then immediately, he answered his own question, “The evidence points to— yes! The date on the inside of the box is 1704, possibly when they were looking to discard the evidence of the mask and the man who wore it, yet here it is. A frightening but exciting piece of history, and all thanks to my best friend!”

His smile beamed once again, dimples visible on his freckled cheeks. Sure, he was a total nerd with his glasses, crazy grin, and clean-cut golden hair, but I knew Al was *my* nerd. Out of all the other kids in the schoolyard, he had chosen me, the impoverished outcast with a harsh life at home. Even here in Paris, he would spend time with me instead of those fancy-ass scholars, saying they were too stuck up for his liking. He would often tell me about his work, which I didn’t always understand, but hearing his musical voice was enough. After so much instability in my life, I cherished Al and the permanence of our relationship.

A pang of sadness ran through me when I remembered he was now missing, but I had faith he would turn up sooner or later. He always did.

The scene ended with Alphonse’s smile with the iron mask looming in the background. Now, the date was September 6th, 1997, 11:58 pm.

The camera was in the same position in Al’s room, but it was much darker this time. Most, if not all, the lights were off, and only a sliver of light shone through the window. Al sat in a chair next to his desk, facing both the camera and the mask from the side. The mask was in the same place, still viewed from straight on.

He wore a frown this time, his eyebrows drawn together. “I know it might sound strange, but... I feel like the last few nights, I’ve been able to hear something coming from the mask. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s almost like... I don’t know, whispers?”

A pit formed in my stomach. Something about the mask, now sitting in the shadows, made me feel uneasy. When my shovel first hit the metal box containing the mask, it hadn’t felt right, like a jolt of infernal energy through my body. But the excitement of its discovery melted away whatever feelings surrounded it. Did I make a mistake in giving it to Alphonse?

In the video, Al sat in his pajamas, staring at the mask in the dim room. It was unsettling, but I leaned into the TV to see if I could hear anything like he claimed he could.

“H-Hello?” Alphonse asked after an extended period of silence.

I squinted at the mask to see it better, but the low resolution of a home video didn't help too much. There was nothing there besides the cross shapes over the eyes and mouth.

"No, I'm not ... I'm Al." He shifted his chair away from the mask, squirming.

"Al, are you stupid? Don't talk to it!" I told him even though I knew he couldn't hear me.

There was another long, drawn-out silence. One that made me hold my breath.

"Okay. Okay, Alphonse, there's no way this thing is talking to you. You've just been thinking about it a lot. You need to go to bed. Let's put it away," Alphonse said to himself, moving from the chair.

The video ended as Al approached the camera, his eyes open wide, jaw clenched.

I wanted to reach out to him. To comfort him. I couldn't.

Now, the date showed September 15th, 1997, 1:41 am.

Alphonse appeared very close to the camera, looking like he just came back from a visit to the trenches of World War I. His ordinarily neat hair was mussed up beyond comparison, and his glasses were cracked and smudged. Screw 5 o'clock shadow— he sported what was far more like a 10 o'clock shadow.

"I... I feel like I'm losing my mind," he said, not looking at the camera. His eyes were dull, far from the twinkling azure I always thought of.

"It speaks to me, and... It tells me not to call mom or.. or Jaq." His eyes welled up, but then he flinched like he was reprimanded by some unseen individual. "No... I'm not doing anything. I'm just talking to myself. I can't use this thing to communicate with anyone anyway."

My heartbeat began to pick up as I drew closer to the screen.

Al backed away from the camera and sat in the chair that was partly facing the mask and partly facing the camera. In all this time, the mask still hadn't moved from its position on the desk.

An unnerving silence filled the room as Alphonse began to rock back and forth on his chair. "I don't know. That... I don't think I should do that," he murmured, trying not to look at the mask.

As I watched the scene, I realized a few feathers were already on Al's desk, and his pajamas were partially ripped down the front. A lump formed in my throat that I couldn't swallow down. I had seen Alphonse in many different states, both good and bad, but this... This was something else. The Al I knew was fighting a losing battle. I couldn't tell if it was against the mask— or himself.

"No, but... I..." Al spoke again, rocking faster now, "I can't..."

I watched as my best friend's chest began to rise and fall in jerky, irregular movements. His shallow breaths hastened. I'd seen Alphonse through enough panic attacks to know what was happening.

"No... No! I can't! I won't!" Alphonse yelled at the mask between rapid breaths, long fingers clawing at his face.

How could I stop this? How could I stop this twisted, fucked up situation?

I couldn't.

Without warning, Al leapt from his chair, screaming incoherent things that made no sense. The camera fell over, and the scene ended.

At this point, I paused the playback, hand shaking. Oh god. Oh god. Al. I had to save him. I had to. I loved him. I always had and always would. He was an absolute fucking fruitcake, but *he was mine*.

Swallowing with difficulty, I tried to calm myself down with slow breaths. Out of the two of us, I had always been the stable one. I would figure this out, right? I gathered what resolve I had and played the tape.

The date showed September 16th, 1997, 3:22 am. At first, the screen was black, but I could hear Alphonse laughing. Strained. Maniacal. He picked the camera up from the ground and placed it back on the stand. Now, he was close to the lens, and his reddened face was distorted into an expression between hysterical laughter and sobbing. I could barely recognize him. Parts of his blond hair had been torn out at the scalp and his eyes were bloodshot. His glasses were missing their lenses, its frame bent out of shape.

He couldn't even speak. He was laughing, or crying, far too hard. Tears glistened in the light and rolled down his face as he picked up the mask from his desk. For the first time, I saw the other side of the mask. I was almost sick.

Where there were eyes and a mouth on the front of the mask, there were reddened, elongated stakes on the back. Alphonse took one last look at the camera.

"No! NO!" I screamed at the screen.

With the side of his face shown to the camera, Alphonse brought the mask closer.

I began to tremble, tears forming in my eyes as I watched something I knew I would have nightmares about for the rest of my life.

Alphonse didn't make a sound when the mask began to sink into his eyes and mouth, forcing bloody pulp out of his eye sockets and down his neck. But he didn't stop there. He pushed the mask through the flesh of his brain. For a moment, there was an audible gurgling sound as the stake in his mouth pressed through his throat. Blood ran from his hands onto the floor, and I could hear the liquid dripping. Only when the mask was on completely did Alphonse stop. It was now deeply embedded in his skull.

The body that used to be my best friend turned toward the camera, standing still as blood continued to spill onto his ripped pajamas and to the ground. I expected it to fall, dead, but it didn't. It just stood there. Staring.

The playback stopped. It was the end of the tape. Tears ran down my cheeks and I stared into nothingness, numb. My best friend of 20 years was gone. I couldn't do anything about it. In the end, I couldn't save him. Not this time.

A few months later, I was trying to get along in life as best I could. After Alphonse's disappearance, there was an official investigation. No one knew what to make of the case. Some officers thought Al faked the entire thing with makeup and acting because no blood was found at the scene, but I knew better. Al didn't have that in him. He just didn't.

I woke up for work one frigid December morning. It was all I had left to keep my thoughts from wandering to the haunting videotape. I pulled on my steel-toed shoes and opened the front door. On the welcome mat, there was a box. The cardboard box was about the size of a microwave, beaten and worn, as if someone had kicked it all the way to my house.

It was quite some time since I last ordered anything, and the box bore no name or address, so what the hell was it? Wearing a frown, I brought the cardboard box, which was surprisingly light, inside and placed it on the kitchen counter. I took out a knife and pierced its tape, running the blade along the edge of the box to free the top flaps.

When I opened it, dozens of packing peanuts spilled out all over the floor. Cursing, I dug through the peanuts until I realized that as I got closer to the middle of the package, the peanuts began to turn red. It was a dark red, one that coated the packing peanuts in a crusty residue.

Immediately, I thought of Al. I swallowed, hands starting to tremble. I paused only for a second before resuming my search through the box.

It only took a moment before my hand touched something freezing cold and metallic. Holding my breath, I grasped the object and pulled it out of the sea of packing peanuts. A mask. Just like the one I saw on the home video Alphonse had taken except covered in dried blood. Underneath the red, I could see a silver metal shining through, corroded at the mask's rough edges. Its unseeing, X-shaped eyes were caked with layers of blood, globs of dried muscle or some sort of tissue attached at the sides along with clumps of golden hair.

I inhaled sharply as I thought of Al's beautiful blond locks shining in the summer sun while we played together as children. Him, dragging me around by the hand with the smile that melted my heart down to its core. His crying fits and periods of depression, when he would stay hidden under his duvet for days at a time, but always poked his head out for me when I visited. The feeling of his head on my shoulder as he whispered his anxieties and fears, his neglectful father and overbearing mother, knowing I could relate after my father left us, his wife and five children, to fend for ourselves.

As I turned the mask over, the three stakes on its back came into view. Thick masses of something terrible clung to them, shriveled, red, and crusty. The mask weighed heavy in my hands. Tears fell from my eyes straight onto the back of the mask, mixing with the dried blood. I knew I should call the police and show them the evidence, but I couldn't move. I stared at the stakes, wondering how much it would hurt to have them slide deep into my skull.

Al was gone now. Forever.

Should I put it on?